

What is contract cheating?

Since 2015, several high-profile cheating scandals have drawn attention to the potentially largescale use of file-sharing sites, and commercial cheating websites, by students to complete assignments at Australian universities.

Contract cheating has been defined as instances of a student submitting work for academic credit that has been completed in part, or in entirety, by a paid contractor, but the understanding and scope of this behaviour has evolved. The Contract Cheating and Assessment Design project states that:

Contract cheating occurs when a student submits work that has been completed by a third party, irrespective of that person's relationship with the student, or whether they are paid or unpaid.

Despite institutional responses to the rise of contract cheating, the difficulty in its detection, and the appropriate management of students that are suspected of engaging in this form of deliberate cheating, continues to be a significant challenge for Universities and other higher education providers. Although contract cheating is academic misconduct under the Institutional Framework for Promoting Academic Integrity among Students Policy, research suggests that it is a symptom, and not the problem. While contract cheating is a systemic issue, compounded by government and institutional policy and practice, staff are still able to foster an environment that discourages inappropriate sharing behaviours by students at the local level. Adjustment to learning and assessment design alone is unlikely to address and resolve the problem however, and a broader shift in academic culture may be required.

Research finds that contract cheating is influenced by 3 key factors*:

1. Student dissatisfaction with teaching and learning
2. Perception that there are lots of opportunities to cheat
3. Students speaking a language other than English (LOTE)

* <https://cheatingandassessment.edu.au/resources>

How prevalent is contract cheating and what causes it?

Studies suggest that 6% of Australian students engage in cheating and outsourcing behaviours, including the following:

- obtaining completed assignments (to submit)
- providing exam assistance
- receiving exam assistance
- taking an exam for another student
- having another person take an exam on your behalf.

The global rise in marketing savvy, commercial cheat sites, as well as an emergent sharing culture among students, has led to cheating that is becoming harder to detect. While the number of students paying third parties to complete assessment tasks on their behalf may be increasing, most students that outsource their learning continue to utilise traditional networks of friends, family members, and former students.

Is 'authentic assessment' the answer to the problem?

While it is less likely that contract cheating will occur with 'authentic assessment' tasks, such as reflections on practicums, research suggests that highly personalised assessment items can be outsourced to third parties. Despite the five authenticity factors of frequency, fidelity, complexity, impact and feed forward being acknowledged as key for good assignment design, it is increasingly understood that 'authentic assessment' does not affect whether students engage in contract cheating, although it may make it easier to detect.

Work undertaken by the Contract Cheating and Assessment Project suggests that assessment types that are less likely to be outsourced by students include the following:

- reflections on practicums;
- oral defences of written work (Viva);
- individualised assignments that relate to personal experiences; and
- supervised assessment, completed in-class.

How do staff identify contract cheating?

The best way to identify contract cheating is to know your students and build relationships with them!

To identify contract cheating you should:

- be aware of your student's linguistic ability and watch for mismatches between ability and assessments submitted
- closely examine those students whose grades have significantly improved without explanation, or who have not been attending, or engaging in, classes.

When identifying if contract cheating has occurred, staff should also consider if the student has:

- not answered the question that was posed;
- not included key readings, critical learning resources, or concepts from the course;
- included tables and figures that are not consistent with the specified requirements of the task;
- used imperial, rather than metric measurements;

- incorporated limited class based examples (e.g. generic not local examples, obscure topics, location specific answers from the wrong location);
- used alternate spelling for course specific terms;
- used irrelevant and extraneous material to meet the word limit;
- used a referencing convention that is not standard for the discipline, or nominated for the course;
- used references that are old and outdated, multiple matched to different places, only available in a foreign language, incorrect author details, or unusual publication dates;
- used a high number of single references;
- a low-similarity index, but the reference list is matched in full;
- not included their first name or surname on the cover sheet;
- format errors in the document (e.g. student name - surname, Professor/Course Convenor name, course name, submission date);

The Quality Assurance Agency (UK) also noted several detection methods in its paper, *Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education*¹. Some of these methods include the following:

- Interviews: conducting an interview with students after the work has been assessed may assist with determining authorship and detecting cheating.
- Online Searches: searching for the set assignment title online may alert you to copywriting websites where similar assignments are being commissioned.
- Detection software: while most contract cheating websites are marketed as providing custom, made-to-order assignments, traditional plagiarism may still occur in outsourced learning, and text-matching software such as Turnitin should be utilised.

In 2018, the University has been participating in a pilot of a tool that provides forensic linguistic analysis of written assessment to provide another source of information about the originality of student work.

How do staff minimise contract cheating?

To minimise contract cheating you should:

- explain academic integrity, contract cheating, and expected values under the Student Charter, to students at the beginning of trimester and ensure students are aware of the consequences under the Student Academic Misconduct Policy
- be available to your students to discuss their issues at times that are convenient to them (advertise your availability and ensure you are available at those times)
- use social media platforms to disseminate information on contract cheating to students (may have further reach than email alone)

¹ Quality Assurance Agency. (2017) *Contract to Cheat in Higher Education: How to Address Contract Cheating, the Use of Third-Party Services and Essay Mills*. Gloucester, UK: Author.

- ensure students understand what is expected of them in assessment and working with others
- support students that are struggling by discussing their learning needs with them and referring to student support services
- get non-cheating students engaged to prevent cheating by others – make them aware it undervalues their degree and hard work
- ensure relevant and meaningful assessment and curriculum design
- minimise opportunities for cheating such as leaving answers unattended, online quizzes which may provide temptation to cheat
- report suspected contract cheating under the Student Academic Misconduct Policy

How do staff assist LOTE students specifically?

Staff can assist LOTE students by encouraging the use of Griffith services to improve their English. Students can be referred to Student Support's English Language Support Service at <https://www.griffith.edu.au/student-services/international/english-language-support>.

Students should be advised of the pitfalls of google translate and encouraged to ask for help if they are having trouble with assessments or understanding assessment instructions.

What policies and information do I need to be aware of that relate to contract cheating?

If a student reports contract cheating to you or you suspect contract cheating you should consult the following policies:

- Student Academic Misconduct Policy
- Institutional Framework for Promoting Academic Integrity among Students Policy
- Student Charter

Staff seeking further advice on contract cheating are advised to contact the Student Academic Integrity Coordinator at sai-coordinator@griffith.edu.au.