
Where are students really getting their assignments from? An international study

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Changes being proposed in legislation suggest that student outsourcing from third parties, usually described as contract cheating sites and essay mills, is an international problem of growing concern. PayPal recently announced that they would be removing its service from essay mills, meaning that companies would have to use alternative means for seeking payments from buyers (Coughlan, 2019). Last year the Irish government announced the proposal of a bill which would make it illegal to advertise contract cheating services (McKie, 2018). Australia and the UK are debating the introduction of legislation which could make the advertisements and/or sale of work to students for academic credit, a criminal offence (Department of Education and Training, 2019; Smith, 2018); New Zealand and the US already have the ability to take legal action against these types of companies/activities (Draper & Newton, 2017).

Irrespective of the direction which legislation takes, higher education providers will need to continue to work towards being proactive and promoting ethics and academic honesty to instil integrity in the student body, whilst also having some reactive actions. If wanting to reduce the amount of outsourcing of assignments in higher education, it is necessary to understand what the prevalence of these types of cheating are, whether some students demonstrate usage with certain methods and through what mode (money, exchange or for free) and what motivates students to utilise different outsourcing methods. These data may also alert educators (by language or country) to the possibility of students studying in their language/country having more propensity to assignment outsourcing from a specific type of third party, as well as possible motivations which could be minimised. Combining these data with research on the business models of these sites, locations of writers, target audiences etc. (Ellis, Zucker, & Randall, 2018; Lancaster, 2018), could greatly empower the higher education industry to assess outsourcing behaviours and work collaboratively and globally, to improve strategies against it.

This paper will present data from the Global Essay Mills Survey (GEMS) project conducted during 2017-18. The survey was released at universities in various countries in twenty one languages, and was the first known study of its kind which sought to gather information on student assignment outsourcing methods from respondents in different countries, using the same survey tool, concurrently. This allowed for a wide international investigation into assignment outsourcing behaviours in tertiary education. The survey used mixed methods with mostly quantitative questions, and other open-ended qualitative responses to provide additional data to triangulate some of the quantifiable survey items. Included in the survey were questions exploring university students' experiences with sites which sell or provide work for academic credit. Usage of different site types was asked of respondents (with associated definitions), to gather data on engagement with peer-sharing sites, essay mills,



assignment bidding sites, bespoke contract cheating sites, as well as obtaining assignments from peers and family members. Respondents were asked whether they submitted the work entirely as they got it, if they edited it before submission, or used it only for reference purposes; and whether they obtained the work with money, through exchange of some form of information, or for free. The paper will provide readers with an overview of the whole data set combined (incorporation of all languages together, or cross-language comparison).

10,495 surveys were returned in twenty one languages. There was an average completion rate of 61%. Seven languages returned less than ten complete surveys and therefore only fourteen were used in analysis. We found that the most common type of outsourcing behaviour that student's engaged in was by obtaining work from friends and family. In relation to the differing site types and modes, the top three most commonly used methods for obtaining assignments were: for free through peer-sharing sites; for exchange through peer-sharing sites; and for free from essay mills.

We tested which variables could account for variations in outsourcing behaviours and which could therefore be considered to be predictors of cheating behaviours. Survey items were designed to include dependent variables (three cheating behaviours – outsourcing from sites, friends and family, other students) which could be tested against the independent variables. Independent variables included some nominal/categorical: knowledge of others cheating; level and discipline of study; gender; or whether they thought contract cheating sites were illegal in their country; ordinal/ranked, such as whether their tutors knew them by name; and continuous variables, such as the reasons why they were at university; and the proportion of students which they believed outsourced their assignments.

The internal consistency for all positive responses to engagement with outsourcing was high (0.894) (Cronbach's Alpha), and when the last two items (obtaining work from friends/family and other students) were removed, internal consistency was higher (0.922). Due to these differences, statistical testing was subsequently done in three groups by outcome variable: all outsourcing, site only outsourcing, and other outsourcing (to include only positive responses to the outsourcing from friends/family, and other students). Bivariate analysis was conducted to determine which of the independent variables had an effect on our dependent variables. Whilst most of the correlations were statistically significant, 'Rate' was the only continuous predictor which explained more than 1% of the total variance for any of the three outcome variables. This demonstrates that the rate at which students felt that others were using outsourcing sites, positively correlated with their own engagement with any type of outsourcing. 'Rate' accounted for the biggest variance. The reasons why students were at university also demonstrated some statistical significance for all three dependent variables, although at a lower level than the rate at which respondents felt others' outsourced their assignments. These were separated by response option into two categories (relating to intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations). Extrinsic motivations showed as a negative/inverse correlation; a predictor indicating that the more intrinsically motivated a student, the less likely to cheat.

One of the most significant predictors from the categorical variables for engagement with any of the three outcomes, was whether respondents thought that other people were using these sites. Effect sizes were small, and from a one-way ANOVA test, the 'Awareness of

others' variable was found to be statistically significant ($p < .0005$). Students who reported knowing others who had used these sites were significantly more likely to use outside sources for their own work. Country was also statistically significant for all three dependent variables ($p < .0005$). The Ukraine had the highest mean score (significantly higher) for all types of outsourcing, followed by the United Arab Emirates, Slovakia, Turkey and Montenegro. The countries with the lowest means were Bulgaria (with only one respondent having reported any outsourcing), followed by the United Kingdom and Sweden (Australia was fifth). However, when considering 'Other' outsourcing (friends/family, students), Hungary had the second highest mean to the Ukraine.

When separated by language, Ukrainian had the highest mean score for all three outcome variables (which was not surprising as the largest country mean). Slovakian was the second highest language by mean for all types, and site only outsourcing. Swedish and English had some of the lowest means for all the three outcome variables. By discipline, Hospitality and Personal Services had the highest mean for all outsourcing with Health having the smallest mean. Agriculture, Information Technology, and Management/Commerce had the 2nd to 4th highest means respectively.

The data provided the ability for us to consider some predictors which can be aligned with higher engagement with different types of assignment outsourcing. As language and country demonstrated high effects, this could imply general cultural differences which may refer to the educational systems, or opinions around ethics/honesty. Knowing that others are cheating, as well as predicting high rates of engagement in dishonest academic practice by others, were also some of the stronger predictors of self-cheating behaviours; implying that these behaviours may be normalised amongst certain groups of students. The paper will present further predictors and information to allow people in different countries, or teaching in different languages, to consider these when working on the positive proactive elements of education to promote ethics and academic integrity.

Keywords: assignment outsourcing, essay mills, peer-sharing, cheating.

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