

*Upholding Academic Integrity: An Institutional Response to
Student Use of Contract Cheating Services*

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Abstract

Students paying online contract cheating services for individualized and affordable responses to their assessment tasks is a serious threat to academic integrity in universities. Australian universities were thrown into this arena due to public press coverage of the MyMaster contract cheating ‘scandal’ in 2015. This incident named prominent universities, numbers of student cheaters, details of payments, and more. Since then, Australian universities have sought to understand the extent of the problem, find ways to address practices, manage reputational risks, and demonstrate responses to the government regulator’s requirements. Existing data matching software rarely detect these customized student submissions. Contract cheating services are readily available and promoted to students through social media, peers and direct marketing on internet browsers. Of particular concern are vulnerable students who may be persuaded by such marketing to use these sites, believing they are not doing anything wrong or having no thoughts of future consequences. This paper provides insights into the thought leadership and practices of a large research-intensive metropolitan university in Australia that is addressing this challenge, based on an institutional academic integrity action plan. Aspects of the Plan include ensuring robust policies are in place; supporting academics in investigating breaches; taking appropriate action against misconduct; strengthening administration structures and practices; building an institutional culture of integrity; educating staff and students; strengthening assessment design; and exploring technological solutions. This paper aims to inform readers and encourage further collaboration across the sector to combat this challenge.

Keywords: Academic Integrity, Contract Cheating, Institutional Policies, Action Plan, Student Misconduct

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Introduction

Academic integrity is the moral code of academia and includes staff and student commitment to the values of honesty, responsibility, transparency, respect, trust and courage in assessment, research, and publishing (UQ PPL.3.10.02 Assessment Policy). Universities expect all staff and students to be responsible for their actions, with staff acting as role models for students (Universities Australia 2017). Academic misconduct includes long-standing practices such as unintentional or minor grievances due to poor referencing and inadequate academic skills, intentional plagiarism of others' ideas or words, and collusion amongst students sharing their work with others. These practices are usually detected by data matching software platforms used by universities. 'High tech' cheating practices, however, using ghost writers, a practice commonly called 'contract cheating', a term coined by Clarke and Lancaster (2006), is more difficult to detect by matching software or markers. Rowland, Slade, Wong and Whiting (2018) comment that contract cheating practices are 'central to much modern cheating behaviour' (p. 653).

Students paying online contract cheating services for individualised and affordable responses to their assessment tasks, which they then submit as their own, is a serious threat to academic integrity in universities. Australian universities were thrown into this arena due to public press coverage of the MyMaster contract cheating 'scandal' in 2015. This coverage named prominent universities, numbers for student cheaters, details of payments, and more. Since then, Australian universities have sought to understand the extent of the problem, find ways to address practices, manage reputational risks, and demonstrate responses to the government regulator's requirements.

Literature Review

A significant body of scholarly literature helps us understand why students cheat, with researchers suggesting both individual and contextual factors are involved. Early work in the 1990s by McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield (1999) found academic and family pressures, the desire to get higher grades, stress, laziness or apathy, and a lack of preparation were influencers. A later survey by McCabe and Trevino (1997) added peer attitudes and behaviour. Later research found individual drivers to include procrastination and fear of failure (Siaputra, 2013), low self-control (Curtis et al. 2018); surface learning and disengagement with morality (Barbaranelli et al., 2018), a competitive focus but impulsive with reduced confidence (Moss, White & Lee, 2018) and psychological health problems, such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Tindall & Curtis, 2020). Contextual drivers include students seeing opportunities to cheat, lack of language proficiency, and dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment (Bretag et al., 2018).

Commercial contract cheating services respond to these individual and contextual drivers by reaching out to students using multiple persuasive marketing techniques, as would a website legitimately selling products and services. Research by Rowland et al. (2018) analysed these persuasive techniques using a six-dimensional framework previously used to measure initial website persuasiveness for holiday choices (see Kim & Fesenmaier 2008; Diaz & Koutra 2013). Their analysis of the contract cheating services' homepages revealed marketing strategies, such as live chat, discounts for first time use, easy to use ordering button and price calculator, assurances of quality work,

a plagiarism free report, money back guarantee, and testimonials. Further, students could buy almost all assessment types across the gamut of disciplines, for example, from annotated bibliographies to oral presentation slides, essays and textbook answers, through to thesis proposals, and dissertations. Cost is determined by the number of pages and timeframe needed for delivery and can be much cheaper than paying fees to repeat a course.

The student, institutional and societal risks that accompany academic misconduct are heightened in contract cheating practices. Students are focused on meeting their immediate need of getting an assessment task response, rather than future implications of their actions. They are, however, open to being blackmailed by these unscrupulous services, both as students and future professionals (see Yorke, Sefcik & Veeran-Colton, 2020) and if caught by their institution will receive academic penalties, ranging from no credit for the task or course, or more seriously being suspended or expelled from their institution. Institutions that do not address student misconduct as open to reputational damage, the devaluing of their degrees, threats to their existing culture of honesty, and equity issues for honest students. Public risks are significant if we have under-qualified graduates working in society.

In summary, two questions must be asked:

1. 'How can we ensure that students genuinely complete assessment responses for which they get university credit?' and,
2. 'In what ways can universities respond to this new form of cheating?'

Case Study Example

The following sections of this paper provide insights into the thought leadership, research, and practices of a large metropolitan research-intensive university in Australia, with approximately 55,000 students. Figure 1 outlines the academic integrity progress made by the University from 2016 until the present.

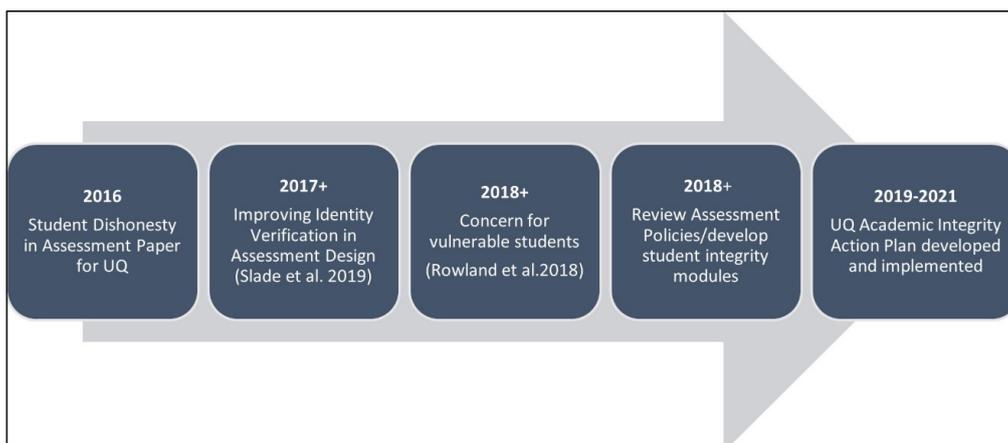


Figure 1: Timeline of academic integrity work at the University of Queensland (UQ)

In 2016 the University's Assessment Sub-committee asked the author, and two of her colleagues, to investigate the current issues involved in student dishonesty in assessment. The resulting publication, Addressing Student Dishonesty in Assessment Issues Paper for the UQ Assessment Sub-Committee, provided an overview of scholarly literature and an environmental scan of other universities' responses at the

time. A summary of the paper’s recommendations is provided in Figure 2, which includes ensuring robust policies are in place, supporting academics in investigations, taking punitive but educative action against misconduct, strengthening administrative structures and practices, ensuring an institutional culture of integrity, providing educative resources for students and staff, strengthening student identity verification in assessment design, and exploring available technologies. No one of these initiatives are enough to combat student misconduct in assessment, but rather all eight aspects need to function together to have an effective institutional approach to maintaining academic integrity (Slade, Rowland & McGrath, 2016).

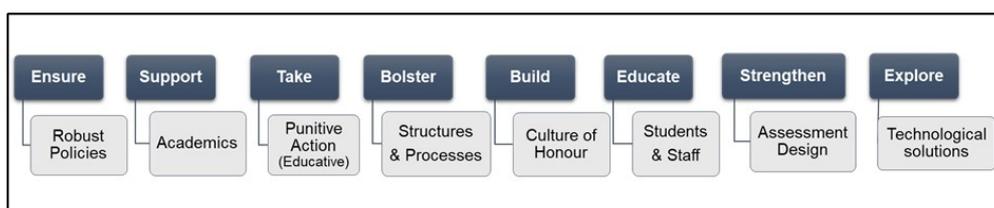


Figure 2: Holistic approach to institutional academic integrity (Slade, Rowland & McGrath, 2016)

In October 2016 the Asia Pacific Forum on Educational Integrity (APFEI) funded the project ‘Developing Student Identity Verified Assessment: A response to contract cheating’. With these funds, the author as project leader, and Professor Susan Rowland, from the Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation (ITaLI) at The University of Queensland, facilitated two creative co-design workshops – one in Brisbane and the other in Melbourne – in early February 2017. Representatives from fifteen Australian universities collaborated in the workshops to redesign a suite of generic assessment tasks, (other than exams) to improve the verification of student authorship in completing the tasks. The workshop processes and outputs can be found in the International Journal for Academic Development. The author continues to facilitate similar co-design workshops at inter/national and institutional levels, as educators learn how to strengthen their assessment design in response to contract cheating.

The publication, mentioned previously about the vulnerability of students to the persuasive messages of online contract cheating services by Rowland, Slade, Wong & Whiting was published in 2018 as the output of a student-staff partnership research project. In the same year, the author was UQ’s representative on the Epigeum International Development Collaborative in which twenty universities globally developed new academic integrity modules, for both students and staff. The student modules are based on interactive scenario-based pedagogies that aimed to help students make good ethical decisions when confronted with typical academic integrity challenge points. The modules are customised to include extra UQ resources and compulsory assessment questions are sprinkled throughout the modules; all of which the student needs to answer correctly before module completion can be recorded. Staff, who support students in the teaching and learning environment, are encouraged to complete the staff modules. The development and implementation of these academic integrity modules became Recommendations 3-5 of the University’s Academic Integrity Action Plan, discussed below.

The concept of student identity verified assessment (IVA) with hurdles continued to be discussed and implemented at different levels across the University. IVA is defined as an assessment task designed to ensure that the task is completed by the student. IVAH

is identity verified assessment with a hurdle that requires students to achieve at a particular level to be awarded grades. This concept became Recommendation 13 of the Action Plan, outlined in Table 1.

Other recommendations of the Action Plan outlined in Table 1 include: establishing a student designed and led honour code; ensuring robust policies are in place; supporting academics in investigating breaches; encouraging student reporting of misconduct; taking appropriate educative action against misconduct; raising awareness of misconduct penalties; supporting students who have English as an additional language; consolidating administration structures and practices; adopting effective e-Assessment options; and strengthening assessment design

No.	Description	Progress
1	Establish a Student Academic Integrity Honour Code	In progress
2	Develop an operationally enforceable Student Code of Conduct to replace the current Student Charter applicable to all UQ students.	TBA
3	Provide an educative online academic integrity program for students and staff – the Epigeum Academic Integrity Program (EAIP).	Completed
4	Require students to complete the student-facing online academic integrity program.	Completed
5	Request academic and professional staff who directly support teaching to complete the staff-facing online academic integrity program.	Completed
6	Create an encouraging environment for students to report breaches of academic integrity by their peers.	In progress
7	Adopt an educative approach to sharing past breaches with students and how these breaches were penalised.	Completed
8	Implement a campaign to highlight and promote the importance of academic integrity.	In progress
9	Develop a support program for students with English as an additional language (EAL) and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students.	In progress
10	Support academic staff in detecting and reporting academic misconduct. Support Integrity Officers to promote appropriate practices and decisions within Schools regarding suspected and actual breaches of academic integrity	Completed
11	Support the uptake of effective and reliable e-Assessment tasks	In progress
12	Revise the academic integrity and misconduct policy	TBA
13	Review the Assessment PPL entry to include Identity Verified Assessment with Hurdles (IVAH) in each course and establish guidelines that promote assessment design to reduce the risk of academic misconduct whilst achieving other essential teaching and assessment goals. Support staff in the design and uptake of new assessments.	In progress

Table 1: Description and progress of academic integrity action plan recommendations (UQ Academic Integrity Action Plan)

The implementation of the UQ Academic Integrity Action Plan's recommendations is underway, despite the interruption in 2020 of enacting rapid remote delivery of teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A working party with representatives from across the University, including student leaders, academics, and professional staff, is furthering the implementation in 2021.

Conclusion

This paper presents the academic integrity challenges contemporary tertiary institutions face from sophisticated online commercial contract cheating services. It also briefly outlines a large metropolitan University's response to these challenges. Unfortunately, there is no end to the cheating opportunities the internet provides to students. Institutions need to remain vigilant as new services emerge and respond with sound but flexible policy and practice outcomes. No individual institution is exempt from contract cheating services; this is a shared problem which requires the sector to collaborate in research initiatives, to share practices (both positive and negative) and resources and take collective action to combat this challenge.

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