A contract cheating update

More than 5 to 10 per cent of students engage in some form of contract cheating. In a tutorial of 20 students, therefore, one or two are cheating in this manner. Associate Professor Tracey Bretag provided this update on contract cheating – when a student outsources their work yet claims it as their own – at a recent academic integrity forum at UNSW.

The Director of the UniSA Business School Office for Academic Integrity also shared other findings from a survey of 15,000 students from eight universities and four higher education providers about cheating, as well as offering pointers from a good practice note on this subject that she co-authored with TEQSA.

She noted that although far more attention is given to cases of paid contract cheating like the MyMaster scandal (“that’s the stuff that’s in our face and … hurts us so bad”), unpaid contract cheating, where work is completed by a student’s friend or family member, is actually far more prevalent. It comprises between 83 and 90 per cent of contract cheating cases.

Bretag is concerned that if contract cheating isn’t dealt with more severely, it will become “normalised”. That’s why she advocates for the research-recommended penalty of suspension for offenders. She stressed this isn’t about punishment. Rather, it’s about giving the offender a chance to reflect on their actions, and thereafter return to university, supported, and with a hopefully reset moral compass.

Contrary to some people’s conceptions, the survey revealed that offenders knew that what they were doing was wrong, and that cultural differences had no impact on this. “It makes me feel sad … it must make them feel pretty sick at heart,” she said.

“They’re having to cheat because they’re struggling so hard.”

Nevertheless, those more likely to cheat in this way include students who speak a second language. For Bretag, this means these students clearly need more support. Other markers that indicate a greater cheating likelihood are dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment, and a perception that there’s an opportunity to cheat.

Bretag provided strategies to tackle each issue. One, teachers need to develop more personal relationships with students: this has been shown to enhance student satisfaction and place teachers in the best position to identify such cheating. Two, to counter the perception that you can get away with cheating, aside from the aforementioned suspension penalty and further support for second language speakers, universities can:

- Raise student and staff awareness of contract cheating, including how to identify it and its penalties. This can be as simple as a mandatory 30-minute video, or in the case of UniSA, a student-led Snapchat campaign
• Visually remind them about contract cheating, using various mediums. Deakin, which has had to deal with this issue in the public eye, held a contract cheating awareness week.
• Change assessment design: the assessment types that make it harder to contract cheat are reflections on practicums, vivas, assignments related to personal/individualised topics, and supervised, in-class assessments.
• Create a simple process for referring cases. Curtin, for instance, outlines this in a flowchart.
• Communicate outcomes of contract cheating cases to the whole academic community (“shout out to Griffith”). Bretag emphasised this is not about naming and shaming offenders. In fact, they need not be named. It is simply about inspiring people to trust in the process.
• Establish an office or even just a person specifically tasked with handling this issue, as USYD and UniSA have done.
• Push to make paid contract cheating websites illegal.

Another contract cheating misconception, according to Bretag, is that it’s hard to establish. “You just have to look at the balance of probabilities … to prove they didn’t complete the work,” she said, referring to Wendy Sutherland-Smith’s work in this area.

To her, combating it is essential, not just for individual students’ learning outcomes, but for society. “[It] undermines institutional reputations, educational standard and credibility, professional practice, and ultimately, public safety,” she said.

“I had a call recently from someone working in aviation who’s very concerned about contract cheating in that discipline. And they were practically crying …”