

The commercialisation of universities, driven by constant uncertainty about higher education funding, has created ‘a perfect storm’ for the proliferation of contract cheating. The findings from this project, based on the largest dataset on contract cheating to date, provide clear evidence that contract cheating is a systemic problem, the causes of which are multiple and complex

Both the quantitative and qualitative data from staff and students connects the issue of contract cheating to the wider context of higher education: to the attitudes and approaches of educators, to the policies and practices of universities, and to the positioning of higher education by government.

Responsibility for addressing contract cheating does not rest solely with students or educators, and simplistic, singular solutions (e.g. assessment design) are on their own ineffective. A systems approach is needed that recognises student and staff decisions are both enabled and constrained by institutional and sector conditions.



## Sector and institution



Intensive competition, a dependence on international student revenue, teaching staff casualisation, and a focus on retention and graduate employability contribute to a compromised teaching and learning environment in which educators are struggling to uphold academic integrity.

A diverse and growing student body, increasingly repositioned as fee-paying ‘customers’ and facing precarious job markets after graduation, are reportedly adopting more ‘transactional’ approaches to learning, while some are outsourcing their work altogether.

*The upsurge in third-party cheating is due to **students' perception of university degrees as a commercial transaction** due to university management's focus on the business of education, such that **marketing of university 'products' becomes more important than the education process itself** (Staff 167).*

## Educator

The prevailing logic in the sector has been that characteristics of assessment can be used to ‘mitigate the risk of academic dishonesty and assure academic integrity’ (OLT, Strategic Priority Commissioned Grant instructions 2016). In particular, ‘authentic assessment’ (ie. assessment engaging students in real-world scenarios or problems) has been recommended as a way of minimising cheating. It is disingenuous, however, to suggest that contract cheating can be solved by relying solely on educators to redesign their assessment processes.



*While it is theoretically possible to design assessment that minimises the opportunity for cheating, **there is not enough time allocated to assessment, and not enough time allocated to student-teacher contact in order to implement this effectively** (Staff 12).*

*The use of a range of assessments is helpful, however **we are under increasing pressure to reduce the number of assessments to manage the marking resources available** (Staff 298).*

*We are given **inadequate time to mark assignments** (10 mins for 1000 words) ... The allocated paid time for marking is unreasonable and every other tutor I've spoken to agree they **end up overtime and marking for free** (Staff 44).*

Findings indicate that the practical conditions of teaching, 'specifically workload for teaching, staff-student contact time, and class sizes' may limit educators' abilities to address contract cheating (Harper & Bretag et al., 2018). A multivariate analysis showed that staff who reported *positively* on teaching conditions at their institution were more likely to use assessment types that students reported were less likely to be outsourced, particularly vivas and in-class assessment (Bretag & Harper et al., in progress). Contract cheating was also most commonly detected when staff had knowledge of their students' academic and linguistic abilities (Harper & Bretag et al., 2018). Moreover,

## Student

This study found that three factors influence contract cheating behaviour: speaking a language other than English (LOTE) at home, the perception that there are 'lots of opportunities to cheat', and dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment (Bretag & Harper et al 2018).

*Native speakers hardly ever want to help international students by checking grammar or structure. **All the assignments that I have submitted I have done on my own, no has as helped me, that's why they are filled with tears, anger, desperation, frustration and my decreasing self esteem. I hate the assignments** (Student 2, Non-cheating group).*

*The **less personal higher education becomes**, the higher the rates of cheating. From my experience, the courses with the best lecturers who engage their students and have mostly face-to-face communications will have the least rates of cheating (Student 145, Non-cheating group).*

## What can be done?

Government and institutions must provide adequate resourcing, policies, systems, and professional development to:

1. Design and implement relevant and meaningful curriculum and assessment processes.
2. Enable teaching, grading and feedback cycles that build relationships with students.
3. Establish communication skill standards for each year in a program, and teach and assess those standards.
4. Build students' comprehension (reading/listening) and also production (speaking/writing) in academic English.
5. Systematically monitor, detect and manage breaches of academic integrity.

## References

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- Office for Learning and Teaching Strategic Priority Commissioned Projects (2016). Information and Application Instructions, <http://www.olt.gov.au/grants-and-projects/programs-and-applications/commissioned-projects>

Further resources available at [www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au](http://www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au)

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