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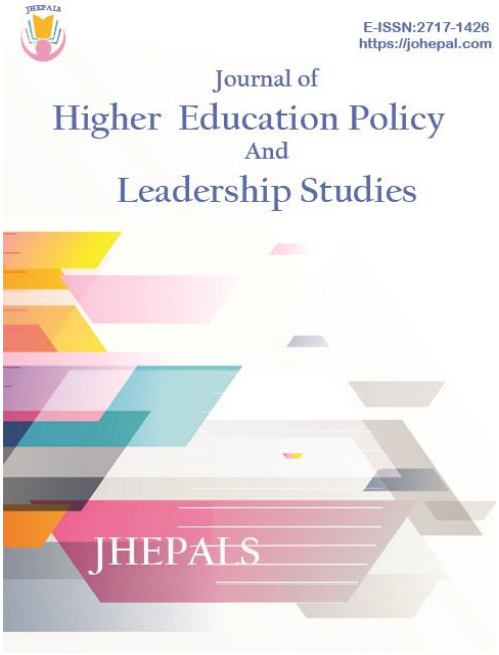

Mitigating the Risk of Contract Cheating in UK Higher Education: A Multi-Level Solution

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Abstract

The Higher Education sector in the UK faces a number of issues that pose a potential risk to the overall sustainability of the sector. A challenge that has become a growing concern recently is the increase in academic dishonesty and the fast-evolving use of contract cheating, which presents a serious risk to HE providers and the stakeholders that may subsequently be affected. More recently, while research has begun to focus on initiatives that may help to mitigate the growing concerns of contract cheating, to date, the majority of research has focused on a single initiative, with none being successful in eradicating the issue. The current paper therefore proposes a multi-level solution, targeting the key stakeholders involved in contract cheating – HE providers, students, and employees. By integrating a range of educational, preventative and deterrent initiatives, the proposed solution offers HE providers a more targeted approach to combating the risk that contract cheating poses.

Keywords: Contract Cheating; Academic Integrity; Higher Education; University Students; Third-party Cheating

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Introduction

Contract Cheating in Higher Education

Academic integrity within Higher Education (HE) plays a fundamental role in maintaining high standards and excellence in learning and teaching (Guerrero-Dib, Portales & Heredia-Escorza, 2020). In the context of individual institutes however, fostering the values that academic integrity embodies is becoming more of a challenge in recent years due to the rising availability of connectivity and technology, which has resulted in the increase of technological misuse by university students, and the growing concern of academic misconduct within higher education (Dyer, 2010). In particular, while long-standing practices of academic misconduct (i.e., intentional plagiarism of others, poor referencing, etc) have usually been detected by software platforms (i.e., Turnitin) used by universities, more advanced practices that are difficult to detect, have developed (Lancaster, 2020). One of the most fast-evolving forms of academic misconduct, which has also been central in advancing cheating behaviour (Roland et al., 2018), has been contract cheating. Student engagement with contract cheating occurs when a student procures a third-party service to complete academic work on their behalf (Lancaster & Clarke, 2014) and then submit this work as their own. This exchange can include swapping assessments with another student, asking a friend or family member to complete the work, or engaging with online academic writing services (also known as essay mills) to purchase customised assignments, which is one of the most prevalent sources for contract cheating (Bretag et al. 2016).

Figures suggest that contract cheating is a global issue that has been steadily increasing in universities across the world for over 40 years. In fact, global records from 2018 indicate that 15% of students have engaged in contract cheating at least once during their degree. This equates to around 31 million students across the globe, a significant increase from 2014, where only 3.5% of students, around 7 million, had engaged in contract cheating (Newton, 2018). These figures also correspond to research carried out in the UK, which indicates that as many as one in seven graduates admitted they had paid someone to complete an assignment for them (QAA, 2020). There is further evidence to suggest that once a student has the opportunity to engage in contract cheating, they are more prone to repeat the offence (Fida et al., 2018), with some studies reporting around 60% of students who have engaged in contact cheating, have done so multiple times (Curtis & Clare, 2017). Research also shows that contract cheating is a global issue which transcends across various disciplines (Lancaster & Clarke, 2014) and assignment types (Bretag et al., 2019). Lancaster (2020) analysed the engagement of contract cheating across 19 distinct discipline groups (i.e., biological sciences, computer sciences, law, engineering, social studies, architecture, etc) and while the disciplines of architecture, computer science and law exhibited the highest levels of student engagement, contract cheating services were found to be well-established across all 19 discipline groups. Most recently, researchers have argued that since the outbreak of covid-19, contract cheating has grown considerably (Yorke et al., 2020), with some studies indicating that the number of students engaging in contract cheating has risen by 200% since the pandemic (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021).

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Risk to Higher Education Providers and Stakeholders

With the rise in contract cheating, it also poses a serious risk to HE providers and the stakeholders that may subsequently be affected. Specifically, contract cheating results in students engaging with their learning on a superficial level, rather than in a deeper context, resulting in them not learning the materials being taught, yet being rewarded the unmerited academic credit (Adam et al., 2017). These actions can have serious repercussions, not only for the student, who is breaching intellectual property laws, but also for the credibility of the HE provider (Amigud & Dawson 2020) and the qualifications that they provide (Slade et al., 2019), as it enables unskilled and unqualified graduates the opportunity to secure employment. This not only defrauds future employers but can also jeopardise community confidence in the university and endanger public health and safety (Bertram-Gallant et al., 2015).

Furthermore, in the UK, as in many other countries, HE providers are obligated to ensure that their assessment processes are fair and reliable, and the award qualifications they provide meet nationally agreed standards (QAA Quality Code, 2018). Universities are also required to uphold the Regulatory Framework (Office for Students, 2018), which ensures students are provided with a supportive and high-quality academic experience and receive qualifications that hold value. Students engaging in contract cheating however present a clear risk to HE providers meeting these obligations and regulatory requirements. Along with the obligations that HE providers need to meet in terms of standards and regulations, they also have a statutory duty when delivering services to ensure steps are taken to protect the health and safety of their students (Department of Education, 2020). In the context of contract cheating, this requires HE providers to take active steps to protect students against the contract cheating companies that target them.

Contract cheating therefore presents a clear threat to HE providers ability to assure the standards of their qualifications, along with the reputation of the university and the entire HE sector. For students, it also represents a risk of graduating with inadequate professional skills, which can potentially put the community and general public at serious risk (QAA, 2020).

Factors Facilitating Contract Cheating

As a result of the growing risk contract cheating poses to HE providers, a significant body of research has developed to help the academic community better understand the contributory factors and reasons as to why students may outsource academic work. Literature in the area has emphasised that the two primary factors which facilitate contract cheating are opportunity and motivation (Beckman et al., 2017).

Opportunity

With the ease of internet use and the speed by which students can instantly access numerous contract cheating services worldwide, students now have the opportunities and pathways to outsource academic work on a global scale (Seeland et al., 2020). These growing opportunities are exacerbated further by the lack of tools available to detect assignments that have been customised by a third-party and by the absence of many providers to have clear policies and procedures in dealing with contract cheating, which can further lead to complacency over the scale of misconduct that is taking place (QAA, 2020).

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Motivation

While there are various contextual and individual drivers which may motivate students to cheat, the contract cheating literature has emphasised that students are motivated to cheat if they feel unsupported by their university, are dissatisfied with their learning and teaching environment, lack the confidence to complete the assignment due to not understanding the requirements, or feel they lack the academic skills required (Bretag et al.,2019; Beckman et al., 2017). It has also been argued that many students may not understand how inappropriate engaging in this type of misconduct is or the consequences they may face if caught (Brimble, 2016).

Actions to Combat Contract Cheating

With the primary factors of opportunity and motivation being well documented within the literature (Beckman et al., 2017; QAA, 2020), more recently, research has begun to focus on effective actions that can target these facilitating factors, with the majority of this research focusing on a single initiative (Seeland et al., 2020). More specifically, to date, there have been a number of actions proposed, some of which emphasise the need to target students and staff (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019; Gladwin, 2018), while others highlight the importance of focusing on HE providers, exploring ways that providers can reduce opportunities for students to cheat (e.g., Bretag & Mahmud, 2016; Dawson, 2020; Hatfield & Wise, 2015; Lancaster & Clarke, 2014). For example, some of the literature has focused on the importance of educating students about contact cheating, as well as broader matters of academic integrity (Morris, 2018).

Gladwin (2018) argued that educating students is an essential factor in changing student attitudes and behaviours about contract cheating and academic integrity. Similar educational and awareness initiatives have also been proposed for academic staff, with research suggesting that contract cheating can be detectable if markers are trained on what to specifically look for within an assessment (Ellis et al., 2018). Dawson and Sutherland-Smith (2019) found that markers who completed a 3-hour training workshop accurately detected more than 80% of contract cheating assignments they marked.

Research has also focused on the importance of institution-wide actions that HE providers could take to reduce the opportunity to engage in contract cheating. For instance, some literature has suggested that providers need to block access to websites that have been identified as contract cheating services, preventing students from access such sites while on the institutional wi-fi (Hatfield & Wise, 2015).

Seeland and colleagues (2020) have recommended that blocking sites should also be coupled with an educative response, referring students to support services and further information on academic integrity. Other literature has emphasised the importance of HE providers re-visiting and enhancing current institutional policies and procedures on assessment design and academic integrity. In particular, implementing assessment policies that highlight practices which minimise opportunities of contract cheating and other forms of academic misconduct (e.g., Morris, 2018; Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019), such as real-world tasks, in-class assessments, reflections or personalised and unique questions (Bretag et al., 2019). Research has also emphasised the need for HE providers to review their existing policies and procedures for academic integrity, ensuring information and clear

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procedures are included as to how the provider deals with the issue of contract cheating (QAA, 2020).

Morris (2018) argued that this should be an essential starting point for all HE providers, as it will help determine priority areas for development and further ensure an operational and institution-wide approaches to contract cheating. Overall, while there are various actions that have been proposed, none have helped to completely eradicate the issue. Experts have argued that a single initiative will not eliminate the risk that contract cheating poses and that a multi-level solution is required (Hill et al., 2021; Morris, 2018; Seeland et al., 2020). Hill and colleagues (2021) emphasised the need to develop a model that targets key stakeholders, including students, academics and the institution.

Both Thacker et al. (2020) and Seeland et al. (2020) also highlighted the need to target these stakeholders, with focus on approaches that include educational, preventative and deterrent strategies. These key areas and the need for a multi-level solution have also been highlighted more recently by several educational quality agencies from around the world (e.g., International Center for Academic Integrity [ICAI], 2021; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2017). In the UK, while the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) have produced information and guidance (Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education - QAA, 2020) on possible actions that HE providers can take to reduce the risk of contract cheating, few papers have explored how such actions can be practically implemented into an institution-wide strategy.

The Current Research

As there are various stakeholders impacted by the risk contract cheating presents and the success of higher education depends significantly on its relationships with their internal and external stakeholders (Kettunen, 2014; Smith, 2000), identifying, understanding and managing stakeholders impacted is vital when targeting issues and implementing strategic solutions (Bryson, 2004). As such, the current paper explores the various stakeholders affected by the issue, suggesting a multi-level strategy (i.e., educational, preventative and deterrent approaches) which targets key stakeholders.

Methodology

Classifying HE Stakeholders

As there are a number of stakeholders potentially involved in the process of contract cheating, general HE stakeholder groups were first identified through reviewing previous academic literature, stakeholders pertinent to the specific contract cheating issue were then prioritised. While literature in relation to the higher education sector and stakeholders is limited (Simms & Chapleo, 2010), the research that has been carried out, consistently identifies a number of stakeholder groups (Table 1).

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Table 1
Stakeholder Groups in Higher Education

Stakeholder Groups
1. HE Provider
2. Funders (government and non-government organisations)
3. Students
4. Employees (academic staff, faculty, administrative staff, support staff)
5. Communities (local community, general public, employers)
6. Regulators (local & federal government, accrediting bodies, professional associations)
7. Suppliers (alumni, secondary education providers, prospective students)

Sources: Kettunen, 2014; Chapleo & Simms, 2010; Mainardes et al., 2012; Marić, 2013; Slabá, 2015

Key Stakeholders in Contract Cheating

To develop a clearer understanding of the dynamics between stakeholders in higher education and the contract cheating issue, the relationship of stakeholders in regards to this issue was mapped (Figure 1). Those stakeholders that had been previously identified in the literature as key targets for intervention (e.g., Hill et al., 2021; Morris, 2018; Seeland et al., 2020; Thacker et al., 2020; QAA, 2020), were considered the most relevant to the issue, this included students, employees and HE providers. The relationship that the remaining stakeholder groups had with those directly involved with the issue were subsequently mapped. This relationship was again based on previous literature in the area (e.g., Amigud & Dawson 2020; Bertram-Gallant et al., 2015; Office for Students, 2018; Slade et al., 2019) which highlighted the direct and indirect risk contract cheating poses to various stakeholder groups.

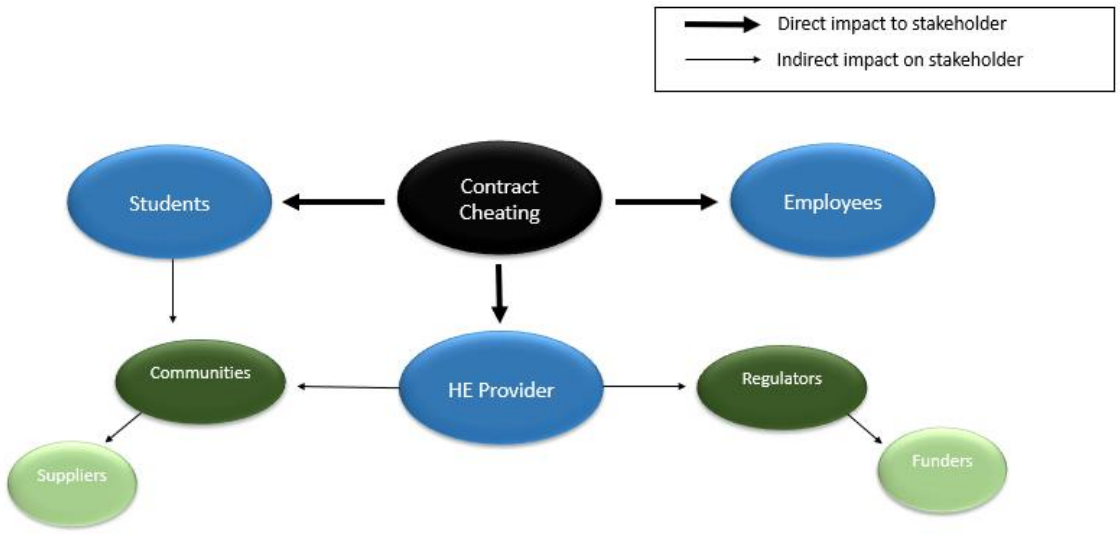

Figure 1. The Direct and Indirect Risk Contract Cheating Poses to Various Stakeholder Groups

As shown in figure 1, students, HE providers and employees have all been identified as the key stakeholders for addressing contract cheating in higher education. Therefore, if interventions are specifically targeted at all three stakeholders, the secondary risk that contract cheating poses to stakeholders indirectly impacted, will subsequently be reduced. According to the network theory of stakeholder influence (Rowley, 1997), by directly

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influencing the key stakeholders affected by the issue, the stakeholder network will indirectly change, impacting the interactions that the indirect stakeholders have with the direct stakeholders. In particular, if interventions are targeted at developing students' awareness and understanding of contract cheating and the broader context of academic integrity, this should in turn help to reduce student engagement with contract cheating, enabling them to develop the necessary skills to impact their communities in a positive and integral manner. As contract cheating also directly poses a risk to HE providers and their regulatory obligations, along with their commitments to the communities they serve, implementing university-wide policies and procedures, targeted at reducing the opportunities for students to cheat, would further help to reduce these risks and the subsequent repercussions from regulatory bodies and the community. With that, as employees are often responsible for ensuring the policies and procedures of a university are upheld, including dealing with cases of academic misconduct and contract cheating, further guidance and support for these stakeholders is also important to ensure the plans and strategies of the university are implemented and sustained.

Multi-Level Solution

With HE providers, students and employees all being fundamental to addressing contract cheating at various levels, the proposed strategy targets these stakeholders through a collective focus on educational, preventative and deterrent initiatives.

HE Providers

Academic integrity scholars have consistently emphasised that one of the most effective ways HE providers can address contract cheating is through vigorous academic regulations (Dawson, 2020). HE providers should therefore review their current policies and procedures to ensure they have an effective academic integrity policy, one that includes clear and transparent information about contract cheating and also the importance of academic integrity (QAA, 2020; Stoesz et al., 2019). Polices also need to have detailed procedures on how providers deal with contract cheating and the possible sanctions and outcomes that students could face (Thacker et al., 2020).

Along with ensuring an effective academic integrity policy, providers also need to enhance institutional policies on assessment design, ensuring assessment practices which minimise opportunities of contact cheating are identified as best practice. In particular, focusing on a mixture of authentic assessments, allowing students to demonstrate knowledge practically, and in a face-to-face format where possible, such as oral presentations, personalised assessments, formal examinations or reflective video narratives. Assessment polices should also highlight the benefit of having a number of low stake assessments, where students can build their confidence on a module through smaller assessments, rather than having a single assessment with high stakes, where students are more likely to engage with contract cheating. While these types of assessment designs are shown to have lower reported incidences of contract cheating, no assessment type is completely immune (Bretag et al., 2019; Learning Futures, 2020; QAA, 2020) and thus, it is imperative that policies not only focus on assessment approaches that reduce the opportunities to cheat, but also emphasise the importance of providing sufficient support

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and guidance for students when introducing assessments. One of the main motivating factors leading students to cheat is feeling as though they do not have sufficient support and guidance about assessment requirements (Beckman et al., 2017; Learning Futures, 2020), it is therefore important that providers include this in their assessment polices and that approaches to assessment design take into consideration the support and guidance that is provided to students.

While enhancing policies on academic integrity and assessments are is important, this is not enough to stop contract cheating from happening, providers also need to reduce opportunities for students to cheat by introducing preventative initiatives. HE providers should therefore look to block access to contract cheating websites on all institutional computers and devices using the WiFi connections on university property. If students attempt to access one of these sites, blocking messages should be programmed to pop-up, which should inform the student that the site is prohibited and also provide a link to further information about the university's academic integrity policy. Research has suggested that blocking such sites not only protects students from making poor decisions regarding their work, but it also prevents them from attempting to access these websites in the future (Seeland et al., 2020; Hatfield & Wise, 2015).

Students

Providing students with information and support about contract cheating and academic integrity is also critical to addressing contract cheating (OfS, 2021; QAA, 2020). HE providers need to ensure that they provide clear information for students about the importance of academic integrity and honesty within their studies, along with an awareness of contract cheating and the potential consequences if they engage in such activities. As emphasised by the QAA (2020), this information should also be coupled with the support (e.g., skills for studying, academic writing, referencing) that students can access to enable the development of their academic skills, and reduce their motivation engage in contract cheating. It is also important that this information is gradually fed to students and reaffirmed throughout the academic year (Fallon et al., 2012). As such, students need to not only be introduced to the concepts of academic integrity and misconduct (including contract cheating), during initial inductions, but this also needs to be coupled with information on the support that is available to them. Reaffirming this information within student handbooks and during critical times throughout the year, such as the start of modules and when assessments are introduced, it is also important. Students are valuable allies in the fight against contract cheating and educating them about this, as well as the broader topic of academic integrity, needs to be integrated every aspect of their educational journey.

Employees

HE providers need to further ensure that staff are not only familiar with academic regulations, including academic integrity and assessment policies, but are also provided with the necessary training and support to uphold these regulations (QAA, 2020). As such, providers need to ensure that staff are kept informed about regulations applying to academic integrity and assessment practices. They also need to educate staff on contract cheating and provide training on the practices that can help combat this form of cheating, including how concepts of academic integrity can be integrated into the curriculum and

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assessment design. Research has consistently emphasised that one of the most important steps providers can take is to ensure staff are educated about the issue and provided with guidance on academic integrity, applying policies and enhancing the curriculum (Morris, 2018; QAA, 2020; Thacker et al., 2020). Providers should therefore look to incorporate this into staff inductions, to ensure staff are all provided with the same information and guidance to follow. As research has further suggested that contract cheating can be detectable if markers are trained (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019), providers should also look to development specific training for staff on the indicators of outsourced assignments, such as the inclusion of unrelated material, generic text or material from the wrong discipline (Rogerson, 2017).

Conclusions

It is evident that contract cheating has become a growing issue for the HE sector and presents an ongoing threat to the standards and reputation of individual providers. While a range of initiatives have been proposed to help providers combat this issue, the majority of these initiatives have focused on single solutions, targeting a specific group of stakeholders. Though these solutions have been effective in combating certain aspects of contract cheating, on their own, they are not enough to have a substantial impact on the overall issue. The current paper therefore proposed integrating such initiatives to create a multi-level solution, targeting the key stakeholders involved in contract cheating, through a range of educational, preventative and deterrent strategies. By targeting key stakeholders and combining various strategies which have been supported by previous literature, the authors recommend HE providers implementing this type of multi-level solution to effectively combat the risk that contract cheating poses to providers.

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