Designing assessment to minimise the possibility of contract cheating
Dr Deborah Rafalin

Contract Cheating is the outsourcing of an assessment by a student to a third party, whether a commercial provider or not and irrespective of whether money has changed hands (Walker & Townley, 2012). After commissioning the work, it is submitted as the student's own work.

Prewritten assessments are available instantly online and bespoke custom-written assignments can be purchased with a few hours' notice. The extent of their use is difficult to ascertain, but the limited evidence available indicates that it is widespread within UK Universities. Indeed, Rigby et al (2015) found that 50% of surveyed UK students were willing to purchase an assignment. Many contract cheating providers (i.e academic custom writing services, essay banks or essay mills, private tutors or freelance workers) claim that contract cheating cannot be detected: it is fair to say that detection of their use is, at best, difficult and time-consuming.

Therefore, preventative strategies in the form of original formative and summative assessment design, alongside the deterrent of a clearly articulated academic integrity policy, will together be most likely to foster a culture of academic integrity.

For example, when designing assessment, good practice suggests:

- Consider developing new individualised assessment strategies such as a multimedia presentation, a project, a poster, an information leaflet, a portfolio, a case study analysis, a student-led seminar, a learning journal, rather than just an essay. Likewise, an assessment can be personalised by making it specific to the student's experience (eg linking written work to a guest speaker's presentation). Essays and reports are particularly straight forward and cost-effective to 'purchase' from contract cheating providers and although Newton and Lang (2015) have emphasised that other forms of assessment are not immune to this type of dishonesty, they still suggest that tasks that ask for student opinion, personal experience and reflection are more likely to be authentic.

- Be mindful that assessment for learning principles should guide assessment strategy. Potentially combine different methods of assessment, for example, a submitted task with a related in-class component within a module. This requires a student to evidence and apply their learning in a range of ways, and increases assessment authenticity. Newton and Lang (2015) note that using diverse assessment methods, including some which involve the student having to physically present their work in some way, will make it difficult for students

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to contract out all their work and thus increase potential learning engagement.

- As mentioned above, consider using in-person assessment to ensure authenticity. This may include oral presentations (by an individual or a student group; in class or pre-recorded); interviews (in class or pre-recorded), examinations, vivas or observed seminar debates.

- Require the student to provide evidence of their work in progress (where practicable). For example, request the submission of drafts, reference material used or planning documentation either at staged submission points or along with the final submission. Alternatively hold meetings with students to discuss progress or ask students to complete a journal of time/activities involved in completing the assignment. A percentage of the final mark could be allocated for the evidenced process as well as the final submission.

- Consider "just in time" announcement of written assessments in order to limit the time available to purchase the work of others (although turn-around times can be very fast by contract cheating providers.)

- Provide students with the opportunity to choose from a range of individualised, reflective, critical assessment options as this is more likely to encourage genuine personal investment and authenticity and reduce the likelihood of contract cheating. Anecdotal evidence suggests students tend to invest more time and energy into completing assessments that interest them.

- Have oversight across module submission dates and ensure students have time and space to produce authentic, good quality work. This is important in reducing the likelihood of contract cheating as anecdotal evidence suggests that students are more likely to commit academic misconduct and cheat in assessment submissions if they are struggling to manage a number of assessment submissions at the same time.

Whilst assessment design alone cannot eradicate misconduct such as contract cheating, it is a key part of the multi-dimensional approach needed to embed Academic Integrity within a programme of study. Such innovative assessment strategies can lead to less reason or opportunity for students to cheat and encourage them to develop authentic work. Importantly, such approaches to assessment should enable students to develop the range of transferable skills that will serve them well in their personal, career and learning development beyond university.

References

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Helpful and interesting additional resources:

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Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2015) Report on Student Academic Integrity and Allegations of Contract Cheating by University Students. Available from: www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publicationdocuments/ReportOnAllegationsOfStudentMisconduct.pdf

The Higher Education Academy JISC Academic Integrity Service (2010) Supporting Academic Integrity: Approaches and Resources for Higher Education. Available from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/supportingacademicintegrity

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