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Exploring contract cheating in further education: student engagement and academic integrity challenges

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ABSTRACT

Contract cheating is a challenging problem facing higher and further education providers (HE and FE) worldwide. In the UK, contract cheating has been identified as a growing problem by the HEA and, more recently, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the Department for Education. The high rate of contact cheating among students suggests that 8–9% of degrees awarded in the UK are unsafe. To address this issue, the current study with a new approach seeks to investigate student's motivations, experiences, and rationale for using contract cheating from their point of view. Collected data has been subjected to content analysis and the findings show different phases and drivers in this process. This study will help increase awareness among UK academics and education providers about the processes involved in contract cheating and propose a set of recommendations for the future.

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Introduction

Contract cheating, also referred to as assignment commissioning or outsourcing, is the practice of exchanging payment for the provision of custom written coursework (Clarke and Lancaster 2006; Hill, Mason, and Dunn 2021). The work is submitted in the name of the purchaser rather than the service provider and therefore constitutes academic misconduct in the form of collusion. Contract cheating transforms assessment into a financial transaction that therefore measures a student's ability to outsource work, rather than demonstrating learning. Review of the literature shows a number of studies have sought worldwide to quantify the scale of this problem. In a sample of almost 700 students from several US colleges and Universities, 2.8% admitted purchasing work from essay mills 'often/very frequently' and 6.3% 'sometimes.' However, 21.1% suspected their peers of doing so

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frequently and 42.2% suspected peers of commissioning assignments sometimes (Scanlon and Neumann 2002). Another study by Hosny and Fatima (2014) found that, of a sample of 145 students at King Saud University in Riyadh, 21.6% admitted to having paid someone else to write assignments (0.68% Frequently, 7.43% Sometimes, and 13.51% Rarely). These studies, conducted over a decade apart on separate continents, seem to produce very similar results – around 8% of students admitted to contract cheating sometimes or frequently.

In the UK the issue of contract cheating has been identified through reports from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (Quality Assurance Agency 2016, 2020, 2021) and the Department for Education (Department for Education 2019). QAA has proposed tackling the supply of commissioned work through a formal complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority as well as lobbying for criminalization and fines of up to £5,000 for websites seeking *'to help students commit acts of academic dishonesty for financial gain.'* The provision and advertising of contract cheating services was made illegal in England on 28 April 2022).

The practice of writing commissioned assignments is performed by so-called essay mills, which advertise as apparently legitimate services online and, in some cases, openly in public (Matthews 2013). In 1997 there were at least 70 such sites (Scanlon and Neumann 2002) and by 2008 over 250 sites offering services aimed specifically at UK students (Scanlon and Neumann 2002). The number of purchasers is impossible to verify, but a study by researchers at Birmingham City University identified approximately 19,000 attempts by students between March 2005 and June 2013 (Clarke and Lancaster 2006; Matthews 2013). Researchers have identified prices between £15 for a 3000-word Master's dissertation proposal in Law to £6,750 for a 100,000-word Ph.D. in English literature, with a seven-day deadline (Newton and Lang 2016). The prices vary within these limits based on both the urgency (prices can rise over £1000 if work is required within 3 hours) and the quality required (first class may be roughly double the price of 2:2 standard) (Quality Assurance Agency 2016). Low prices are possible because there is believed to be considerable under-utilized capacity.

Contract cheating has an impact on student attendance and engagement in teaching and learning. While assessment is intended to both support and provide the opportunity to demonstrate learning, the intention to commission work removes the requirement for learning and any value in attendance. Additionally, there are huge ethical and practical implications for employability and for employer satisfaction. Employers should be entitled to assume students achieving a degree have achieved all the appropriate learning outcomes, which is not the case for students who have purchased rather than written their own work. This can lead to serious safety concerns if health, engineering and construction professionals have not earned the qualifications they possess.

This study examines the phenomenon of contract cheating from the unique lens of student perspectives, a critical aspect often overlooked in existing literature. While previous research has predominantly focused on quantifying the prevalence of contract cheating and its legal ramifications, this paper looks into the underlying motivations, processes, and deterrents as perceived by the students themselves. By adopting this approach, it not only sheds light on the often-neglected subjective experiences and rationales behind such practices but also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the issue. Furthermore, the integration of comparative analysis across different cultural and educational contexts offers a broader, more global perspective, thus filling a significant gap in current academic discourse. This novel angle is poised to provide important insights for educators, policymakers, and academic institutions, driving the development of more targeted and effective strategies to combat the growing challenge of contract cheating. The findings from this research are anticipated to indicate further lines of enquiry in academic integrity discussions, potentially influencing future policies and educational practices on a global scale. Hence the research tries to answer the below three questions:

- (1) What motivates students to engage in contract cheating?
- (2) What are the processes used to engage students in this practice?
- (3) What is helping and/or hindering this practice?

Despite the small sample of the study, the findings of the study will address some concerns regarding this growing issue via proposing a set of recommendations for both further and higher education providers as well as policy makers.

Literature review

Prevalence

Contract cheating has attracted increasing interest since Clarke and Lancaster first coined the term in 2006, although it is difficult to establish the degree to which its prevalence is increasing. Newton (2018) in a systematic review of 65 studies dating back to 1978, found a significant positive relationship between date of study and number of students who said they outsourced their work; however, this could be partly due to an increase in students' willingness to admit cheating, not just a rise in the phenomenon itself. Finding an average of 15.7% of students admitting to contract cheating in the period 2014–2018, Newton extrapolated a figure of 31 million students globally. Notably, many of these procure more than one assignment (62.5%, according to Curtis and Clare 2017).

While Clarke and Lancaster seminally defined contract cheating as *'the submission of work by students for academic credit which the students have paid contractors to write for them'* (Clarke and Lancaster 2006, 1). later studies have

expanded the term to include outsourcing methods which may be free or paid for in kind. Ellis, Zucker and Randall classify suppliers in six categories: 'family and friends; academic custom writing sites; legitimate learning sites (eg. file sharing, discussion and microtutoring sites); legitimate non-learning sites (eg. freelancing sites and online auction sites); paid exam takers; and pre-written essay banks' (Ellis, Zucker, and Randall 2018, 2). This range makes it impossible to quantify the number of contract cheating providers, as does the covert nature and volatility of online sites: while academic custom writing sites may operate under multiple banners to increase their market exposure/share (Ellis, Zucker, and Randall 2018; Lancaster 2020), freelancing and online auction sites have been known to change their names or be acquired by their competitors (Clarke and Lancaster 2013); social media storefronts can be shut down with ease (Amigud 2020); and individual freelancers may subcontract their work or sell on their accounts to other writers (Clarke and Lancaster 2013; Lancaster 2019). It is likewise difficult to estimate the global worth of the contract cheating market: one of the most established researchers in this field, Thomas Lancaster, alludes to it as 'a massive international industry, thought to be worth hundreds of millions of dollars per year' (Lancaster 2020, 116).

Marketing

Given the scale and worth of the contract cheating industry, it is hardly surprising that operators use varied and sophisticated techniques to attract custom. In addition to more traditional methods such as flyers, business cards, advertising hoardings, posters on public transport (Quality Assurance Agency 2020), assignment providers have kept up with developments in online marketing, from posting notices in online forums (Clarke and Lancaster 2013, 221) to purchasing advertising space on search engines (Lancaster 2020), use of YouTube influencers (BBC 2018), and direct marketing on social media, assisted by tools such as reply bots (Amigud 2020). They even threaten cybersecurity: in 2021, the Australian government discovered that essay mills were placing malicious code on HEI websites, directing students from the institution's webpages to their own services (Quality Assurance Agency 2021). Providers typically emphasise the credibility of their offer: in an analysis of 11 sites, Rowland *et al* found '*assurances of qualified writers (100% of sites); quality work (91%); payment security (91%); affordability (91%); on-time delivery (73%); confidentiality (73%); satisfaction (64%); and refunds for substandard work (64%)*' (Rowland *et al.* 2018, 658). Many promise originality (supported in some cases by plagiarism scans), use empathetic language, and normalise their service through use of testimonials and customer statistics (Medway, Roper, and Gillooly 2018). Other enticements include discount vouchers (Ellis, Zucker, and Randall 2018), instant chat (Rowland *et al.* 2018), free sample essays and 'free' plagiarism checks, which companies may use to obtain further essays for their database (Lancaster 2020).

Using reverse Domain Name Server (rDNS) lookup on a small number of academic custom writing sites, Ellis, Zucker and Randall (2018) uncovered slick and sophisticated business processes, with 'meticulous' attention to quality assurance and customer satisfaction.

Students' motives

Investigations that focus specifically on reasons for engaging in contract cheating are relatively recent, so earlier studies tend to draw on the literature about plagiarism and cheating in general (Walker and Townley 2012). Most studies involve self-reporting of students' own behaviour (e.g. Bretag et al. 2019,b), perceptions of their peers' behaviour (e.g. Awdry 2021) or reporting of what they would do in a given scenario (Rahimi et al. 2018; Rahimi, Akgunduz, and Bilgihan 2023, Rahimi et al., 2016; Rigby et al. 2015; Yorke, Sefcik, and Veeran-Colton 2020). A different approach is taken by Amigud and Lancaster (2019), who analysed 5000 tweets posted by students offering to pay for an essay. While some students were struggling to complete an assignment, others had no interest in undertaking the work, wishing to outsource the tedium and effort required to 'produce academic content' (p.104) in order to focus on more pleasurable activities such as shopping and parties. It can be seen clearly from all these studies that reasons for cheating arise from a complex intersection of personal and environmental factors and can be triggered by a specific situation (i.e. while some students habitually outsource their work, others do so only once).

Regarding personal characteristics, Amigud and Lancaster (2019) identified lack of perseverance and self-discipline as the first and third most cited reasons for wanting to buy an essay, with perseverance being the ability to finish an unpleasant/difficult task, and self-discipline the ability to begin it. Another personality trait relevant to contract cheating is risk aversion. Using hypothetical discrete choice experiments to determine students' willingness to pay for a bespoke assignment, Rigby et al (2015) found this increased with tolerance of risk; valuation declined with the quality of the essay; and no students were willing to pay where both the probability of getting caught and penalty were high. Yorke, Sefcik and Veeran-Colton (2020) used a similar method to test participants' response to the possibility of blackmail by contract cheating providers. Being made aware of this possibility halved the number of participants who said they would be willing to cheat. However, seven students said they would still purchase an assignment, feeling the risk and cost of failure was greater than that of blackmail.

One significant variable emerging in the UK-based study by Rigby et al (2015) was students' language background. Of the 18 users of English as an Additional Language (EAL), 15 (83%) indicated they would buy an essay, compared with 41% of participants whose first language was English (E1L). A higher proportion of EAL users had been previously warned about their source use, knew someone

who had bought an essay, and predicted a low pass grade for the assignment (i.e. had more motive to increase their marks). Lack of English language proficiency (including among domestic students who use EAL) is also noted as a factor in Canadian studies by Eaton et al (2019) and MacLeod and Eaton (2020). In a large-scale Australian study, Bretag et al (2019b) found (in relation to a question on assessment design) that EAL users expressed a greater likelihood of cheating on all 13 assessment tasks than did E1L users. Bretag et al (2019a) also found language background to be a significant variable in students' actual experience of cheating; however, it should be noted that this relates only to receiving assistance in examinations (including impersonation), not to 'obtaining an assignment to submit' (p.1854). In Yorke, Sefcik & Veeran-Colton's scenario-based study (2020, Australia), participants who elected to cheat were all domestic students and users of E1L. While language background has been established as a relevant factor in the literature on plagiarism (Pecorari 2008) mixed findings in the studies above indicate a need for caution in extrapolating this to the outsourcing of academic work.

Scholars caution against making essentialist assumptions about the relationship between cheating and culture, particularly in the case of international students (Bretag et al. 2019, 1849). While national differences have been identified in large-scale international surveys (Awdry 2021), it is acknowledged that previous learning experiences influence students' expectations and behaviors. For instance, Eaton et al. (2019, 8) mention an individual who reported paying a professor for copies of previous assignments at their home university. Additionally, students who are accustomed to examination-based assessments may face challenges in meeting the requirements of assessed coursework in a new educational environment. It is important to note that the influence of educational background extends beyond international students, as evidenced by cases of parents seeking to buy essays for their children and the promotion of custom essay-writing services to young influencers (Amigud and Lancaster 2019; BBC 2018). One environmental factor which may motivate students to outsource their work is financial pressure. With rising tuition fees in most Anglophone countries, more students may be engaging in paid employment to offset these costs. This gives less time for study, causing extra stress at peak assessment times (Eaton et al. 2019, 8). Note that in Rigby et al (2015) study, having a part-time job was found to be a non-significant variable in students' willingness to pay for a bespoke essay, and one of the least cited reasons in Amigud and Lancaster's 2019 investigation. However, failure incurs extra tuition costs, not to mention delay in entering full-time employment and (for international students) visa complications. These considerations may prompt a borderline student to cheat: *'If the assignment will cause me to fail it will cost an additional \$1500 to repeat the unit compared to only \$150 and a small chance of being caught'* (Yorke, Sefcik, and Veeran-Colton 2020, 7). In the UK, students typically graduate with five-figure student loan debt.

Other environmental factors cited in the literature are ‘a perception that there are “lots of opportunities to cheat”’ and ‘dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment’ (Bretag et al. 2019, 1837). In this survey, the areas of most marked difference in satisfaction levels between Cheating and Non-Cheating respondents were understanding assessment requirements; accessibility of tutors when help was needed; receiving sufficient feedback to enable progression; and teaching of scholarly practice (research, reading, critically analyzing and discussing discipline-specific material).

Higher and further education

Scholars have pointed to systemic changes in HE policy and the marketisation of education (ref) which may underpin the growth of contract cheating. Progressive reduction in funding for tertiary education has caused a rise in tuition fees and financial pressure on students. It has also led HEIs to offset the shortfall by recruiting more international students (with even higher tuition fees), sadly without investing adequately in the English language tuition and other forms of support these students need (Walker and Townley 2012, 37). The massification of HE (unaccompanied by an increase in funding) has led to large cohorts and class sizes, inducing feelings of anonymity and disengagement among students (Walker and Townley 2012, 36). Seeking to reduce staffing costs, HEIs have increased academic staff workloads and rely increasingly on casual labour (including zero-hours hourly paid contracts), both of which impact on availability of staff outside class time and their ability to give plentiful assessment feedback: two factors highlighted by Bretag et al (2019a) in students’ decision to outsource assessments. In addition, the growing perception of education as a commodity and students as customers has led to a ‘transactional’ view of study (Awdry and Newton 2019; Bretag et al. 2019, 1838), with degrees ‘increasingly a means to an end’ (Walker and Townley 2012, 37), leading to further dissociation from the subject of study. If the goal of study is employment rather than learning, and if custom-written essays represent value for money, a university degree (as consumer product) can be achieved more cheaply by paying for assignments as well as tuition.

Contract cheating therefore poses a significant ethical challenge to tertiary institutions, not least because of the potential for reputational damage if graduates are found to lack the skills their award is supposed to evidence. With support from national quality bodies such as Quality Assurance Agency (2020) and TEQSA (2017), education providers are employing a raft of measures to address the issue, including policy, staff development, student awareness campaigns, increased student support, rethinking assessment design and detection. While good assessment design has long been considered vital in promoting academic integrity, recent studies stress that no assessment type is cheat-proof (Bretag et al. 2019), including exams (Lancaster and Clarke 2017).

'Authentic' and 'practical' assessment methods are recommended, using 'face-to-face format where possible' (Quality Assurance Agency 2020, 19). Recent surveys suggest that most academic staff are aware of the problem and have a more or less realistic sense of its extent (Harper et al. 2019). Research into the detection of contract cheating shows that staff may not notice when it occurs (Lines 2016) but are more likely to pick it up if alerted to the presence of third-party submissions (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith 2018), and that detection rates can be improved with training (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith 2019). Software is being developed to assist the detection of outsourced work through linguistic profiling (Turnitin.com 2019), with some initial success (Dawson, Sutherland-Smith, and Ricksen 2020). However, there are significant barriers to the successful prosecution of students who commission an assessment. Studies from around the world show that academic staff are discouraged from reporting contract cheating cases because of the amount of time it takes to gather evidence, balanced against the likelihood of a conviction and the amount of time allowed within their workload (Harper et al. 2019; MacLeod and Eaton 2020). In particular, staff on precarious contracts may not be paid for the extra time pursuing a cheating case incurs, and may fear loss of employment if they fail too many students. Other barriers are the use of anonymous marking (introduced to eliminate bias), large cohorts and reduced staff-student ratios/contact time, which make it harder for tutors to know the abilities of their individual students.

Research method

The primary objective of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the real-life experiences of Further Education (FE) students involved in contract cheating and the strategies employed by various companies to engage them in this unethical practice. A qualitative research approach was utilized, and data were collected from students pursuing higher education degrees at a FE provider in Business Subject (University Partnership) located in London, United Kingdom. The student population predominantly consisted of international students, specifically European nationals funded by the UK Government through Student Finance England. This particular group was chosen as they were perceived to be more susceptible to engaging in contract cheating, based on observations made by their Tutor regarding prevalent contract cheating practices within their course.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, only students who had completed their degrees were invited to participate in the study. Ethical approval was sought from the University Ethics Committee, and informed consent was obtained through the distribution of information sheets and consent forms. To ensure the anonymity of the respondents, the students were approached by the Student Representative of the class, rather than the researchers or Tutors

directly, in order to mitigate any potential pressure or bias. A total of 20 identical USB sticks were distributed among the students, accompanied by a request to document their experiences related to contract cheating, including the processes involved and their motivations for resorting to such services. Students were explicitly instructed not to include any personal information or names in their responses. Out of the twenty distributed, eight USBs were returned, and five of the received responses were deemed suitable for analysis. While the small sample size of this study is a notable limitation, it is important to recognize the distinctiveness and valuable insights gained from the experiences of the (former) students, which contribute uniquely to our understanding of the subject. The collected information underwent content analysis, involving multiple stages of engagement, to identify key themes and patterns pertaining to contract cheating practices.

It is important to acknowledge that this research was conducted within the context of a specific FE provider, operating in partnership with a university, situated in the United Kingdom. Therefore, the research findings cannot be generalized to a broader population or applied to other countries or educational settings, however, they do enable identification of future research questions.

Findings

The analysis of the USB stick reflections provided by the five students reveals significant patterns and themes regarding their experiences throughout their engagement with contract cheating organizations. The findings shed light on different phases of the student journey, including the initial stages, the middle phase, and the eventual conclusion of their relationship with such entities. Throughout the discussion, pertinent aspects are explored, and relevant quotes directly extracted from the USB sticks are utilized for illustrative purposes, offering concrete examples to support the analysis.

Beginning stages: the initial connection

All initial contact was direct and by either the recruitment agents or the contract cheating organisations. Of the five respondents, two approaches to them seemed to be planned, with these two respondents citing agents as their initial contact whilst the other three mentioned a more emergent approach with *'a girl on a train from the same College and country,' 'a middle-aged male visitor on campus'* (not connected to the College) and another meeting with *'a random male.'* There was no clear gender emphasis with two quoting males and one a female for the emergent approach. The two who mentioned agents suggested that they were both female and male.

Although the emergent meetings seemed to be random, the suggestion is that they were planned as the individuals concerned were either working with

or for the agents and/or the contract cheating companies. It also seemed that the preference is to have the initial contact made by a third party directly face to face in order to gauge interest, and then to follow this up with a business card once interest is shown. This helps to limit the chances of meeting whoever is behind the companies and also reduces an email trail that could be shared as evidence, by whistle-blowers.

It was clear from all five respondents that they were contacted either before coming to the country (by the recruitment agents involved), or whilst in their first few weeks in the country (by the other third parties). This is potentially good timing for the ghost writer organisations. Students, new to the country, the College and the different educational context, could be confused about the university processes and will be looking for a friendly face and some support early on. The suggestion being that for some students, unsure or naïve to the cultural norms of the country, asking for support may feel out of their comfort zone early on and so when it is offered, it is more readily accepted. These students will be easier to spot at inductions and first week lessons. Interestingly, only one person mentioned explicitly that they were approached by someone in their own country; although the suggestion is that co-national agents allowed a familiarity and greater sense of belonging with those who come from a similar background, particularly in times of early induction anxiety.

Except for agents with a pre-existing relationship, gaining access and developing relationships could be challenging to start with so business cards were being handed out where students are likely to gather e.g. the canteen, local phone booths, but also through using new starters to gain access and to pass the word on. Two of the participants mentioned that 'word of mouth is the most popular transmitter of the information about it. It is very easy to approach other students to get some help or at least contacts.' The suggestion is that it is hard to avoid receiving this information.

Beginning stages: the initial conversation

The two recruitment agents had slightly different approaches. One student explained their anxieties related to the move towards assignments and away from the expected exams, creating concern for the incoming students as they had not been used to this approach. Another mentioned that the agent offered help with the assignments as part of the form filling application process and the wider support that they could offer. 'It's one of the procedures that agents use for convincing the students apply for a College or University.' On one hand the agents were creating worry and concern, and on the other hand they were also offering a solution. The agents tend to build on the relationship they have already established with the students; they have been a positive support for them through the application process, they are from the same country, speak the same language and so become a familiar official/formal figure that students

start to trust and as such begin to rely on for advice. It is possible that students feel obliged to the agents as they have helped them achieve their much wanted UK university place, or feel that if the agents have offered this service, then it must be culturally acceptable to pursue. The other three students mentioned more random approaches centred on reassurance with one saying 'he told me something like this is not going to be a problem.'

Four out of the five respondents mentioned that they needed help with their written English, with one stating '*we are all very bad in English language.*' Lack of written and verbal English skills will affect a student's readiness and motivation to learn. If students are feeling particularly vulnerable in their first few weeks in the UK, are struggling to understand the induction and first few weeks' teaching material and have paid a lot of money to journey to the UK and to study here, together with potentially (parental) pressure to pass, this will add to their increased anxiety about failing. Focussing on students when they are most vulnerable seems to be a key strategy; '*When I came in this country, I didn't know nothing about all of the business from here.*'

Information about other less formal offers were shared including fellow students handing out business cards and offering a paid service to support each other; '*one of my colleagues offered to help me with the assignments in case I struggled. He didn't mention any amount of money, but again, he knew someone (an Asian guy – by the sound of his name) who could provide me with already made assignments.*' Another mentioned second year students writing assignments for first year students and another senior student (who was not in paid employment) wrote assignments for extra money for others. Interestingly, this student was clearly very aware of the Academic Misconduct processes in place as '*she didn't take too many in the same subject because of the similarity. She could do one or two of each module because the research was taking more time to avoid the same references and similar statements.*' Also, help was sought from family members; one lady asked her daughter (presumably for free), another asked his brother (and was charged £100 per assignment) and another asked his wife. As students are becoming aware of the contract cheating offer, it is interesting to see the more entrepreneurial students seeing this as an opportunity for them to make money too whilst studying or after graduation and charging similar fees.

Beginning stages: contracting

It seems that unless one is involving family, friends, friends of friends or current student colleagues, one is unlikely to ever meet the assignment writer as they are probably based overseas. The five respondents mentioned that the external formal help offered by agencies and through word of mouth or business cards used anonymous '*assignment writing teams*' based in other countries in Asia. No names are mentioned, and the details are kept confidential, however the assumption is that there is a large team, and they are '*well educated and*

professional people who have many years of experience in writing' which is surprising considering the quality of the work returned (mentioned later.) The UK was mentioned by one of the respondents, but the suggestion is that these organisations are likely to be based outside the UK; *"I've never heard of natives doing this job. They are all foreigners, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and other Asian countries."*

For one respondent the deal was struck through the initial contact, then a phone call was made, followed by sending in the assignment brief via email. An email was then sent back along with the payment instructions. Then an assurance was made that the assignment would be ready within 7–10 days. Another respondent needed to go to a large office to meet a team of people face to face to complete a form with personal, module and assignment details i.e. layout, content, guidelines etc. together with their VLE password to their college student account so they could give access to the Tutor's notes and topics discussed in the class. It is worrying that assignment suppliers can access the college systems using the student's password as this means that they can access all the module, course and institutional material, which they can then download and use for this and for other contract cheating assignments too. Also, this provides the possibility for suppliers to use institutional platforms to contact other students about their services too.

Middle stages: assignment in progress

Respondents who detailed their assignment writing journey mentioned that they pay for an iterative service with room to go back and to have changes made. This shows quite a sophisticated system whereby formative and summative feedback will be considered. One of the methods suggested to tutors to reduce the chances of contract cheating is to ask for various drafts of formative work, but if the formative work is also being written by a third party, the outsourcing will not be detected. One respondent mentioned that if the tutor's feedback suggests more work needs to be done, the draft is sent back via email to the supplier, who takes the tutor's comments into account. For the other respondent, *'after the appointed time the "technical department" ... check the work in the turn-it-in programme and they attach the similarity percentage results. After the tutor saw the work and gave the feedback, [my friend] needed to send it [to the supplier] and they done the required corrections. My friend told me that after they done two corrections, he got merit.'*

Student motivation is indicated in the comments made earlier about their poor English writing skills and their lack of experience with non-examination-based assignments. One respondent mentioned that *'I am paying for most of my assignments just to have a structure to work on/Last semester I have spent 10 h/day, 5 days/week for each task. So, 4 tasks = 4 weeks for each assignment! And I had to quit work. I was able to do 2 of my assignment.'* This suggests that

outsourcing assessments saved time and allowed the student to continue in paid employment.

If international students are coming over to study in a foreign country and bringing their families too, they may well feel the pressure of needing to work and soon realise that they are unable to do both, with the time and effort needed to be invested. This will also be the case for those who are already working in the UK but are later supported by the agent to apply to College. Whichever the route in, this with the additional stress of needing to improve their language skills may well put pressure on students to find alternatives. If they do not pass, and fail again at resit, they will need to pay an additional fee to retake. This increased fee is much more than the initial cost of the assignment writing service, so it may seem much more economical to pay for the assignment support upfront than spend time and effort to write the assignment themselves and potentially not achieve a pass. In addition, it is recognised that there is a huge pressure on students in relation to the competition with peers, the family pressure to pass, the additional financial obligations to pay UK study fees and potentially to send money home too.

A more sinister and systemic reason for contract cheating was succinctly outlined by one respondent. Because this finding is so rarely reported in the literature, we have included their response in full:

When I came in this country I didn't know nothing about all of the business from here. I meet one guy and his name is Y. He ask me if I want to win some money without doing nothing just to go to school. I say look mate I don't know you English, I don't have knowledge and nothing but he told me something like this is not gone be a problem. 'You have to go to school and make the attendance and I'm gone make you the assignment because this in this country is a nice business for us.' And I ask him why? 'Because all of us wich are we doing this we do this for money.'

This is clearly an example of the type of scam uncovered by BBC Panorama in 2017 (Student Loan Scandal). Lord Storey, a tireless campaigner for legislation against essay mills in the UK, explained it thus to the House of Lords (HL) in 2021:

The Greenwich School of Management and other colleges were paying agents to recruit young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and often unemployed, to take up degree courses. The agents were paid a fixed sum of money for every young person they signed up to the course. To entice these young people on to the course, they would tell them not to worry about the academic assignments—they would be provided by an essay mill which would do the assignments for them. The agents got their money, the college got its fees, the students got a loan which was higher than a jobseeker's allowance, the university that validated the degrees got a fee, and the Government could show that a higher number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds were going into higher education. The trouble was that a very large number of young people took the loan and left at the end of the first year.

At the time our data were collected, EU students also qualified for support from Student Finance England, and it appears that some may have had no real

interest in studying within the UK. They paid for their assignments to ensure that they passed and progressed, and remained eligible for Student Loans Company finance.

End stages: quality

Despite the earlier suggestion that highly educated people are writing these assignments, the quality was mentioned by two respondents as poor; *'they are using bad English, as you already know by now'* and the results are less than satisfactory. It clearly must depend on which assignment writing organisation is used, as one respondent reported their friend attaining merit for his bought work. However, with the chance to go back to the organisations to make changes and the opportunity to make one's own changes too, this will improve the chances of success. This suggests that contract cheating is not always a time saving option. One of the respondents mentioned that; *'For my own experience, it is no chance to pass with those assignments if you are not personally work on it, adding information, make the corrections and formatting the document. Everything is wrong (70% at least).'* This connects with the comment made earlier that the student is using this service to provide structure and guidance, to get started. It also raises questions about the integrity of the academics that may be marking this work; *'I do not understand how my colleagues [fellow students] are passing as they are just printing the assignment from the guy.'* However, this could be less about integrity and more about intensification of the academic workload and ever increasingly tight marking and moderation deadlines.

One of the respondents shared concerns that *'In some ways this is disturbing because, without any involvement, this student may get better marks than those who actually spend time and energy researching and writing their own assignments.'* Perhaps this is another reason why students engage in contract cheating: not only does it save time, but it saves wasting time and effort for low reward. For those with poor English and a lack of understanding of assessment expectations, it is simpler to pay for someone else to do this for them. At least, in the most part, that will better guarantee a pass, or a better grade. In short, the suggestion is that if you want a better grade, you will need to pay; not a helpful word of mouth comment as perhaps very able students may be forced to engage in this practice as well, to ensure they keep up with the competition.

End stages: payment

For one of the respondents, the payment was made in cash and in advance. For another, the bill was sent with the completed essay. The participants in this study shared that the costs are relatively small, and depend on the number of words, the desired grade and also the turnaround time required. The turnaround times can vary between one to four weeks with assignments needed

within a week being the most expensive. Typically, the costs ranged from £80-£200. The prices seemed to be the same whether written by former/current students or through the contract cheating organisations. For students doing this type of work, they seemed to charge depending on the word count: £100 for 3000 words, £110 for 4000 words, £130 for 6000 words and £200 for 8000 words. Agencies tended to charge based on the grade the student was hoping to achieve e.g. £120 (3000 words) for pass, £150 for merit and £200 for distinction. *"They are having different prices for different marks. Also, the number of words is making the price. They are not giving any guarantee for the grades."* One of the respondents mentioned that students openly share their actions; *'students don't hide the fact that they are paying for their assignments. They talk loud and clear about the money they spend and how pleased (or not) they are regarding their assignments and the marks they are getting.'* This again helps word of mouth in recruiting new customers (or not, if negative feedback) but also suggests that students are not ashamed of their actions nor are worried about getting caught.

Discussion

In respect of our first research question, the results of the five student respondents showed that in terms of motivation, students engage in contract cheating due to poor English language skills, concerns about the financial implications of not passing and other work and/or family related pressures. As with the studies by Rigby et al (2015), Eaton et al (2019) and MacLeod and Eaton (2020), the lack of first language English was the most mentioned reason for our respondents. Our study does not infer that this is a practice only undertaken by international students, albeit our respondents were all from outside of the UK, as later other students were mentioned as being involved in writing essays for others, who may well have been students/family members with English as their first language. Two respondents mentioned the change in educational expectations in relation to assessments; the switch from exams to essay writing, being something they were unfamiliar with (Eaton et al. 2019) and concerned about, but again this is not something only of concern to non-UK students. As stated earlier, the reasons for cheating arises from a complex intersection of personal and environmental factors. There was no mention of blatantly not intending to do the work (Amigud and Lancaster 2019) but this may well have not been reported by the students too readily in their responses anyway.

In terms of our second research question in relation to the process, for these students initial contact is made by third parties in the very early part of the student journey, in a variety of ways. Those third parties can be formal businesses with custom-writing sites, those selling essays and/or through family, friends and fellow students (Ellis, Zucker, and Randall 2018). The more traditional ways of recruiting students are mentioned by the students in this study (face to face, business cards and referrals) with no mention of on-line marketing

(BBC 2018; Lancaster 2020). The details of the actual assignment writers are kept very confidential, to avoid detection and being fined, but also as they are likely to be based overseas, and not in the UK. The cost is surprisingly affordable and cheaper than originally published (Newton and Lang 2016; QAA; Newton and Lang 2016) but depends on a number of factors including speed and grade expected. The quality can be variable too, but if this is the case there are opportunities built in for additional support and changes to be made to bring the work to a pass.

In terms of our final research question in relation to helping and hindering factors, our research uncovered a complex web of interconnected stakeholders, all of whom stand to gain or lose financially from contract cheating. Bogus 'students' may apply in order to secure student finance or (from outside the country) migrate for employment purposes. Genuine students may turn to contract cheating in order to free up time for paid work, or mitigate the costs of failure. Students may also feel that the support is not available from the already stretched Tutors to support them (Bretag et al. 2019; Walker and Townley 2012). Tutors may not feel they are supported or paid enough for the many hours needed to follow up suspected contract cheating, or may fear that their (precarious) contract will not be renewed if they fail a high number of students. Agents receive commission from education providers for students they recruit, and possibly also from the assignment providers they engage. FE colleges and the validating universities may be eligible for funding related to widening participation, in addition to students' tuition fees and so may be aware of these practices, but not be tempted to develop a reputation for uncovering these practices and ultimately reducing future student recruitment. Conversely, tackling contract cheating requires resources: a robust reporting system with dedicated staff to manage processes, and sufficient marking time for teaching staff.

Recommendations and future research

Despite the illegal nature of contract cheating (add in 2022 ref from page 1 here), our results show that contract cheating is both prevalent in a number of forms and a complex issue. Tackling this necessitates engagement with all stakeholders towards recognising their role and accepting their responsibility within this, towards addressing the processes, policies and procedures involved. Also to be considered are the wider FE and HE context, the UK Government context and the wider international context that allow these unethical and unacceptable processes to occur i.e. students being targeted, systems that do not pick up or punish enough. Targeting one stakeholder group, e.g. the students, or one process or one contract cheating provider will not bring about the large-scale change that is needed. Targeting all stakeholders as an interconnected group and addressing inadequacies in institutional approaches

and national policies will combine to effect ultimate change in the way things are accepted or not in the educational culture of FE and HE, moving forward.

From the student point of view there needs to be more managing of expectations/more input at induction, more leniency regarding poor academic practice early on. There need to be awareness campaigns to show students the dangers inherent in contract cheating (including the possibility of blackmail) and benefits of doing the work themselves. Staff will require training in detecting and reporting contract cheating, and confidence in the procedures involved. They will also need adequate (paid) time to undertake this work, and reassurance that reporting incidents of cheating will not affect their employment prospects, while ignoring (or abetting) cheating could invoke disciplinary procedures. Assessment design should be re-considered – the Quality Assurance Agency (2020) offers useful guidance on this. There may also need to be investment in authorship identification software which uses forensic linguistics and document metadata to flag possible outsourcing of student work. From the processes, policies and procedures perspective there need to be more rigorous student recruitment processes and a tighter check and control for entry qualifications. The role of agents in the recruitment process needs to be revaluated and corrupt agents add burden to this process. As the majority of FE students' progress to HE top-ups, this means that they are taking these practices with them. The corrupt process seems to be beneficial for some FE providers due to the level of income they receive from Student Finance England. In some cases, students do not declare their previous tertiary qualifications, so that they can enter UK FE colleges and claim a student loan.

Of course, institutions, their agents, students and staff do not exist in a vacuum but operate within a national and global economic and legislative context. In countries where the provision and advertising of contract cheating services has been criminalised, very few prosecutions have occurred due to the fluid and international nature of these providers. In England, real-terms funding for Higher Education has been decreasing [for how long/since when?]. The removal of the student numbers cap in 2014–15 led to the marketisation of HE whereby HEIs were free to recruit as many Home students as they could, resulting in an increasingly crowded and impersonal environment where students may lack support and become disengaged, while staff struggle to discern individual students' capabilities. The founding of the Office for Students [say what this is] in 2018 heralded a strategic shift of focus from widening participation in Higher Education to rewarding institutions whose students continue and complete their course (strategic guidance ref 2018). It is yet to be seen whether this will result in more selective recruitment practices, or less stringent assessments. Recruitment of International students is regulated by the UKVI [say what this is?], who have three Core Requirements for institutions that wish to recruit international students and employ international staff. Ironically, the third Requirement (a course completion rate of 85%) may discourage institutions

from withdrawing bogus students and/or prosecuting contract cheating, since this would risk missing the completion target. Looking at the intensification within FE sectors, staffing and resources are the main issues as the class sizes are large, the teaching loads are heavy, Tutors need fewer qualifications and there is a lower rate of payment. This 'massive international industry' (Lancaster 2020, 116) already does and will continue to lead to serious safety concerns in relation to the qualifications and competence of graduates in all professions. This complex issue cannot be addressed without all stakeholders taking responsibility towards creating and buying into whole-scale policies created and enforced by the Government.

Future research should consider expanding the sample size, if accessible, to encompass a broader demographic. It would be beneficial to critically examine themes such as the normalization of contract cheating in academic discourse, essentialist assumptions underlying student behavior, the impact of the massification of higher education, and the commodification of education. Such an analysis could provide a more profound understanding of contract cheating, not merely as an isolated practice but as a symptom of broader educational and societal trends. These suggested areas of focus would not only complement the findings of this study but also contribute to a more nuanced and holistic discourse on academic integrity in the context of modern education. The advent of advanced AI technology, capable of generating essays and academic content, poses a significant challenge to traditional academic integrity and may alter the landscape of essay mills and paid assignment services.

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