Discussing Assessment Design To Limit Collusion And Contract Cheating

Autumn 2021
The Context

There has been a significant rise in the number of academic misconduct cases investigated at RHUL, notably during the COVID crisis. Particular concern has been raised around collusion and contract cheating.

Research published in 2018 suggested that up to $1/7$ graduates world-wide may have paid for an assignment to be produced.

Collusion and contract cheating are a threat to academic standards: a growing concern for the devaluation of degrees.
Emerging Cyber Security Threats

Malicious code in university domains:
• Website code redirecting students to cheating service websites from specific urls
• Direct links to cheating service websites
• Comments in discussion forums providing and propagating links
• Fake essay etc. contests harvesting original student material for selling on QAA/JISC.

QAA/JISC. Emerging Cyber Security Threats to the Integrity of UK Teaching and Learning. July 2021
Information and support for students:

Positive focus on integrity, early information, developing skills.

Training and information for staff:

Regulations, responsibilities, procedures.

Reducing opportunities to cheat:

Assessment design, website/marketing blocks, alert pop-ups.
Detection:

Text similarity software (Turnitin), linguistic analysis software, teachers identifying unexpected changes in students’ submissions.

Regulations and policies:

Allocated staff, clear regulations/guidance, recording and analysis.
Information and Support for Students

Discuss academic integrity early, and frequently at key assessment times

Clear assignment expectations guidance, e.g. videos. State ‘you must complete this piece of work alone’ where appropriate. This can also enhance inclusivity.

Signposting to academic English and skills support (CeDAS)

Sharing positive Turnitin statistics with students could undermine the misconception that ‘everyone is cheating’
Highlight the consequences of detection, e.g. for employment, scope for blackmail. Reporting of confirmed misconduct to a PSRB (professional, statutory and regulatory bodies) can jeopardise entry into a profession, e.g. Law, Social Work, Accounting & Finance.

Point out to students that research has found that contract cheating sites can fail to deliver on time, can deliver fail grade work, can fail to respond rapidly to queries, and can request levels of personal information that generate vulnerabilities. (Sutherland-Smith & Dullaghan, 2019)
The ‘Avoiding Plagiarism’ Moodle course:

https://moodle.royalholloway.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=1897

All students are automatically enrolled, staff need to use the enrolment key **Zanzibar46!**.

Some courses already have a requirement for this to be successfully completed by students.

Educational Development and AQPO have consulted, and are working on it becoming a mandatory module for (nearly) all UG1 and PGT courses.
Discussion:

Which features of assessment design could reduce the chances of students colluding on, or commissioning, their assignment submissions?
Nothing can realistically be ‘cheat-proof’ without being impractical/expensive/harmful to learning.

Design for reducing misconduct must not lead to complacency in detecting and acting. Studies have shown that teachers are more readily able to spot contract cheating when they're actively seeking it out.
Authentic assessments reflect the ‘real world’ use of learning. Can include self-reflective assignments such as learning journals.

Suggested as a means of reducing academic misconduct

Some research to suggest that they are still susceptible, so vigilance is still required

Students may need help preparing for ‘unfamiliar’ assignments
The use of various assignment types can add to the commissioning cost as a disincentive, and also benefits inclusivity:

- Controlled and uncontrolled timing/location
- Written and oral, presentations and portfolios
- Group and peer assessment may deter ‘uncharacteristic’ submissions
- At RHUL: audio, video, graphical, performance etc.
- For technical answers, photographic evidence of working, rationale for the approach to the answer
Shortening submission deadlines may not be a solution:

Essay mills can respond very quickly
The added stress may increase the likelihood of misconduct

At RHUL: Support students with timely, rich and detailed feedback/feedforward, e.g. Turnitin audio comments for individuals, and Panopto for class feedback.
Written coursework can be particularly vulnerable. Interim ‘checkpoints’ can help:

- Early drafts
- Presentations
- Seminars discussing progress
- At RHUL: Multi-part Turnitin assignments, e.g. lit. review, outline, draft, final.

Multiple submission points may help those who struggle with a single major deadline.
Figure 1. Assessment tasks – Proportion of students’ who perceive that contract cheating is likely/extremely likely (cheating and non-cheating groups), and proportion of educators who use assessment tasks moderately/great deal.
Implemented especially during the pandemic to promote positive academic practices and help to reduce the challenges that could lead to misconduct:

- Regular progress planning and tracking
- Discussion forums, peer mentoring, office hours
- Signposting to support provision

What will be the role of invigilated in-person examinations post-pandemic? Students will need to be helped to prepare.
Discussion

Which means do we have of detecting academic misconduct?
Text similarity detection software:

Some commissioning providers may themselves plagiarise, thus allowing detection
Commissioning providers may ‘launder’, and fabricate references, to obtain unreasonably low similarities
At RHUL: academics are best-placed to interpret Turnitin similarity scores in the context of their assignment
QAA Recommendations on Detection
Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education, QAA, 2nd Edn, 17 June 2020

Document/assignment characteristics:

File metadata, consistent formatting
Credible reference lists, e.g. library availability
Content matching the materials taught
Comparison with earlier work, shifts in grade
Replication of unusual errors as evidence of collusion in technical answers

At RHUL: a role for Personal Tutors in interpreting grade patterns?
Interviews/Vivas:

Not practical if used widely

Random sampling may detect some cases and act as a deterrent, however this would require a policy change at RHUL

Online searches:

Searching for the assignment name could find evidence of commissioning attempts
The future?

AI-based linguistic analysis

Proctoring
Further Resources

Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education, QAA, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Edn, 17 June 2020.


Briefing sessions in the autumn term to cover regulatory / operational matters around academic misconduct investigations. Run by AQPO & Academic Investigations.