Title

Fear of failure: a student-facing investigation into the motivations for contract cheating and academic misconduct.

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Abstract

The advent of remote learning and the over-representation of international students in contract cheating literature have contributed to the beliefs that a digital pathway to higher education necessitates academic malpractice, and that this phenomenon is more prevalent among non-native students. This study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on international students and contract cheating by providing both holistic and nuanced student perspectives from survey and interview data. An online survey distributed to 117 students, of which 103 international students participated and a supplementary interview conducted with 6 additional participants from a UK university reveal a holistic and nuanced insight into the student perspective of contract cheating definitions and causes. The results support the currently scarce but emerging literature that a fear of failure and lack of self-confidence due to weak academic writing skills in English have a greater contribution to a student's susceptibility to outsource their work than students' automatic international status. This paper advocates for university support systems for academic writing skills in English to be shared among universities, and further suggests that these systems should be tailored and further promoted to the postgraduate student demographic.

Keywords

Contract cheating, academic misconduct, academic integrity, higher education, online cheating, international students

Introduction

Academic misconduct has plagued higher education institutions since their inception, resulting in the degeneration of authentic student academic identity and the undermining of scholarly pursuits, and there remains an active battle between pedagogues and students to combat such behaviour (Gu, 2011; Lancaster et al., 2019; Slade et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2021). Educators have become equipped to deal with certain misconduct, whether it be outright plagiarism or taking notes into exam halls, however, a recent phenomenon receiving more traction has made itself a cause for concern: contract cheating (Ransome and Newton, 2018; Ahsan et al., 2022). Originally coined by Lancaster and Clarke in 2006 and used interchangeably with terms such as commercial writing, ghost-writing, and pseudepigraphy, contract cheating is the process of outsourcing academic work to a third party for partial or entire completion, typically for financial gain but not always (Page, 2004; Lancaster and Clarke, 2006; Lines, 2016; Harper et al., 2019; Popoola, 2022). The contract cheating phenomenon is a particularly insidious form of academic misconduct due to the profound chasm between the student and their submitted output; the authorship of the third party is entirely clandestine (Page, 2004; Senders, 2008; Ison 2020; Ali and Alhassan, 2021).

It is estimated that approximately 6% of students confess to a form of contract cheating behaviour (Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; Bretag et al., 2019, Ellis et al., 2020), and one in seven recent graduates internationally have engaged in contract cheating behaviour (Quality Assurance Agency, 2020). These reported figures may appear conservative, yet the percentage of individuals who participated in contract cheating behaviour and are reoffenders exceeds 60% (Curtis and Clare, 2017; Harper et al., 2019). These numbers are also likely to

underrepresent the true prevalence of such behaviour, as many survey participants are unlikely to disclose instances of malpractice, even in anonymised contexts, indicating that the real number of contract cheaters is much higher (Curtis and Claire, 2017; Curtis et al., 2022). This transactional collusion between the bespoke writer and the student consumer only serves to corrupt the established institutional guidance on academic integrity, and threatens university accreditation (Emery-Wetherell and Wang, 2023). Thus, the unique nature of contract cheating, as opposed to other forms of academic misconduct, demands a profound investigation into why students decide on the outsourcing of their work as their chosen method of academic impropriety.

Literature Review

The literature on academic misconduct is bountiful, as the phenomenon has been happening since the establishment of academia itself (Gu, 2011), even occurring in physical contexts under the surveillance of examination invigilators (Drake, 1941). However, the existing body of literature pertaining to contract cheating has only recently come out of infancy, and has most notably gained traction since 2017 (Ransome and Newton, 2018; Ellis et al., 2020; Ahsan et al., 2022). Yet, despite the growing abundance of research, there seems to be general agreement on the types of opportunities and motivations which make a student more susceptible to engage in academic misconduct, and particularly contract cheating behaviour.

The digital path to contract cheating

Exacerbated by the development of the Internet and the rise of artificial intelligence tools, contract cheating methods and opportunities have only increased in their magnitude and complexity (Lancaster and Clarke, 2008; Eaton et al., 2019; O'Leary and O'Connor, 2022). Such methods may include but are not limited to the purchasing of essays from essay mills, auction and freelancing sites, file-sharing sites, discussion forums, sitting an examination for someone, outsourcing their work to family, friends, peers, or staff members, or even physically purchasing a written assignment (Lancaster and Clarke, 2007; Medway et al., 2018; Amigud and Lancaster, 2019; Lancaster et al., 2019; Awdry et al., 2021; Lancaster and Cotarlan, 2021). Of these, essay mills or 'cheating companies' (Alin, 2020) tend to remain the most popular avenue for contract cheating, defined by the UK Quality Assurance Agency as "organisations of individuals, usually with a web presence, that contract students to complete an assignment or assignment for a student, for a fee" (Quality Assurance Agency, 2020). Their allure comes from the persuasive marketing techniques employed by the individuals and organisations providing the service: 24/7 availability and quick turnaround times, claims of complete authenticity, live chats, or the ability to procure the assignment from the privacy of one's own home (Ritter, 2005; Ahsan et al., 2022). Essay mills and outsourcing companies use an ethically dubious combination of technological and human resources to optimise their marketing and sales plans in order to attract new students and retain their current customers (Crockett and Maxwell, 2021). These services are advertised openly and internationally, shared through word of mouth or target individuals using the recorded interaction patterns of student profiles on social media, almost always under the guise of innocent academic help, assuming the position of guest lecturers or former students, or language services for international students (Amigud and Lancaster, 2019; McKie, 2019; Draper et al., 2021; Nott, 2023).

A more recent period of growth for these outsourcing services coincide with the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced educational institutions internationally to adopt an unparalleled blended or entirely remote approach to teaching design and delivery (Ahsan et al., 2022; Eshet, 2022; Emery-Wetherell and Wang, 2023). The transition to a digital learning environment places an increased onus on the student to commit to academic integrity policies from a distance, as assignments completed in a remote setting are largely unsupervised (Hill et al., 2021; Lancaster and Cotarlan, 2021). However, the unprecedented nature of the pandemic also increased the likelihood of students taking advantage of the situation, perceiving cheating to be easier in online situations compared to traditional, physical contexts (Lancaster and Cotarlan, 2021), emphasising the idea that students will cheat in these situations if given the opportunity to (King et al., 2009).

International contract cheaters

Research also posits that international students and students with a native language other than English (LOTE) are more susceptible to engage in contract cheating behaviour (Eaton et al., 2019; Alin, 2020; Holi and Alhassan, 2021). It is believed that international students "often lack study skills and English language fluency and experience cultural pressures to succeed" (Hill et al., 2021), or use formal, higher education as a means to a

permanent career and residence. These sentiments are widely supported across the available literature (Kettle, 2007; Kaktiņš, 2018; Alin, 2020; Özşen et al., 2023; Rahimi et al., 2024).

Guo and Guo (2017) propose that there is a growing internationalisation of Western universities because international students are greater financial contributors than domestic students due to their elevated tuition fees, functioning in manners akin to commercial businesses (Kjellgren et al., 2022). Yet, this financial internationalisation does not necessarily translate into successful social and curriculum internationalisation; Western perspectives govern the curriculum, and fuels academic disengagement due to an impersonal relationship between the student's cultural background and educational content (Medway et al., 2018; Ali and Alhassan, 2021; Özşen et al., 2023). These students possess the added challenges of manoeuvring in a complex environment in a language not native to them, and may face both academic and social disengagement from fellow peers and faculty members due to prejudices or stereotypes where international learners are often perceived as intellectually inferior, or may in fact struggle with their academic English language skills (Khoo and Kang, 2022; Rahimi et al., 2024).

In their study with five graduates, Rahimi et al. (2024) found that international students were contacted by bespoke, and allegedly high quality, essay writers prior to entering the country. Although all graduate respondents attributed their contract cheating behaviour to poor English language skills, one respondent in particular stressed that if they were to redo their assignments, they would avoid outsourcing their work to a third party and instead do it themselves. This could suggest that an overall lack of self-confidence trumps a difficulty with the English language as a main motivation for contract cheating.

Similarly, the presence of an additional language may always not contribute to an inclination for academic misconduct. Emerging literature exploring the relationship between the Internet as an opportunity to cheat during online examinations and students with English as a foreign language (EFL) instead point to other primary motivations (Maleki, 2024). Maleki's recent study with 27 students of an Iranian context revealed a lack of self-confidence and learner procrastination as significant motivators for cheating during online examinations, including the outsourcing of the exam to another individual. Dishonest behaviour has been recorded to come from a lower self-esteem, with individuals who are self-assured and confident feeling and being less inclined to engage in cheating behaviours (Aronson and Mettee, 1968). Similar results were also corroborated by Blachnio and Weremko (2011) who found that a combination of peer influence and low self-esteem resulted in a greater propensity to academic misconduct. Ineffective teaching methods characterised by surplus module content and sources or a noticeable lack of expertise of the educator also contributed to a student's susceptibility to cheat. However, a study conducted by Taherkhani and Aref (2024) with a similar Internet-Iranian context intersection involving 406 EFL students found that the least frequent form of academic misconduct was having a surrogate take the exam, yet the participants often referenced instances of collusion and the outsourcing of their answers as a common cheating practice.

While the various demographics of EFL, LOTE, and international students may often overlap, this is not always the case, and LOTE students may have a greater influence on cheating susceptibility than simply being an international student (Saddiqui, 2022). Bretag et al. (2019) also protest the conflation of the international and the LOTE student in the largest known study of contract cheating involving over 14,000 students, dispelling the belief that international students harbour culturally distinct attitudes that predispose them to contract cheating behaviour and that their international status is a de facto inclination of academic misconduct.

Commercial education and academic disengagement

Rather, both domestic and international students, hold similar beliefs regarding the severity of contract cheating, which instead points to a dissatisfaction and disengagement with the teaching and learning environment as the strongest reason for engaging in the academic misconduct (Foltýnek and Králíková, 2018; Bretag et al., 2019). Academic disengagement tends to stem from the ever growing commercialisation in place in higher education institutions, which distances the student both culturally and ideologically from the university (Page, 2004; Ritter, 2005; Bretag et al., 2019). Universities are "market-oriented and operate similarly to other commercial enterprises" (Kjellgren et al., 2022: 11), rendering the procurement of a degree a purely transactional process rather than an educational one (Awdry and Newton, 2019). In addition to student cohorts increasing in size and individuals growing in anonymity, tertiary education has become deeply impersonal (Pitt et al., 2020; Sadiqqui, 2022), amplifying student detachment.

The commercialisation of a formal education also results in students' development of external and academically distinct motivations for pursuing a formal, higher education (Roherson and Basanta, 2016; Khan et al., 2020) resorting to the commercialisation of their assignments via the outsourcing services mentioned above. Positioning education as a commodity for procurement puts recipients in a customer-consumer position rather than a student position, fuelling extrinsic motivations such as obtaining a prosperous career, educational status, or simply wanting to appear competent. Outsourcing academic assignments to a third party "transforms assessment into a financial transaction" (Rahimi et al., 2024), ultimately measuring the ability to commercially cheat rather than the ability to sufficiently author a piece of academic work. Contract cheating erodes the academic process by perpetuating a culture of commodification, commercialisation, and deceit. There is also a greater susceptibility to engage in academic misconduct, compared to students with an intrinsic and genuine desire to learn (Rettinger, 2004; Kaktiņš, 2018; Rundle et al., 2019). Alternatively, students may have the skills to succeed in their degree, but simply lack motivation (Amigud and Lancaster, 2019) or view their assignments to be too vague, overwhelming, poorly explained, seek an efficient method to complete their assignments, or have been uneducated on academic integrity and come from a weak educational background (Lines, 2016; Slade et al., 2019; Spruin, 2022). Thus, well-established relationships between faculty and students not only serve as a significant deterrent for cheating, but also positively influence pedagogues' awareness of the academic misconduct and encourage co-creation between the two (Drake, 1941; Beasley, 2014; Awdry and Newton, 2019; Harper et al., 2019; Slade et al., 2019; Khoo and Kang, 2022). In fact, a systematic literature review of 15 academic papers concerning contract cheating causes and prevention strategies found that a sufficient student-staff rapport "could alleviate most of the problems while simultaneously encouraging interactive ways of teaching" (Xu and Li, 2023: 312), where "problems" refer to commercial contract cheating behaviours.

Establishing ample opportunities for staff and student academic co-creation and the development of better relationships between faculty staff and students also serves to increase awareness regarding the contract cheating phenomenon, as a lack of awareness is also considered to be a contributing factor and opportunity to engage in contract cheating (Ferguson et al., 2023). Research conducted in a Jordanian context revealed that university students' most common rationalisation of academic misconduct was an explicit absence of awareness and definitions of cheating practices (Al Shbail et al., 2022). Consequently, students purported that they were not in violation of academic integrity policies (Shbail et al., 2022). Thus, a lack of dialogue regarding academic misconduct and consequences for committing such acts also fosters the perception that there are many opportunities to cheat (Bretag et al., 2019; Eaton et al., 2019) by way of not enforcing honour codes and implicitly enabling a cheating culture at the university (Rettinger, 2004; Simkin and McLeod, 2010). Generally, students and staff tend to agree on what constitutes academic misconduct (Nuss, 1984), but in a context where discussions about honour codes and academic integrity are scarce, a significant number of students feel that such behaviour outweighs the risks of getting caught, that it is normalised, or that staff are simply ignorant of its occurrence in their institution (McCabe, 1993; Lines, 2016; Medway et al., 2018; Eaton et al., 2019; Williamson, 2019; Rundle et al., 2019; Nagy and Groves, 2021). Honour codes are integral to the maintenance of academic integrity and appropriate academic conduct, so its privation is a sure contributor to cheating behaviour (McCabe, 1993; Slade et al., 2019). Yet, in a study centred on academic cheating in an online context and honour codes, Corrigan-Gibbs et al. (2015) found that priming their participants with a warning reduced rates of cheating by up to 56%, as both a preventative measure and a deterrent, compared to the "insignificant" (Corrigan-Gibbs et al., 2015: 28) results by the employment of an honour code.

Research Questions

The rationale behind contract cheating is complex and influenced by a panoply of opportunities and motivations, including fellow peers, faculty, and external society. Such behaviour can hardly be delegated to a single reason or justification. Therefore, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What motivations, opportunities, and/or justifications do students enrolled at a UK university have for engaging in contract cheating behaviour?
2. How do these students interpret contract cheating?
3. What are the major preventative measures that can be taken to mitigate instances of contract cheating?

The research objectives endeavour to explore the multifaceted nature of contract cheating behaviour exhibited by students from a UK university. They aim to uncover the complexities behind commercial malpractice from the

original perspectives of the student participants and contribute to the relevant academic literature, particularly pertaining to international and postgraduate students.

Therefore, based on the findings of the study, the following paper seeks to contribute to the existing literature in two ways:

1. By supporting the literature protesting the notion that international student demographics may be predisposed to contract cheating behaviour.
2. By providing a nuanced approach to understanding the motivations students have for academic misconduct, in addition to student-suggested preventions to mitigate such behaviour.

Instead, the outcomes of this ontic-level study conducted on students from a UK university point to a fear of failure and lack of self-confidence as being the primary motivators for contract cheating, corroborating the currently sparse but slowly emerging literature presenting similar results (Aronson and Mettee, 1968; Blachnio and Weremko, 2011; Awdry and Newton, 2019; Maleki, 2024).

Methods

An online questionnaire was conducted using the Jisc Online Surveys platform to obtain the primary data. It was disseminated across the student body via email and social media in a UK university consisting of approximately 13000 students and kept open for three months. The survey was composed of 10 questions in total and the sampling method used was convenience sampling with many friends and acquaintances of the researchers likely to have participated. One of the researchers was a postgraduate international student studying at the same university. Closed questions were used to collect quantitative data to facilitate a general overview of student perceptions of and reasons for contract cheating. This study focuses on the responses received to all sections of the questionnaire including background, academic misconduct, and the reasons for engaging in contract cheating. The survey themes and corresponding questions were generated by the authors having read the relevant literature available regarding academic misconduct and contract cheating, thus forming the basis for the survey questions and providing prompts and answer selections. Participants were able to skip questions if they preferred not to answer or leave the questionnaire at any time, however, no partial responses are included because all 117 participants chose to complete the survey in its entirety. The data was processed using the Jisc Online Surveys analysis tool and a breakdown of the participants is presented below in Table 1 and Table 2.

A supplementary interview was conducted with six anonymous and voluntary participants to obtain qualitative data in order to highlight the individual voices of students regarding contract cheating behaviour at the university. The interviewees did not participate in the survey, and were selected to provide a unique perspective of the motivators for contract cheating. To ensure the comfort of the interviewees and facilitate engagement with the study, the responses were not recorded or transcribed. Instead, detailed notes were taken during the interviews at the authors' discretion. Each interview consisted of 16 questions and was allocated 45 minutes. The interview notes were categorised according to the relevant interview questions where each participant was assigned a number (1-6) and keywords and shared themes were grouped together among additional, pertinent information and contributions. Both the interview and survey questions were reviewed by the ethics committee at the university and approved.

Table 1: Participant degree classification

Degree classification	**Number of participants**	**Percentage**
MSc	53	45.3
MBA	44	37.6
BSc	14	12.0
BA	2	1.7
Other	4	13.4
Total	**117**	**100.0**

Table 2: Number of international and domestic participants

International or domestic student?	**Number of participants**	**Percentage**
International	103	88.0
Domestic	14	12.0
Total	**117**	**100.0**

Results

Two introductory questions regarding academic integrity were asked to the students, and over 75.2% of the surveyed students confirmed that they were familiar with the term 'academic integrity', but only 65% of respondents were aware of the university's academic integrity policies. Five of the 41 participants who were unfamiliar with the university's academic integrity policies were domestic students, and of the 36 international students who were unfamiliar with the university's academic integrity policies, three were undergraduates. Similarly, all six participants of the supporting interview had a fair understanding of what academic misconduct was, but did not know where to find the resources for the university's own academic integrity policies or information.

The participants were then asked to identify which behaviour was considered to be academic misconduct out of a list of five options, where three of the five options constituted contract cheating and the remaining two did not. This question permitted the selection of multiple answers: getting part of a project completed by a friend or family member; paying an external party to complete part or whole of your assignment; purchasing ready-made projects from a website or someone; discussing difficult topics with friends and peers; receiving help from the learning development team at the university. The results presented in Figure 1 illustrate that the majority of students believe that the fiscal aspect of outsourcing their assignments constituted a form of academic misconduct, and the least selected option was the reception of help from the learning development team at the university.

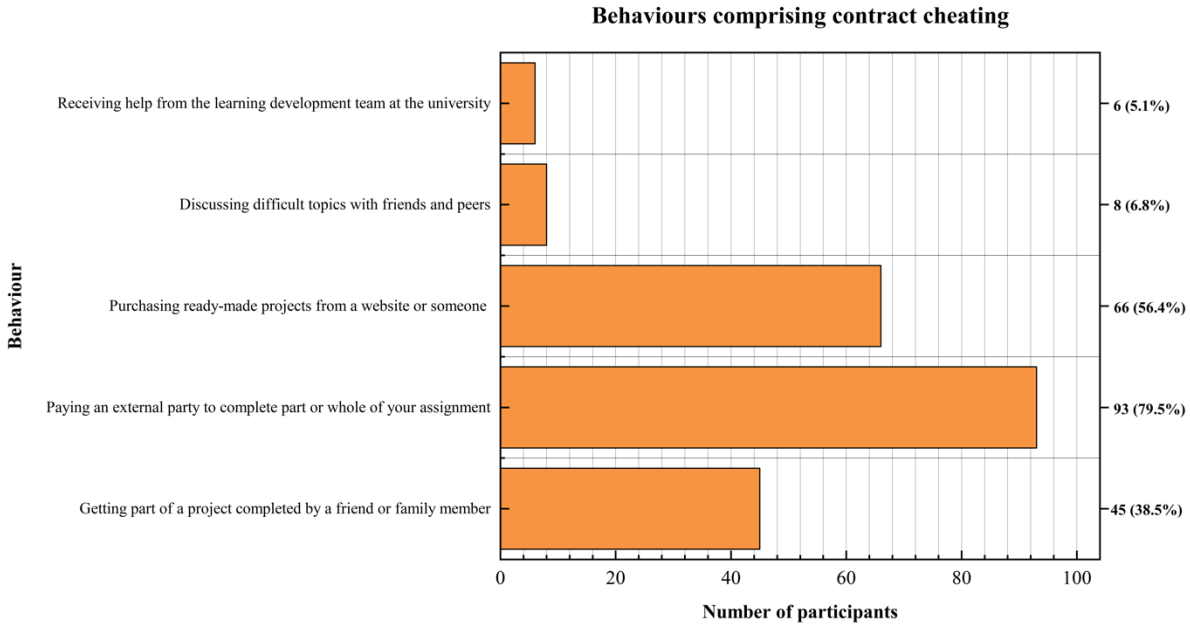

Figure 1: Responses to a multi-answer question: Which of the following does academic misconduct consist of?

The participants were then asked to consider how frequent contract cheating behaviour occurs, and were provided with a definition: 'contract cheating is outsourcing part or whole of your assignment work to someone else either for free or money'. Barring nine of the total 117 respondents who had never seen or heard of contract cheating at the university, 70% of the respondents considered such academic misconduct to be common or very common. Five of the six interviewees had confessed to engaging in or having been reported for suspected contract cheating.

A matrix question consisting of a list of reasons for contract cheating was put forward to the participants thereafter; the column choices consisted of a five-point Likert scale to assess the strength of agreement or disagreement with the suggestions provided. The cumulative percentage of the responses are detailed in Figure 2. Fear of failure and lack of self-confidence were the two strongest reasons for engaging in contract cheating, with their cumulative agreement ('Strongly Agree' and 'Agree') being equivalent to each other, garnering 77% of the selections each; 'fear of failure' surpassed 'lack of self-confidence' under the 'Strongly Agree' category by 3%. The issue of academic writing in English being too difficult occupies second place jointly with 'no time to study due to part-time job(s)', with their cumulative agreement being equivalent to each other, garnering 70% of the selections each; with there existing only a 1% difference between the third most agreed upon selections: 'weak educational background' and 'new assessment methods' at 69%. The selection with the greatest total disagreement (a combination of 'Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree') was 'no fear of getting caught' at 24%.

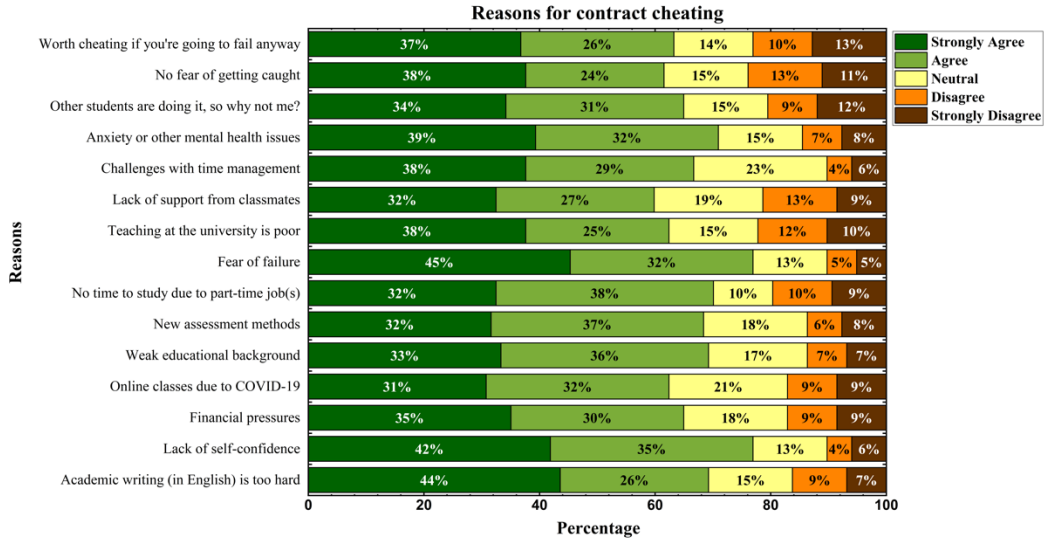

Figure 2: Reasons for contract cheating

A similar question was asked to the interviewees: 'Why do you think students resort to contract cheating?'. The participants' responses touched on all of the prompts provided in Figure 2, but also specified naivety regarding the severity of the consequences and sheer laziness as a motivating factor for contract cheating. The discussions also touched on future deterrence or preventative methods, where three of the six participants specifically used the word 'help', and one used 'guidance' to advocate that receiving aid on academic work and self-confidence will help to mitigate contract cheating.

Discussion

This study has explored the student perspective of contract cheating at a UK university using a survey which was disseminated online and a supplementary interview with additional participants to provide a holistic approach as to the reasons and causes for acting upon this particular academic misconduct. Together, the quantitative and qualitative data have proved fruitful in identifying that the majority of students were familiar with the notions of academic integrity and contract cheating, emphasising the aspect of financial gain for the latter. Given that 88% of respondents (n = 103) indicated an international background, this finding is particularly interesting. The findings contribute to the idea that international students are not automatically more likely to cheat due to their international status (Bretag et al., 2019) as only a minority of students were unaware of the university's academic integrity policies at 35% of the total participants. The research by (Bretag et al., 2019) indicates that both domestic and international students may engage in cheating behaviours despite thinking that they are wrong, not because they believe these practices are acceptable and 'culture' alone does not explain the phenomenon. Considering that international students occupied 88% of the total participant number in our research, one would expect the number of students unaware of the university's academic integrity policies to be much higher if, indeed, their international background was a *de facto* implication of a liability for academic misconduct.

Considering this in combination with the two most agreed upon options ('fear of failure' and 'lack of self-confidence'), and the second-most strongly agreed upon option ('academic writing (in English) is too hard'), the results may point to the idea that an international student's background is not a *de facto* characterisation of cheating behaviour. Instead, a reiteration of academic integrity principles for all, and further guidance in academic writing appears to be a pertinent point of necessity (see interview results). These findings not only contribute to the wider debates of the contract cheating, academic misconduct, and international students, but may also support the research by Sanni-Anibire et al. (2021) who conducted a study on international students and their insights on academic misconduct with a smaller sample size of 60 students. Sanni-Anibire et al. (2021) found links between uncertainty of academic integrity principles and generally negative emotions (fear, anxiety, etc.) which are somewhat mirrored in this research, when reviewing the links between a lack of a self-confidence, fear of failure, and difficulty in academic writing. This combination of results is somewhat contrary to the idea that international students lack the appropriate English repertoire (Alin, 2020; Hamza et al., 2022), but may instead point to more nuance – a lack of appropriate *academic* English repertoire. Although none of the research questions specifically address international students, the overwhelming majority (n=103, 88%) of them mean that these results are pertinent in the field of contract cheating and international students. The disproportionate number of international students to domestic students responses was unexpected, but facilitate the contribution of research to the available literature touched upon in the literature review, while contributing to the answering of the first research question.

Concerning the second research question, Figure 1 evidences that students interpret the occurrence of contract cheating as executed, mostly, through a financial lens. The most selected behaviour believed to comprise contract cheating was 'paying an external party to complete part or whole of your assignment', yielding 79.5% of the total selections. This was followed by 'purchasing ready-made projects from a website or someone' at 56.4% of selections. All other selections, including the third-most selected option which *does* comprise of contract cheating (getting part of a project completed by a friend or family member) were selected by significantly less than half of the participant population. This could point to a perceived increase in the severity of the action when money or financial exchanges are involved, as it reiterates the commercialisation and commodification of education highlighted in the literature (Page, 2004; Ritter, 2005; Bretag et al., 2019; Kjellgren et al. 2022). However, these results also serve as a double-edged sword, potentially implying that a lack of specification of behaviour constituting academic misconduct may permit certain behaviours, though still comprising contract cheating behaviour, to be perceived as a less significant or severe transgression of academic integrity principles.

Turning to research question three, the potential preventative measures that can be taken to mitigate instances of contract cheating are largely aid-based. The fruitful discussions of the interviews all pointed to 'help' or 'guidance' as key measures to combat contract cheating. The combination of the minority of survey participants who were unaware of academic integrity principles and the acknowledgement of family and friends as third-party members of contract cheating reinforce the discussions in the interviews centring on a general lack of awareness of the consequences of academic misconduct, fear of failure, and laziness. As such, appropriate academic aid may seek to contribute to a greater awareness of integrity principles and motivate students to work hard, diverting their liability to turn to academic misconduct. This aid can be fortified by the learning development team at universities, which 95% of survey participants understood did not comprise contract cheating behaviour, and which may provide the necessary 'help' and 'guidance' required to complete academic assignments and prevent academic misconduct, as highlighted by the interview responses.

Recommendations

Thus, the following recommendations seek to address both the issues surrounding the status of the rapport between pedagogues and students, and the obscurity or confusion that students face when completing academic assignments.

1. Publicise university support systems that assist in the development of academic skills and include a mandatory session on academic integrity when students join the university.

This addresses two matters simultaneously: spreading awareness of the available resources for academic development and dispelling any confusion about the university's facilities and places all students, regardless of international status, on an equal footing of knowledge about academic integrity and best practice. The call for awareness campaigns have made themselves prevalent across the available literature, highlighting not only the

necessity, but efficacy of sheer knowledge of contract cheating and its consequences (Corrigan-Gibbs et al., 2015; Khan et al., 2020, Rahimi et al., 2024). This increases student morale and confidence in their knowledge, learning, and application of academic writing (in English) in their assignments (Khoo and Kang, 2022; Maleki, 2024).

2. Tailor these support systems to a postgraduate audience.

Due to the fact that a postgraduate degree (in the UK) tends to occupy one calendar year, versus an undergraduate degree spanning three academic years, it may also be helpful to have these systems tailored, or further promoted, to a postgraduate audience as all participants who were unfamiliar with the university's academic integrity principles were all postgraduate students. The authors hypothesise that the combination of the shorter duration and the expectations associated with postgraduate students as already having academic integrity knowledge may result in a dichotomy between students' academic integrity expectations and applications, when compared to undergraduate students who encounter consistent reference to academic integrity principles throughout the duration of their, typically, three year degree, thus making this tailored approach an appropriate recommendation.

Limitations

This study was conducted on a small sample of 117 participants which consisted mostly of international postgraduate taught students rather than undergraduate or postgraduate research students, and did not permit the use of open-ended questions for survey participants to provide their own qualitative data if they did not consent to the interview. Although the interview participants were external to the online survey, the small number of six participants does not allow for a generalisation of qualitative data regarding contract cheating causes and prevention strategies at the UK university. Future research should place an emphasis on garnering a balanced representation of participants from each demographic or degree background to provide a more holistic and generalisable understanding of the student perception and causes for contract cheating.

Conclusion

Against the context of an ever globalised and interconnected world driven by the Internet and the internationalisation of tertiary institutions, this study conducted on 117 students from a UK university sought to answer three research questions related to the motivations, justifications and interpretations of contract cheating behaviour in addition to highlighting potential preventative measures to combat the phenomenon based on the students' own responses. Both the quantitative survey results and qualitative interview responses studied in this paper point towards a lack of self-confidence and fear of failure as being the main driving factors for outsourcing assignments, in addition to a general naivety and challenge regarding academic writing in English. To address this, it is recommended to divulge and reinforce university support systems that provide academic writing and assignment aid, particularly to postgraduate students studying courses of shorter durations that may not have the necessary reinforcements of academic integrity principles provided to undergraduate students.

Declarations

Ethics Approval

The authors received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Northampton. All the subjects have provided appropriate informed consent.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Data Availability

The research data associated with this article are openly available in Figshare at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.26165455.v1. The data set can be accessed directly using the provided DOI link.

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