CONTRACT CHEATING IN ISRAEL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Keywords

Academic integrity; Contract cheating; Internet-based plagiarism detection service; Covid-19

Abstract

Academic integrity is an essential pillar of any educational system. It is defined as acting in a manner consistent with the values and accepted standards of ethical practices in teaching, learning, and scholarship (Fishman, 2015). Contract cheating, or ghostwriting, is currently one of the most severe violations of academic integrity. It involves students engaging a third-party, usually an online essay writing service, to complete their academic works on their behalf (Draper et al., 2021). Some of these services offer pre-written essays, whereas others offer bespoke custom-written essays. According to the academic literature, the advent of the internet and digital technologies underlay this rapid deterioration of academic integrity (Ison, 2020; Lancaster & Clarke, 2014).

Different learning environments, such as face-to-face (i.e., a learning environment involving the physical presence of both instructor and students) and online web-based (i.e., teaching mode that takes place partially or entirely over the internet), have been shown to affect academic integrity in different ways (Eshet et al., 2021). While contract cheating is common in both conventional face-to-face (F2F) and online settings, it is more likely to take place in the latter (Lancaster & Clarke, 2014; Slade et al., 2018). There are several possible explanations for why online students engage in contract cheating more often than F2F students. In particular, this includes the problem issue of psychological distance, which adversely affects interpersonal relationships; and the problem issue of moral distancing, because the internet can obscure the line between academically honest and dishonest behavior (Sharma & Maleyeff, 2003).

These issues were further exacerbated by the sudden shift from F2F to emergency remote teaching (ERT) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahsan et al., 2021; Bjelobaba, 2021). Indeed, contract cheating had become a significant COVID-19 side effect for higher education institutions. In contrast to the well-planned F2F or online learning courses, ERT-based courses are not originally designed to be delivered virtually (Fatonia et al., 2020). The chaos brought by the abrupt campus closure and related unexpected transition to ERT provided both the opportunity and the incentive for contract cheating (Hill et al., 2021). Through social media students have very quickly become fully aware of the possibilities of a wide variety of options to carry out Plagiarism (Bautista et al., 2022). There has been an increase in ways to try to bypass text-matching or text-reuse (i.e., plagiarism) detection systems, for example using micro-spaces, white ink, punctuation, and typos (Abdelhamid et al., 2022). Even though ghostwriters, especially commercial ones, claim their essays are original and therefore cannot be detected using text-matching software, third-party assignments may still contain recycled text (Aitken et al., 2017; Newton & Lang, 2015). Text-matching detection software could use these breaches to identify outsourced academic work (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016; Wang & Xu, 2021).

This study compared about four thousand term papers written in the languages Hebrew, Arabic

and English that were submitted using the Moodle system a year before the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, with about four thousand term papers submitted at the time of the closure of the first wave of COVID-19 outbreaks. The inspection was done using text matching software. Academic integrity was defined as papers submitted with at least 70% original content, according to the software. The findings show that there is a significant decline in the level of academic integrity. While the software was able to easily detect ready-made papers and copying from previous years, it had difficulty locating custom-made papers. Thus, it seems that ghostwriters do deliver their promise of writing custom academic work. The results demonstrate that even when using state-of-the-art automated detection methods, contract cheating remains difficult to detect (Johnson & Davies, 2020; Lancaster & Clarke, 2016; Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016). This provides alarming evidence for higher education institutions and constitute a serious threat to academic integrity. Accordingly, a new approach is needed to detect more subtle potential indicators of contract cheating.

Following these findings, a novel algorithm was developed designed to track students' progress throughout their studies and identify deviations from writing patterns. This presentation will reveal the decline in the level of academic integrity that occurred during the distance learning emergency, in cross-sections of scientific disciplines, institutional rankings and comparisons between universities and colleges. An operational idea will be presented on how to reduce the use made of Contract Cheating by students.

Further studies will examine whether the algorithm is able to identify ghostwriting in languages other than Hebrew.

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