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Good Practice Note:
Addressing contract cheating to safeguard academic integrity

Second edition

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TEQSA

Good Practice Note: Addressing contract cheating to safeguard academic integrity (second edition) – May 2026

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Provider resources

TEQSA regulates and assures the quality of Australian higher education providers.

In carrying out this work, we produce resources to support higher education providers to understand their responsibilities under the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021*.

Threshold Standards

The Threshold Standards is a legislative instrument that is structured to align with the student experience or 'student life cycle'. It sets out the requirements for provider entry to, and continued operations within, Australia's higher education sector. The Threshold Standards apply to all providers offering courses leading to a regulated Australian higher education award, irrespective of where and how a course is delivered. All providers are required to demonstrate their adherence to the Threshold Standards.

Guidance notes

Guidance notes are concise documents designed to provide high-level, principles-based guidance on interpretation and application of specific standards of the Threshold Standards. They also draw attention to other interrelated standards and highlight potential risks to compliance. They do not introduce prescriptive obligations.

The definitive instruments that set out providers' obligations in delivering higher education remain the Threshold Standards (as written by the Higher Education Standards Panel) and the TEQSA Act.

Good practice notes

Good practice notes offer practical advice and examples of good practice to guide operations regarding in specific areas. They are intended to support and promote the quality assurance approaches of providers.

More information and guidance on the Threshold Standards and our regulatory approach can be found at teqsa.gov.au.

First edition author's note

It has been my great pleasure to collaborate with TEQSA in writing this *Good Practice Note. Addressing contract cheating to safeguard academic integrity* incorporates much of my thinking and research on academic integrity since 2002, and focusses that knowledge on a new and emerging threat to higher education across the globe.

As the literature review in this document demonstrates, academic integrity is not a new field of inquiry, and I pay homage to the many researchers who have paved the way, over many decades. In addition, I wish to extend my thanks and appreciation to the many colleagues who contributed to this *Note*, both directly and indirectly. A special thank you to the Australian higher education providers who agreed to have their exemplary work showcased, so that other institutions could benefit from their good practice: Griffith University, the University of Western Australia, Deakin University, Curtin University, UniSA College and CQ University. Thanks also to my generous colleagues, both in Australia and abroad, who provided case studies of an academic integrity innovation that had been successful in their own contexts: Sonia Saddiqui, Wendy Sutherland-Smith, Gavin Hodgkinson, Michael Baird, Joseph Clare, Shiva Sivasubramaniam, Ann Rogerson, Salim Razi and Greg Preston. Other colleagues provided valuable insights or pointed me in the right direction regarding resources: Jon Yorke, Sharon King, Jenny Roberts and Michael Draper.

An enormous debt of gratitude is owed to my many research partners on numerous Australian Office for Learning and Teaching funded projects, without whose inspiration, expertise and perseverance, the research on academic integrity would be significantly less advanced: Saadia Mahmud, Julianne East, Margaret Green, Colin James, Ursula McGowan, Lee Partridge, Ruth Walker, Margaret Wallace, Karen van Haeringen, Lee Pointon, Rowena Harper, Sonia Saddiqui, Cath Ellis, Phil Newton, Pearl Rozenberg and Michael Burton. I also wish to acknowledge the leadership of two key organisations in addressing contract cheating: the Quality Assurance Agency (UK) and the International Center for Academic Integrity (USA). Finally, I am grateful every day to work for the University of South Australia, where my long-standing interest in academic integrity, and my desire to effect lasting cultural change for students and staff, continues to be supported.

This *Good Practice Note* does not purport to deliver a 'solution' to the problem of contract cheating, but aims to provide a stimulus for reflection and a call to action, both in our own institutions, and as part of a sector-wide collaboration.

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Second edition author's note

The first edition of the Good Practice note was written by Professor Tracey Bretag. Professor Bretag tragically passed away in 2020. Her work on the original Good Practice Note was exceptional, and her contributions to academic integrity in Australia and internationally are unmatched. Although this is not the place to eulogise, readers who are interested in Professor Bretag's enormous influence on academic integrity scholarship can read a collection of tributes.

The second edition of TEQSA's Good Practice Note on contract cheating is not a wholesale revision of the previous work. This edition mostly retains previous good practice examples and adds updates, new ideas and innovations to the previous note. In addition, in this 2nd edition, some content and background information have been updated to incorporate new research.

The principal rationale for updating the background to this note is that most of the research on contract cheating that currently exists has been published since the 1st edition (Lancaster, 2022). As well as the various research papers on contract cheating, the first scholarly book on contract cheating (Eaton et al., 2022) was also published 5 years after the release of the 1st edition of this Good Practice Note. On top of this, new innovations in addressing contract cheating have been developed, many of which are outlined in the TEQSA Masterclass: Contract cheating detection and deterrence.

This update to the Good Practice Note was supported by TEQSA as part of a wider upgrade to their *Academic Integrity Toolkit*. I want to thank my collaborators on the project to upgrade the Toolkit: Christine Slade, Rebecca Awdry, Kane Murdoch, Joe Clare, Cameron Foale and Amanda White. I would also like to acknowledge the seminal work across the higher education sector in Australia on contract cheating by numerous academic and professional staff including: Cath Ellis, Ann Rogerson, Rowena Harper, Jasmin Thomas, Shaun Lehmann, Wendy Sutherland-Smith, Phill Dawson, Sheona Thomson, Nick Milne, Edward Pickering, Katherine Seaton, Tristan Enright, David House, and many more – apologies to anyone I've forgotten.

In addition to those mentioned above, the sector-wide response to tackle the problem of contract cheating in Australia has been supported by successive Australian governments through TEQSA. In particular, legislation prohibiting advertising and selling contract cheating services has been world-leading. Current and past directors of TEQSA's Higher Education Integrity Unit, Lenka Ucnik and Helen Gneil, have been instrumental in supporting the higher education sector in Australia to combat contract cheating.

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Purpose

This *Good Practice Note* is intended to complement the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) *Guidance note: Academic and research integrity.*

The recommendations in this *Good Practice Note* correspond to the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* and provide specific, practical advice to address contract cheating in relation to five critical areas:

- policies to promote academic integrity
- procedures and policies to address academic integrity breaches
- actions to mitigate risks to academic integrity
- the provision of academic integrity guidance
- good practices to maintain academic integrity.

This *Good Practice Note* provides Australian higher education providers with access to research and exemplars to enable the development of policies and processes to minimise contract cheating. This endeavour is part of a sector-wide agenda to safeguard academic integrity and is critical to protect students' learning outcomes, institutional reputations, educational standards, professional practice and public safety.

Background

Since around 2000, numerous media reports have highlighted the importance of academic integrity to the Australian higher education sector. In the early years, the focus was on plagiarism and the impact of increasing internationalisation on academic standards (see Bretag, 2016). As a result, considerable research has been conducted; much of it funded by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching, on how best to address plagiarism, support international students and ensure that all students receive adequate academic literacies training. By and large, the emphasis has been on developing and promoting clear academic integrity policy and processes for undergraduate students, coupled with appropriate support services and resources. Various research projects and investigations demonstrated that all Australian universities had appropriate policies in place (Grigg, 2009) and generally speaking, there had been a shift in emphasis from a punitive to educative approach in relation to academic integrity (Bretag *et al*, 2011).

In late 2014, the focus shifted again. A high impact media story relating to the 'MyMaster scandal' – where the Fairfax media exposed widespread use by students of the commercial cheat site 'MyMaster' – led to Australian higher education providers beginning to address this new threat to academic integrity known as 'contract cheating'. This occurs when students outsource their assessments to a third-party, whether that is a commercial provider, current or former student, family member or acquaintance. It includes the unauthorised use of file-sharing sites, as well as organising another person to take an examination.

During this period, higher education providers around the world (for example, in the United States, Canada, South America, United Kingdom, Ireland and Europe) were experiencing similar concerns with the proliferation of unscrupulous and marketing-savvy commercial organisations providing bespoke essays for students. The Australian higher education regulator, TEQSA, requested the 17 higher education providers named in relation to the MyMaster incident provide an 'assurance of academic integrity' and specifically demonstrate how the threat of contract cheating was being addressed.

Based on the higher education providers' responses, TEQSA prepared the *Report on student academic integrity and allegations of contract cheating* in 2015. In 2016, further analysis was conducted of additional information provided by the 17 higher education providers named in the media, as well as documents provided by 13 other higher education providers, against Part A of the Threshold Standards, to assess how effectively the higher education providers had responded to the allegations that contract cheating had occurred in their institutions. The analysis concluded that the 17 higher education providers identified as being implicated in the MyMaster incident had provided responses which complied with the Threshold Standards, to varying degrees. Three providers were noted as exhibiting excellent academic integrity practice: Griffith University, the University of Newcastle and CQUniversity. Six key areas were identified as requiring additional attention across the sector:

1. higher education providers taking a holistic approach to academic integrity
2. consistent academic integrity education for both staff and students
3. innovative assessment design which goes beyond invigilated examinations
4. using text-matching software consistently for both education and detection
5. training and professional development for academic integrity decision-makers
6. the role of academic integrity breach data for quality assurance and improvement.

Literature review

How prevalent is cheating?

Most of the highly cited work on academic integrity around the world has been based on large surveys, which have asked students to self-report their cheating behaviours (see Table 1). None of these surveys have contradicted earlier work by Bowers (1967) or McCabe and colleagues (1992, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2005), in that a large proportion of students in every survey report engaging in one or more 'questionable' behaviours (such as copying or using unauthorised notes in an exam). While the proportion of students who admit to some form of academic integrity breach is generally high, the percentage of students who report having plagiarised varies from as low as 19% (Scanlon & Neuman, 2002), to 26% (Ellery, 2008), 66% (Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995) and 81% (Marsden et al., 2005). Self-reported rates of plagiarism in postgraduate work also vary widely from 5% (Segal et al., 2010) to 27% (McCullogh & Holmburg, 2005) and 42.6% (Gilmore et al, 2010).

Evidence suggests a steady downward trend in plagiarism engagement over the past two decades in Australia, which is related to better academic integrity education and

assessment security in the form of text-matching software (Curtis & Tremayne, 2021). Nonetheless, such surveys still show that around 60% of students engage in some form of plagiarism (Curtis & Tremayne, 2021). Similarly, the percentage of self-reported cheating varies, from 47% (Stiles et al., 2018) to 67% (McCabe, 1992) and 72% (Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005), depending on how 'cheating' is defined in the research.

The percentage of students who report engaging in contract cheating is comparatively lower than other forms of cheating, but, again, this varies widely depending on survey contexts, research questions, and methods (Curtis & Clare, 2024). Various studies have provided estimates of the prevalence of contract cheating ranging from 0% (Newton, 2018), or close to 0% of students in the study (e.g., 0.0007%; Christiansen-Hughes & McCabe, 2006) up to nearly half of the students in the study (e.g., Abukari, 2016). Because of such significant variation, the more reliable estimates of the prevalence of contract cheating come from large-scale studies, meta-analyses, and studies using advanced methodologies to overcome the limitations of self-reports (Curtis & Clare, 2024a).

Two meta-analyses of contract cheating self-report surveys both found that around 3.5% of students admit to engaging in contract cheating (Curtis & Clare, 2017; Newton, 2018). Notably, these surveys looked at commercial contract cheating, where students paid for assignments. Subsequent large-scale surveys found higher rates of engagement in assignment outsourcing, when considering not just paid outsourcing, but also use of file-sharing sites to obtain assignments, and informal outsourcing such as obtaining help from friends and family members (Awdry, 2021; Bretag et al., 2019). These studies, each surveying over 10,000 students, estimated that between 7% and 12% of students engage in contract cheating. Finally, an Australian study of over 4,000 students, using sophisticated methods to estimate the prevalence of commercial contract cheating, found that although only around 2% of students admitted to buying and submitting bespoke assignments, around 8-11% of students most likely engage in commercial contract cheating (Curtis et al, 2022).

Although studies suggest that it is a minority of students who engage in contract cheating, the small percentages extrapolated over the number of students in higher education translates to tens of thousands of instances of students engaging in contract cheating (Curtis & Clare, 2024a). A serious concern, beyond the number of students who engage in contract cheating is the number of students who might do so. Research by Rigby et al. (2018) presented students with various scenarios in which they might buy assignments to submit instead of writing them. They found that 50% of students indicated that they would buy an assignment. Thus, although the majority of students do not engage in contract cheating, at least half are "cheat curious" (Rundle et al., 2020). Furthermore, evidence indicates that students who do engage in contract cheating tend to do so repeatedly (Curtis & Clare, 2017).

Who cheats?

Numerous studies have demonstrated the influence of demographic or other contextual variables on cheating behaviour, including:

- gender
- age
- discipline of study
- personality

- learning orientation
- linguistic background
- use of technology.

The literature demonstrates that males self-report more cheating than females (Crown & Spiller, 1998; Marsden et al., 2005; Kremmer et al., 2007; Bretag et al., 2019). Younger students are more likely to cheat than older students (Brimble, 2016; Marsden et al., 2005), and younger students tend to engage in more 'collaborative cheating' than their older peers (Kremmer, Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2007; Bretag et al., 2019).

McCabe and Trevino (1993) reported differences in dishonest behaviours among students according to discipline, noting that business students self-report the most cheating, followed in order by engineering, science and the humanities. The likelihood of business students cheating more than non-business students has been supported by other studies (McCabe & Trevino, 1995; Smyth & Davis, 2004). Marsden et al. (2005) found that engineering students were more likely to cheat than students from all the other disciplines in the study, a finding supported by recent research by Bretag et al. (2019).

Some studies have found that students with a lower Grade Point Average cheat more (Crown & Spiller 1998; McCabe & Trevino 1997). Other studies demonstrate that students who focus on learning tend to cheat less than those who focus on goals such as obtaining marks or qualifications (Baran & Jonason, 2020; Marsden, 2005).

Numerous studies have found that personality variables are associated with engagement in cheating and cheating intentions (Curtis & Clare, 2024b). Higher self-control and conscientiousness are related to less cheating (Cochran et al., 2006; Giluk & Postlethwaite, 2015). Whereas traits generally associated with anti-social behaviours are related to more cheating (Curtis; 2023; Lee et al., 2020). Although higher education institutions should not screen their students' personality traits, the existence of a range of individual differences means that there is no one-size-fits all solution to academic misconduct (Curtis & Clare, 2024b).

Students for whom English is an Additional Language (EAL) have unique challenges in meeting the requirements of English-based instruction. Numerous studies have highlighted that plagiarism is a particular concern for EAL students (Marshall & Garry, 2006; Pecorari, 2003; Vieyra et al., 2013). Bretag et al. (2014) found that international students were more than twice as likely as Australian domestic students to convey a lack of confidence in how to avoid an academic integrity breach and twice as likely to have been reported for a breach.

Two large-scale Australian studies of contract cheating have independently found that EAL students were significantly over-represented in the cheating group (Bretag et al., 2019; Curtis et al., 2022). In both of these studies, EAL status was a stronger predictor of contract cheating engagement than international student status, which suggests that the challenge of studying in a non-native language is more likely to lead to contract cheating engagement than simply being an international student.

Numerous commentators have addressed the specific role played by the Internet in relation to writing practices, particularly plagiarism (see for example, Lathrop & Foss, 2000; Howard, 2007; Park, 2003; Sutherland-Smith, 2008; 2016). Scanlon and Neumann (2002, p. 380) reported that a small percentage of students admitted to:

- copying an entire paper from the Internet (5.4% sometimes, 3.2% often or very frequently)

- requesting a paper to submit for grading (8.3% sometimes, 2.1% often or very frequently), and
- purchasing a paper from an essay mill (6.3% sometimes, 2.8% often or very frequently).

Why do students cheat?

A number of writers (Blum, 2016; Bretag, 2007, 2013; Curtis, 2024; Foster, 2016; Heuser, Martindale & Lazo, 2016; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Walker, 2024) have situated academic misconduct in the context of an increasingly commercialised, internationalised and highly competitive higher education sector. The shifting emphasis from tertiary education as a transformative learning experience to one that focuses on credentials for employment has also had an impact on the values and practices of academic integrity.

Research has consistently shown that one of the strongest motivators of students' cheating behaviour is peer influence (McCabe & Trevino, 1993, 1997; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009; Zhao et al., 2022). In addition, the 'likelihood of being caught and the severity of the consequences' is a powerful deterrent to cheating behaviour. In numerous studies (Ahmad et al., 2008; Diekhoff et al., 1999; Power, 2009) students have reported that their fear of being caught combined with their concerns about the potential punishment was the main reason for not engaging in unethical conduct generally, and contract cheating specifically, rather than their intrinsic motivation to learn with integrity (Rundle et al., 2019; 2023).

Lack of understanding also has an important part to play. Gullifer and Tyson (2014) found that only half of the students in their study had read the university's plagiarism policy and confusion remained about the meaning and behaviours associated with plagiarism. Other studies have also reported that both students and staff struggle to understand and agree on the meanings and practices of academic integrity (Foltynek et al., 2014; Glendinning, 2014; 2016). A long-running longitudinal study in Australia has consistently found that students tend to engage more in the kinds of plagiarism that they least understand as being a breach of academic integrity expectations (Curtis & Tremayne, 2021). Moreover, evidence suggests that academic misconduct can be reduced by teaching students the skills of citation and referencing, so that lack of awareness is reduced as a cause of plagiarism (Bretag et al., 2014; Curtis, 2022).

Blum (2016) lists the characteristics of contemporary higher education students which impact on their motivations to follow the principles of academic integrity. These include:

- differing motivations for enrolling in higher education
- divergent understandings about authorship practices and norms of sharing
- pressures to achieve
- lack of interest in learning content
- complex lives
- time pressures
- developmental issues
- mental health.

The widely cited article by Park (2003) lists nine motives for student plagiarism, many of which overlap with Blum (2016). These include:

- genuine misunderstanding
- 'efficiency gain' (a high grade for the least effort)
- time management
- personal values or attitudes
- defiance
- students' attitudes to teachers and class
- denial or neutralisation
- temptation or opportunity
- lack of deterrence.

Recent meta-analyses of the psychological predictors of cheating identify attitudes, norms, personality and culture as key influences on cheating (Lee et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2018).

Opportunity has been implicated as one of the biggest factors in contract cheating engagement (Clare & Rundle, 2022). This was particularly highlighted by changes to assessment methods that were used during emergency online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hollis, 2024). In particular, the expanded use of unsupervised online tests, quizzes and exams corresponded with increased student access to online file-sharing and "homework help" websites (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021; Slade et al., 2024) and the expanded use of these unsecured assessments saw a documented increase in students self-reporting cheating in such assessments (Newton, 2024).

Contract cheating

The term 'contract cheating' was first coined by Clarke and Lancaster (2006). As noted earlier, contract cheating occurs when students employ or use a third-party to undertake their assessed work for them and these third parties may include:

- essay writing services
- friends, family or other students
- private tutors
- copyediting services
- agency websites, or
- 'reverse classifieds' (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016, p. 639).

While clearly not a 'new' phenomenon, most commentators maintain that there has been a global rise in contract cheating in recent years, across all disciplines (Newton, 2018). This has raised the level of community concern about the credibility of higher education qualifications and academic outputs, and correspondingly seen a rise in the number of media stories highlighting the issue, such as the 2015 MyMaster incident.

Of particular concern is the proliferation of marketing-savvy commercial providers who bombard students via social media, online platforms and other advertising forums of

cheating services about their 'academic services'. Newton and Lang (2016) identified five categories of third-party commercial providers:

- academic custom writing
- online labour markets
- pre-written essay banks
- file-sharing sites
- paid exam takers.

For a price, and even within extremely short turnaround timelines of hours rather than days, any assessment item can be contracted out to a third-party (Newton & Lang, 2016). Employment portfolios, reflective journals, case studies, experiential reflections, online presentations, group projects, research proposals and even complete doctoral dissertations can all be bought like any other commodity. While there is no type of assessment which will prevent outsourcing, recent research has demonstrated that some assessment tasks are less likely to be outsourced (Bretag et al., 2019). Nevertheless, as even authentic assessment tasks can be readily outsourced, assessment design is not a silver bullet against contract cheating (Ellis et al., 2020).

Analyses of the contract cheating industry show that various channels and advertising strategies are employed to market ghostwriting services to students (Ellis et al., 2018; Rowland et al., 2018). Often, marketing includes social media, with advertising on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter (now X) (Amigud, 2020). Contract cheating providers advertising includes sales techniques such as discounts, 24/7 support, money-back guarantees (Rowland et al., 2018). They attempt to persuade students to use their services with rationalisations for cheating and promise to evade detection with "plagiarism and AI-free assignments".

Educators and researchers agree that contract cheating is qualitatively different to plagiarism, collusion or other breaches of academic integrity that have been the subject of attention in recent years and so requires an entirely different approach. Walker and Townley (2012) point out that cheating that involves third-parties is more difficult to detect and constitutes a form of fraud. Moreover, while educational and assessment security responses have evolved to address longstanding issues of plagiarism, lack of understanding and/or poor academic literacies, education alone is insufficient to address such a deliberate form of cheating (Bretag & Harper et al., 2016).

Contract cheating has ramifications for individuals' learning outcomes, institutional reputations, educational standards and credibility, professional practice and public safety, particularly if it is somehow normalised as an acceptable way for academic work to be accomplished.

What can be done?

It has only been in the last 8 years, since the publication of the 1st Edition of this Good Practice Note, that assessment security measures to address contract cheating have begun to emerge. Nonetheless, these are not well-known, well-understood or widely implemented in higher education internationally. And, although Australia is a world leader in addressing contract cheating, stamping out the problem remains a work in progress.

A major breakthrough in combatting contract cheating in Australia is the ability of TEQSA to block contract cheating provider websites and prosecute provision and advertising of academic cheating services. Under changes to legislation specifically to deal with contract cheating providers, institutions and members of the public can report suspected academic cheating services to TEQSA. At the time of writing, TEQSA has used these powers to block access, at a national level, to around 300 known contract cheating providers' websites.

A further significant contribution to the fight against contract cheating is the educational program offered by TEQSA in the form of the Masterclass on Contract Cheating Detection and Deterrence. An expert-led online course available to all higher education staff in Australia. Both academic and professional staff in higher education have a critical role to play in combating contract cheating.

The view that teaching staff have a pivotal role to play in terms of their influence on students' behaviour has been the subject of much commentary and recommendations for good practice (Bertram Gallant, 2008; Carroll, 2002; HEA, 2011a, 2011b; Lang, 2013), particularly in relation to curriculum and assessment design. While the phrase 'designing out' student cheating (HEA, 2011b) has been commonly used, there is now less confidence that assessment – even that which is original, sequential, reflective and personalised or authentic (Bretag et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2020) – is sufficient to address some forms of academic misconduct such as contract cheating.

In the current resource-constrained working environment, which characterises higher education, academics may not have adequate time or support to demonstrate best practice. Nonetheless, Dawson (2021) offers some simple starting points for assessment security by noting the three least secure forms of assessment that should generally be avoided: 1. reusing previous assessment items unchanged, 2. unsupervised summative online quizzes/tests/exams, and 3. take-home assessments with a single correct answer. Such assignments are not only vulnerable to contract cheating, but also, collusion, plagiarism, and misuse of genAI. Individual teachers can, at a minimum, avoid such dubious assessment-design choices.

Nonetheless, rather than focusing solely on the responsibilities of individuals (whether those individuals are students or teachers), establishing a culture of integrity requires a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach that promotes integrity in every aspect of the academic enterprise (Bretag, 2013). This includes:

- higher education provider mission statements and marketing
- admissions processes
- nuanced and carefully articulated policy (with the resources to promote the policy and the 'teeth' to enact it)
- assessment practices
- curriculum design.

Students need to be provided with information during orientation, with embedded and targeted support in courses and at every stage, and frequent and visual reminders on campus. A holistic culture will require:

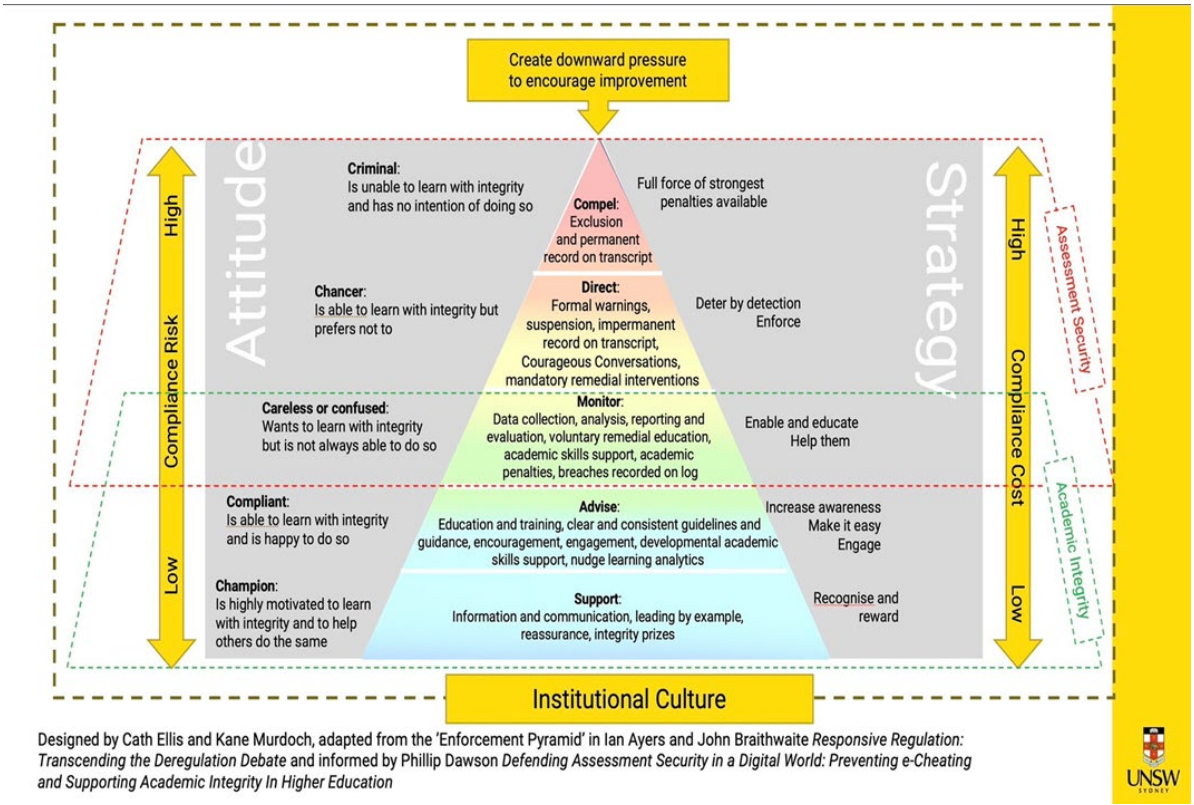
- partnering with students
- professional development for staff

- research training, and
- the use of new technologies to assist scholars at all stages of study and research to avoid integrity breaches, and as a tool to detect and respond appropriately to breaches when they occur (Bretag, 2013).

In the UK and Australia, such a holistic approach takes as its starting point policies that include education about academic integrity for both teachers and students, plus real consequences for breaches (often referred to as 'penalties' in the UK and Australia, or 'sanctions' in the US).

Important recent work by Ellis and Murdoch (2024) has captured a holistic picture of contract cheating that aligns student motives and profiles with interventions that are needed to reduce contract cheating. Ellis and Murdoch (2024) outline the Educational Integrity Enforcement Pyramid, drawing on research into individual differences in students' reasons for engaging in academic misconduct and high-level experience of detecting and substantiating cases of contract cheating using the latest methods.

Figure 1: Educational integrity enforcement pyramid



In sum, the pyramid shows that the majority of students are in the bottom (i.e. the largest) layer. These students are happy to comply with academic integrity rules and are generally motivated to learn. For such students, academic integrity education and advocacy will typically be sufficient to deter contract cheating. In the middle layers, there are students who may be "cheat curious" (Careless, Confused, or Chancer), but these students will mostly be deterred from cheating by assessment security measures and the threat of penalties. For these students, policies that include penalties must exist, and assessment security measures that are noticeable and capable of deterring and detecting breaches must be evident. At the top layer, are the small minority of students who will only be deterred from cheating by serious consequences and a high chance

of detection. This may include people enrolled in courses who are not genuine students and are part of "criminal" schemes such as visa fraud.

It has recently been argued that 'No amount of educational interventions, honour codes, or integrity awareness campaigns will be sufficient to address [serious and persistent contract] cheating' (Curtis & Ellis, 2025). As implied and the Pyramid, deterrence of contract cheating for students who are most likely to engage in it, and who are most likely to do so repeatedly, requires detection. Many of the methods for detecting contract cheating have been developed since the 1st Edition of the Good Practice Note, these are summaried below in Table 1 from Curtis and Ellis (2025) below.

Table 1: Effective methods to improve the detection of contract cheating

Method	Description
Training graders	Training graders to notice tell-tale signs of ghostwritten assignments improves their identification of contract cheating (see Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019).
Performance discrepancies	Poorer performance on identity-verified proctored exams compared with unproctored assignments suggests unproctored assignments may have been outsourced (see Clare et al., 2017).
Turnitin(™) Authorship	This tool compares document properties, software versions, and other data for all assignments submitted to Turnitin's text-matching software for the same enrolled student at a higher education institution (see Dawson et al., 2020).
Document forensics	Microsoft Office documents include "xml" metadata that can provide evidence as to how a document was written and edited that may distinguish authentically written from copied work (see Johnson & Davies, 2020).
Bibliographic forensics	Numerous bibliographic signals may raise suspicions of ghostwriting including (but not limited to) fake, outdated, irrelevant, or foreign references, and use of reference-manager software (see Ellis et al., 2022).
Courageous conversations	A non-adversarial and empathetic investigative approach to discussing suspected contract cheating with students where reduced penalties (e.g., fail for the class rather than expulsion) are provided for full and frank admissions (see Murdoch & House, 2024).

To add to the table above, recent technological developments in institution-level assessment security have been game-changing in detecting contract cheating. These include the development of bespoke software monitoring interactions with learning management systems and document metadata. Sector-leading, and indeed world-leading, practices have been developed at institutions such as Macquarie University, Deakin University, and the University of Southern Queensland. These innovations are mostly not outlined in the 2nd Edition of the Good Practice Note, but they were shared with universities around Australia in 2024 via TEQSA's Assessment Security Forum event. Some of these methods are discussed in the updated *Substantiating contract cheating: A guide for investigators*, which can be found in TEQSA's Academic integrity Toolkit.

The following sections provide practical recommendations for good practice in promoting academic integrity generally and addressing contract cheating specifically, taking the Threshold Standards as a starting point.

1. Policies to promote academic integrity

The *Academic Integrity Standards Project* (Bretag et al., 2011) identified 'five core elements' of exemplary academic integrity policy.

These include: access, approach, responsibility, detail and support, as briefly summarised below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Five core elements of exemplary academic integrity policy

1. **Access:** The policy is easy to locate and read, and is concise and comprehensible.
2. **Approach:** There is a statement of purpose with an educative focus up-front and throughout the policy.
3. **Responsibility:** The policy details responsibilities for all stakeholders, including students, teachers, professional staff and senior managers.
4. **Detail:** The policy provides extensive but not excessive description of breaches, outcomes and processes.
5. **Support:** The policy points to proactive and embedded systems to enable implementation of the policy.

Good practice example 1: Clearly define contract cheating in academic integrity policy

In relation to contract cheating, an exemplary academic integrity policy needs to include clear information which:

- defines and describes contract cheating
- provides information for both staff and students about why contract cheating is considered to be such a serious breach, how it undermines the values of the academic community, and impacts on the value of degrees and the reputation of the higher education provider
- includes clear details about how to identify and respond to instances of contract cheating, and
- educates both staff and students about resources to support learning regarding the outsourcing of assignments.

Importantly, a good policy will indicate the likely outcome or penalty for contract cheating so that this issue is dealt with consistently across the higher education provider. Griffith University's academic integrity policy and processes are exemplary in this regard, as in the example shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Excerpt from Griffith University Academic Integrity Policy

2.4 **Plagiarism** occurs when the work of another is represented, intentionally or unintentionally, as one's own original work, without appropriate acknowledgement of the author or the source. This category of academic misconduct includes but is not limited to the following:

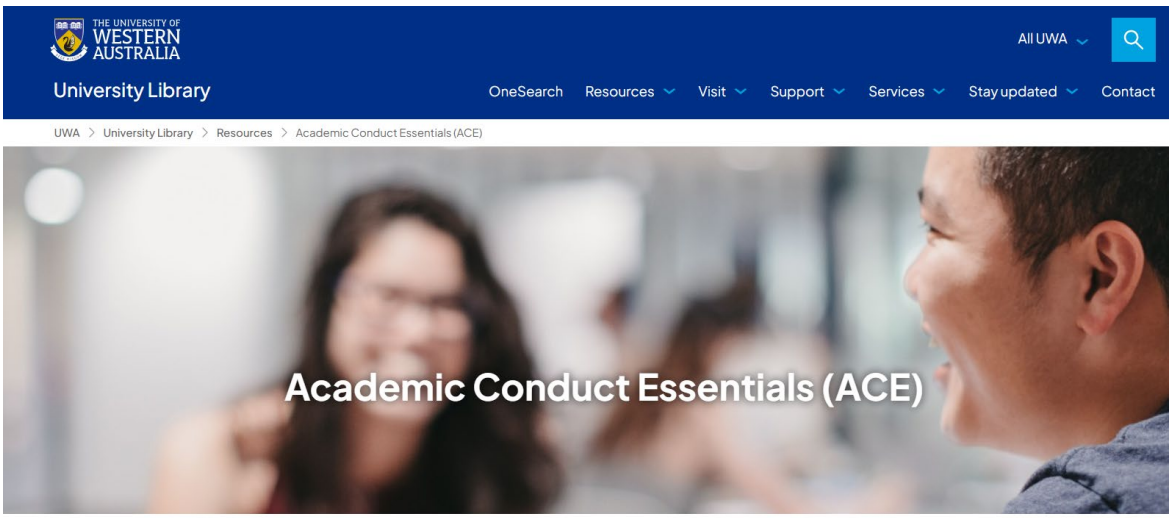
1) collusion, where a piece of work prepared by working closely with one or more individuals or in a group is represented as if it were the student's own, this includes:
    a. writing the piece of work together;
    b. determining the method or approach to a question or assessment task together;
    c. sharing answers or giving access to questions and answers or completed assessment tasks;
2) acquiring or commissioning a piece of work, which is not his/her own and representing it as if it were, by:
    a. purchasing a paper from a commercial service, including internet sites, whether pre-written or specially prepared for the student concerned;
    b. submitting a paper written by another person, either by a fellow student or a person who is not a member of the University;

Good practice example 2: Include information about academic integrity and contract cheating in online platforms, course outlines and mandatory courses

Research has demonstrated that many students (and staff) are confused about academic integrity requirements at their institution. Given that contract cheating is a relatively new phenomenon, it is imperative that higher education providers include specific information about this in multiple forums, such as learning management systems and course outlines. Internationally recognised best practice is to mandate that students complete an academic integrity training module early in their programs. Comparable training should also be provided to staff. The highly acclaimed Academic Conduct Essentials program at the University of Western Australia (UWA; see Figure 4 below) is one such compulsory program for students.

UWA developed the Academic Conduct Essentials program as institution-wide academic integrity training and information for all new students. The bespoke program won an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Program Award in 2011. After Academic Conduct Essentials had existed for several years, UWA replaced its in-house developed content academic integrity modules provided by Epigeum. This updating of content demonstrates a commitment to keeping academic integrity information for students up-to-date with the latest developments and research.

Figure 4: Excerpt from University of Western Australia website



Academic Conduct Essentials (ACE) is a compulsory online unit that introduces UWA students to the basics of ethical scholarship and the expectations for correct academic conduct at UWA.

All coursework students enrolled in a UWA course are required to complete ACE in their first semester of study. You will be automatically enrolled in ACE, and the unit is available to you through

Source: https://www.uwa.edu.au/library/find-resources/ace

Good practice example 3: Reminders that academic misconduct and contract cheating are not acceptable

Frequent and visual reminders regarding academic integrity generally, and contract cheating specifically, are part of a holistic approach to promote integrity on campus. A number of higher education providers conduct 'marketing campaigns', particularly at strategic times during the semester (such as Orientation and just before exams) that include distributing leaflets around campus, and posters and large adhesive decals in strategic locations. In 2016, Deakin University worked closely with students to develop a campaign that raises awareness about contract cheating (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 5: Deakin University Contract Cheating Awareness Week Campaign

More recently, Deakin has run e-newsletter articles warning students of the risks of contract cheating. This includes warning students of the danger of being blackmailed by cheating providers – a risk many students are not aware of, and a risk that research has show dissuades students from cheating (Yorke et al., 2021).

In 2019, the University of South Australia displayed posters such as the one pictured to the right, promoting academic integrity and linking students to the university's academic integrity information website via QR codes.

Making visible that 'contract cheating is not acceptable' requires the message to be reiterated in both face-to-face and online environments. It is a relatively simple matter to block students' access to known commercial cheat sites while on campus, nd simultaneously provide a counter-message about academic integrity. Whether a student deliberately or inadvertently tries to access such a site, they should receive a message such as: 'This site has been blocked because it is not a legitimate learning service', along with a link the higher education provider's academic integrity resources.

Good practice example 4: Student-led, engaging activities to promote a culture of integrity

Both staff and students need to be reminded about the pitfalls of contract cheating in ways that go beyond mere communication of policy. Engaging activities that work in tandem with other campus events (Saddiqui, 2016) are the most effective in terms of reaching a wide audience. Encourage students to lead interactive activities that focus on integrity at Orientation, Open Day, Careers Day, etc. Ideas for activities include interactive games (e.g. giant jenga, tug-of-war, juggling, hoola-hooping, treasure hunts). Some higher education providers hold specific events or whole weeks dedicated to academic integrity. Another useful approach is to encourage students to participate in sector-wide activities such as the annual 'International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating'. For more senior students, opportunities may be created to undertake research into academic integrity in a range of disciplines (see Rettinger, 2023).

Figure 6: Image from International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating website

Source: Original image by Inkan Hertanto, University of California (San Diego) student, used to promote International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating (https://contractcheating.weebly.com/the-day-against-contract-cheating.html)

2. Policies and procedures to address academic integrity breaches

Contract cheating is a particular and egregious academic integrity breach which is qualitatively different to other breaches (such as minor or unintentional plagiarism).

The Centre for Studies in Higher Education (2002) describes the complete outsourcing of an assignment (contract cheating) as being at the extreme end of the plagiarism continuum, and therefore requiring a much more significant 'penalty' than breaches at the other end of the continuum such as inadvertent or minor plagiarism. This recommendation accords with the Educational Integrity Enforcement Pyramid.

Good practice example 5: Include information about contract cheating in academic integrity policy

The best examples of academic integrity policy in Australian higher education providers recognise that not all academic integrity breaches are the same, and therefore not all breaches will result in the same outcomes or penalties. In response to recent concerns about contract cheating, many Australian higher education providers have updated their academic integrity policies to include specific guidance on the identification of, and likely outcome or penalty for, contract cheating (see Good practice example 1 above).

Good practice example 6: Use institutional data to identify contract cheating 'hot spots'

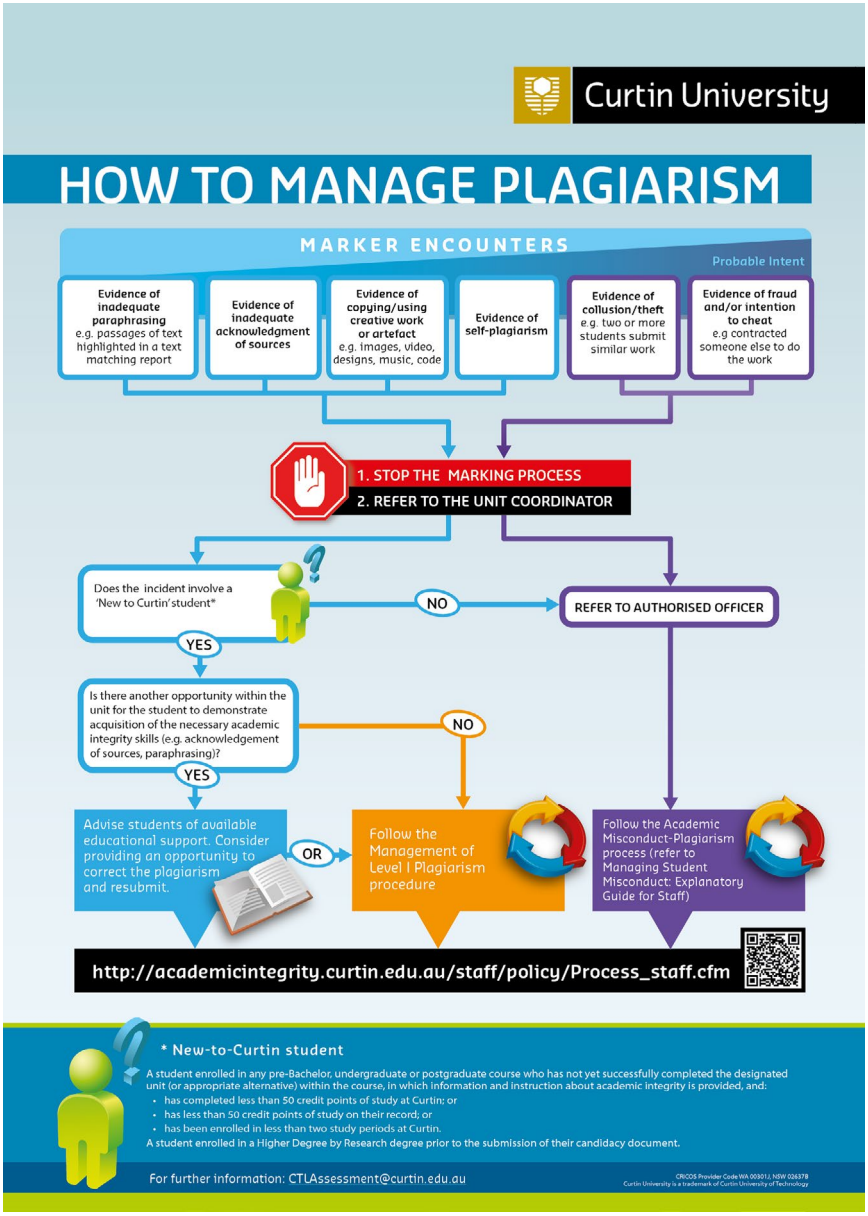
All higher education providers collect and maintain data for the purpose of quality assurance and improvement. These data can be used to identify contract cheating 'hot spots'. For example, academic integrity breach data should be maintained in a central, confidential database and regularly analysed to determine where contract cheating is occurring (faculties, schools/departments, courses, units, types of assessments) so that resources can be allocated in areas most prone to contract cheating. Other data sources include feedback from:

- academic integrity decision-makers
- appeals committees
- senior managers
- teaching staff
- students, and
- policy-makers in other functional areas (see Bretag & Mahmud, 2016).

Good practice example 7: Create a simple process for referring contract cheating cases

Identifying contract cheating is only the first step. Teaching staff need to be aware of the seriousness of contract cheating and understand the importance of referring such cases for formal investigation, rather than 'dealing with it themselves'. Teaching staff, therefore, need to be familiar with their higher education provider's procedures for referring contract cheating cases for further investigation and follow-up. Simple flowcharts and guidelines should be communicated to teaching staff at regular intervals, via both electronic and hard copy means. Staff should be made aware that where there is evidence of a student having outsourced their work, this should always be forwarded to an appropriate decision-maker for further investigation. The best flowcharts are simple, easy to communicate (and remember), and available online, as in the example from Curtin University in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: How to manage plagiarism resource, Curtin University



Good practice example 8: Implement appropriate and consistent responses to contract cheating

Ensure that serious breaches such as contract cheating are dealt with consistently and fairly. As contract cheating may warrant serious penalties such as expulsion from a higher exclusion institution, processes must be procedurally fair, consistent, and determinations of penalties must be made by staff with sufficient training, seniority, and experience. If misconduct investigation and decision making is centralised (see Good Practice Example 12), consistency may be easier to achieve. If a decentralised model is used, conduct regular audits to ensure that all faculties or schools/departments are following the same process and applying the same outcomes for contract cheating (see Figure 8 below for an example of consistent penalty guidance for plagiarism).

Figure 8: Guidelines for Applying Penalties, Curtin University

GUIDELINES FOR APPLYING PENALTIES: COURSEWORK UNITS

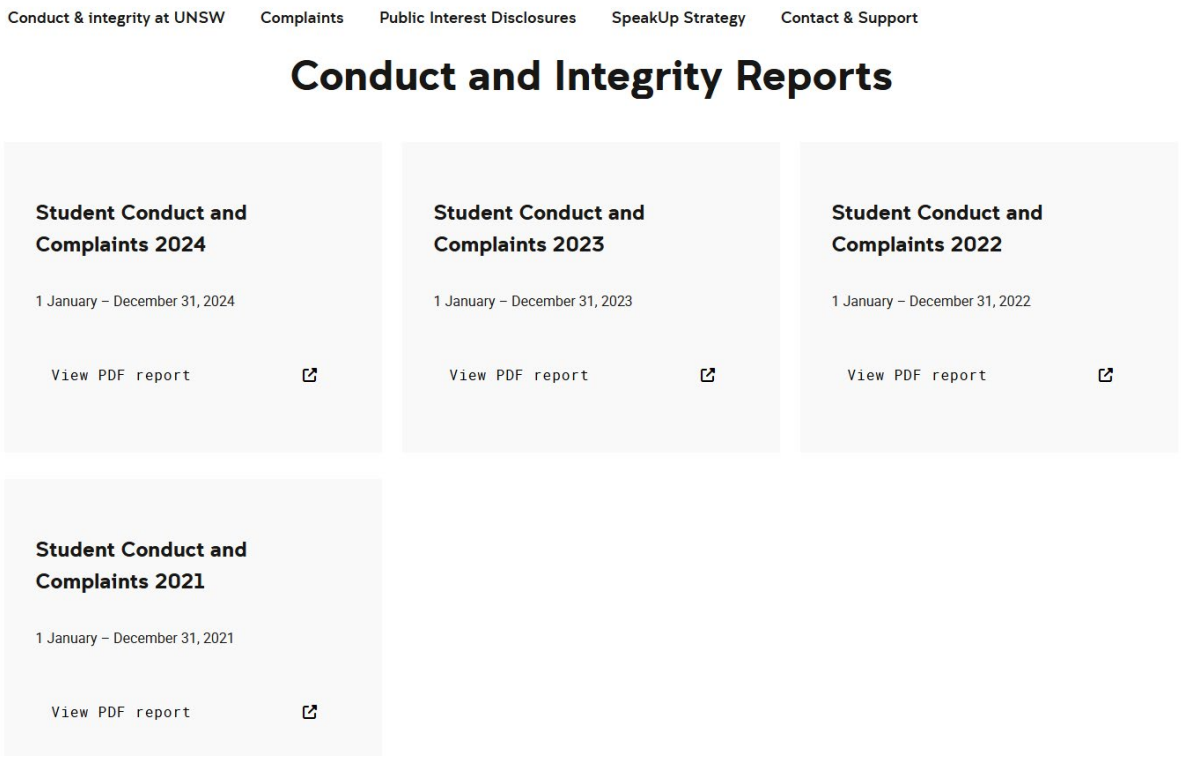
Confirmed Level I Plagiarism (Unit Coordinator)	Confirmed Level II Plagiarism (Student Discipline Panel, SDP)	Confirmed Level III Plagiarism (Student Discipline Panel)	Confirmed Level III Plagiarism (Board of Discipline, BoD)	
•				Educational advice
•				Revise and resubmit the assessment
•	•	•	•	Attend counselling or a lecture, seminar, workshop or similar activity
	•	•	•	A formal warning or admonishment, or both
	•	•	•	Repeat assessment with reduced maximum mark
	•	•	•	A reduced or nil grade in respect of the assessable item in which the Academic Misconduct occurred
		•	•	An ANN grade for the unit in which Academic Misconduct occurred
		•	•	ANN grades for one or more other units; assessed in the same study period as the unit in which Academic Misconduct occurred
		•	•	Suspension of all or any of a Student's rights and privileges within the University for a period up to 1 month (if SDP) or a specified period (if BoD) including: i. exclusion from attendance at any specified scheduled class activity, such as a lecture, seminar, or tutorial workshop ii. exclusion from all or a specified part of a campus or education centre iii. exclusion from participating in any activity organised or managed by the University iv. denial of access to any or all facilities or services of the University v. exclusion from enrolment in any unit or admission to any course
			•	Termination from the course to which the Student is admitted
			•	Expulsion from the University
			•	Prohibition from being admitted or re-admitted to any course and from enrolling in any unit
			•	Rescission or withholding of any award or the withdrawal of credit for an completed unit, or both

Source: Excerpt from Academic integrity at Curtin University: Staff guidelines for dealing with student plagiarism 2015

Good practice example 9: Communicate outcomes for contract cheating to staff and students

Research on academic staff responses to academic misconduct by students suggests that poor communication and barriers to following university policies are associated with inconsistent responses by staff (de Maio et al., 2019; 2020). Both staff and students should feel confident that contract cheating is being dealt with fairly and consistently. Data from the Contract Cheating and Assessment Design Project (Bretag et al., 2016) found that 33% of staff who had referred serious cheating cases for investigation were not informed of the outcomes of the process. This has the potential to impact on teachers' confidence levels about the process, as well as make it less likely that cases will be referred in the future. A simple solution is to inform all relevant staff members of the outcomes. In addition, the higher education provider should publish de-identified data on the institution's intranet, available to both staff and students, which details at the very least the types of breaches being investigated in a given period, along with the associated outcomes. A brief, regular 'Academic Integrity' newsletter with this information could also be distributed via staff and student portals. As an example, the University of New South Wales published annual reports containing information on student misconduct case numbers, types, and outcomes.

Figure 9: Excerpt from UNSW website – Academic Integrity Data



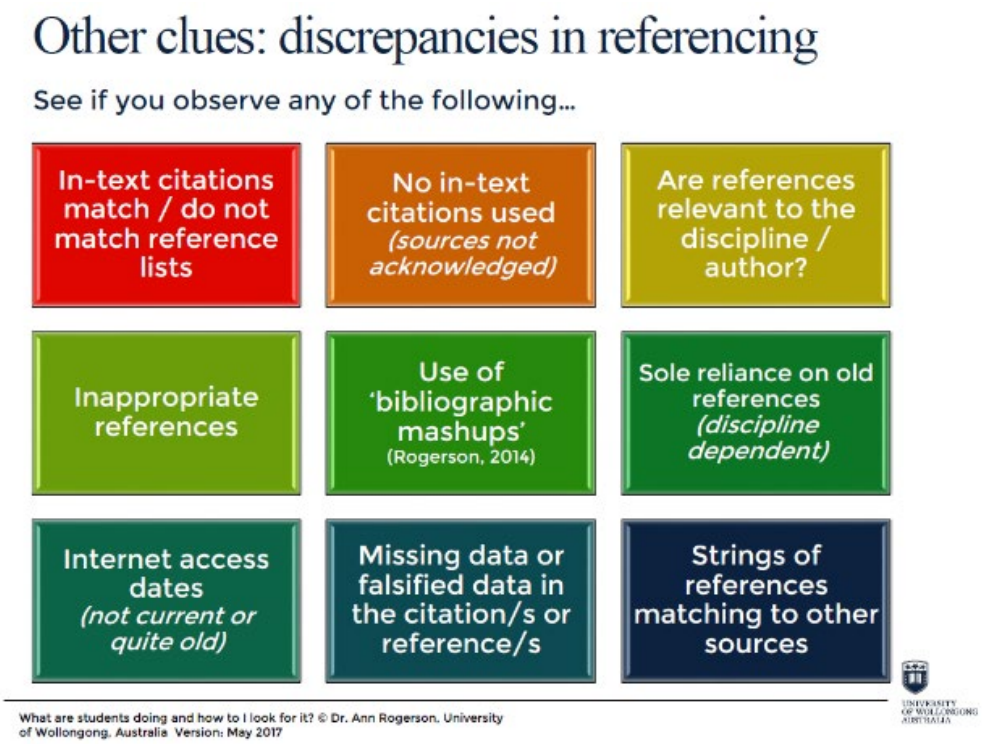
Source: Screenshot from UNSW's conduct and integrity website. https://www.unsw.edu.au/assurance-integrity/conduct-integrity/conduct-unsw/student-conduct-integrity

Good practice example 10: Provide training on how to identify contract cheating

Teaching staff, academic integrity investigators, and academic integrity decision-makers require professional development in how to identify contract cheating. Unlike textual plagiarism, which is generally able to be identified through text-matching software and/or the teacher's knowledge of the source content, contract cheating by its very nature is difficult to identify. Bespoke essays written by a commercial provider or acquaintance, depending on the quality, will not result in a high 'Similarity Score'. In fact, contract cheating providers often promise (although do not always deliver) 'plagiarism and ai-free' essays. Thus, a low text-matching score may also be a trigger for further investigation. Simple marking guidelines, instructions, and reminders should regularly be communicated to those who need to identify contract cheating, particularly markers and academic integrity investigators, and decision-makers. Key staff should complete TEQSA's Masterclass in contract cheating detection and deterrence and utilise resources related to contract cheating from TEQSA's Academic Integrity Toolkit.

Online resources and face-to-face workshops are also useful, particularly around key assessment points and marking times. The University of Wollongong provides training for markers to assist in the identification of contract cheating, as in the following excerpt from a presentation by Dr Ann Rogerson in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Excerpt from presentation by Dr Ann Rogerson



3. Actions to mitigate risks to academic integrity

Actions to mitigate risks in relation to contract cheating should include a range of preventative measures that take into account the student life-cycle from (pre)admission through to graduation.

Good practice example 11: Provide training for *all* staff

Students, teachers and academic integrity decision-makers are not the only stakeholders of academic integrity. Librarians, academic developers, learning advisors, counsellors and other support staff all need to be informed about contract cheating. Higher education providers should consider inviting academic support staff to professional development workshops for teachers, or offering separate workshops that meet the specific needs of those staff members. For example: professional staff who deal with admissions, pastoral care and referral to support services or assist with input of grades, compilation of Turnitin reports (at higher education providers where this is the process), examination invigilation, course homepages and unit outlines, to mention just a few examples.

Other non-student focused professional staff also need appropriate induction, training and ongoing support. For example, facilities management staff are critical stakeholders as these colleagues are usually the first to see (and have the opportunity to remove) contract cheating advertising. Professional staff are too often 'left out of the loop' regarding contract cheating, and need advice and support about how their specific roles can contribute to fostering a culture of integrity to counter contract cheating.

Figure 11: Examples of cheatsite advertising

Facilities staff have a 'frontline' role in removing cheat site advertising
Source: Tracey Bretag

Good practice example 12: Establish an office responsible for promoting academic integrity and responding to breaches

As early as 2011, the Higher Education Academy (UK; now known as Advance HE) (2011a; 2011b) recommended that higher education providers should have in place a standing committee with a specific academic integrity remit. More recently, a number of Australian higher education providers have recognised the critical importance of academic integrity and the corresponding need to resource this operational area. For example, as part of the response to contract cheating incidents in late 2014/early 2015, The University of Sydney established the Office for Educational Integrity. Such an office can provide the academic community with a central point of expertise for all matters relating to the promotion of academic integrity, as well as the ability for higher education providers to respond in a timely manner to specific threats such as contract cheating.

A central academic integrity office may house staff who have specialist skills in fair and timely investigation of academic misconduct generally, and the time and resources needed to investigate contract cheating specifically. Higher education institutions can decide, based on their structures, needs, and expertise, whether various tasks of investigating and penalising academic misconduct breaches should be managed by a central unit or partly or fully decentralised to academic organisational units. Nonetheless, it is important that staff have dedicated training, time, and resources to carry out the work needed to enact academic integrity policies – in other words "make it someone's job". In the past decade, there has been an increasing trend in higher education to professionalise academic integrity work, with dedicated roles in higher education institutions (Vogt & Eaton, 2022).

Good practice example 13: Inform all stakeholders about contract cheating

The specific issue of contract cheating needs to be communicated to all stakeholders, including:

- those responsible for recruitment and admissions
- the CEO/Vice-Chancellor
- senior managers
- governing bodies, and
- learning and teaching committees to mention just a few.

Similarly, the issue needs to be discussed with students at all levels of their candidature, beginning with offer of enrolment through to orientation, and at key points during the student's program (including Higher Degree by Research students). Reminders about the potential consequences of contract cheating are best communicated to students in relation to assessment, and well in advance of assignment due dates.

Good practice example 14: Share breach data with senior managers and decision-makers

Many higher education providers provide detailed academic integrity breach data to the Academic Board, the CEO/Vice Chancellor, Corporate Governing Body, Teaching and Learning Committees and other critical stakeholders such as Heads of Schools. This ensures that academic integrity remains at the forefront of key decision-makers' agendas, and also provides opportunities for discussion and action regarding emerging threats to academic integrity such as contract cheating.

Good practice example 15: Provide consistent messages about academic integrity at all points of study

Many higher education institutions provide a pathway to university study and as such play a crucial role in preparing students to meet expectations in relation to academic standards and integrity. It is particularly important that students undertaking foundation studies or other pre-university courses receive adequate training in the values and practices of academic integrity. Recent research by the Contract Cheating and Assessment Design (CCAD) Project (Bretag et al., 2019) found that students from Non-University Higher Education Providers (NUHEPs) reported similar rates to University students of obtaining an assignment with the intention of submitting it as their own, but were six times more likely to pay money for it. Educating NUHEP students about the pitfalls of contract cheating includes ensuring that this group of students have the necessary skills to complete their own work so that they are less likely to be influenced by advertising from commercial cheat sites. UniSA College detailed the specific skills such as referencing and how to write assignments that will be taught as part of the Foundation Studies Program (see Figure 12 below).

UniSA College also rigorously follows the University of South Australia's Academic Integrity Policy, with trained Academic Integrity Officers providing guidance, mentoring and consistent outcomes to those students who breach the policy.

Figure 12: UniSA College Foundation Studies – excerpt from website

Foundation Studies

Who is it for?

- people returning to study
- no formal qualifications are required for entry (if you have completed Cert IV or higher you are ineligible)
- students must be 18 by 1 February for semester 1 or 1 July for semester 2; OR have completed SACE
- Australian citizens, permanent residents, humanitarian vias holders and New Zealand residents

Applicants who have prior qualifications (e.g. ATAR/TER, STAT or Certificate III) may wish to consider applying for a UniSA College Diploma in conjunction with their Foundation Studies application.

Key Features

- Learn the skills required to study successfully at a tertiary level, such as how the University works, how to write academic assignments, how to reference and how to manage your time.
- Gain important information discipline-specific skills and base knowledge with support from UniSA College staff,
- Select electives related to your preferred field of study
- Upon completion students can apply for entry to a degree at UniSA (competitive gradepoint average required)

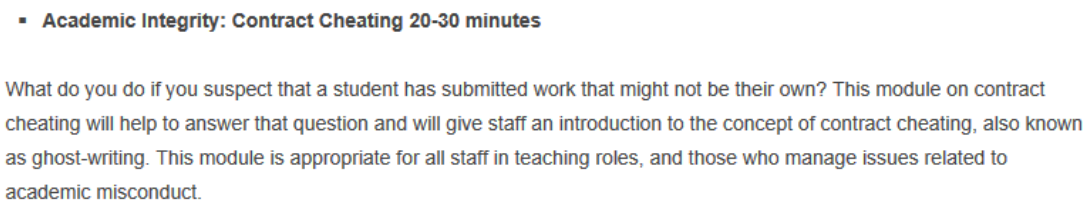
Source: Excerpt from UniSA College - http://www.unisa.edu.au/Study/foundation-studies/

Good practice example 16: Support teaching staff to address contract cheating

The CCAD Project (Harper et al., 2019) found that only 15.5% of teaching staff agreed that staff workload assisted in minimising contract cheating, while the majority (57.5%) 'disagreed' and 'strongly disagreed'. Only 14.4% and 14.9% respectively agreed that performance management and recognition or reward supported their efforts to minimise contract cheating (Harper et al., 2019).

It is therefore critical that higher education providers create an environment and practical support that make it both possible and probable that staff will both promote integrity and respond to breaches if and when they occur. Coordinators of large core courses and units are under particular pressure to manage assessment and moderation processes in a timely fashion, and may find the requirement to identify and respond to academic integrity breaches difficult without adequate workload and professional staff support. Teaching staff need practical resources that do not add an additional time burden, as in the following example in Figure 13 from Curtin University.

Figure 13: Curtin University, staff resources



- **Academic Integrity: Contract Cheating 20-30 minutes**

What do you do if you suspect that a student has submitted work that might not be their own? This module on contract cheating will help to answer that question and will give staff an introduction to the concept of contract cheating, also known as ghost-writing. This module is appropriate for all staff in teaching roles, and those who manage issues related to academic misconduct.

Source: Advice and resources on contract cheating available to teaching staff at Curtin University www.curtin.edu.au/cli/professional_learning/ple.cfm

Teaching staff also need recognition of their efforts; for example, as part of the performance review process or other reward structures. The Office for Academic Integrity in the University of South Australia Business School recently established an 'Academic Integrity Champion' award based on three criteria:

1. How has the staff member promoted academic integrity in their course or program?
2. How has the staff member responded to academic integrity breaches?
3. How has the staff member made academic integrity part of their portfolio of (teaching and learning) achievements?

While such an award will not 'solve' the problem of contract cheating, it does go some way to highlighting the importance of academic integrity and recognising the efforts of teaching (and professional) staff to address concerns in their own spheres of influence.

Good practice example 17: Use assessment design to make contract cheating 'less likely'

Authentic, individualised and experiential assessment design has long been touted as the 'solution' to contract cheating. Recent research has challenged this myth (Ellis et al., 2020). Research shows that contract cheating providers supply students with assessments that were designed to meet the definition of being "authentic". Furthermore, data from the CCAD project indicated that no assessment types are immune to contract cheating, but student survey respondents also suggested that four types of assessment are 'less likely' to be outsourced. These include:

- reflections on practicums
- oral defences of written work (vivas)
- assignments that relate to students' personal experience or which have been individualised, and
- supervised assessments that are completed in-class.

The data from the CCAD Project has provided an evidence base which demonstrates that assessment design alone is not the answer to contract cheating, but nevertheless plays an important role in addressing this threat to academic integrity (see Bretag et al., 2016).

Figure 14: Four assignments 'less likely to be outsourced'

Good practice example 18: Use text-matching software for both detection and education

Text-matching software such as *Turnitin* is used by all universities and many large higher education providers across the Australian higher education sector. However, its use in many institutions is inconsistent and in some cases biased. The most appropriate, educationally focused use of text-matching software should adhere to the following parameters:

1. Text-matching software should be applied to all text-based assignments, regardless of discipline. It is therefore essential that text-based assignments are submitted electronically to allow for automatic checking by the text-matching software.
    a. The use of text-matching software should not be 'at the discretion' of individual faculties, departments or academics
    b. All students should be included, not just those suspected of plagiarism or other academic integrity breaches.
2. Training should be provided to all staff involved in using text-matching software.
    a. Short, focused face-to-face workshops should be offered
    b. Online support and text-matching software experts should be available for 'at elbow' support as needed.
3. Regular audits of text-matching 'similarity reports' and associated grades should be conducted to ensure that staff are using the reports to address integrity concerns.
4. Students should have the opportunity to submit their own assignments and correct errors in advance of the submission date.
    a. Regular workshops and online support should be available to assist students in understanding the role of text-matching software and how to use it to improve their academic performance.
5. Where appropriate, 'similarity reports' should form part of the evidence base for an academic integrity investigation.

It should be noted that text-matching software such as Turnitin is less useful for identifying contract cheating than it is for typical plagiarism. Contract cheating providers often advertise their work as "plagiarism free" and may use text-matching software to check their work before supplying it to a student. However, these contract cheating providers are often fraudulent and may recycle assignments or cobble-together 'copy-and-pasted' content that will be identified by Text-matching software. Text-matching software therefore remains a useful tool in identifying contract cheating. Research by the CCAD Project (Bretag et al., 2016) found text-matching reports were the third most common way that staff identified outsourced assignments (after the educator's knowledge of the student's academic and linguistic abilities).

Although test-matching software can be helpful in detecting contract cheating, its main role is detecting and deterring *plagiarism*, and may provide support in the education process by helping students' awareness of plagiarism. Turnitin have a tool called Authorship, which is specifically designed to help detect contract cheating. Another commercial tool of note to help identify and manage cases of contract cheating is Wiroo.

Good practice example 19: Foster 'personalised' teaching and learning relationships

Research by Bretag et al. (2019) found that students who reported engaging in contract cheating were less satisfied with three aspects of the teaching and learning environment:

1. the opportunity to approach teaching staff for assistance
2. clarification about assessment requirements, and
3. assignment feedback.

These three aspects of a 'personalised teaching and learning relationship' can be fostered by:

1. clarifying assessment requirements through: task instructions; scaffolding, interactive discussions and assessment or marking rubrics
2. being accessible to students for learning help and support, and
3. providing constructive, meaningful and timely feedback for each student.

Such a personalised teaching and learning relationship is even more important in light of the finding from the CCAD project mentioned in Good practice example 18 above, that the educator's knowledge of the student's academic and linguistic abilities was the key way that contract cheating can be identified.

This focus on establishing positive, interactive learning relationships as part of an overall strategy to promote academic integrity is highlighted by Central Queensland University in numerous forums, as in the following excerpt in Figure 15:

Figure 15: Excerpt from CQ University website – building relationships with students

> A number of courses are now being delivered with a mix of on-campus tutorials and online learning, providing students with access to an innovative learning experience which encourages a personalised and interactive learning environment. This mode provides an opportunity for students to build strong and highly valuable relationships with the academics and their fellow peers.

Good practice example 20: Recognise and support the particular needs of International LOTE students (and other 'at risk' students)

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that international students who speak a language other than English (LOTE):

- demonstrate less understanding of the meanings and practices of academic integrity (Bretag et al., 2014)
- are twice as likely to have been involved in an academic integrity breach investigation (Bretag et al., 2014), and
- are significantly more likely to report engaging in contract cheating (Bretag et al., 2019; Curtis et al., 2022).

This vulnerable group of students is also the most likely to be targeted by unscrupulous commercial cheat sites that offer quick and relatively cheap 'assistance' with completing assignments. Struggling with studying in a non-native language, confusion about the requirements in the new academic environment, as well as isolation, family pressures and multiple responsibilities, it cannot be surprising that some international LOTE students may be tempted to resort to cheating.

Given that Australian higher education providers actively pursue an internationalisation agenda that includes a strong focus on the recruitment of international students, most of whom speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), it is imperative that higher education providers maintain acceptable minimum English language requirements for admission and invest appropriately in support services (language, academic skills, counselling) for this vulnerable group of students. Teaching staff also need appropriate training and support to enable them to meet the needs of this student cohort, while simultaneously upholding academic standards. Central Queensland University makes explicit the importance of adequately supporting international students (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: Excerpt from CQUniversity website – supporting students who need additional assistance

5 POLICY STATEMENT

CQUniversity is committed to monitoring the academic progress of its students to ensure student success and uphold the credibility of its offerings. The Monitoring Academic Progress (MAP) policy and procedures provide a framework describing how the university identifies and engages with students who are not achieving satisfactory academic progress and therefore may be at risk of not achieving their academic goals. CQUniversity seeks to support all students in becoming successful in their studies and in achieving their potential.

CQUniversity understands that its students come from a variety of educational, cultural, social and economic backgrounds with differing motivation and achievement levels.

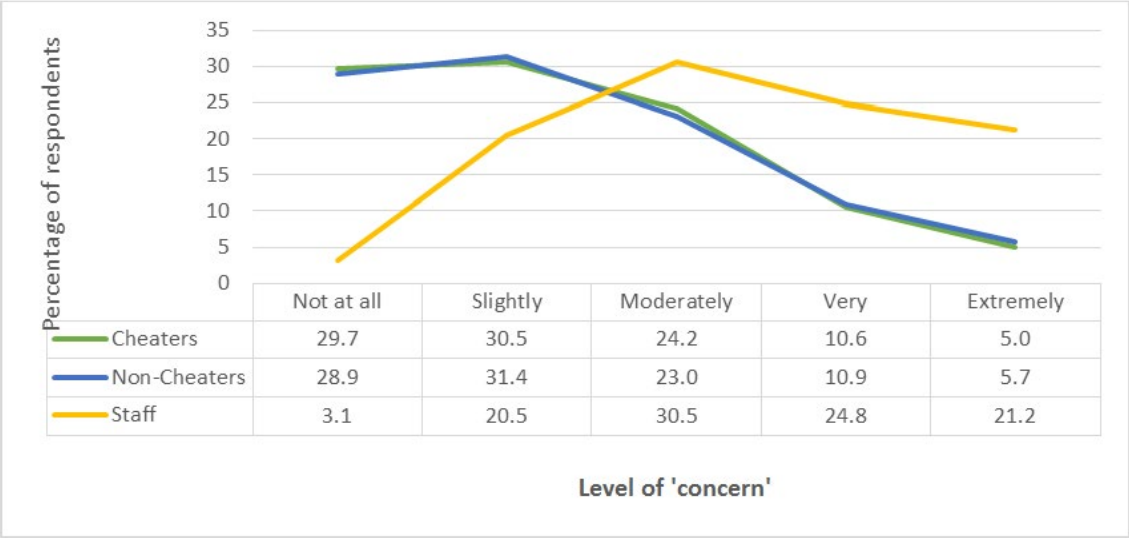
CQUniversity seeks to identify students who may require additional assistance as early as possible in their study course. Targeted academic skills and personal courses, as applicable, are offered to assist with satisfactory learning outcomes.

Other 'at risk' students such as first in family, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, educationally 'less prepared' (see Bretag et al., 2014), and mature-age students with multiple and competing responsibilities, need to be identified early and appropriately supported through a range of targeted programs.

Good practice example 21: Encourage conversations between staff and students about contract cheating

Contract cheating has repercussions for the credibility of degree programs, the reputations of institutions, and long-term consequences for professional practice and the community. However, recent research suggests that non-cheating students are no more concerned about the impact of contract cheating than those students who actually engage in cheating behaviours (Harper et al., 2019). This is shown in Figure 17 below.

Figure 17: Level of 'concern' that higher education students are engaging in contract cheating, as reported by teaching staff, cheating students and non-cheating students



	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
Cheaters	29.7	30.5	24.2	10.6	5.0
Non-Cheaters	28.9	31.4	23.0	10.9	5.7
Staff	3.1	20.5	30.5	24.8	21.2

Source: Harper & Bretag et al (2017, in progress)

One recommendation to ameliorate this situation is to encourage formal and informal conversations between teachers and students, which raise awareness about the effects of contract cheating. Intrinsically motivated students who would never consider outsourcing their learning to a third party need to be encouraged to speak up when they witness cheating in their own programs or elsewhere on campus. Confidential, simple processes need to be established to facilitate open communication between students and staff so that contract cheating can be identified and appropriately managed (see Case Study 9 for one example).

Good practice example 22: Collaborate across the higher education sector

Contract cheating is not only an institutional, regional, or even national issue. Contract cheating is a concern for all educational providers right across the globe. A coordinated, collaborative approach is therefore needed, beginning with Australian higher education providers working together to share data and best practices.

Previously, individual higher education providers in Australia have been reluctant to collaborate, often considering (perhaps naively) that incidents such as MyMaster 'won't happen here'. However, research by the CCAD Project (Bretag et al., 2016) demonstrated that no higher education providers are immune, no assignment types can fully 'design out' contract cheating, and despite concerted efforts by many institutions and individual educators, a small but concerning percentage of students consider contract cheating to be an appropriate and strategic way to complete their studies (Ellis & Murdoch, 2024).

Collaboration among Australian universities has been fostered by initiatives from TEQSA, such as the nationwide Academic Integrity Workshops held in 2019 (Curtis Bretag et al., 2022). More critically, the leadership of Professor Bernie Marshall from Deakin University to establish the Australasian Academic Integrity Network (AAIN), has been pivotal in facilitating dialogue among educational institutions and staff in Australia about academic integrity. Founded in 2019, the AAIN now has over 1000 members at 140 institutions, active email list, and an annual conference (forum).

4. Good practices to maintain academic integrity and address contract cheating: Case studies

Case Study 1: Office for Academic Integrity, UniSA Business School

Tracey Bretag, University of South Australia

The Office for Academic Integrity was established in the UniSA Business School in October 2015, partly in response to academic misconduct scandals in the press around essay mills, contract cheating, file sharing, the sale of fake parchments and other egregious academic integrity breaches which had resulted in some universities revoking students' degrees post-graduation.

An academic integrity working group was convened early in 2015 and provided a number of recommendations relating to contract cheating which ultimately resulted in resources being allocated to establish the Office for Academic Integrity. Working closely with the Dean: Academic, an Advisory Committee and other relevant stakeholders representing the Student Engagement Unit, the Teaching Innovation Unit, UniSA Students Association, the Digital Learning Strategy team and the Marketing Unit, the key objectives of the Office for Academic Integrity are as follows:

1. Foster a culture of integrity on campus for both students and staff;
2. Provide professional development for teaching staff at all levels in relation to curriculum design, teaching strategies, assessment, marking and implementation of academic integrity policy;
3. Build capacity for Curriculum Leaders, Program Directors and Course Coordinators to be champions of academic integrity;
4. Encourage students to be active participants in nurturing academic integrity, rather than passive recipients of policy;
5. Provide a central point of expertise, support and mentoring for Academic Integrity Officers;
6. Ensure consistent and appropriate application of UniSA policy for all academic integrity breaches.

Figure 18: UniSA Business School Office for Academic Integrity promotional material

Source: Office for Academic Integrity marketing material focusses on the positive values and multiple stakeholders of academic integrity

Case Study 2: Academic Integrity Ambassadors

The University of Adelaide and Macquarie University

The University of Adelaide currently runs a successful Academic Integrity Ambassadors program. This program recruits and trains student volunteers to promote academic integrity at the university. This program is similar to the Macquarie University Academic Integrity Matters Ambassadors (AIMA) imitative. To maximise the viability and long-term potential of the organisation, AIMA at Macquarie enlisted as a chapter of a larger, more well-established organisation – the Academic Integrity Matters student organisation, which is based at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD; founded by Dr Tricia Bertram Gallant in 2009). This affiliation provided AIMA with a ready-made organisational constitution, marketing and branding materials, and other useful resources that enabled the dissemination of a consistent academic integrity message.

At Adelaide and Macquarie, students have engaged with peers as role-models, workshop leaders, advisors, and advocates. They have led on-campus events promoting academic integrity and provided unique learning opportunities for the ambassadors themselves. These programs' success has been sustained by dedicated staff support from Claudia Gottwald at the University of Adelaide and Sonia Saddiqui at Macquarie University.

Figure 19: Macquarie University Academic Integrity Ambassadors

Case Study 3: Student Action on Contract Cheating, Deakin University

Wendy Sutherland-Smith and Gavin Hodgkinson, Deakin University

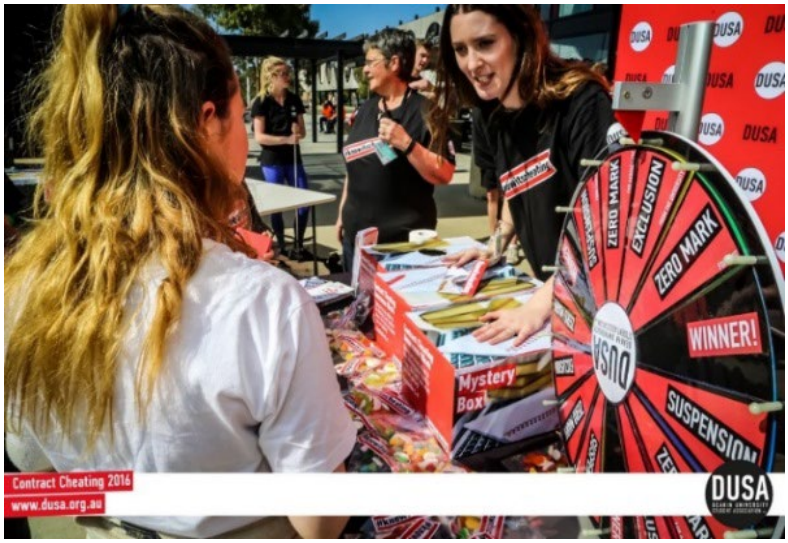
Deakin University has actively engaged with the issue of contract cheating. Policies and processes have been changed to specifically include contract cheating as an area of dishonest conduct and the schedule of outcomes has been changed to ensure students who are proven to have engaged in this conduct face serious consequences. The Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) has been exceptionally active in this space, with ongoing awareness campaigns for all students being undertaken on each of Deakin University campuses.

The DUSA awareness campaigns were initiated following the 2016 *International Call for Action Against Contract Cheating* to raise awareness across campus and to make students aware that it was not ethical conduct and that there were serious consequences if detected. A most successful part of the campaign was the Deakin University 'spinning wheel', which contained a series of 'outcomes' from the policy that students could relate to specific scenarios. The advocates introduced students to the spinning wheel, highlighting the idea 'that there is never an appropriate situation to engage in contract cheating and that doing so is taking a gamble'. DUSA reported that most students were shocked to learn that there were such serious consequences for contract cheating. DUSA also reported that a student was so affected by the DUSA campaign that he went to his lecturer and 'confessed' to contract cheating in an assignment as he realised he had made an unethical decision and decided to report his behaviour and seek advice and assistance from DUSA and his lecturer.

DUSA also decided to use the strident red and black colours as these are the colours of the DUSA Dragon, the university mascot and symbol of the various student activity and sporting groups. DUSA plans to extend the range of the contract cheating awareness campaigns in 2017.

Similar to the rationale for the spinning wheel exercise. Educators may be interested in Associate Professor Amanda White's Academic Integrity Board Game.

Figure 20: Deakin University Contract Cheating Campaign



Case Study 4: Good practice in assessment — innovations to minimise contract cheating

Michael Baird (Curtin University) and Joseph Clare (Murdoch University/UWA)

This case study is taken from a large Australian university where a business capstone unit is a final study period unit which every Bachelor of Commerce student must complete in order to graduate. Capstone units are common in business degrees as they pull together previously acquired knowledge, skills and experiential learning, and provide a mechanism to measure students' abilities before they graduate. Up to the end of 2014 the assessments in the unit were varied and well-rounded, consisting of:

- a business simulation (40% of the unit mark)
- an individual case study (20%)
- a series of weekly eTests (20%), and
- a presentation (20%).

Upon release of the University's online system for anonymously gathering and reporting student feedback on their learning experiences (eValuate) in mid-2015, it was reported that contract cheating problems were occurring, and at the end of 2015 reports came in from numerous campus locations. At the completion of 2015, the unit was in crisis. Therefore, work was carried out building on a platform provided by criminological theory and crime prevention practice, whereby the assessment elements of the capstone unit were adjusted to reduce the opportunity for contract cheating. The objective for this work was simple: continue to improve the unit and make it harder for students to participate in and get away with contract cheating, but not any harder for students to legitimately learn the material. Some of the interventions included:

- an anonymous feedback facility via a Google Form to allow reporting of issues earlier
- a 'team shake-up' which took a member of each team, chosen at random, to switch teams mid-way through the simulation
- increased simulation variability between classes, which means that every class has different simulation market conditions, and
- an academic misconduct information handout (hard copy) distributed to all students and enhanced tutor education with respect to academic misconduct.

One year after implementing these changes, the number of alleged cases of academic misconduct across all assessments in the unit had reduced to 27, down from 183 alleged cases in 2015. This opportunity-reduction success did not hinder any genuine students' ability to complete the unit and score a high grade, demonstrating that it is possible to minimise contract cheating in a manner consistent with the aim of implementing teaching and supporting learning that influences, motivates, and inspires students to learn.

Reference

Baird, M., & Clare, J. (2017). Removing the opportunity for contract cheating in business capstones: A crime prevention case study. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 13(1), 6.

Case Study 5: Good practice in assessment — Student-Centred Active Learning Environment with Upside-down Pedagogies (SCALE-UP) to address contract cheating

S. D. Sivasubramaniam, Nottingham Trent University, UK

It is apparent that traditional 'take-home' style assessments can create opportunities for students to collude, plagiarise and obtain pre-written essays. In addition, on some occasions, there is a disparity between a student's coursework and their exam performance, with higher grades being attained in the former. Although this disparity may be due to several factors, including poor self-directed learning and revision techniques, inadequate time management, and exam-related stress, some academics suggest that coursework provides opportunities for academic integrity breaches, such as contract cheating. To ameliorate this situation, we explored the possibility of using classroom-based active learning and assessment as an alternative to traditional coursework to minimise the opportunities for contract cheating.

The approach was designed to suit a second-year biomedical/pharmacology core module with 145 to 174 students at a UK university. In this module, an exercise (which assesses information gathering, self-directed learning and critical analysis skills to enhance students' revision skills) was transformed from traditional coursework to an in-class SCALE-UP activity. Led by Dr Sivasubramaniam, the peer-assisted activity was split in two 3-hour sessions. In the first session, students were allowed to research a specific topic in groups of four, with sub-topics allocated to each member of the group. Students were allowed to use books, the Internet and any other relevant sources.

This process was assisted by academics giving 'feed-forward' leading questions to assist students to critically evaluate their topics. At the end of the session, students uploaded their short notes to the intranet for academic feedback. The second session started with brief academic feedback on students' short notes, followed by students writing their reports in-class which were then submitted at the end of the session. In this way, the students were: (a) actively researching the topic, (b) involved in peer-assisted learning, (c) directed by discipline academics towards achieving their task goals, and above all, (d) not provided with an opportunity to obtain outside assistance or purchase essays.

Students' grades in this exercise and in the exam were compared with that of previous years to analyse the impact of this intervention on students' learning outcomes. Although there were no significant changes for the coursework component, there was a statistically significant increase in students' exam performance, from a mean of 37% (± STD 17.7) to 58% (±STD 10.1). This suggests that the SCALE-UP methodology not only helped to reduce opportunities for contract cheating but also enhanced students' learning processes and overall performance.

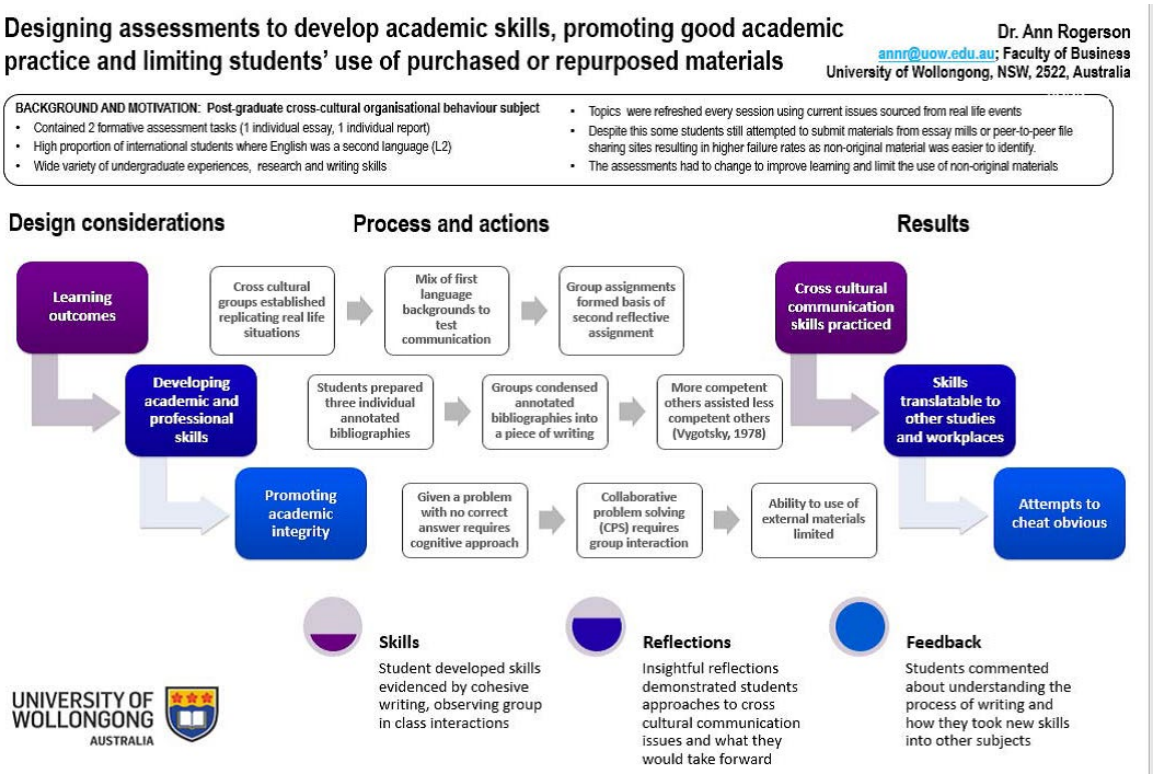
Case Study 6: Good practice in assessment — limiting opportunities for students to outsource work to third parties

Ann Rogerson, University of Wollongong

The pressures applied to academics in meeting increasing responsibilities with reduced resources can mean that assessment tasks may be tweaked or recycled from year to year, which unintentionally contribute to contract cheating issues. With a little creativity, assessment tasks can be redesigned, not only to limit the potential for students to seek outside paid assistance to complete tasks, but actually engage students in their learning and prepare them for future study tasks and real-life responsibilities.

Changes were made to an assessment design in some postgraduate subjects undertaken by international students. Students were introduced to understanding the construction and purpose of annotated bibliographies, extracting key information from journal articles, and integrating a series of annotated bibliographies into a coherent passage via a series of group work tasks. Later tasks developed skills in reflection, linking theory to practical experiences in multi-national groups. Reflective tasks related to in-class discussions or experiences are difficult for others to replicate and where a reflection is purchased, copied or borrowed key elements are usually missing. All the tasks were designed to achieve the learning outcomes, while minimising opportunities to submit plagiarised, borrowed or purchased materials - but in the end this assessment innovation achieved much more than originally anticipated. Reflections from students included their experiences in finally understanding how to read, extract, and use information from journals, recognising the relationship between methodological processes and results and how they had applied these learning experiences to other subjects and thus achieving improved results (see Figure 21).

Figure 21: Assessment Design Poster by Dr Ann Rogerson



Source: Rogerson, A.M. (2015). Designing assessments to develop academic skills while promoting good academic practice and limiting students use of purchased or repurposed materials, *Assessment in Higher Education Conference*, Birmingham, 16-18 June, 2015.

Case Study 7: Using text-matching tools to promote learning and reduce plagiarism[1]

Salim Razi, Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey

Dr Salim Razi teaches academic writing to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University in Turkey, and for the past five years before writing this case study has used Turnitin to address increasing levels of unoriginal work at the university and promote academic integrity. Following initial success with using Turnitin, which overall saw unoriginal content in students' work (as shown in Similarity Reports) significantly decrease from 58% to 11%, Dr Razi looked to explore Turnitin's online feedback tools to develop a systematic approach to providing students with effective digital feedback on their writing via the peer review facility.

One of Dr Razi's key aims was to encourage those students who are often reluctant to submit their work. His approach uses a combination of self and peer feedback in order to help develop key critical thinking skills which will be essential to students' future study and work. Students are grouped according to their academic performance; that is, good, moderate and poor and each student receives feedback from each of these groups using a rubric developed by Dr Razi:

> *Each student receives anonymous feedback from each group, which helps them to develop their writing, whilst also forcing them to look critically at the quality of their own reviews. I require multiple submissions and review these at each stage, which assists my students to revise and develop their critical thinking skills.*

Additional feedback is also provided by the tutor who contributes a summative mark. This whole process is facilitated by Turnitin as such a complex approach to offering feedback from multiple sources would be difficult to achieve manually.

Dr Razi has found that by providing students with opportunities to review their own work and the work of peers, students develop their own academic writing style and critical thinking skills. Specifically, he has found a positive correlation between students' academic writing and peer reviewing capabilities, in that better writers give better reviews.

1. Turnitin Innovation Awards, http://turnitin.com/en_us/community/award-winners/item/using-self-and-peer-feedback-to-improve-academic-writing

Case Study 8: Processes and training to ensure consistent responses to academic integrity breaches

Greg Preston, University of Newcastle

A Student Academic Conduct Officer (SACO) is an academic staff member appointed to receive reports of alleged academic misconduct and to manage the University of Newcastle's response to those incidents in line with the Student Academic Integrity Policy. SACOs may be based within a School, across multiple Schools or in another academic unit (such as a campus), and are usually appointed at level C or above, except in certain circumstances.

The training of Student Academic Conduct Officers (SACO's) involves both initial and ongoing training. Training is facilitated by the SACO Coordinator, who provides strategic oversight of the SACO network with support from the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Academic.

The initial training includes an orientation session with the SACO coordinator. At this session SACOs are familiarised with University of Newcastle Student Academic Integrity Policy, and introduced to relevant support materials. Those support materials include:

- flowcharts on case handling
- sample letters to communicate with staff and students in terms of investigations and outcomes
- guidelines for penalties, and
- reporting procedures.

The session also includes discussion of a number of scenarios which deal with issues that SACOs are likely to face during their tenure. These scenarios include both procedural and ethical issues.

New SACOs are encouraged to work with the SACO Coordinator when handling their first few cases. Additionally, SACOs are briefed about University of Newcastle initiatives around the Code of Conduct, curriculum and assessment design to reduce plagiarism, and given various tools to help them work with staff in their school or discipline area on minimising academic integrity breaches through these approaches.

The ongoing training is provided through face-to-face and online means. The face-to-face training is conducted through four SACO meetings each year, and one major workshop. The meetings provide training and updates on specific issues (for example, assignment mills or data entry for university systems), and always have a general discussion section where individual SACOs can raise any issues that they wish. The annual major workshop provides opportunities to 'calibrate' the University of Newcastle approach around issues such as penalties, and provide greater understanding of the place of the SACO system with the University. Presentations on issues such as 'Natural Justice' or Ombudsman processes are typical of the sessions that might occur here.

Online training resources and other support is available to all SACOs through a dedicated Web space which has resource material, policy documents and discussion rooms on various academic integrity issues.

Case Study 9: Applying the Courageous Conversations model

UNSW

The Courageous Conversations model (Murdoch & House, 2024) is a proactive, educational approach implemented to promote academic integrity and address academic misconduct, particularly contract cheating, within higher education settings. Rather than relying solely on punitive or formal investigative processes, the model invites students to participate in structured, supportive dialogues when suspected of academic breaches. As contract cheating allegations can be enormously stressful for students (Pitt et al., 2021), its core objective is to foster open communication, personal responsibility, and ethical development through transparency, support, and education.

The Courageous Conversations process typically involves early, honest communication with students about concerns with the integrity of their assignments, presenting objective evidence in a non-confrontational manner, and encouraging students to reflect on their actions. When students demonstrate integrity by taking responsibility, the model emphasises learning and restoration over punishment, integrating support mechanisms to help students avoid future misconduct.

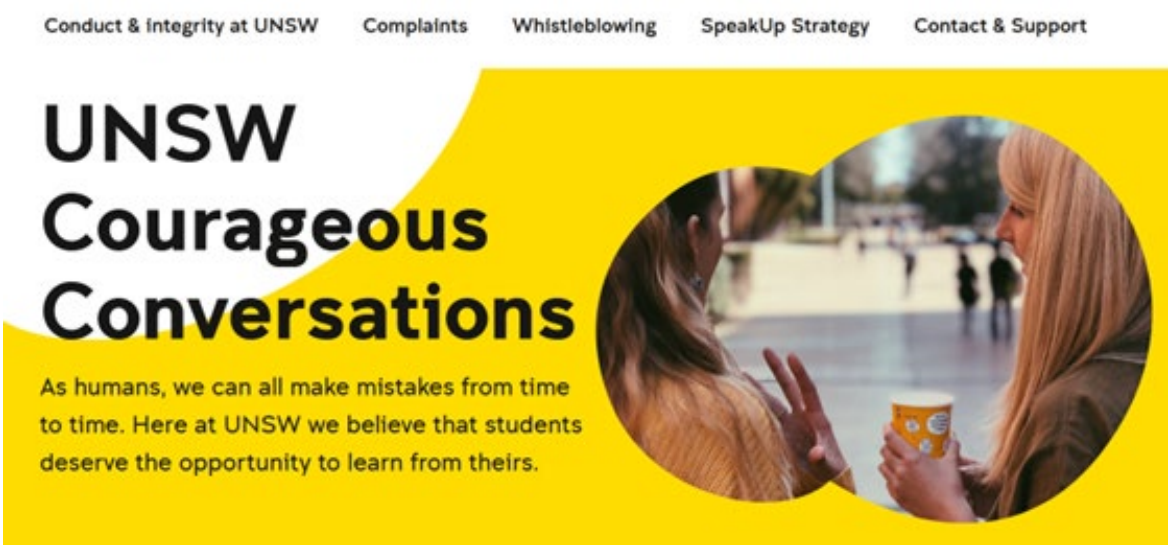
The process in practice

- Students are invited to attend a Courageous Conversations discussion if they are suspected of engaging in contract cheating. They are sent the evidence supporting the concern and information about the courageous conversations process.
- A meeting with a student suspected of contract cheating begins by presenting evidence factually and objectively, refraining from accusatory language.
- Students are given the opportunity to clarify, provide context, or admit responsibility in a safe environment.
- The process is framed as a learning opportunity: students are informed about the importance of academic integrity, institutional expectations, and the potential consequences of not addressing issues early.
- If a student acknowledges a breach of academic integrity, the most serious penalties for contract cheating, such as exclusion, are "taken off the table", but students are asked for full disclosure of the behaviour. When a student admits to contract cheating, the focus shifts to restorative practices including educational interventions such as academic skills workshops, counseling, and the chance to resubmit work or re-take a course.

The Courageous Conversations model has allowed academic misconduct investigators to gain valuable intelligence on contract cheating providers' methods. This has helped to uncover and substantiate more cases of contract cheating than had previously been the case. At the same time, the Courageous Conversations model has demonstrated positive outcomes, including increased student engagement in academic integrity, reduced instances of repeat misconduct, and stronger trust between students and institutional authorities. Staff report that the process de-escalates situations and turns breaches into teachable moments, while students appreciate the non-confrontational, fair approach.

The Courageous Conversations model supports a well-resourced and robust detection framework for contract cheating, that involves investigation of data beyond that which is identified by markers alone.

Figure 22: UNSW Courageous Conversations



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