



# **NUS Submission to Tackling Contract Cheating**

Presented by NUS National Education Officer, Lachlan Barker

## The issue of contract cheating

According to a 2018 study of students in higher education, as many as 15.7% students globally - that is, 31 million individuals - are likely to have accessed contract cheating services at some point in their degree.<sup>1</sup> This is the magnitude of the academic integrity 'crisis' faced by universities across the country and indeed here in Australia.<sup>2</sup>

Repercussions for contract cheating have varied in level of severity in punishment. No matter the level of punishment, there is no consistent reported correlation between punishment and likelihood to cheat.<sup>3</sup> In fact, many studies are seeming to uncover that neither cheating, plagiarism or falsification 'were significantly related to a student having been informed about the rules and penalties for cheating or plagiarism'.<sup>4</sup> According to research conducted by academics at the University of South Australia, the cultural or linguistic background of student respondents did not affect their beliefs about the wrongness of cheating,<sup>5</sup> but that it could impact upon the levels of anxiety experienced around the production of high-quality assessments, and therefore result in greater statistical representation of students with a first language other than English (LOTE-status students) amongst contract cheaters.<sup>6</sup>

This begins to unpack the issues underlying contract cheating: level of assessment, the pressure to perform, feelings of isolation compared to the level of support, and understanding of academic integrity.<sup>7</sup> These are, however, all informed by a university context (that bleeds into a learning environment) that prioritises a market-model of education.<sup>8 9</sup>

## Why do students use these services?

Past cheating behaviour, understanding the meaning of cheating or academic integrity, poor study conditions, dissatisfactory classroom environment, struggling to maintain grades, lack of time, struggling with poor English skills, distance education, age and gender (with younger men

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<sup>1</sup> Philip M. Newton, 'How Common Is Commercial Contract Cheating in Higher Education and Is It Increasing? A Systematic Review' (2018) 3 *Frontiers in Education*.

<sup>2</sup> 'More support for academic integrity in higher education: Australian Government response to recommendations of the Higher Education Standards Panel' <[https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/australian\\_government\\_response.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/australian_government_response.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Rowland et al, "Just turn to us": the persuasive features of contract cheating websites' (2018) 43(4) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 652, 653.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Marsden, Marie Carroll & James T. Neill, 'Who cheats at university? A self-report study of dishonest academic behaviours in a sample of Australian university students' (2005) 57(1) *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 1, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Tracey Bretag & Rowena Harper, 'Assessment design won't stop cheating, but our relationships with students might', *The Conversation* (online, at 12 May 2017) <<https://theconversation.com/assessment-design-wont-stop-cheating-but-our-relationships-with-students-might-76394>>.

<sup>6</sup> Tracey Bretag et al, 'Contract cheating and assessment design: exploring the relationship' (2018) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Rowland et al, "Just turn to us": the persuasive features of contract cheating websites' (2018) 43(4) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 652, 655-56.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Gillings & Jane Williamson, 'Universities run as businesses can't pursue genuine learning', *The Conversation* (online, at 19 June 2015) <<https://theconversation.com/universities-run-as-businesses-cant-pursue-genuine-learning-43402>>.

<sup>9</sup> Tracey Bretag & Rowena Harper, 'Contract cheating in Australian universities: Implications for assessment, integrity and review of quality and standards' (Strategic Priority Project Findings No SP16-5283, Department of Education & Training, presented at Higher Education Quality Network Conference 7 June 2018) <[https://www.hes.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploaded-content/website-content/Images/Documents/2018-HEQN-Conference/bretag\\_harper.pdf](https://www.hes.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploaded-content/website-content/Images/Documents/2018-HEQN-Conference/bretag_harper.pdf)>.

more likely to cheat), and the belief that cheating would bring a positive outcome are all factors reported to have contributed toward students' decisions to employ a contract cheating agent.<sup>10</sup>

LOTE-status students who have been surveyed about contract cheating have cited an additional factor: 'lower levels of satisfaction and engagement compared to their domestic peers'.<sup>11</sup> Australia's LOTE-status students are predominantly from international backgrounds<sup>12</sup> and feelings of social isolation and struggling to access academic support have been cited when students are asked about engagement with classes and course content.<sup>13</sup> Whilst understanding of cheating - and, specifically, the belief that it is wrong - are not impacted by LOTE-status, comprehensive knowledge of academic integrity and understanding contract cheating as cheating are reportedly impacted.<sup>14</sup>

**Recommendation 1: ensure that international students are supported socially and academically supported. Target policy-teaching to potentially vulnerable student groups.**

As is understood by many academics and commentators,<sup>15 16 17</sup> a solely punitive approach to contract cheating is unlikely to address the complex reasons that lead students to employ an cheating service. Students' own ethical and moral codes do not predispose them to take up contract cheating any more than threat of punishment;<sup>18</sup> the same is evident for authenticity in assessment design or attempts to 'design-out cheating' - this has little impact upon the likelihood of students to cheat.<sup>19</sup> A further issue identified with punitive approaches is the transformation of the classroom dynamic from a 'teacher-student relationship' to a 'police-criminal relationship'.<sup>20</sup> The focus on tracking down wrongdoers or dissuading cheating affects how classes are taught and assessments approached; originally about learning and self-development, the classroom environment becomes a space of 'distrust which not only

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<sup>10</sup> Philip M. Newton, 'How Common Is Commercial Contract Cheating in Higher Education and Is It Increasing? A Systematic Review' (2018) 3 *Frontiers in Education*.

<sup>11</sup> Tracey Bretag et al, 'Contract cheating and assessment design: exploring the relationship' (2018) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Tracey Bretag & Rowena Harper, 'Assessment design won't stop cheating, but our relationships with students might', *The Conversation* (online, at 12 May 2017) <<https://theconversation.com/assessment-design-wont-stop-cheating-but-our-relationships-with-students-might-76394>>.

<sup>16</sup> Jedidiah Evans, '15% of students admit to buying essays. What can universities do about it?', *The Conversation* (online, at 18 October 2018) <<http://theconversation.com/15-of-students-admit-to-buying-essays-what-can-universities-do-about-it-103101>>.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Gillings & Jane Williamson, 'Universities run as businesses can't pursue genuine learning', *The Conversation* (online, at 19 June 2015) <<https://theconversation.com/universities-run-as-businesses-cant-pursue-genuine-learning-43402>>.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Rowland et al, "'Just turn to us": the persuasive features of contract cheating websites' (2018) 43(4) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 652, 653.

<sup>19</sup> Tracey Bretag et al, 'Contract cheating and assessment design: exploring the relationship' (2018) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Walker & Cynthia Townley, 'Contract cheating: a new challenge for academic honesty?' (2012) 10 *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 27, 34

undermines learning but can become a self-fulfilling prophecy as students live down to apparent expectations.<sup>21</sup>

**Recommendation 2: centre the classroom experience around the benefits of learning. Ensure that academic penalty policies are transparent and well-communicated, driven by restorative approaches. Ensure that education about contract cheating is focussed on benefits of learning.**

The increasingly market-driven ‘universities-as-businesses’ approach is also impacting upon perceptions of learning environments,<sup>22</sup> with students reportedly identifying systemic issues as contributing factors in contract cheating.

*‘[W]ith education now a “business” and degrees sold as a “product” - there is less connection and understanding that University is about acquiring knowledge. It is seen as a user-pays system to get the degree. The degree will get the job, or the extended visa for the Masters, the job, etc. [...] It’s about getting passes, getting through the process - hence, little attachment to the ethics of cheating...’* - Student interviewed for HEQN conference.<sup>23</sup>

Staff members interviewed in the same research highlighted similar concerns, citing the ‘university management’s focus on the business of education’ becoming ‘more important than the education process itself’, and thus creating a transactional approach to academic work. The universities-as-businesses approach has also impacted upon international students, Australia’s third-largest export industry. International students generated \$32.2 billion for the Australian economy in 2017, and more than 98% of this money was from tuition and living costs.<sup>24</sup> The problems from the business model of universities intersect with and amplify the issues already affecting international students; a feeling of a lack of support, absence of social value, transactional approaches to education, and fear of failure all result in greater pressure to perform and an increased likelihood of outsourcing to a contract cheating service.<sup>25</sup>

**Recommendation 3: reverse cuts to tertiary institutions. Restore a demand-driven model for higher education.**

**Recommendation 4: ensure that international students are both equipped and supported to take on higher education in Australian institutions.**

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Gillings & Jane Williamson, ‘Universities run as businesses can’t pursue genuine learning’, *The Conversation* (online, at 19 June 2015) <<https://theconversation.com/universities-run-as-businesses-cant-pursue-genuine-learning-43402>>.

<sup>23</sup> Tracey Bretag & Rowena Harper, ‘Contract cheating in Australian universities: Implications for assessment, integrity and review of quality and standards’ (Strategic Priority Project Findings No SP16-5283, Department of Education & Training, presented at Higher Education Quality Network Conference 7 June 2018) <[https://www.hes.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploaded-content/website-content/Images/Documents/2018-HEQN-Conference/bretag\\_harper.pdf](https://www.hes.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploaded-content/website-content/Images/Documents/2018-HEQN-Conference/bretag_harper.pdf)>.

<sup>24</sup> ICEF Monitor, ‘Australia’s international education exports grew by 22% in 2017’ (Article, 17 April 2018) <<http://monitor.icef.com/2018/04/australias-international-education-exports-grew-22-2017>>.

<sup>25</sup> Tracey Bretag et al, ‘Contract cheating and assessment design: exploring the relationship’ (2018) *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1, 12.

- **Provide adequate language support services, and key information in major international student population first languages.**
- **Increase funding for counselling services.**
- **Provide more support and more flexible options for international student accomodation.**

### **Conclusion**

The path forward for tackling contract cheating requires addressing the reasons that students access contract cheating services. It is highly unlikely that institutions will ever permanently root-out all cheating. The approach in reduction, though, cannot be one focussed on punishment, or driven by market theories in running education businesses. All efforts require restorative approaches that centre student needs and wellbeing. NUS calls on the Australian Government to better fund universities, and ensure that learning environments are not punitive. Education on contract cheating must centre the benefit of learning - and universities must demonstrate a dedication to this principle.