Australian Government
Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

# Substantiating contract cheating: A guide for investigators

May 2026

TEQSA

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# Developments since TEQSA's Academic integrity toolkit was released

Since TEQSA's Academic integrity toolkit was first released in 2020, staff at Australian universities have developed world-leading approaches to systematically detecting contract cheating. As the nature and scale of contract cheating has become more apparent through both investigative work and research, approaches to detection and gathering of evidence required to substantiate concerns of contract cheating have changed significantly.

Recent technological developments have seen the rise and fall of some outsourcing services, with so-called "homework help" services being supplanted in most cases by increased use of generative artificial intelligence (gen AI). Although the concept of the "essay mill" arose predominantly from student's outsourcing written work to submit for credit, investigators have uncovered evidence of widespread and systematic use of third-party contract cheating services, including "essay mills", or so-called "homework help" sites. Concerningly, some of these service operators have been known to access university learning management systems in order to complete tasks, subjects and even entire degree programs on behalf of students.

Current evidence strongly challenges the view that contract cheating is undetectable. Research has demonstrated that staff in higher education institutions can be trained to identify contract cheating. Similarly, dedicated investigative teams have made significant breakthroughs in detecting contract cheating at scale. These findings have been crucial in developing training programs and detection protocols, moving the field from a position of perceived helplessness to one of informed and active response.

## Multi-layered approach: The educational integrity enforcement pyramid

New theoretical perspectives have provided structured frameworks for understanding these multi-layered approaches. The Educational Integrity Enforcement Pyramid offers a systematic framework for challenging and responding to student cheating.

The evidence strongly suggests that a multi-layered approach combining technological tools, educator training and institutional policies is most effective in addressing this challenge. The Educational Integrity Enforcement Pyramid framework reinforces this understanding, demonstrating that institutions need comprehensive systems operating at multiple levels to effectively address contract cheating.

The framework highlights that institutions that are under-reporting cheating (and other forms of learning avoidance) are likely missing at least one level in their enforcement pyramid, indicating higher institutional risk and highlighting the critical importance of comprehensive, multi-tiered approaches to educational integrity. Another key point to note from this research is that partnership between academic and professional staff investigators is highly effective in tackling contract cheating.

Current best practice suggests that multi-modal approaches to detection are most effective in addressing systematic, large-scale contract cheating. Rather than relying upon any one detection method, institutions will need to integrate technological tools with human expertise and institutional policies for more comprehensive coverage.

## Integrated approach: key considerations

An integrated approach recognises that effective contract cheating detection requires not just technological sophistication but also trained human judgment and supportive institutional frameworks.

The implications for educational institutions are significant and multifaceted. Immediate actions should include:

- deploying available detection tools while recognising their limitations
- integrating multiple detection methods into investigative practices rather than relying on single solutions
- establishing clear protocols for investigating suspected cases
- ensuring adequate training for staff using detection technologies.

Staff development is crucial, requiring training on:

- manual detection techniques
- development of institutional expertise in contract cheating identification and investigation
- creation of support networks for staff dealing with integrity issues
- establishment of clear escalation pathways for suspected cases.

# Evidence

The transition from suspicion to successful and scalable proof presents challenges that higher education institutions continue to grapple with. Establishing **proof** of academic misconduct *on a balance of probabilities* is requires more substantive evidence than simply raising concerns. Proof on the balance of probabilities means that based on the available evidence it is more likely than not that misconduct occurred. Although this does not mean that it is necessary to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that academic misconduct happened, substantiating contract cheating still requires evidence beyond suspicions.

Research demonstrates this challenge clearly. Even when instructors' intuitions about contract cheating are correct, they often struggle to provide the level of evidence required for formal academic disciplinary processes. Despite considerable focus, individual academics working in isolation are not necessarily equipped to generate probative evidence of contract cheating, and not at the scale required to be effective.  This is because specialised knowledge and skills may be required to access technical data and systems outside of an academic staff member's typical expertise in research and teaching.

Investigators have significantly closed this evidentiary gap between suspicion and proof, and in doing so have made the conversion of suspicion into evidence a more effective process. In

the process, a range of evidence types have come to prominence, gaining strength in the course of investigations, while others have proven to be less effective than originally believed.

## Traditional evidence types

The first TEQSA guide to substantiating contract cheating was heavily focussed on actions that "coal face" academics could take to develop evidence and build cases to prove contract cheating, much as was the case with "copy and paste" plagiarism which preceded contract cheating. Indeed, in many cases the onus was *entirely* on academic staff to investigate instance of plagiarism and contract cheating alike.

### Student writing

In practice, the evidence provided by academics primarily referenced the content of assessment tasks – what they see in front of them as they mark student work, with a focus on elements such as:

- writing style
- mismatches between known student capabilities and the quality of a given piece of work
- "bland" or off-topic content in an assessment task (see Table 1 for a more detailed list of indicators).

This focus on the style and tone of a piece of writing led to the development of detection approaches such as stylometry, which was later embedded in Turnitin's Authorship tool. However, approaches such as stylometry should be used with caution, particularly as a student's baseline writing style is rarely known.

### Formatting and pattern recognition

Formatting and technical patterns proved to be valuable in building a body of evidence to prove instances of contract cheating such as:

- unusual formatting patterns
- irregular referencing styles
- mismatches in document properties
- inconsistent use of language conventions.

Further work was later undertaken in developing in-task evidence, such as bibliographic anomalies, however such approaches encounter issues with academic workload and scalability, which, given the estimated extent of contract cheating in higher education, must be considered.

### Content-led approach

Of course, not all work submitted for assessment is in a written language form. Work has been conducted to address the challenges of substantiating contract cheating in disciplines which are symbol-dense, such as mathematics or physics. In most cases, disciplines such as these require subject matter expertise in order to generate an academic opinion about a student's work, which forms the basis of evidence against the student.

A significant drawback of content-led approaches is that the threshold of proof at the "balance of probabilities" standard employed in student conduct matters remains a challenge, given the quality of evidence produced. Some research addressed this point specifically, contributing to the concept of a multi-modal approach to detection, with a combination of evidence from academic and non-academic sources to support and corroborate the view that a student has engaged in contract cheating.

Nonetheless, despite attempts to strengthen academic evidence, in isolation it remains somewhat weak in comparison to data sourced from across a whole program of study. The major advances in detection of contract cheating identified stronger, more objective, evidence that students did not undertake the work themselves, which combined with systematically gathered evidence (see Table 1), results in significant downward pressure on contract cheating, at an institutional level.

While academic staff retain a key role in providing evidence to initiate cases, this evidence may be the starting point for a more comprehensive investigation, which can only be enabled by effective institutional processes.

# New detection methodologies and evidence

Although published data on investigations conducted by higher education institutions is rare the adoption of wholistic investigation methodologies has been shown to be highly effective. These methodologies, and the tools used, do not automatically identify contract cheating but rather provide evidence to support human investigation and decision-making.

## Learning Management System and IP address

Learning Management System (LMS) and IP address analysis represent important technical approaches to the detection of contract cheating. These methods typically involve:

- monitoring submission patterns and timing
- tracking student engagement with subject materials
- analysing login patterns and study behaviour.

## Metadata

The examination of file metadata including authorship and the software used to create a document can provide institutions with additional tools for identifying patterns that can indicate contract cheating (see 'Key LMS Analytics for Contract Cheating Detection' for a more complete list of indicators).

## Revision save identifiers

Another valuable tool for detecting contracting cheating (and other potential academic integrity breaches such as collusion and inappropriate AI usage) are those that analyse Revision Save Identifiers (Rsids). Rsids are unique codes assigned by Microsoft Word to ***any*** edit session in a MS Word document. Between opening a new document and the first save (manual or autosave), the program will assign the document a "Root" code and assign a different code to material inputted to the document after that first save. This helps investigators compare documents (such as drafts and final submissions), and see whether large sections of text have been pasted into a document.

Some universities have developed their own tools, and commercial tools have been developed in the UK and by graduates from the University of Western Australia, to enable investigators to quickly analyse documents.

# Conversations with students

A key element of student misconduct investigations, from both a process and a procedural fairness perspective, is providing students the right of reply to allegations. There are different approaches and procedures taken by institutions, however, "Courageous Conversations", originally implemented at the University of New South Wales, has proven to be both highly effective and highly efficient in resolving student misconduct matters.

As an institution gains investigative and detection capabilities, it exposes the extent and seriousness of potential student conduct breaches that have been invisible until those capabilities were gained. This presents significant workload and resourcing issues, which need to be effectively and fairly managed. "Courageous Conversations" is, in effect, an "informal" stage supplementing institutional student conduct policies, which seeks to address the concerns raised against the student, and provide them with an opportunity to be honest about their behaviour – to demonstrate courage and return to acting with integrity.

Taking an empathetic approach when communicating concerns to students – exchanging accusatory and legalistic language for plain English which is less likely to induce an emotional response – greatly assists in focusing students on their behaviour. When considering appropriate outcomes for integrity breaches, focusing on learning (or lack thereof) instead of punishment opens the way to more educative conversations with students, in which they can better understand the consequences of their actions.

The principles of "Courageous Conversations" are:

1. education
2. focus on the person, not the "crime"
3. partnership between academic and professional staff
4. a natural justice framework
5. removal of the most serious available penalties for honest admissions of misconduct
6. efficiency and reduction of administrative workload.

The "Template for conducting a student academic integrity interview" (on page 14), includes questions designed to seek information rather than levelling accusations or seeking to confirm suspicions.

# Strategy

To facilitate the advancement of contract cheating investigations there are several significant gaps that require attention:

- technological advancement remains a priority, with a need for more sophisticated approaches, better integration of multiple detection methods into unified systems, and development of real-time detection capabilities
- education and training is equally important, requiring comprehensive training programs for investigators, development of standardised detection protocols and professional development resources for academic staff.

Long-term institutional strategies must address policy development through:

- comprehensive academic integrity policies addressing contract cheating
- clear consequences and remediation procedures
- prevention programs alongside detection efforts
- student education initiatives about academic integrity.

Research and development activities should include:

- participation in, or support of, research on detection effectiveness
- collaboration with other institutions to share best practices
- contributions to the development of detection technologies
- monitoring of emerging or evolving trends in contract cheating services.

The key to success lies not in any single detection method but in the integration of multiple approaches, continuous staff development and proactive institutional policies. As contract cheating services continue to evolve, educational institutions must remain vigilant and adaptive in their response strategies.

> The combination of technological advancement and educational expertise represents the most promising approach to maintaining academic integrity in the face of evolving challenges.

Future research should focus on developing more sophisticated automated detection methods while maintaining the crucial role of human judgment in the detection and investigation process. It is also important when developing institutional strategies, that aspects such as resourcing, technical capabilities, privacy obligations and student welfare are central to considerations.

# Training your decision makers

Whether your institution operates a centralised or decentralised model of investigation, it is important for those making decisions to be familiar with the types of evidence and lines of argument that may be put forward to support a contract cheating case.

If decision makers (typically at a more senior level) are unfamiliar with key aspects of contract cheating research or investigative practice, they may create roadblocks to the investigative process. Key aspects that decision makers should be aware of are:

- the estimated scale of contract cheating across the sector
- the different forms contract cheating may take in varying disciplinary contexts
- technical data and analyses
- statutes of limitations within institutional policies (if they appear).

Prior to cases being put forward for a decision, it is highly recommended that decision makers attend sessions where investigative approaches are laid out and explained, especially in cases where significant clusters of contract cheating cases have been identified and investigated.

# Principles for systematic detection of contract cheating

1. **Approach the problem systematically:** Ensure all relevant staff, particularly markers and unit/course coordinators, are trained to recognise initial signals that may indicate contract cheating. These signals should be treated as triggers for investigation using multiple data sources rather than standalone evidence. Initial suspicions or anomalies warrant deeper investigation - relying on only a few signals is insufficient evidence to reach a finding.
2. **Take a "whole of program" approach:** Students who contract cheat, and are not detected, may tend to resort to contract cheating or other forms of academic misconduct in future. Rather than looking at one assessment or subject in isolation, review the student's history of study using relevant information sources, such as LMS logs and compilations of their document metadata. It is advisable to seek this information first before seeking further academic opinion regarding other assessment tasks.
3. **Deploy multi-source analysis:** When initial signals are detected, systematically examine additional data sources including:
    - a formal academic opinion detailing their concerns
    - Learning Management System (LMS) activity logs
    - Turnitin Authorship metadata reports
    - technical comparison between documents, using tools that analyse RSIDs
    - bibliographic analysis.
4. **Document the investigation trail:** Maintain detailed records of all analytical steps, data sources consulted and evidence gathered. This systematic documentation supports the investigative process and ensures transparency.

5. **Apply appropriate legal standards:** Investigations in higher education are conducted according to the civil law standard of 'balance of probability' based on 'clear and convincing evidence'. The test is whether it is more likely than not that contract cheating occurred, which is less demanding than the criminal standard of 'beyond reasonable doubt'.
6. **Conduct structured interviews:** Use standardised interview protocols to assess student familiarity with assignment content, research methods and development processes. Document responses systematically for analysis.
7. **Follow institutional policies:** Ensure all investigations adhere to institutional academic integrity policies and procedures. Refer cases to appropriate investigators and decision-makers as required.
8. **Ensure procedural fairness:** Provide students with adequate opportunity to explain their work and demonstrate their knowledge, either in person or in writing. Ensure appropriate support is available and maintain detailed records of all interactions.
9. **Reach evidence-based conclusions:** Evaluate the strength and reliability of each piece of evidence, considering the limitations and accuracy of different analytical tools and data sources. It is important to consider the "preponderance of evidence", the sum of evidence, when arriving at key decision points such as whether to investigate, and whether a case is proven.

Table 1: Guide to textual and technological signals of potential contract cheating

| Content-based signals | Why this may be a clue |
|---|---|
| Content or language is not appropriate to discipline area | The writing and content may be at odds with language typical in the assignment/discipline, because academic cheating service writers can provide assignments on multiple academic disciplines and cite irrelevant or peripherally relevant sources from any number of disciplines. |
| Assignment quality different to or above expectations | A mismatch between the assignment quality (language use, content knowledge, formatting and style) and the student's previous work (e.g. assignments, exams, online and in-class work) may indicate the work is not that of the same author. |
| Language use and ability mismatch | A mismatch between the language use in the assignment and the student's language use (e.g. in class, in interpersonal interactions, online, in previous assignments, exams). In particular, high-quality writing from people with low standards of spoken language may be a red flag. |
| Unreadable language, including jargon-filled sentences and misuse of words | Online 'article spinners', gen AI programs, translation or paraphrasing tools can automatically transform any text into 'original' writing that bypasses text-matching software. This writing may sound excessively verbose or complicated, make little sense, and misuse terms and everyday words. This process may be used by students or ghost-writers to avoid text-matching detection. |
| References in languages that the student does not speak | It is highly unlikely that a student would try to use foreign language references that don't match their own language/s, particularly for older sources where automatic translation may not be easily available. |
| Reference list, but:<br>• no in-text citations<br>• mismatch with in-text citations<br>• sources inappropriate/ irrelevant<br>• access dates for internet sources predate enrolment<br>• references are falsified.<br><br>Does not meet criteria/ requirements:<br>• min/max required references<br>• required references/authors<br>• date range of references<br>• referencing style<br>• excludes key content<br>• includes irrelevant content. | Commercial 'bespoke' assignments may be produced quickly by (re)using old information or writing from previous jobs. This maximises profit and leads to low quality work.<br><br>Students taking a transactional approach to learning may only send minimal task information to the cheating service, overlooking important details in the assignment brief. This can result in assignments that are only vaguely relevant to the topic, or use references to odd sources, which are both classic signs of contract cheating.<br><br>Writers may append reference lists without any in-text citations, or in-text citations may not match the reference list. Access dates for internet sources may predate the student's enrolment in the course. Some of the references may be false (non-existent) or falsified (the cited source does not contain the information claimed).<br><br>References may not include theories or literature covered in the unit learning resources, textbook or lectures that are typically cited by other students for the same assessment.<br><br>Text-matching software may indicate all references are from the same source. References cited by others, students' reference lists should match other sources that have used the same citations; however, a 'block' match to one paper may indicate the assignment paraphrases that paper. |

Table 1: Guide to textual and technological signals of potential contract cheating *(continued)*

| Technological signals | Why this may be a clue |
|---|---|
| Document properties:<br>• author<br>• creation date<br>• editing time<br>• version number<br>• properties blank/wiped. | The metadata of a Word document may indicate an author name that does not match the student, an odd creation date, or very short editing time. If properties are blank they may have been wiped to hide such anomalies. The software used to create the document may also be evidence of contract cheating – switching between operating systems and software versions, for example, may be a cause for concern.<br><br>If the student suggests it was written on a friend's computer, or that it is a final 'fresh' version, they should be able to provide drafts and other evidence. |
| Reference formatting bibliographic software that is not known to the student | Undergraduate students, in particular, may not use referencing software such as Endnote or Mendeley, or your institution may provide access to one type of referencing software and the submission uses a different kind. If a suspicion is raised and referencing software was used, check that the student is aware of it. |
| Non-learning analytics | Learning Management System (LMS) logs are an invaluable and highly scalable source of evidence. Please see "Key LMS analytics for contract cheating detection" for a more detailed set of indicators of contract cheating in LMS logs. Logins and online behaviour with institutional systems using student credentials may also provide causes for concern. |
| Evidence of library access to cited material | Student login records may show that the student has not accessed sources they have cited in their assessment. Students may be asked how or where they accessed the materials that they cited. |
| Evidence of a template that is not from your institution – e.g. running head, extra white space, 'insert name here' | Some academic cheating service writers may use a template that includes uncommon features of student writing such as a running head or text fields such as name or date that they, or the student, do not update. Some templates include features such as excessive spacing or blocks of 'white space', to extend the number of pages because academic cheating services are often paid by the page. Other templates may use language that is inconsistent with the institution (e.g. unit,module, subject, course; semester, trimester, session). Furthermore, some large-scale contract cheating providers may use numbering or codes in files to identify job numbers, writers and clients, these may be discoverable within document metadata. |
| **Anything else that seems unusual or concerning?** | Trust your instincts as an experienced educator. If something seems unusual or 'off', consult a trusted colleague or academic integrity decision-maker. |

Adapted from www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au

# Key LMS analytics for contract cheating detection

## Activity logs and behavioural patterns

- LMS platforms, such as Moodle, track student activity logs which can help institutions identify unusual patterns, though the LMS itself cannot directly detect cheating.
- While LMS systems provide IP addresses for student activity, institutions can leverage temporal and spatial information, statistical data and probability analysis to identify anomalies in student activity E-Exam Cheating Detection System for Moodle LMS.

## Specific behavioural indicators

- **Engagement patterns:** Unusual login times, extremely short session durations, minimal interaction with course materials before assessment items.
- **Submission patterns:** Last-minute submissions after minimal LMS activity, or conversely, excessive engagement patterns designed to appear normal.
- **Learning pathway analysis:** Students who skip fundamental materials but demonstrate advanced knowledge in assessments.
- **Time-on-task anomalies:** Insufficient time spent on research, reading or drafting relative to assignment complexity.

## Technical analytics

- **IP address analysis:** Multiple submissions from different locations or unusual geographic patterns, such as "impossible" travel (non-VPN).
- **Shared IP addresses:** Multiple student accounts being accessed from the same IP addresses, particularly to complete assessment items.

## Statistical and machine learning approaches

- Comparison of LMS engagement data with assessment performance to identify statistical outliers.
- Pattern recognition across cohorts to identify systematic anomalies.

### Limitations and considerations

- LMS analytics work best when combined with other detection methods (like Turnitin authorship analysis).
- False positives can occur due to legitimate variations in student behaviour, such as logging into institutional systems while traveling, sharing computers with housemates and family members, etc.
- Students should be generally advised that an institution is conducting these analyses.

As legitimate explanations often exist for individual anomalies the most effective approach combines multiple LMS analytics indicators.

# A brief guide to academic integrity interviews with students

This Guide is intended for investigators who conduct discussions with students about suspected academic integrity breaches in their assessments. The Guide provides an overview of:

1. the background and goals for academic integrity interviews with students
2. a template for conducting an academic integrity interview.

## Background for conducting student interviews

Best practice academic integrity guidelines state that interviews should be conducted by trained academic integrity investigators rather than markers or academic staff. The focus of the interview and the designated interviewer may vary according to institutional policies and procedures. However, a critical principle in all cases is that the interviewer should be familiar with the assessment item in question and the areas of concern raised about the student's work before conducting the interview. Importantly, an academic integrity investigation is first and foremost an opportunity to support student learning.

An interview with a student may not be needed for common academic integrity issues such as poor referencing, and the issue can be addressed with written or oral feedback from the marker, or via a deduction of marks. For more serious suspected breaches of academic integrity, it is helpful and appropriate for an interview to be held with the student.

## The goals of an academic integrity interview

1. **Check academic integrity understanding:** An interview helps to determine the student's understanding of academic integrity expectations. Have they completed academic integrity education? Have they been told the rules and expectations relating to particular types of assignments (or is it reasonable for them to know these rules)? Have they read the institution's academic integrity policy?
2. **Check academic integrity skills:** Determine whether the student knows the relevant academic integrity rules and if they know how to apply them to the assignment in question. For example, does the student know how to correctly reference academic sources using the appropriate referencing system?
3. **Educate:** The interview is an opportunity for one-on-one education of academic integrity knowledge and skills, as well as research, technical or writing skills.
4. **Provide an opportunity for students to provide explanations:** Suspicions of academic integrity breaches are often based on initial evidence from a submitted assessment (for example, electronic text-matching, poor referencing, document properties showing another author). However, the suspected breach may stem from a lack of understanding or the 'red flags' that raised suspicion may in fact have a reasonable explanation.
5. **Gather evidence:** Answers provided by students in an interview can provide evidence that substantiates the suspected breach and justify consequences for inappropriate conduct. Evidence may include admission of wrongdoing or inconsistencies between student's answers to questions and textual, documentary orelectronic evidence.

6. ***Viva voce* (oral defence):** An interview can provide an opportunity to further assess the student's understanding of the material in the written assessment. This is a particularly useful step in assessing whether the student has completed the work themselves or may have outsourced the work to a third party.
7. **Refer to support services:** Regardless of the academic integrity investigation, meeting with a student often elicits unexpected information which should prompt referral to appropriate support services. In addition to being referred to online information and learning and teaching support services, some students may benefit from psychological counselling, financial advice, vocational guidance or academic program advice. Investigators should place the student's welfare at the centre of the interview.

# Template for conducting a student academic integrity interview

**Unit:** **Teaching period:**

**Assessment:**

**Date:** **Time:**

**Interviewer:**

**Student:**

**Student number:**

**Others attending:**

| Issues of concern identified by the assessment marker, unit/module/course/subject coordinator, interviewers |
|---|
| |

| Questions relating to the assessment writing process | Student answers |
|---|---|
| How long have you been studying your current course? | |
| What do you know about academic integrity? | |
| Have you had any specific training in academic integrity? | |
| Are you aware of the institution's academic integrity policies? | |
| How did you go about researching the assignment? | |
| What websites, search engines, books, and/or databases did you use to research the assignment? | |
| What referencing system/style did you use? | |

| Questions relating to the assessment writing process | Student answers |
|---|---|
| In the referencing system you used, are there any differences in how quotes and paraphrased material should be represented? | |
| Did you talk to anyone else about the assignment when you were researching or writing it? If yes, who, and what did you discuss? | |
| Did you write or prepare the assignment with anyone else's help. If yes, who, and what help did you receive? | |
| How did you go about writing the assignment? | |
| What software and computer did you use to complete the assignment? | |
| Did you use a reference manager or bibliographic software? If yes, which one? | |
| Can you tell me in your own words what the assignment was about? | |
| Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your circumstances during the writing of this assignment? | |
| **Possible follow-up questions in the case of suspected contract cheating (or if applicable)** | |
| You used the term _____ in your assignment, what do you understand this term to mean? | |
| Your assignment's references were formatted using bibliographic software (e.g. Endnote/ Mendeley). What can you tell me about how you used this program? | |
| The document properties of your assignment indicate that the author was _____. Who is that person? | |

| Possible follow-up questions in the case of suspected contract cheating (or if applicable) | |
|---|---|
| The document properties of your assignment indicate an inconsistency from what you told me earlier (e.g. different software, short editing time). Can you explain why that is? | |
| Where did you find the references to _____ source? | |
| _____ source is not available through our library, can you tell me where you found it? | |
| _____ reference(s) are more related to another discipline than the focus of your assignment. Why did you cite_____? | |
| Other_____? | |
| Can you show me an earlier draft of your work? | |
| Can you show me sources that you downloaded in researching this assignment? | |

# Acknowledgements

This guide was prepared by Kane Murdoch and builds on an earlier version created by Associate Professor Guy Curtis, Professor Tracey Bretag, Associate Professor Christine Slade and Dr Margot McNeill that itself was based on the work of Professor Ann Rogerson, Felicity Prentice, the Contract Cheating and Assessment Design Project and numerous researchers on contract cheating. We would like to thank Professor Phillip Dawson and Professor Cath Ellis for their feedback on earlier versions of this work.

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