The student experience of contract cheating allegations: an international collaborative research project Deakin University (Australia) and Coventry University (UK)

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Contract cheating is the obtaining of bespoke university assignments with the intention of submitting them for assessment (Lancaster and Clarke, 2016). In recent years the scale of contract cheating in higher education has grown substantially. If left unchecked, the global £200m contract cheating industry may lead to many students incorrectly being certified as having achieved learning outcomes (Adams, 2015). This may have disastrous consequences for public safety and community confidence in higher education (Bertram-Gallant 2016; White, 2016). The Quality Assurance Agency in the UK (QAA) and its equivalent in Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) have made the issue of contract cheating a national priority in terms of research and suggested guidance for higher education institutions (QAA, 2016, 2018; TEQSA, 2016, 2017). Therefore universities are seeking to better understand the phenomenon and how to advise, support and safeguard students against the contract cheating industry.

Although any student can undertake contract cheating, students can be disadvantaged in their preparation for higher education in both UK and Australia if they have never before been asked to perform academic writing under certain conditions, such as:

1. writing academic assignments in English,
2. referencing scholarly academic sources; and,
3. avoiding plagiarising (Borg, 2009; Glendinning 2013, 2016; Pecorari & Shaw, 2018; Sutherland-Smith, 2008, 2014, 2018).

Such students may fall easy prey to the targeted approaches used by contract cheating websites (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith, 2018a, 2018b; Medway et al, 2018; Rowland et al., 2017). Despite recent intense focus on contract cheating in higher education, the activity itself remains a complex, partially understood phenomenon. Whilst some self-reported survey research has explored student views about contract cheating and its extent (Bretag et al, 2018; Harper et al, 2018), there is limited research, to date, into the perspectives of students alleged to have committed the act of contract cheating. This study seeks to address that gap in knowledge and, to our knowledge, is the first study in the world examining students experiences of the allegation processes and the support they receive before, during and after the formal process. It is also innovative as student advocates at both institutions are central to the research project and drive the investigation, supported by experienced researchers.

This project is a current six month study conducted simultaneously at Deakin University

(Australia) and Coventry University (UK). We probe the perspectives of students who have been through formal allegation processes at both institutions where the allegations of contract cheating (Deakin policy) or serious plagiarism (Coventry policy) have been found proven. We are exploring the students' decision-making processes leading to the breach behaviour, any factors contributing to their actions, their experience of support before, during and after the formal process. We seek to understand what interventions might have prevented students from taking this path. This is critical to institutional understanding of how to use current resources to better support students' ethical learning and integrity choices.

We investigate the following research questions:

- What attitudinal, social and/or physical barriers led to the actions taken by students?
- What experiences have students had of contract cheating companies' marketing materials and techniques?
- Did students realise the consequences of their actions?
- What is the student perspective of experiencing the formal allegation process?
- What help/services do students continue to need (if any)?
- How might the university do more to prevent contract cheating?
- What advice would students now give to other students?

Data collection is through semi-structured interviews which are recorded (with student permission) and transcribed. Participation is, of course, voluntary. Interviews are conducted by student advocates, who are members of the project team. Embedding Student Advocates in the project ensures we harness their considerable insight and understanding of the formal allegation process to better understand the issue of contract cheating behaviours. Data coding is achieved using thematic analysis. Inter-rater coding reliability occurs at both Deakin and Coventry universities, undertaken by senior researchers in the team. We wish to share insights into this project, as well as our experiences of conducting a research project across international contexts, with multiple researchers and student unions in both countries in the area of contract cheating.

The project is an innovative approach to a complex and topical issue. It addresses a vital gap in research done to date by including in the issue the voice of potentially disadvantaged and disempowered students with intimate understanding of the contract cheating process. The evidence gathered from this project will potentially help us understand how to reduce disadvantage by mitigating contract cheating and assisting more students understand the consequences of submitting work written by others. We aim to better understand what targeted student support services are needed, how investigative and decision-making processes are working when handling allegations and appreciate similarities and differences in policy context. This can inform better levels of education about academic honesty and integrity. With better understanding of contract cheating, and of Deakin and Coventry's policies and processes, the project lays the ground for the team to engage in more effective policy advocacy.

We anticipate that the findings from this study will be of interest and relevance to other educational institutions experiencing cases of contract cheating. We will share the results to date with conference participants and suggest how this evidence can be used to strengthen institutional policies and procedures for deterring misconduct, with particular focus on

the systems and processes for managing suspected cases of contact cheating.

Keywords: contract cheating, student advocates, student experiences, institutional policies, international collaboration.

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