ABSTRACT

Contract Cheating and Assessment Design: Exploring the Connection

PRESENTER: Dr Rowena Harper, prepared in collaboration with project co-leader
Associate Professor Tracey Bretag, University of South Australia

If media reports are to be believed, Australian universities are facing a significant and growing problem of students outsourcing their assessment to third parties, a behaviour commonly referred to as contract cheating. Contract cheating was first defined as the submission of work by students for academic credit which the students have paid contractors to write for them1. The definition has since broadened, however, to include any instance where a student arranges for their assessment to be completed by someone else, whether they are an acquaintance or stranger, and whether this is paid or unpaid. Much of the reporting language suggests the problem is on the rise, yet few studies have provided an empirical basis for this assertion. Amid widespread anxiety about the integrity of the entire higher education system currently experiencing a perfect storm of competition, commercialisation, corruption, cost-cutting, casualization, and credentialism contract cheating can perhaps be seen as symptomatic of a system under strain. The sharpened focus on contract cheating might then be understood as recognition that the contemporary higher education environment provides ideal conditions in which contract cheating could proliferate.

Assessment design has been proposed by many as a key strategy for minimising or even designing out contract cheating. In addition to a range of assessment design strategies advocated by academic integrity researchers, authentic and programmatic approaches have more recently been suggested. This session reports the main findings from the largest known study to date on contract cheating, which sought to determine if and how assessment design may be used as part of a broader teaching and learning framework to minimise contract cheating. Funded by the Department of Education and Training, the study conducted a large scale survey of students (n = 15,047) and staff (n = 1,243) at eight universities and four pathway colleges. The surveys explored attitudes toward and experiences with contract cheating, including the individual, contextual and institutional factors that may contribute to this behaviour. In addition, the project analysed data from two universities longitudinal academic integrity databases, and a large dataset (n = 20,000) of procurement requests posted to multiple cheat sites which show the types of assessment most commonly contracted out.

Findings indicate that while assessment design is likely to play a role in minimising contract cheating, other factors are more salient. Particular cohorts of students including international and LOTE students are much more likely to report behaviours classified as cheating. In addition, students who reported cheating were more likely to report negative experiences with three specific features of the teaching and learning environment: opportunities to approach educators for assistance when needed; educators ensure understanding of assessment requirements; educators provide sufficient feedback for learning. This research suggests that supporting more personalised teaching and learning relationships with vulnerable cohorts is central to addressing contract cheating. Moreover, the work of ALL units is directly implicated in this agenda.