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## **Attitudes to eradicating contract cheating and collusion amongst Widening Participation students in the UK: reflections from Foundation Year students at Bloomsbury Institute**

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### *Introduction and institutional context*

The following paper presents and discusses perceptions on academic integrity matters, particularly relating to the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at combatting contract cheating and collusion amongst Foundation Year students at Bloomsbury Institute.

Bloomsbury Institute is a small Alternative Provider (HEFCE, 2018) delivering undergraduate degrees (validated by the University of Northampton) in business, law and accounting. Embracing a widening participation (WP) agenda (Hubble and Connell-Smith, 2018), we are committed to the recruitment of non-traditional students who might not otherwise have the opportunity to enter higher education. Our student population (approximately 1,700 students) is unique within the UK Higher Education (HE) sector, with high proportions of students with underrepresented characteristics. For example, our institutional data shows that 80% of our students in 2017-18 were mature (compared to the national average of 46% (HESA, 2018)) and 50% were from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic group (24% nationally). Most of our students come from low-income households: according to Student Loans Company data, in 2016-17, 96% of our students who had submitted means testing information had a household income of £25,000 or below. Additionally, the majority of our students work as well as study, and many have young families. A high proportion of our students are speakers of English as an additional language; however, only a small proportion is classified as international students: most are British or EU citizens who have settled in the UK.

Providing such widening access opportunities to students is largely achieved through our Foundation Year (FY). As most of our students are returning to education after a long break or have limited formal qualifications, they begin their HE journey on our FY, which prepares them to study at degree level. Many British universities offer such courses in various forms (Prospects, 2019).

In recent years, like many HE providers worldwide, we have observed a rise of academic misconduct (AM) cases, particularly of contract cheating and collusion amongst FY students. In response, and alarmed by reports of the 'global rise in contract cheating in recent years, across all disciplines' (IJEI, 2017), we wanted to develop a tailored action plan to help our students avoid AM.

We understood that our WP students faced particular challenges (Crockford et al., 2017; McVitty and Morris, 2012) and, therefore, we investigated the literature for guidance on understanding and tackling the issue of contract cheating, and more broadly the subject of academic misconduct amongst WP students. Although there is an abundance of publica-



tions on academic integrity (Bretag (2016), Newton (2018), QAA (2016 & 2017), TEQSA (2017)), we were unable to find research focusing on AM within WP students. We conducted a number of informal institution-wide and FY-specific initiatives exploring the reasons why our WP students cheat, aiming to generate practical solutions to limit/eradicate the problem, and, in September 2017, we launched our Academic Integrity Matters (AIM) campaign to promote high academic standards amongst all our students.

The campaign included: academic integrity awareness sessions for all students, with additional workshops for students found 'guilty' of cheating; training sessions for all lecturers on recognising and preventing contract cheating; the development of innovative teaching materials on avoiding AM; assessment redesign; and clarification and enhancement of relevant policies and processes.

Although the AIM campaign seemed to have brought the desired results of higher student and staff awareness of academic integrity matters and lower levels of contract cheating and collusion, particularly in the redesigned assessments, it was clear that with the essay mills' aggressive online and on campus advertising campaigns (Turnitin, 2018), we have been fighting, what sometimes seemed, a 'losing battle'. Therefore, we decided to seek input from students 'at risk' of cheating to help evaluate appropriateness of preventative measures to inform future action plans.

## Methodology

In July 2018, i.e. 10 months after the launch of the AIM campaign, approximately 770 2017-18 FY students were invited to complete a web-based survey. The researcher advertised the project through messages sent via our Virtual Learning Environment. The survey was anonymous, and participation was voluntary. The project had the approval of our Research Ethics Committee.

Students were asked questions relating to their understanding of acceptability and scale of contract cheating and collusion in the institution and in the UK. Students were also asked if they had ever submitted assignments which were a result of contract cheating or collusion, or if they had ever considered doing so (the survey contained the synonymous term 'contract cheating' for 'commissioning' as it was widely used in the institution and was, therefore, more recognisable). Further questions explored student motivations for cheating and invited students to evaluate the potential effectiveness of future initiatives aimed at stopping students from submitting assignments that are a result of contract cheating or collusion. Additionally, students were asked to evaluate the honesty of their responses.

## Results and discussion

133 students (17.3% of all invited) responded to the survey.

The results demonstrated that approximately 70% of participants had a very good understanding of what contract cheating and collusion were, and 95.5% perceived these cheating behaviours as unacceptable. 30.8% of participants admitted they were aware of other students submitting assignments which were a result of contract cheating or collusion, 7.5% admitted to doing so with a further 14.3% admitting to having considered it.

Responses to the multiple-answer question inviting students to express their views on activities that would combat contract cheating or collusion are presented in Table 1.

Activities	Proportion of students indicating the activity			
	Overall (n=133)	Students who admitted commissioning or collusion (n=10)	Students who admitted considering commissioning or collusion (n=18)	Students who did not admit commissioning or collusion or considering doing so (n=102)
Additional English language classes	55.3%	80.0%	50.0%	53.9%
Clearer assignment instructions	50.0%	40.0%	50.0%	51.0%
Online assignments (e.g. quizzes with closed and short-answer questions)	45.5%	50.0%	50.0%	45.1%
Additional workshops on avoiding plagiarism	36.4%	40.0%	38.9%	35.3%
Stricter penalties for commissioning/collusion	35.6%	10.0%	0.0%	43.1%
More frequent but smaller/shorter assignments	34.1%	40.0%	55.6%	30.4%
More information on commissioning/collusion in classes	28.8%	0.0%	11.1%	34.3%
Exams and presentations instead of long essays and reports	28.8%	40.0%	38.9%	26.5%
Posters & videos discouraging students from commissioning/collusion	18.2%	10.0%	5.6%	21.6%
A whistleblowing policy for students (i.e. students encouraged to report those who they know submit commissioned assignments)	15.9%	0.0%	0.0%	20.6%

Table 1. Activities that could eradicate commissioning and collusion

An overwhelming majority of students (80.3%) indicated more than one initiative.

Overall, FY students pointed primarily to more 'practical' solutions. 77.4% (n=99) pointed to at least one 'assessment-related' initiative. Since most HE advisory bodies and researchers recommend assessment redesign (e.g. QAA (2016 & 2017), TEQSA (2017), Bretag et al. (2017), Lancaster and Clarke (2017)), it is encouraging to see that students embrace these proposals, too. In our institutional context, students who responded to the survey had already experienced two redesigned assessments and it was particularly pleasing to see that so many of them perceived such actions as effective preventative measures. It also gave the



FY academics a 'mandate' to continue to redesign our assessments.

Not surprisingly, with the large proportion of FY students being speakers of English as an additional language, calls for English language and study/academic skills support were also popular. This is in line with the findings and recommendations from Rigby et al. (2015) or Bretag et al. (2017). As additional support of this nature was widely available at the institution, it suggests that more work needs to be done to advertise this to our students.

Interestingly, nearly all calls for more information about commissioning/collusion (in class or in marketing materials), stricter penalties and calls for a whistleblowing policy came from students who did not engage in or consider commissioning or collusion. This suggests that students 'at risk' do not perceive these measures as a deterrent but indicates, perhaps, feelings of frustration with contract cheating and collusion amongst the 'honest' students.

### Limitations

The completion rate was relatively low (17.3%). No questions about student demographics were asked. The survey presents perceptions of a unique cohort of students at one institution.

### Conclusions

The results of this study revealed that our WP students, including those who admitted cheating or considering doing so, displayed good knowledge and awareness of the complexities of contract cheating and collusion, and provided 'generous' advice on measures that could eradicate the two cheating behaviours. This indicates the effectiveness of the AIM campaign and shows student support of the institutional efforts.

The majority of our students advise more 'implicit' methods of combatting contract cheating and collusion, including assessment redesign and broad teaching and learning initiatives, rather than the 'explicit' educational activities such as marketing materials discouraging students from contract cheating or collusion, or a student whistleblowing policy.

The input from students was enormously helpful in the evaluation of institutional efforts and deciding on further actions. It is recommended that other institutions seek similar input from their students, particularly those 'at risk' of engaging with the cheating behaviour.

**Keywords:** academic integrity, contract cheating, collusion, foundation year, widening participation.

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