



## Awareness programs against contract cheating at a Middle Eastern university – pathway to building campus-wide culture of integrity

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Trying to create a culture of integrity can feel like an uphill battle. Experts suggest that building a culture of integrity may be the best weapon against academic misconduct. Student cheating is not a new phenomenon and researchers and academics have grappled with this issue for generations. Every generation of teachers feel they are having it worst, with newer, sneakier ways students cheat in and out of classrooms. With the infiltration of technology in today's blended classrooms, the challenges are as complex as they are supposed to be varied. However, the problem remains the same – that of loss of academic integrity inside classrooms and what that means for the greater society.

Academic integrity is a vital part of education system. As academics we strive to instill the Fundamental Values as recognized by International Centre for Academic Integrity, these being honesty, trust, fairness, responsibility and respect. But how do we go about instilling these values in our students?

Of interest to this research is one type of academic misconduct – that of buying and selling assessments. Research has shown that there is a distinct rise in the proliferation of essay mills and number of students involved in buying assessments globally. It would seem with the rise of the internet, ease of setting up a website and e-commerce, essay mills have transformed into e-mills that are rampant, mushrooming all over the digital space, flooding students' mailboxes and hounding them on social media. Known commonly now as contract cheating, this form of academic misconduct is not new. Dated as far back as mid nineteenth century where fraternity houses hosted essay mills in their basements and encouraged recycling of submitted essays, these fraternity essay mills transformed into ghostwriting and the modern-day contract cheating that researchers and academics are vehemently opposing, calling for bans on such practices, promotion of such services and illegalizing such businesses (Singh, S. and Remenyi, D.; 2015).

Students are the target consumers of the essay mill industry. By buying and using their services, students are providing social license for these businesses to operate. If we look at this business model, then the question arises – how do we stop students from giving their acceptance and the social license, thus developing a culture of integrity in them?

In this study we compared student awareness of contract cheating, and student understanding of contract cheating as a misconduct, before and after a series of awareness activities that were carried out on the campus. This study used exploratory case report method (Yin, 1984) that has gained reputation over the years as an effective methodology particularly when investigating complex issues in areas such as social sciences, education and even business (Harrison, Birks, Franklin & Mills, 2017). The case was developed based on time series over three years of data collected before and after the celebration of the Global Ethics Day and International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating. We felt this method allowed us to go beyond the “statistical results and really understand the behavioral con-

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ditions through the [students'] perspective" (Tellis, 1997), at the same time allowing us to include both qualitative and quantitative data.

The campus celebrated International Day of Actions against Contract Cheating three years in a row. We captured student feedback during the whiteboard pledge campaign based on a series of two simple questions, "Do you know what contract cheating is" and "Did you know students buying essay writing services from online sources is a form of cheating". Students were then given details on contract cheating, nature of the misconduct, why it was considered a misconduct and how the institutional policy dealt with such misconduct. They were asked to put down their pledge if they so wanted to. It was observed during the first year, that of the 30 students who voluntarily participated in the pledge campaign, none of the students were aware of the term "contract cheating" nor were they aware that such action could be "deemed" as a misconduct or cheating, let alone that it was "in the policies".

During the second year of the celebrations, the student clubs run by some of the students who had taken the whiteboard pledge the previous year decided to join in the awareness campaign and developed a week-long program for the campus. These events included psychological mind frame workshops, painting and design competitions, plenary sessions with Registrars and students on the consequences of misconduct and effectiveness of policies and procedures. All the events were carried out before the final day which marked the whiteboard pledge campaign. This time, more than 40 students volunteered to participate and more than 70% of them knew what contract cheating was and knew it was a misconduct. By the third year, more than 60 students, including post graduate students participated. More than 80% of the students taking the pledge now showed awareness and understanding.

It is also important to note here that students who had graduated by this time had begun to track companies that targeted students on social media and started reporting them to the school authorities and raised voice against such ads, pop ups and messages.

It was observed that the students speaking out against contract cheating to other students year on year had a tremendous positive impact on student attitude against contract cheating where students became advocates for integrity, posting messages against essay mills, and confronting the service providers as unethical and irresponsible businesses on open, public platforms and at events where the service providers showed up to promote their questionable services.

This case report suggests that regular, consistent awareness programs involving students as co-developers in the integrity-culture building process has a significantly high impact on student contribution, participation, and knowledge.

The next step of the project is to map how and if this attitude and awareness has any real impact on student behavior and curbing students' likelihood to contract cheat in the future.

**Keywords:** awareness, contract cheating, student initiatives, academic integrity, Middle East, UAE, culture of integrity.



## References

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