

ENhance QUICK GUIDE

Combatting Contract Cheating

Kay Sambell, Sally Brown and Phil Race

What's the problem?

'Contract Cheating' is part of the wider range of unfair academic conduct, and a form of plagiarism, where a student commissions or pays someone else to produce part of, or the whole of an assignment, perhaps an essay, report or dissertation. There is currently much discussion in the press about how prevalent the problem is, and anguish among academics and Registrars about how to prevent, identify or deter it. Normally the assignment would be submitted for assessment either electronically or in printed form. 'Essay mills' are often websites offering to compose essays specifically to order, and the work may be written by 'ghost-writers', who are usually experienced writers either knowledgeable in the topic concerned, or well skilled in using Wikipedia, Google and other source materials to produce assignment answers.

"It is currently extremely easy for students, in any area of education, to pay a third party to do their work for them. Bespoke "custom essays" are available from hundreds of companies, and many online contract employment sites have sections for "academic writing". "Essay mills" may contain many thousands of prewritten assignments, available for some form of fee. It is even possible for students to pay for someone else to do examinations on their behalf" (Newton and Lang, 2016, p18).

The problem is compounded by the fact that such ghost-writing may produce material which is unique and will not be 'caught' by plagiarism detection software.

Why is it important?

When it is known that contract cheating is unlikely to be detected, and when students feel that others around them are engaging in this kind of unfair academic conduct, the likelihood to engage in such conduct increases. There are many reported 'reasons' why students are lured into such conduct, including:

- Running out of time for an important submission deadline;
- Several assignment deadlines coinciding through poor planning of student workload;
- Assignments being too long, increasing the pressure students feel;
- In large cohorts, where marking may be done by different assessors, the feeling that no-one will notice that the work may not be the student's own;
- Other life pressures interfering with academic work;
- Pressure from family to succeed whatever the cost;
- Pure laziness and unwillingness to put energy into academic work;
- The ready availability of 'essay mills' and ghost-writing 'services' online;
- Temporary illness interfering with progress;

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- The relative anonymity a student may feel as part of a large cohort;
- Dissatisfaction with the perceived quality of teaching;
- Determination to get good coursework grades whatever the means.

Whatever the 'cause', when this problem arises, it can poison the ethos of a group of students, and although 'whistle-blowing' can occur if fellow-students know about it and feel really badly about it, this rarely happens in practice.

What can we do about it?

This is a problematic area, because most HEI practitioners are eager to foster peer support and review so any attempts to deter deliberate cheating need to be mindful that "any response needs to be designed so as not to undermine or discourage appropriate collaboration, which is a cornerstone of learning" (Newton and Lang, 2016, op cit p18).

The following tactics may reduce the incidence of the problem:

1. Design assignments so they depend more on the particular experience of the individual student. For example, include briefings to reflect on their individual experience, or critical incident accounts, or creative suggestions to address a given situation.
2. Reduce the word-count of assignments. It has been argued that students are less likely to cheat in a short assignment than a long one. In any case, it can be more 'noticeable' if more than one student submits identical work when assignments are brief.
3. Plan in plenary review sessions, so students gain incremental feedback on their progress composing drafts of important or lengthy assignments, reducing the tendency to leave the task till too late and meaning that there is some level of scrutiny of work in progress.
4. Include a short oral face-to-face element in the module's assessment design, to check on veracity of submitted work, where two or three staff members give each student a very short 'micro-viva', asking just a few probing questions about the work submitted to check the student's understanding of what has been submitted.
5. Include a 'self-evaluation' section in an assignment, asking students themselves to comment on what they perceive as their strengths and weaknesses in the work they have submitted.
6. Foster a sense of the importance among students of good academic conduct, particularly with students entering subsequent employment requires adherence to Codes of practice, like Teaching, Nursing, Social Work, Accountancy etc. where dishonourable conduct can lead to disqualification (Carroll, 2002).

References

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DEPARTMENT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING ENHANCEMENT

Room 7.B.37, 9 Sighthill Ct, Edinburgh EH11 4BN

Phone: 0131 455 5018/6418 Web: <http://staff.napier.ac.uk/Enhance>



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