

The prevention of contract cheating in an online environment

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Contract cheating refers to students getting someone else to do their assessed work (Lancaster & Clarke, 2007). While the term has become closely associated with students buying custom essays online, contract cheating can occur with any task type, and need not involve a formal contract or payment. In online learning it can be difficult to tell if students have contract cheated, because it is harder to observe students working, and contract cheating assignments are bespoke creations made specifically for the student. This guide dispels some myths about contract cheating and offers practical suggestions for how to prevent it through assessment design, detection, and partnerships with students.

Three myths about contract cheating

Myth 1: Contract cheating is very rare

While the vast majority of students never contract cheat, the rate of contract cheating is high enough to warrant serious attention. In one large-scale Australian survey, around 6% of university students surveyed self-reported that they had contract cheated (Bretag, Harper, Burton, Ellis, Newton, Rozenberg, et al., 2019). The rate of contract cheating appears to be comparable at Australian Non-University Higher Education Providers (NUHEPs), with 7% of NUHEP students surveyed admitting to contract cheating (Bretag et al., 2020). A key difference between students at the two types of institution was that NUHEP students surveyed were twelve times more likely to use commercial cheating services compared to students at universities.

Myth 2: Contract cheating can be ‘designed out’ of assessment

Convincing-sounding arguments are sometimes put forward that contract cheating can be eradicated through assessment design. Approaches like authentic assessment (assessment that represents the real-world practice of a profession or discipline), short turnaround times for tasks, and replacing take-home tasks with exams, are common proposed solutions. These approaches do not reduce rates of contract cheating. Students can purchase authentic assessments just as easily as traditional assessments like essays (Ellis et al., 2019). Contract cheating services can meet very tight deadlines (Wallace & Newton, 2014). And exams do not protect against contract cheating; if anything, they may be the site of more contract cheating and more undetected contract cheating than take-home assignments (Harper, Bretag, & Rundle, 2020). However, while assessment design cannot make contract cheating impossible, it can help improve detection rates and make students less likely to



contract cheat. This is discussed further under the Contract cheating and assessment design subheading.

Myth 3: Contract cheating is impossible to detect

Detection rates for contract cheating are very low. One investigation by journalists found that less than one percent of contract cheating was being caught at UK universities (Lee, 2019). Traditional approaches to detecting plagiarism, like the use of text-matching software (e.g. Turnitin) do not work with contract cheating because each assignment is a brand-new creation. However, while contract cheating businesses would like us to believe that contract cheating is undetectable, across multiple Australian studies markers have been able to spot contract cheating most of the time – but only when they are specifically asked to look for it (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2018). Additional supports like training and special software can improve detection rates significantly (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019; Dawson, Sutherland-Smith, & Ricksen, in press). Evidence-based strategies to improve detection rates for contract cheating are discussed under the *Detecting and proving contract cheating* heading later in this document.

Contract cheating and assessment design

While contract cheating is possible in any assessment task, there are some assessment design approaches that may help prevent it. Large-scale survey data suggests that students are less likely to contract cheat in some tasks compared with others (Bretag, Harper, Burton, Ellis, Newton, van Haeringen, et al., 2019). Students said they were less likely to contract cheat in reflections on practicums, tasks that involved discussions about work, personalised or unique tasks, and in-class tasks. Some of these assessment design approaches can be directly translated into online environments, for example, on completion of an assessed task a student could be required to participate in a video chat about the work they have done. The tasks students thought would be most likely targets for contract cheating were heavily-weighted tasks, and tasks with short turnaround times. This means that ‘take-home exam’ style assessments, where students complete a high-stakes task in a short period of time, may be particularly vulnerable to contract cheating. The [Contract Cheating and Assessment Design project website](#) has further information and resources about addressing contract cheating through assessment design.

Detecting contract cheating

To prevent contract cheating, higher education providers need robust processes in place to detect potential cases. Contract cheating detection is largely undertaken by frontline educators, such as tutors or lecturers who mark student work. In Australian research studies, when markers were not looking for contract cheating they did not detect it (Lines, 2016), but when markers were asked to spot contract cheating they detected it around 60% of the time (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2018, 2019). One of the simplest and cheapest interventions to improving contract cheating detection rates therefore is to alert staff to the possibility of contract cheating, and have clear processes in place for them to follow up suspicions.

There are a range of potential indicators that markers can use to detect contract cheating. Inclusion of irrelevant material, generic text (Rogerson, 2017), or material from the wrong discipline (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2018) might indicate the work was written by someone not in the class. Markers who have disciplinary expertise and experience marking a task might spot other unusual mistakes that tip them off to potential contract cheating (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019). Metadata like the 'author' or 'company' field in a Microsoft Word document (accessible via the File->Properties pulldown menu) can also sometimes be used to detect contract cheating if a cheating student has forgotten to change it to their own name. However, all of these are only potential indicators of contract cheating and they should be used with caution.

Where there are particular concerns about contract cheating it may be useful to train markers on how to detect it. After completing a three-hour training workshop, markers in one study accurately detected more than 80% of the contract cheating assignments they marked (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019). [The agenda for this training workshop is available as a free and reproducible resource.](#)

Proving contract cheating

Detection is one thing – but how can a case of contract cheating be evidenced and proven? Research with educators in Australian higher education suggests that many suspected cases of contract cheating are not reported because of a perception that proving them is too difficult or time consuming (Harper et al., 2019). This perception may be shared by students, who may think they cannot be punished because it cannot be proven. Institutions need to provide clear guidance to educators about the sort of evidence that is required to prove cases of contract cheating. They also need to make it clear to educators and students the level of certainty required to consider a suspected case of contract cheating as proven – the 'burden of proof'. At many institutions the burden of proof is 'on the balance of probabilities' – in other words, that it is more likely contract cheating occurred than it did not occur – rather than 'beyond reasonable doubt'. This substantially lowers the level of evidence required, which is important because absolute certainty is difficult with cases of contract cheating. Institutions could consider adopting a standard template for use in substantiating contract cheating processes, such as [this one](#) developed by the [Contract Cheating and Assessment Design](#) project.

As the skillset required to evidence cases of contract cheating can be quite specialised, some institutions have started employing specialist staff to assist in investigations. This can take some of the burden off frontline educators, and provide more robust evidence. Some technology tools can even prepare reports comparing a student's work with their previous work; these reports may be useful for academic integrity committees in making their decisions (Dawson et al., in press).

Working with students

Students can be valuable allies in prevention, as they are the ultimate victims of contract cheating. At an absolute minimum, students need to be made aware of what contract cheating is, that it is unacceptable, and that it can be detected. Many institutions do this through mandatory modules that address contract cheating as well as broader matters about

academic integrity. But working with students can go much further. Student organisations can be brought in to key decisions as stakeholders, and they can be partners in getting messages about contract cheating out. Students can also participate in the [International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating](#).

In addition to sharing positive academic integrity messages with students, there is also a need to educate students about the dangers of contract cheating. Students need to know they can get caught and that the penalties are severe. They need to know that the quality of contract cheated work is often poor; in one Australian study, most contract cheating assignments purchased failed to achieve a passing grade when marked by tutors (Sutherland-Smith & Dullaghan, 2019). Even more troublingly, there is evidence that contract cheating sites blackmail some students by threatening to report students to their institution unless they pay even more money (Yorke, Sefcik, & Veeran-Colton, in press). Examples of how institutions have worked to educate students about the dangers of contract cheating include the [Academic Integrity Board Game](#), the [Carnival of Consequences video](#), both from UTS, and [UNSW's guidance for students about contract cheating](#) which also outlines how the university helps students who are being blackmailed.

There is little danger in talking with students in terms of alerting them to the existence of contract cheating – students already know about it. Students do not find contract cheating, it finds them, through advertising, manipulating results when students make legitimate searches for help, and social media outreach. The contract cheating industry is dishonest, and educators need to work with students to help them see through the lies, and find legitimate help when they need it.

Key resources

- The [International Center for Academic Integrity](#) has a broad range of resources on academic integrity, and it also hosts the [International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating](#)
- The [Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning \(CRADLE\)](#) at Deakin University has [resources on contract cheating and assessment security](#)
- The [Contract Cheating and Assessment Design](#) project website has a range of [resources](#).
- Tracey Bretag produced a [Good Practice Note for TEQSA about addressing contract cheating](#). It includes case studies of how particular institutions have addressed contract cheating.

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Author's Bio

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