Contract cheating: a survey of Australian university staff

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If media reports are to be believed, Australian universities are facing a significant and growing problem of students outsourcing their assessment to third parties, a behaviour commonly known as 'contract cheating'. Teaching staff are integral to preventing and managing this emerging form of cheating, yet there has been little evidence-based research to inform changes to their practice. This paper reports on the findings of a large-scale survey of teaching staff in Australian universities on the topic of contract cheating. It investigated staff experiences with and attitudes towards student cheating, and their views on the individual, contextual and organisational factors that inhibit or support efforts to minimise it. Findings indicate that contract cheating could be addressed by improving key aspects of the teaching and learning environment, including the relationships between students and staff. Such improvements are likely to minimise cheating, and also improve detection when cheating occurs.

Keywords: academic integrity, contract cheating, higher education, plagiarism, third party cheating

Introduction

Contract cheating occurs when a student submits work that has been completed for them by a third party, irrespective of the third party's relationship with the student, and whether they are paid or unpaid. The term was coined by Lancaster and Clarke in 2006 to describe computing students' use of professional agency sites (such as www.rent-acoder.com) to hire third parties to complete their assessment. Since then the meaning of the term has expanded, recognising that this kind of 'outsourcing' of assessment spans all discipline areas and involves a variety of both paid and unpaid sources, including custom assignment services, friends, family, and personal tutors (for a recent overview, see Lancaster and Clarke 2016). Numerous media scandals in Australia and internationally have exposed examples of contract cheating (Doherty 2016; Visentin

2015; Yorke 2017), prompting concerns that the problem may be growing and threatening the integrity of higher education provision (Thomas and Scott 2016).

Student outsourcing of assessment is not a new phenomenon and public panic is common each time a new form of student cheating emerges (Bertram Gallant 2008; Sutherland-Smith 2010). However, numerous social, economic and technological changes are converging in higher education, lending a particular sense of urgency to the problem of contract cheating. Increasing commercialisation and marketisation is repositioning education as 'a commodity to be acquired' (Page 2004), which has in turn led to a logical outgrowth of a cheating 'service' industry in which academic work becomes a commodity rather than an artefact representing a process of thinking and learning (Rigby et al. 2015; Walker and Townley 2012). This problem is compounded by increasingly precarious job markets, which encourage an employability focus for institutions and their students. This kind of 'credentialism' (Brown 2001) risks repositioning learning as an instrumental transaction in which students are only minimally engaged. Added to this is a booming 'sharing economy' (Richardson 2015) supported by online platforms that facilitate new modes of exchange of goods and services. Anything can now be easily bought or sold online – including academic labour – leading to a diminishing regard for traditional ideas about information ownership and intellectual property. Until the late 1990s, the outsourcing of assessment was necessarily a localised and hidden activity, limited to students' own social circles. The use of online platforms such as Airtasker and Freelancer, however, make contract cheating both public and global in its reach. The visibility and potential scale of the problem is perhaps creating the impression that it is on the rise, despite no empirical evidence to suggest that this is the case. Current anxieties about contract cheating might therefore

reflect a recognition that the contemporary higher education environment provides a set of ideal conditions in which contract cheating could proliferate.

A significant body of research exists on why students cheat. This has largely been generated by surveys of students (a method with recognised limitations), but common findings are that students cheat for a range of individual, contextual and situational reasons. In a recent review of the literature, Brimble (2016) identifies seven motivators for cheating. These include demographic factors (e.g. age, gender and language background, with those who speak a language other than English [LOTE] particularly vulnerable), a growing cultural acceptance of cheating, a lack of knowledge and skills among students and staff, issues with curriculum design and delivery, and situational factors such as peer culture, likelihood of detection, and consequences. In addition, Brimble identifies the effect of 'modern life' on both students and staff, which for both involves managing competing priorities, increased performance pressure, and less time and inclination to prioritise teaching and learning.

Surveys of staff have also identified a range of factors that may influence student cheating. In Walker and White's Australian study (2014), respondents cited class sizes and the 'impersonal nature' of contemporary teaching models as reasons why student cheating might go undetected. They reported that better trained and more experienced lecturers often remain distant from students, while those close to them are often casual staff who are more likely to have less experience and training, be less connected to institutional culture, and not paid enough to devote time to following academic integrity procedures. This environment of anonymity is potentially compounded by the practice of 'anonymous' marking, ostensibly established in many educational environments to reduce bias and ensure fairness. Staff also reported a tendency for appeals against breach investigations to be overturned, which undermines

staff members' faith in their institutional processes (Walker and White 2014). Findings from Sattler, Wiegel and van Veen's German study (2017) also suggested that large class sizes were problematic, along with staff awareness of detection methods and management processes.

Anonymous and impersonal learning environments are potentially problematic, given that numerous studies have found staff-student relationships to be significant for deterring cheating. MacGregor and Stuebs (2012) found that students were more likely to engage in cheating if they perceived their educator did not care about them, concluding that students' ethical decision making may be influenced by the extent to which they have a personal relationship with their educator. Similarly, Beasley (2014) found that students were more likely to cheat if they perceived staff had a lack of care for individual students, their learning and their success. Simkin and McLeod (2010, 450) also found cheating was deterred by student and staff connections, particularly 'the presence of a moral anchor in a faculty member whose opinion mattered' to the student.

Multi-pronged and holistic approaches have been widely recommended to address academic integrity, whereby responsibilities are explicit and shared by students and staff across an institution (Bretag 2013; Morris and Carroll 2016). Responsibilities include establishing principles, policies and processes (Walker and White 2014; Bretag et al. 2011), mapping program curricula to develop a sequential schedule of assessment that scaffolds skills (Walker and White 2014), designing assessment and course curricula to minimise opportunities and reasons to take shortcuts (Morris 2016; Newton and Lang 2015; Walker and Townley 2012), teaching academic integrity and academic practice (Cheung et al. 2016; Henderson and Whitelaw 2013; Morris 2016; Sutherland-Smith 2010), and managing breaches (e.g. enforcing rules, detecting and referring suspected cases) (Walker and White 2014). However, many of the recommendations for

improving teaching practice in order to minimise cheating are based on experience and educational 'common sense' rather than empirical evidence which clearly demonstrates efficacy.

In any approach to academic integrity, the fundamental role of teaching staff is evident. While holistic approaches may be overseen and supported by a range of university staff, most rely on teaching staff for their implementation. Although teaching staff consider contract cheating to be a very serious ethical and moral matter (Sattler, Wiegel and van Veen 2017), a range of factors influence the extent to which they actually implement their institution's strategies for preventing and managing breaches of integrity. Staff may perceive that responsibility ultimately lies elsewhere (e.g. with the student) (Walker and White 2014), or they may be generally uninformed about academic integrity matters, lacking awareness or knowledge about what role they can play (Ransome and Newton 2017). A large German study of over 1,400 staff at four institutions found that staff practices were primarily based on three factors: the time and workload involved, compared to the likelihood of reward; the perceived efficacy of suggested methods, and behavioural expectations of other staff and students in their context (Sattler, Wiegel and van Veen 2017).

In this context, contract cheating presents new challenges because it is not clear how 'detectable' it is to teaching and marking staff. Research by Dawson and Sutherland-Smith (2017) found that markers identified 62% of contract cheating cases when they were advised to specifically look for it; however, Lines (2016) found that when markers were unaware of the possible presence of contract cheating, none was detected. Even when cases are detected, teaching staff are concerned that it may be difficult to 'prove' (Walker and Townley 2012). The complexity of the problem,

combined with a variety of perceived barriers or disincentives to tackle it mean that many staff may simply ignore it altogether (Coren 2011; McCabe 2005).

This paper supports ongoing discussion about the role of teaching staff in responding to the problem of contract cheating, and the role of institutions in supporting them. It reports on findings from a survey of teaching staff (n=1,147) conducted at eight Australian universities. The staff survey formed part of a nationally-funded research project (www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au), which also included a parallel student survey (n=14,086). Together, the surveys were designed to explore staff and student experiences with and attitudes towards a range of outsourcing behaviours, and the individual, contextual and institutional factors that may contribute to these behaviours. Specifically, this paper addresses the following four research questions:

(1) What are the experiences of university teachers with identifying and managing contract cheating?

(2) What are university teachers' attitudes towards contract cheating and other forms of outsourcing?

(3) To what extent do organisational factors (including policies and processes) contribute to minimising contract cheating?

(4) To what extent do university teachers implement teaching and learning practices associated with minimising contract cheating?

Method

Survey questions were phrased to allow responses from staff in a range of teaching roles, including casual tutors, lecturers and subject coordinators. The questions used either nominal or ordinal scales (5 point Likert scales), with the exception of a single open-response item, the qualitative data from which is not examined in this paper. The

survey was constructed online, using Qualtrics, and contained 64 items addressing demographic information, experiences and attitudes towards student outsourcing, organisational factors that help to minimise contract cheating, and teaching and assessment practices[1]. Initial ethics approval was obtained from the lead institution and the survey was piloted at one institution, before final ethics approval was secured for the updated survey. After gaining consent from senior managers at each participating institution, a link to the online survey was distributed and promoted through staff email systems. A convenience sampling method was used, as it was not possible to coordinate a random sampling method at all eight participating universities within the time constraints of the project. The survey was conducted between October and December 2016. Data were analysed in SPSS using descriptive statistics, cross tabulations and factor analysis to explore relationships between items.

Findings

Responses were obtained from 1,147 staff, representing 7.32% of the total academic staff population. Response rates to each question varied throughout the survey, so for accuracy of reporting, findings include the response rate for each question (e.g. 50%, n=200/400). Where relevant, parallel responses from the student survey are also shown for comparison.

Teaching staff experiences with identifying and managing contract cheating

Outsourced assessment tasks

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[1] The staff and student survey instruments are available here:
www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au/surveys/ Findings from the student survey are reported in a separate paper in this journal.

More than two-thirds of respondents (67.6%, n=619/916) had encountered an assessment task that they suspected was written by someone other than the student who submitted it. Of those, 39.7% (n=241/607) had suspected this on more than five occasions. Staff were asked to indicate what had prompted their suspicions, selecting one or more signals from a list provided. Their responses are shown in Figure 1. Staff knowledge of the student prompted suspicions in a large majority of cases, including knowledge of the student's academic ability (70.6%, n=420/595) and knowledge of the student's language ability (62.2%, n=370/595). A high text-match indicated by text-matching software was the third most common signal (49.4%, n=294/595).
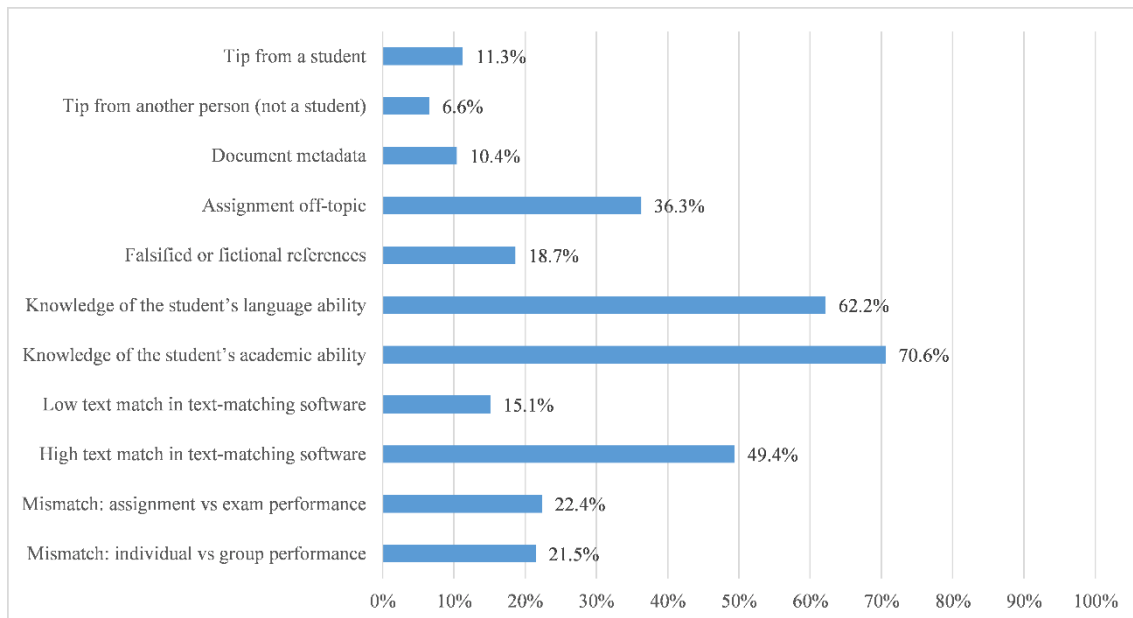

Figure 1: Signals that have prompted suspicions of outsourced assessment

The staff who reported suspecting outsourced assignments were then asked to identify their 'typical response' to such cases. Their responses are shown in Figure 2. Referral to an academic integrity decision-maker was reported as the typical response for 55.8% of
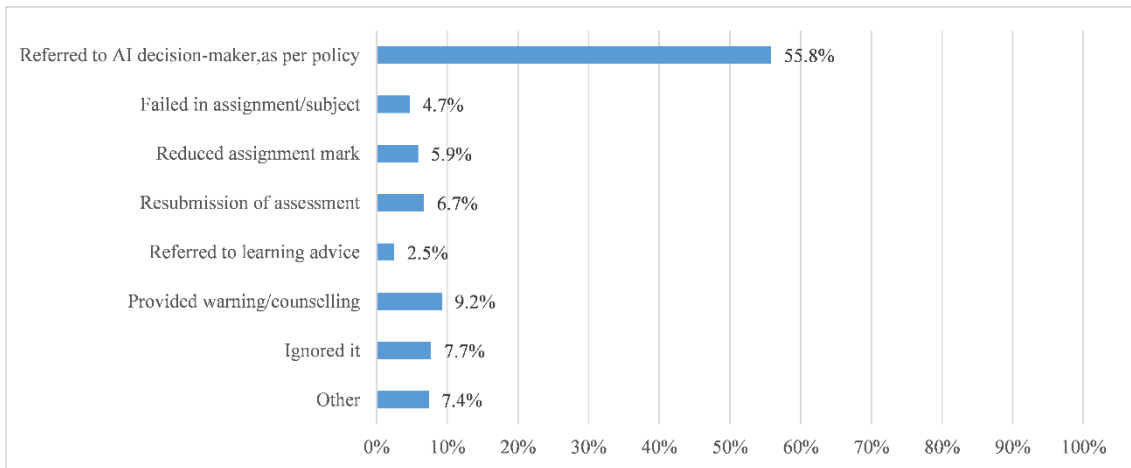
Figure 2: 'Typical' responses of staff to suspicions of outsourced assessment

teaching staff (n=332/595). A further 7.7% (n=46/595) reported ignoring it. The remaining respondents reported handling such cases themselves applying a very broad range of penalties. These penalties included providing a warning/counselling (9.2%, n=55/595), asking the student to resubmit (6.7%, n=40/595) applying a penalty to the assignment mark (5.9%, n=35/595) failing the student in the assignment and/or subject (4.7%, n=28/595) or referring the student to learning advice (2.5%, n=15/595).

Staff who indicated they do not typically refer such cases to an academic integrity decision maker were asked for their reasons why, selecting any reasons that applied. Their responses are shown in Figure 3.
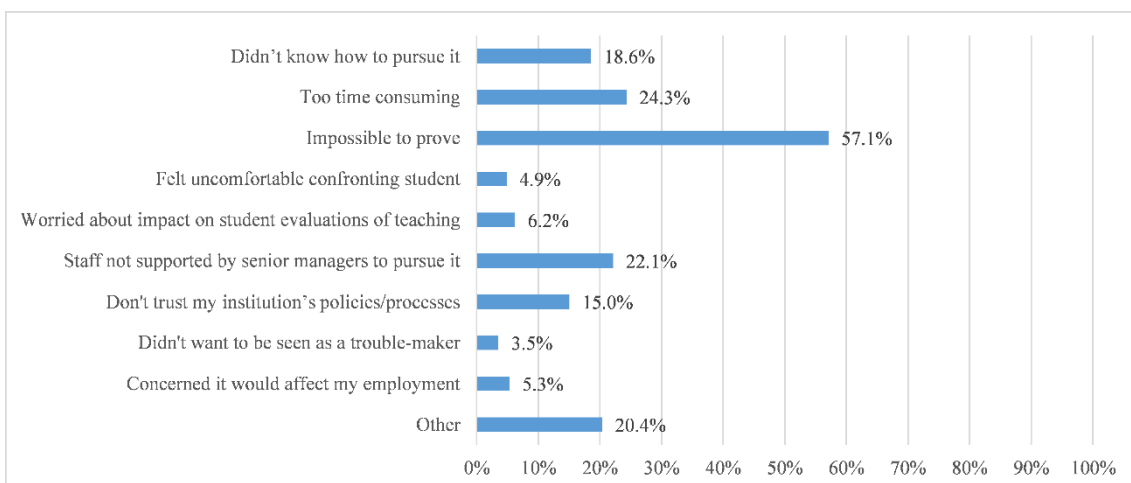

Figure 3: Reasons for not referring cases to an academic integrity decision-maker

Over half (57.1%, n=129/226) reported it was because this kind of cheating is 'impossible to prove'. Others reported reasons such as 'too time consuming' (24.3%, n=55/226) and 'staff are not supported by senior management to pursue these matters' (22.1%, n=50/226). Staff who did report referring cases to an academic integrity decision-maker were then asked to estimate what proportion of these cases had been substantiated and, when they were, what penalties typically applied. Responses to these two questions are shown in Figures 4 and 5 respectively. A large proportion of staff (33.2%, n=143/431) reported that they did not know what proportion of their referred cases had been substantiated. Of those indicating they had knowledge, 34.8% (n=150/431) reported that such cases were substantiated 90-100% of the time.
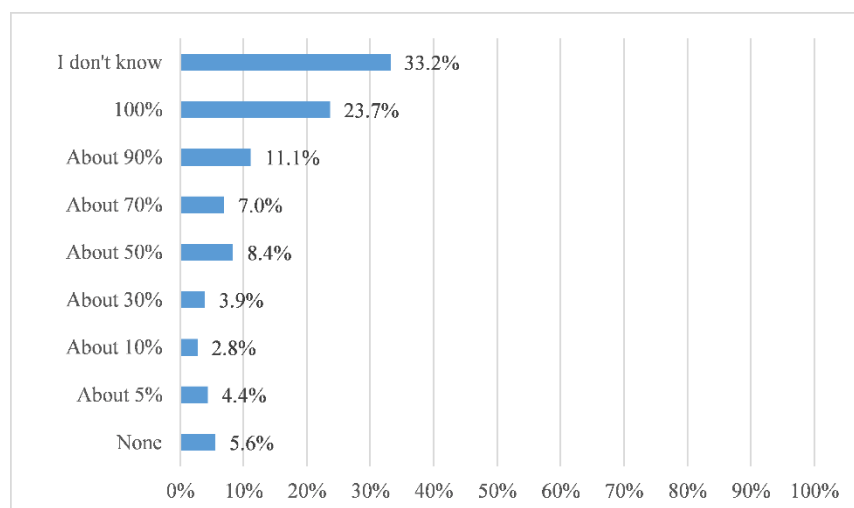
Figure 4: Proportion of referred cases that staff reported are substantiated

When asked about the typical penalty, respondents were able to select from a combination of items to reflect the application of penalties that may include more than one outcome, for example, zero for the task and referral to a learning adviser. Penalties most commonly included a warning/counselling (41.9%, n=176/420), zero for the assignment (37.1%, n=156/420), and a reduced mark for the assignment (28.3%, n=119/420). One in four staff (25.2%, n=106/420) reported that a record of such cases

Figure 5: Components included in 'typical' penalties for substantiated outsourced assessment

was entered into an institutional academic integrity database. Suspension was indicated as part of the typical penalty by only 4.3% of respondents (n=18/420), and exclusion/expulsion from the university was indicated by 2.4% (n=10/420).
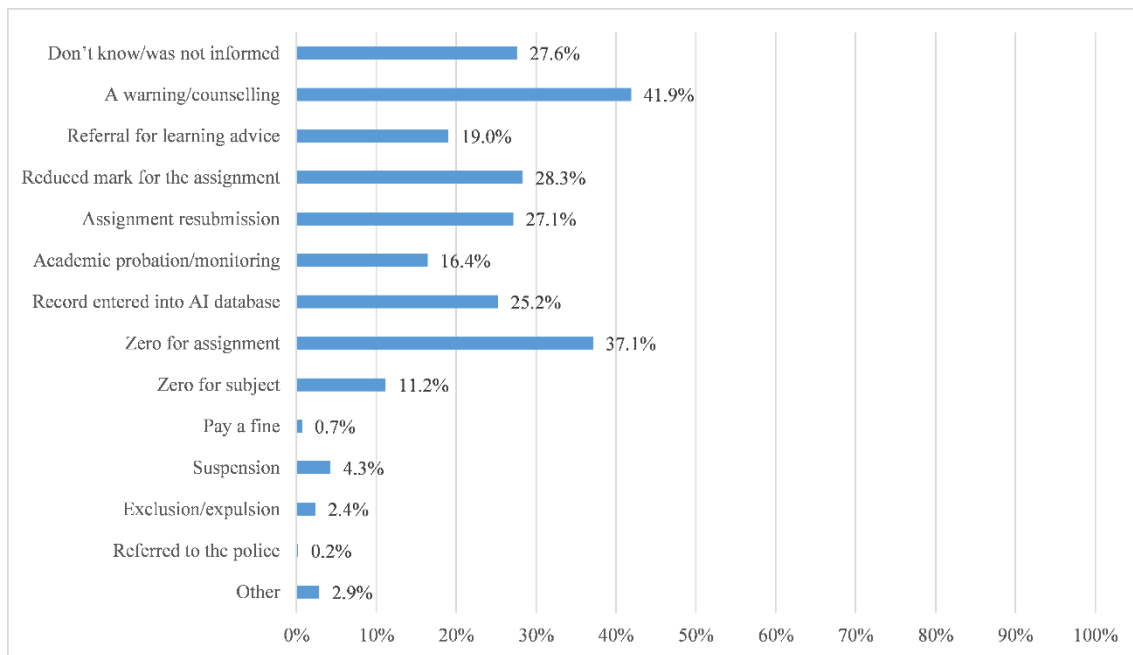
Examination assistance

A small number of staff (7.1%, n=61/863) reported being aware of students providing or receiving examination assistance in a course in which they had taught. Of these, 60.7% (n = 34/56) had experienced this one or two times, while 39.3% (n = 22/56) had experienced this three or more times.

Exam assistance is a broad term, encompassing behaviours ranging from whispering a single answer to a student in an adjacent seat, through to using technological devices to assist someone with an entire exam, so reported penalties for this behaviour varied widely. When asked what penalties typically applied in these cases, a significant proportion of staff (23.2%, n=13/56) answered 'I don't know'. The

most common penalties included a warning/counselling (46.4%, n=26/56), followed by zero for the exam (35.7%, n=20/56), resitting the exam (10.7%, n=6/56) and zero for the subject (8.9%, n=5/56). Suspension was reported by 1.8% of staff (n=1/56) and exclusion/expulsion from the university was indicated by 3.6% (n=2/56).

Examination impersonation

Exam impersonation was slightly less common, with 5.0% of staff (n=43/868) reporting that it had been identified in a course in which they had taught. Of these respondents, most (76.7%, n=33/43) had experienced this one or two times, however 11.6% (n=5/43) had experienced this ten or more times.

When asked what penalties typically applied in these cases, a significant proportion of staff (34.9%, n=15/43) answered 'I don't know'. The most common penalties included a warning/counselling (23.3%, n=10/43) and zero for the exam (23.3%, n=10/43), followed by zero for the subject (16.3%, n=7/43) suspension (16.3%, n=7/43), and academic probation/monitoring (14.0%, n=6/43). Exclusion/expulsion from the university was indicated by 11.6% of respondents (n=5/43).

Attitudes towards contract cheating

Staff were asked to report their levels of agreement on a 5 point Likert scale regarding the 'wrongness' of seven outsourcing behaviours, behaviours which were also investigated in the student survey (Bretag and Harper et al., under review). Figure 6 shows the percentages of staff who agreed or strongly agreed that each behaviour is 'wrong', as compared to the percentages of students who reported engaging in cheating
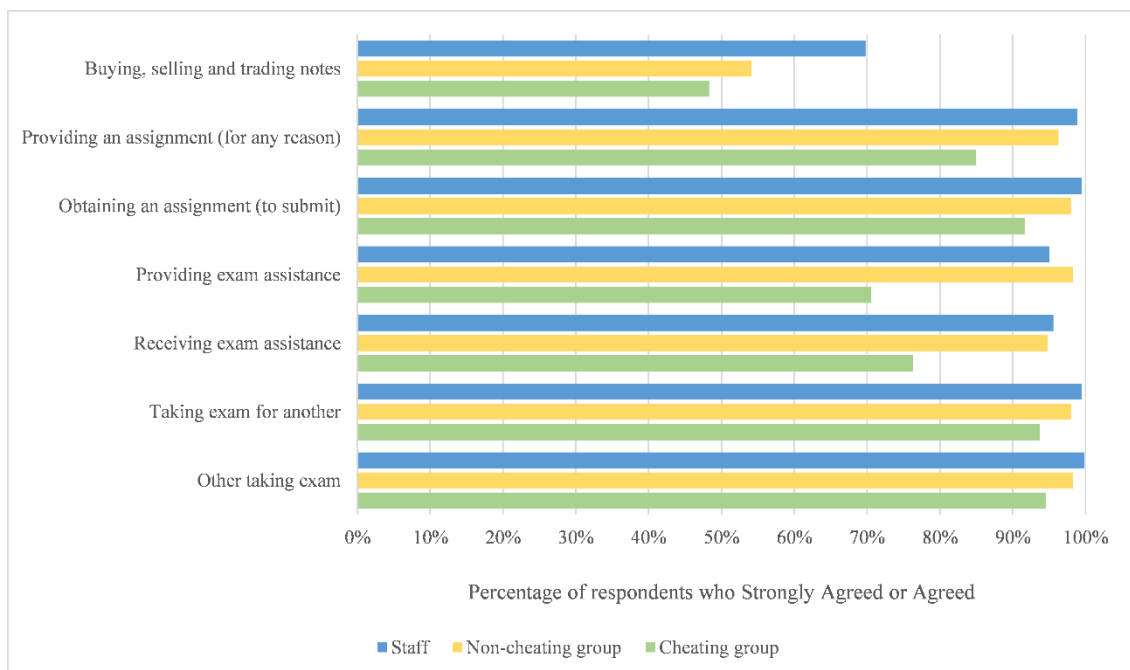
Figure 6: Comparison of Staff, Cheating and Non-Cheating group attitudes towards outsourcing behaviours

(Cheating Group) and students who did not report engaging in any cheating behaviours (Non-cheating Group). For all behaviours, except providing exam assistance, Staff had higher levels of agreement than both student groups that the behaviour was wrong. For exam assistance, Non-Cheating students had the highest level of agreement of all three groups. Almost 70% of staff (n=590/845) agreed that buying, selling or trading notes is wrong, compared to 54.1% (n=6,775/12,529) of Non-Cheating students and 48.3% (n=370/766) of Cheating students.

Staff were then asked to estimate what percentage of university students had engaged at least once in contract cheating (in either assignments or exams). Their responses are shown in Figure 7. Students were also asked a similar question[2], and their

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[2] The staff and student questions about estimated prevalence differed slightly, so Figure 7 should be read with this in mind. Staff were asked 'What percentage of higher education students do you estimate have engaged at least once in third party cheating (in assignments or exams)?', and a definition of third-party cheating was provided. Students were asked 'What percentage of higher education students do you estimate have engaged at least once in these

responses are included for comparison, again broken down into Cheating and Non-Cheating groups. There are considerable differences in the percentages estimated by each group. For staff, 42.2% (n=356/844) estimated that 1-10% of students have engaged in contract cheating, an estimation that aligns with students' self-reported rates of cheating in the research literature (Bretag and Harper et al., under review; Kralikova 2017). Only

	0	1-10%	11-20%	21-30%	31-40%	41-50%	51-60%	61-70%	71-80%	81-90%	91-100%
Cheating group	0.1	6.6	6.6	9.2	10.5	8.1	11.2	10.5	14.6	13.8	8.9
Non-Cheating group	1.2	23.1	19.0	17.6	11.7	7.7	6.1	5.4	4.5	2.4	1.3
Staff	0.9	42.2	21.6	15.8	7.0	4.3	2.8	2.7	1.7	0.6	0.5

Estimated percentage of university students who have engaged in contract cheating
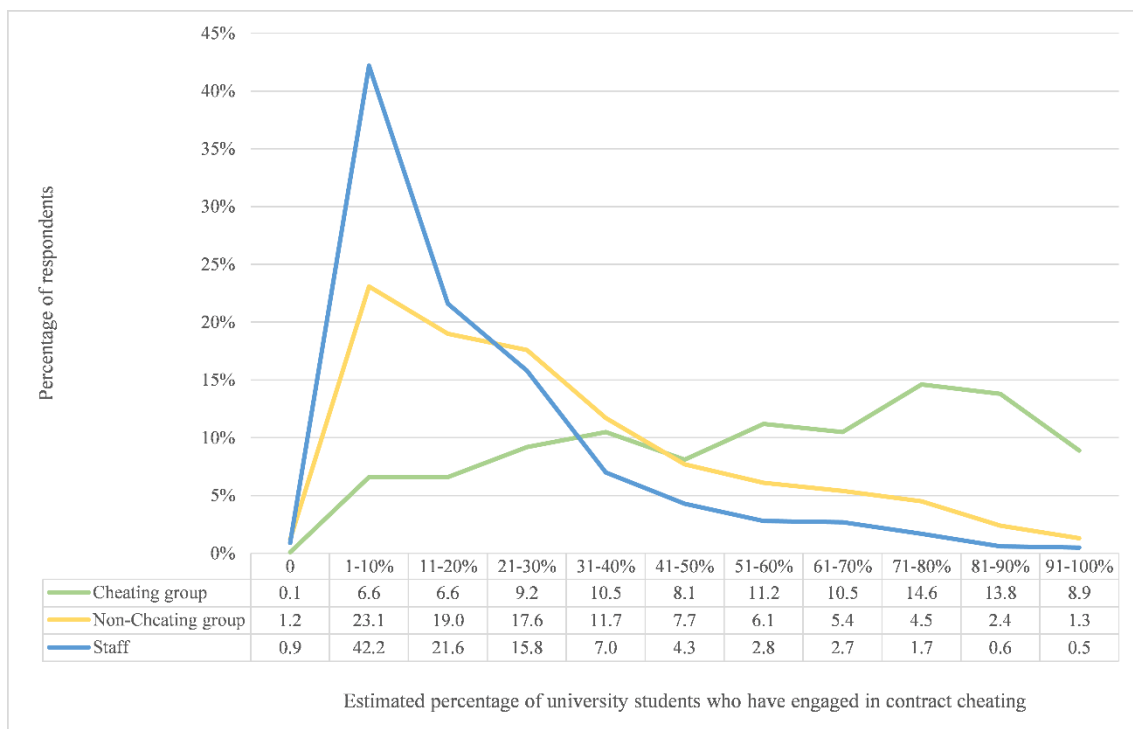
Figure 7: Estimated percentage of university students who have engaged in contract cheating, as reported by teaching staff, cheating students and non-cheating students

23.1% (n=3,063/13,258) of the Non-cheating Group and 6.6% (n=50/762) of the Cheating Group made the same estimation. Almost half of the Non-cheating Group

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behaviours (in either assignments or exams)?', referring back to the seven outsourcing behaviours investigated. This was done to avoid labelling any of the seven behaviours as cheating, or otherwise, in order to reduce student anxiety that responses would be negatively perceived.

(48.3%, n=6,404/13,258) estimated that between 11% and 40% of students had engaged

in contract cheating. A similar proportion of the Cheating Group (47.8%, n=364/762)

made much higher estimations, suggesting that 61-100% of all university students had

engaged in contract cheating.

Both staff and students were then asked to report how 'concerned' they were

that students are engaging in contract cheating in higher education[3], using a 5 point

Likert scale from 'not at all' to 'extremely'. Figure 8 shows the responses of staff, as

compared to the responses of Cheating and Non-Cheating students. Staff most

commonly reported being 'moderately' concerned (30.5%, n=257/844), and most of the
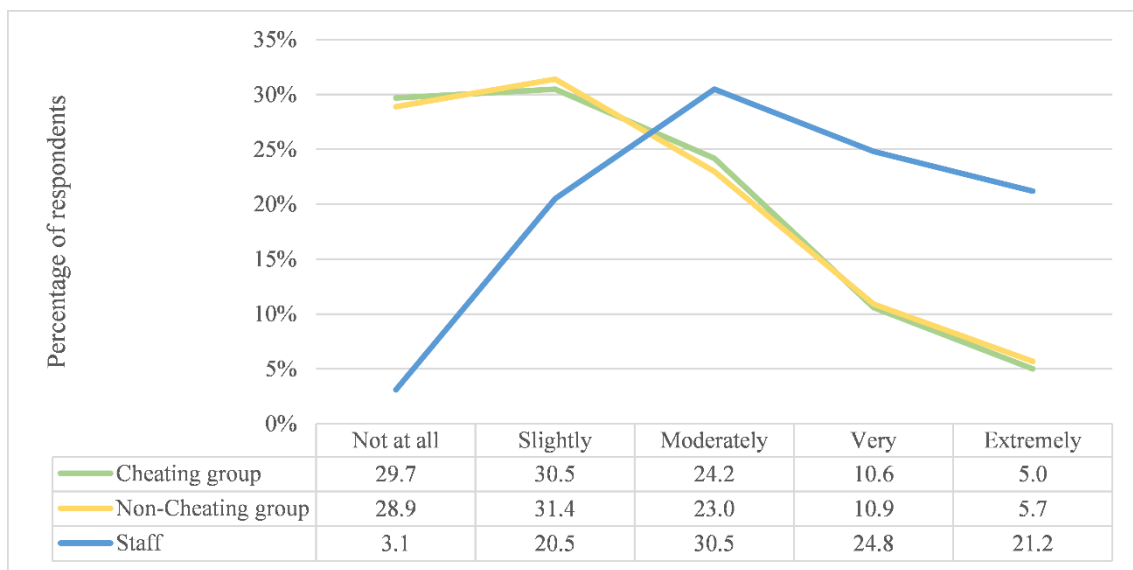
remaining staff

	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
Cheating group	29.7	30.5	24.2	10.6	5.0
Non-Cheating group	28.9	31.4	23.0	10.9	5.7
Staff	3.1	20.5	30.5	24.8	21.2

Figure 8: Level of 'concern' that university students are engaging in contract cheating, as reported by Staff, Cheating, and Non-Cheating groups

were either 'very' or 'extremely' concerned (46.0%, n=388/844). The distribution of

student responses is virtually identical across the Cheating and Non-cheating Groups,

[3] The staff and student questions about levels of concern reflected the same difference noted in the previous footnote.

and it diverges significantly from the staff distribution. A majority of students (60.2% of the Cheating Group [n=458/761]and 60.3% of the Non-Cheating Group [n=7,535/12,496]) are only 'slightly' or 'not at all' concerned that higher education students are engaging in contract cheating.

Organisational factors

Staff reported their levels of agreement about whether particular organisational factors help to minimise third party cheating at their institution, using a 5 point Likert scale. Figure 9 shows that the majority of staff 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that faculty academic integrity practices (54.4%, n=457/840) and university-wide academic integrity policies and processes (51.3%, n=431/840) help to minimise contract cheating. Assessment moderation processes also attracted mainly positive responses (44.5%, n=372/835). Staff appeared less positive about the role of assessment policy (37.3%, n=309/830) and professional development and support (32.4%, n=272/840), which attracted a mix of positive, neutral and negative responses.
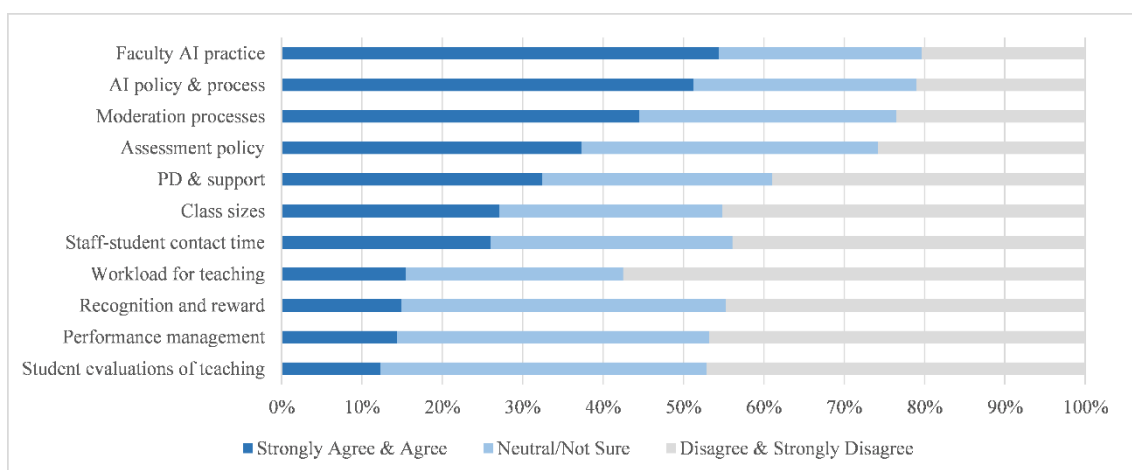

Figure 9: Staff agreement regarding the role of organisational factors in minimising contract cheating

Less than one-third of staff reported that class sizes (27.1%, n=226/835) and student-staff contact time (26.0%, n=217/835) helped with this issue. Only 15.5% (n=129/830) agreed that workload for teaching assisted in minimising contract cheating, while the majority (57.5%, n=477/830) 'disagreed' and 'strongly disagreed'. For the three remaining organisational factors, fewer than one in six respondents agreed that the factors assisted in minimising third party cheating: teaching evaluations (12.3%, n=101/822), recognition and reward (14.9%, n=122/822), and performance management (14.4%, n=118/822). These remaining three factors also recorded the highest levels of staff 'neutral' responses, perhaps indicating ambivalence or uncertainty about the potential role of these factors in minimising cheating.

Teaching and learning practices

Staff were then asked about their use of a range of teaching and learning practices. They were provided with a series of personalised statements, and then asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 5 point Likert scale. The items are detailed below:

(1)   I provide opportunities for students to approach me for assistance when needed.

(2)   I make a conscious effort to ensure that students understand what is required in assignments.

(3)   I explain my institution's academic integrity policy to students, and the consequences for breaching it.

(4)   I spend class time teaching students how to reference (including how to quote, paraphrase and summarise with acknowledgement).

(5)   I spend class time talking about 'contract cheating' and its consequences.

(6)   I spend class time teaching students how to engage in scholarship in my discipline (i.e., research, read, critically analyse and discuss discipline material).

(7)   I consistently monitor and penalise academic integrity breaches in line with my institution's policy.

(8)   I make a conscious effort to be consistent with colleagues in grading assignments.

(9)   I provide sufficient feedback to ensure students learn from the work they do.

(10)   There are lots of opportunities to cheat in the subjects I teach.

In the student survey, students were provided with a parallel set of items (e.g. 'I have opportunities to approach my lecturers and tutors for assistance when needed') and the same Likert scale. Figure 10 shows the responses of staff (columns) as compared with students (lines), who are again broken down into the Cheating and Non-cheating Groups.

There were three practices which had very high levels of agreement among staff: ensuring that students understand assessment requirements (98.3%, n=804/818), providing students with opportunities to approach them when needed (98.2%, n=803/818), and providing sufficient feedback to ensure students learn from the work they do (95.5%, n=768/804). Those same three items yielded the largest differences between the responses of Cheating and Non-cheating students, with Cheating students reporting less positive experiences.

As shown in Figure 10, all three groups reported comparably high levels of agreement (around 80%) that lecturers' and tutors' explain their institution's academic integrity policy. The groups reported comparably low levels of agreement (below 45%), that there are lots of opportunities to cheat in courses, and that lecturers and tutors

explain contract cheating. Figure 10 also shows large staff and student divergence on four practices. Staff agree at much higher levels than students (both Cheating and Non-cheating students) that assignment grading is consistent, that staff teach scholarship in their discipline, that staff consistently monitor and penalise academic integrity breaches, and that staff teach referencing.
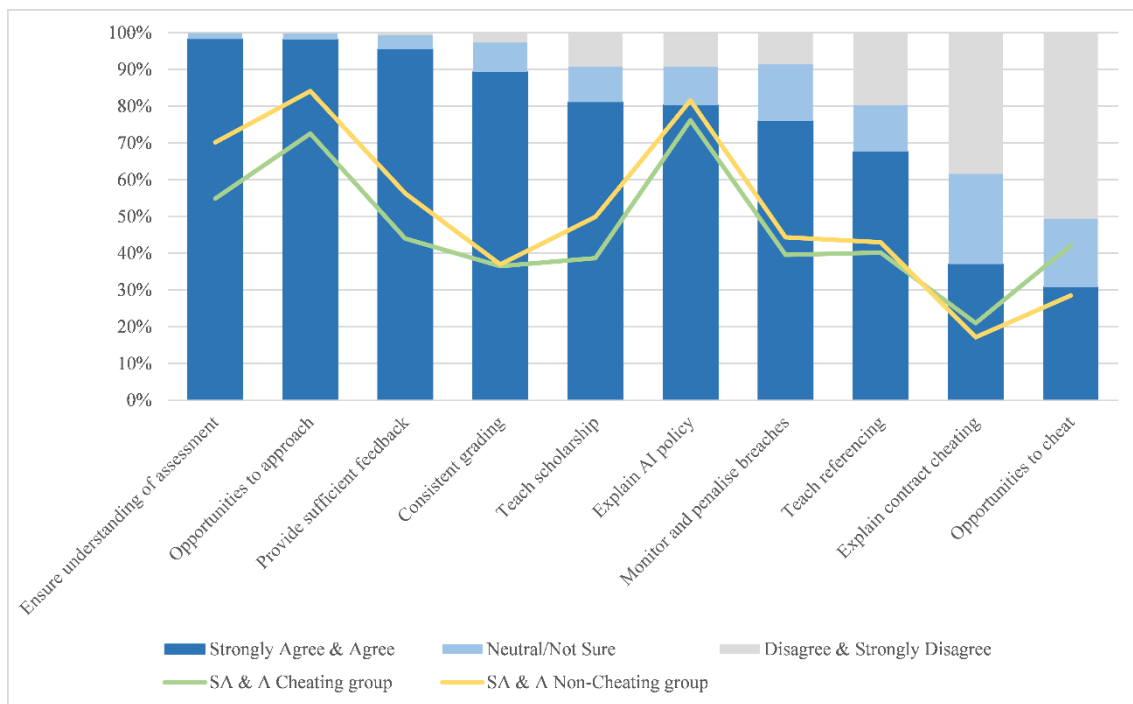

Figure 10: Use of teaching and learning practices, as reported by Staff, Cheating and Non-Cheating groups

Engagement in contract cheating

Staff were then asked whether – in their role as staff – they had ever provided materials to a student that had allowed them to gain an unfair advantage. A very small percentage (0.5%, n=4) said yes, with one respondent reporting they had been paid money to do so. Of those who had, 50% (n=2) had been detected, with the most serious penalty being non-renewal of contract.

Staff were also asked whether they had ever engaged in behaviour that would be classified as third-party cheating when they were themselves students. A total of 10% (n=78/782) reported that they had, with most (97.4%, n=76/78) reporting they had engaged in this behaviour 1-5 times.

Discussion

Despite concerns that contract cheating is difficult to detect, our findings show that almost 70% of teaching staff have suspected outsourced assignments at least once. The most common signals that prompted their suspicions were their knowledge of students' academic and linguistic abilities. Although concerns have been expressed that text-matching software has limited value for identifying outsourced assignments (Lancaster and Clarke 2016), staff reported that it was still a useful tool for prompting suspicions. This is possibly because the similarity report indicates matches to essay mills or other students' work which includes material from those sites. In addition, unscrupulous commercial cheat sites have been known to respond to buyer fraud (e.g. when a student uses a stolen credit card to purchase a 'bespoke essay') by posting the sold essay online so that it will become part of the Turnitin database (Rigby et al. 2015, 24).

Nearly half the staff who have suspected seeing outsourced assessment reported that they typically manage these cases themselves, rather than refer them on to an academic integrity decision-maker. A small but concerning percentage choose to ignore these cases entirely. While staff reported a range of reasons for managing contract cheating themselves, the most common response was that 'it is impossible to prove'. This perception can be challenged by the finding that when contract cheating cases are referred to an appropriate decision-maker, one-third of staff reported these cases were substantiated 90-100% of the time. However, a further third of staff reported that they were not informed of the outcomes of referred cases. This data suggests that some

educators hold misconceptions about contract cheating, and that university processes are failing to consistently engage and inform staff to ensure that all suspected cases are referred and dealt with appropriately.

Although research in the United Kingdom suggests that the minimum penalty for serious academic integrity breaches such as contract cheating should be suspension (Wallace and Newton 2014; see also Tennant, Rowell et al.), we found in the Australian context that suspension was only rarely applied. The most common penalty for outsourced assignments involved warning/counselling, closely followed by zero for the assignment, with suspension applied only 4.3% of the time. It could be argued that zero for the assignment is not a penalty at all, given that the student did not complete the task, and did not engage in the learning in any demonstrable way. A student who does not submit the assignment will receive a zero for the task, but has not breached academic integrity in any way. It seems unfair that this honest student should receive the same outcome as a student who attempts to defraud the institution. A zero for the task therefore accurately reflects the lack of effort on the part of the student, but does not address the deceptive and intentional nature of the breach. Worse, for students who anticipate that they will fail an assignment if they complete the work themselves, contract cheating may be viewed as an expedient approach to completing assessments; the risk of a zero for the assignment might be one worth taking. In light of research which demonstrated that students are less likely to purchase an assignment as the probability of detection and the penalties increase (Rigby et al. 2015, 24), it is critical that penalties for contract cheating are of an appropriate severity if they are to serve as disincentives for students to engage in this behaviour.

An additional problem appears to be that even when contract cheating was substantiated and penalties applied, staff reported that records of these breaches were

not typically recorded in an official database. If staff perceptions are accurate, this is a particular concern in light of the Australian Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015. Section 7.3.3(c) requires all universities to maintain secure and confidential information systems and records to 'document and record responses to… breaches of academic or research integrity…'. Given that students who engage in contract cheating tend to do so repeatedly (Bretag and Harper et al. under review; Curtis and Clare 2017), consistent record keeping is particularly important if contract cheating is to be promptly identified and addressed.

The data demonstrates that teaching staff consider contract cheating to be a serious matter. They hold strong views regarding the 'wrongness' of outsourcing behaviours, which are comparable to those of Non-Cheating students. The only notable exception was for buying, selling and trading notes, which 69.8% of staff agreed was wrong (compared with 54.1% of Non-Cheating students). In the student survey analysis (Bretag and Harper et al. under review), this behaviour was classified as sharing but not cheating, recognising that while it outsources components of the learning process, it does not involve the outsourcing of submitted work. However, given that course, assignment and exam notes are increasingly accessible via online file-sharing and peer-to-peer networking sites that also facilitate the sharing of completed assessment – such as ThinkSwap (www.thinkswap.com), Course Hero (www.coursehero.com) and Baidu Library (www.wenbku.baidu.com) – it is perhaps unsurprising that in the context of a survey on contract cheating staff might be ambivalent about this behaviour. One view is that swapping notes and completed assignments is 'merely translating into the online environment what students have always done' (Siebert 2015). There is growing concern, however, that the organised, online trade of academic work encourages students to adopt transactional approaches to learning and view assignment tasks as

commodities to be acquired, rather than artefacts that demonstrate the attainment of learning outcomes. These concerns have prompted at least one university to caution against the sharing of work in their academic integrity policy[4].

In addition to their views on note sharing, over three quarters of staff were moderately to extremely concerned that students are engaging in contract cheating in higher education. Their heightened concern was not accompanied by inflated perceptions of the prevalence of contract cheating; staff most commonly estimated that 1-10% students engage in outsourcing behaviours, which closely approximates the data from this and other research (Bretag and Harper et al. under review; Curtis and Clare 2017; Kralikova 2017; McCabe 2005). It therefore appears that staff have a reasonably accurate view of the extent of contract cheating, and their levels of concern are congruent with their attitudes that these behaviours are egregious.

The views of staff are in stark contrast to the views of students. A majority of students – at least 70% of both cheating and non-cheating students – agreed that the cheating behaviours investigated were 'wrong'. Unlike staff, however, most are only slightly or not at all concerned about the issue. In addition, while both groups of students over-estimated the prevalence of contract cheating, the Cheating Group vastly over-estimated the prevalence of cheating behaviours, with nearly 9% estimating that virtually everyone was engaged in it. Such an inflated view of cheating prevalence ('everyone is doing it') may have served to normalise cheating behaviours, which in turn may have influenced students' (low) levels of concern (see also McCabe and Trevino 1993, 1997; Rettinger and Kramer 2009). It is somewhat perplexing that while the Non-Cheating students perceive cheating to be both wrong and common, they do

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[4] See Griffith University's *Institutional Framework for Promoting Academic Integrity among Students*, Section 2.5 Solicitation: http://policies.griffith.edu.au/pdf/Framework%20for%20Promoting%20Academic%20Integrity.pdf

not appear to be worried about it. We maintain that Non-Cheating students have the potential to be a significant resource to combat contract cheating. Universities need to educate this group of students about the negative impact of contract cheating on the value of their own qualifications, and on the risk it represents to the public. Students need to be encouraged to care in the same way that staff care, and then the sector could have a powerful resource to influence (through peer culture) a change in behaviour across all students cohorts.

In addition to exploring attitudes towards and experiences of contract cheating, our research sought to investigate the influence of organisational factors on the capacity of staff to address and minimise contract cheating. While the most positive responses were about departmental and institutional academic integrity policies and practices, just over half of staff agreed that these factors contributed to minimising contract cheating. The remaining factors had agreement from less than half of respondents. The most negative responses related to two distinct aspects of the teaching environment. The first were practical conditions of teaching, specifically workload for teaching, staff-student contact time, and class sizes, which may constrain teachers in their ability to minimise cheating. The second was the performance review and reward environment, including recognition and reward, performance management, and student evaluations of teaching, which may serve as a disincentive to actively address and report breaches such as contract cheating.

Although a review of the literature published from 1924 to 1998 on student evaluations found a strong empirical basis for their value, it also found that issues can result from 'how they are misinterpreted and misused', particularly in the absence of comparative information and where the purpose is punitive (Aleamoni 1999, 5). Certainly, numerous researchers have been apprehensive about the way that SET is used

as an auditing and performance management instrument (see for example, Shevlin et al. 2000; Slade and McConville 2006). Many studies have also examined students' motivations in completing the SET and concluded that a complex array of factors influence the way that students evaluate teachers, some of which have little or nothing to do with teachers' ability or expertise. One factor identified by Pounder (2007) was labelled 'Students punishing their teachers via SET scores'. This occurs when students use the SET to punish 'conscientious educators' who may have asked challenging questions, maintained high grading standards, or set excessive homework (see also Crumbley et al. 2001). It follows that teaching staff, particularly those on short-term or casual contracts, who are reliant on positive SET scores as the major performance criteria for future work may be apprehensive that disgruntled students who have been referred to an academic integrity decision-maker will use the SET as a vehicle for retaliation. The data from our study supports anecdotal evidence that teaching staff may prefer to manage academic integrity breaches quietly, and via the marking process, due to the perception that their SET results may be misused by their students and institution.

Staff were also asked to report on the extent to which they implement a range of teaching and learning practices linked to the minimisation of contract cheating. In the parallel student survey, students were asked to rate their lecturers and tutors on the same practices. There were two important items on which staff and students' views converged. Staff, Cheating and Non-Cheating students shared a high level of agreement that academic integrity policy is being explained. At the same time, all three groups shared a low level of agreement that contract cheating is being explained. It is evident that much progress has been made in recent years in relation to academic integrity education more broadly, but that the specific and more serious breach of contract cheating is not discussed as openly and consistently. This may be because staff assume

that contract cheating is so evidently 'wrong' that it is unnecessary to provide any explanation or education about the issue. However, students' lack of concern about contract cheating suggests that conversations between teaching staff and students are needed if the implications of contract cheating are to be understood and the issue meaningfully addressed.

Of particular interest are the three teaching and learning items on which staff rated themselves most confidently. Over 95% of staff agreed that they ensure students understand assessment requirements, provide students with opportunities to approach them when needed, and provide sufficient feedback to ensure students learn from the work they do. On these three items, however, students who engaged in cheating reported a markedly more negative experience (at least 11 percentage points lower) than their non-cheating peers (Bretag and Harper et al. under review). Clearly there is a disjuncture between the way that teachers perceive aspects of their own practice, and the way that cheating students experience it. In light of staff concerns about organisational factors such as workload for teaching, staff-student contact time, and class sizes, all of which can inhibit the capacity of staff to implement these aspects of teaching and learning, it may be that staff perceive they are doing the best they can within their institution's constraints.

It is important to emphasise the significance of the teaching and learning environment in this research. In the parallel student survey the 10 teaching and learning items contained two factors which, together with students' language background, played a fundamental role in influencing cheating behaviour. Greater dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment (a 9-item factor) and a perception that there were lots of opportunities to cheat (a 1-item factor) were coupled with a greater propensity to cheat (Bretag and Harper et al. under review). The items related to aspects of

curriculum design, academic integrity education, education and training in scholarly practices, maintenance of clear and consistent standards, and attending to students' individual understanding and development through assessment and feedback. This finding supports other research that points to the critical role played by teaching staff and their practices in addressing cheating.

There are limitations to this study which should be noted. The survey was based on a convenience sampling method, in which institutions and their teaching staff volunteered to participate. This method carries the potential for self-selection bias. Moreover, although the number of responses collected is quite large when compared with most other surveys of staff on the topic of academic integrity, it represents a relatively low response rate (7.32%) from all staff at the eight universities. In addition, on items where the wording of staff and student questions was not identical (Figures 7 and 8), results should be interpreted with caution. We suggest the findings are indicative of possible divergences in staff and student perceptions that warrant further investigation.

Conclusion

Based on responses from 1,147 teaching staff at eight Australian universities, this research has demonstrated that teaching staff can and do identify contract cheating, usually based on their knowledge of the students they teach. Reporting of contract cheating to an appropriate decision-maker is not ubiquitous, however, as many staff have the misconception that it is impossible to prove, or perceive a lack of institutional support. This may in part be because reporting processes and outcomes are not uniformly communicated back to staff or recorded. When contract cheating is substantiated and addressed, penalties are surprisingly lenient, which may add to staff members' reluctance to refer cases.

Despite concerns in the media and elsewhere that contract cheating is impossible to detect, it is evident that detection is not the primary problem. There appears to be inadequate follow-through with detected breaches, with breakdowns at numerous points in the process. As a result, many staff decide not to refer cases. This may lead to incomplete recording of contract cheating, inconsistent responses, and perhaps most importantly, a lack of institutional knowledge and action on arguably the most extreme form of academic integrity breach. Confidence in institutional processes is likely to be further undermined by the lenient penalties applied to substantiated cases of contract cheating. Our data has demonstrated that Australian universities apply a wide range of penalties to substantiated cases of contract cheating, most of which are less severe than those recommended in the literature. It may be that universities need a sector-wide discussion about the benefits of a consistently applied minimum penalty.

Evidence suggests that improving the teaching and learning environment would make contract cheating less likely. Specifically, staff should: develop curriculum designs and teaching approaches that minimise opportunities to cheat; provide education and training in scholarly practices, including referencing; maintain clear and consistent standards, and attend to students' individual understandings and development through assessment and feedback. In addition, they could begin to address the clear disjuncture between staff and student concerns about contract cheating by staging more open discussion with their students about the issue.

It should be recognised, however, that improving the teaching and learning environment is not solely the responsibility of the individual teacher. There are organisational barriers and disincentives that may affect both the capacity and willingness of staff to engage in this process. Universities therefore need to look carefully at how their institutional conditions both foster and inhibit practices that

address contract cheating. The practical conditions of teaching appear to be a barrier to minimising cheating, specifically workload for teaching, staff-student contact time, and class sizes. The performance review and reward culture may also have an effect, serving as a disincentive to engage in curriculum redesign or pursue suspected breaches. Addressing the problem of contract cheating therefore requires genuine institutional commitment to making the organisational changes needed to support meaningful improvements to teaching and learning practice.

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