



The Rise of Contract Cheating in Graduate Education

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INTRODUCTION

Contract cheating and other forms of academic misconduct appear to be on the rise (Newton, 2018; Rigby et al., 2015). Over the last 15 years, research in the area has expanded from an initial definition of contracted cheating based on findings from a computer science study (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006) to an area of study including contract cheating in the context of most academic disciplines and assignments. A more recent definition of the phenomenon is provided by Draper and Newton (2017) as “a basic relationship between three actors: a student, their university, and a third party who completes assessments for the former to be submitted to the latter, but whose input is not permitted” (p. 1). Contract cheating represents a billion-dollar industry (BBC, 2019) and continues to expand. In a study of 130 contract cheating sites, Ellis et al. (2018) identified the practice’s primary business models. The study finds three models:

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freelance writers, the academic custom writing business owner, and master site owners. The models build on one another, increasing infrastructure and distributing revenue as companies combine the models.

Although most research describes undergraduates who engage in contract cheating, graduate students are also targeted by contract cheating marketing efforts, often thesis and dissertation writing. Russian media reports suggest essay mills were used in up to 10,000, or the equivalent of two-thirds of all dissertations conferred in 2006. In a study identifying the prevalence of contract cheating, Harper et al. (2021) found that text-based assignments were the top eight most frequently detected forms. The authors surmised that many elements of graduate study, such as research development, annotated bibliographies/literature reviews, research proposals, theses, and dissertations, are text-based.

Graduate students are a rising, sought-after subsection of higher education and the contract cheating customer base. Unfortunately, factors including an increase in a customer-driven higher education system (Guilbault, 2018) represent a diminishing return on investment. Furthermore, marketing that appeals to students disappointed in the graduate school experience makes graduate education susceptible to predatory markets (Newton, 2018). This chapter provides an overview of contract cheating related to graduate students, the rise of dissertation and thesis services in the contract cheating industry, and the risks these pose to graduate students. Implications and discussion conclude the chapter.

Graduate Students and Contract Cheating

Graduate students are a rising population (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022). Given a need for a highly skilled workforce, these credentials are desirable during economic downturns. Graduate education may also serve as a financial safety net for institutions with declining undergraduate enrolment, the value of graduate students who provide institutional labour, and the increase of working professionals seeking promotions or career changes (Paris, 2021). As a result, graduate programmes will continue to grow (Paris, 2021). In some cases, institutions struggle to support student populations with increasingly diverse needs. El Alfy and Abukari (2020) identify student support as service quality dimensions. Supports include academic services (course-related and instructor-related), administrative services, academic facilities (library and education technology), and student service resources. El Alfy and Abukari (2020) describe

the challenge of increased admissions and perceptions of service quality in a qualitative study of students, administrators, faculty, and staff warning that increasing access through holistic admissions without refining services quality measures, such as tutoring or technological resources, presents challenges and erodes trust.

Graduate students may return to school with additional personal and professional responsibilities that challenge classroom engagement. Graduate student development literature indicates that students seek direct feedback, instruction, and relevant connections to their fields of interest or aspiration. Knowles et al. (2015) describe the adult learner as someone who needs to know what is expected, what will be assessed, and how the work relates to their needs and desires using the concept of andragogy. As outlined in practice, graduate students seek respect for their former experiences, personal lives, and time commitments. Nebulous concepts may prove incredibly challenging for graduate students with diverse educational experiences. Graduate students are more likely to succeed when approaches are personalised rather than standardised ones. However, research indicates that graduate students who feel disconnected from faculty or advisers may experience anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction (Ballantine & Jolly-Ballantine, 2015). Merç (2016) describes the heightened anxiety associated with writing expectations of research findings, thesis, and dissertation writing common in graduate studies. In addition, students may be more likely to experience dissatisfaction and decreased trust in the institution (Newton & Lang, 2016). This may represent a threat to the perceived value of graduate education. These factors make the graduate student population especially susceptible to contract cheating. Contract cheating companies are methodical in their approaches to reaching students. Rowland et al. (2018) identified persuasive word patterns in a website study of contract cheating providers. Terms related to dishonesty and integrity were omitted. At the same time, persuasive words and phrases related to customer service, quality, and security were prominent. The study described both evidence that reassurance and problem resolution strategies are used as efforts to entice students.

Doctoral contract cheating is on the rise, and seeking contract cheating services has also increased (Amigud & Lancaster, 2020; Rigby et al., 2015). Google trend data shows that as of October 2021, the search term *dissertation/thesis writing service and dissertations/thesis ghostwriting* is at peak popularity or 100%. The same term was at 33% in 2016 (www.trends.google.com, 2022).

Industry Marketing

In response to increased demand for cheating services, the contract cheating market response is personalised to service the needs of graduate student writers. Companies craft advertisements appealing to the real challenges inherent in the expectations of graduate-level academic writing. A literature review by Kelly and Stevenson (2021) found themes related to the challenges doctoral students face, including “balancing work and personal life,” “the complexity of doctoral academic writing,” “self-efficacy,” and “academic career progression” (pp. 368–369). The study presented in this chapter aimed to understand how contract cheating companies market services to graduate student writers in strategic response to unmet andragogical need, customer service orientation, and perceptions of blame that generate a neutralisation response concerning academic misconduct. Specifically, the study sought to explore the techniques and services offered to students writing dissertations and theses. Additionally, the study sought to understand the nature of the services offered, the unique efforts and characteristics used to appeal to the graduate student market, and the risks associated with contract cheating providers.

METHOD

Qualitative content analysis was used in this study; it is widely used in education research and is well suited to answer the research questions. In addition to describing the website contents, the method is valuable in understanding broad themes of a given unit of analysis. It may include visual, digital, and textual elements (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). As is standard in qualitative content analysis, it was necessary to be intentional in data collection by (1) engaging with the data points, (2) developing and using a coding scheme, (3) organising codes into themes, and (4) defining and presenting findings while answering the research questions guiding the study (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008).

Data Collection

This study represents a review of active websites using the search terms *dissertation coaching*, *dissertation tutoring*, *dissertation/thesis writing*, and *dissertation consulting* appearing in Google, a search engine; Facebook, a social messaging system; Discord, an instant messaging and digital

distribution application; and Reddit, an online discussion forum. Website data were captured in Excel, with pictures of the live sites captured in screenshots and saved to a cloud-based storage system between 11/2/21 and 11/12/21. Evidence of contract cheating was represented by language offering the service, the presence of a payment area to purchase a dissertation, or a link to order a completed dissertation requiring a consultation.

Company websites were searched by landing page, about us page, and any subpages including specific evidence related to (1) *tutoring or coaching services*, (2) *academic misconduct, integrity, or plagiarism*, (3) *writing services offered*, (4) *service offerings* that meet the definition of an evident or implied ability to engage in contract cheating, and (5) *additional content* related to graduate students. For clarity, editing, methodological consulting, and coaching services were not included in this analysis *in the absence of* direct evidence of contract cheating. In addition, coaching and consulting services that specifically state they do not write content for students were excluded. Finally, data collection was delimited to website advertising specifically to graduate students for dissertations or theses.

Data Analysis

Deductive codes were informed by the principles of andragogy, the practice of adult learning (Knowles et al., 2015). These include Self-Concept, or how a student understands what they need to do (and how they need to do it) independently; Adult Learner Experience, or how a student can use their life experiences to make sense of new information; Readiness to Learn, or a student's ability to fit learning into their full lives; Motivation to Learn, or a student's internal desires and motivations; and Goal Orientation to Learning, or a student's connection to problem-based learning. Ultimately, this theory guides four principles. First, adults see themselves as partners in learning and want to be involved; second, adult students rely heavily on personal experiences and those guide their approach to learning; third, adults prefer to learn concepts that are tied to their personal and professional interests; and fourth, within this contextualisation, subject mastery for adult students most often comes from their ability to solve relevant problems.

The principles, guided by the theory, were chosen not to assign age attributes to graduate learners but to acknowledge that graduate students embody unique experiences, motivations, and responsibilities that require

the incorporation of students' perspectives, experiences, and responsibilities. This study includes concepts such as *respect*, *life experience*, and *practicality*. Additional emergent codes, informed by the websites themselves, included *legality*, *quality*, and *help*. In all, 65 codes were identified. First, pattern coding was completed by collapsing aligning codes, then by aspects of the sites, such as visual and textual advertising characteristics, evidence of audience, and contractual agreements. Advertising characteristics were further explored, including positive and negative language. For example, language relating to career advancement was categorised as positive, whereas language related to unsupportive mentors was negative. Codes were also organised by responsibility. For example, services that "help" students who cannot grasp a specific concept versus services that describe themselves as filling the void of an inattentive or unsupportive faculty advisor. Second, cycle pattern coding continued until saturation.

FINDINGS

The websites or webpages included 102 websites, with 5 of these found through Reddit posts using the search terms listed in the *r/assignmenthelp* and *r/essayhelp* subreddits. Four were found through Discord ($n = 1$) and TikTok ($n = 3$). Finally, nine sites were found through Facebook groups using the same search terms. All of the sites contained text evidence of selling written dissertations and theses. The sites also refer to homework help, tutoring, and consulting.

On other sites, academic imagery, including subjects (individuals or animals) with glasses, textbooks, computers, and pieces of paper, represents scholarly activity. Images of success are depicted, replete with graduation caps, raised arms, and smiles. The imagery on the websites often depicts stressed students, frequently hunched over a computer, hands on their heads to depict a sense of frustration and helplessness. Contract cheating is heavily marketed as a solution.

Contract Cheating as a Solution to the Problems of Graduate Students

Students visiting these websites are invited through marketing to solve a problem. On every website, the dissertation/thesis is presented as a problem outside a student's control, at times even an insurmountable goal. Graduate student challenges are addressed, specifically related to work and

family demands, the urgent need for a quality paper, time limitations, and the document's importance. Solutions were presented to problems classified as being related to instruction, student challenges, time constraints, and the importance of the work.

Instruction was depicted as marginal, with the most frequent descriptors related to the time and care faculty have for students. Examples of this include the following statements that are critical of professors and instructors “students pick just the worst instructor who keeps demanding impossible things” (rush-my-essay.com). Another example describes the independent and sometimes isolating experience of graduate study: “These so-called external PhD students are not integrated into the academic community and generally receive much less intensive supervision by the supervisor than students who attain their doctorates within the faculty” (dissertation-writingservice.com, 2022).

Additional language included critiques of expectations and support, including feedback “many professors do not provide constructive criticism of mistakes and even less corrections for those mistakes” (academicresearchandwriting.com) and suggesting that the expectation of research papers is an outdated concept. “The old-fashioned education system that refuses to acknowledge that the times have changed and that essays are no longer the best way to gauge knowledge and understanding” (smartassignmenthelp.com).

In both instances exemplified here, the solution providers pose is to circumvent the faculty or institutional relationship by using contract cheating services, relying on “experts” who have experience navigating the process. The companies make attempts first to capitalise on the fear and anxiety of struggling students. The design of the websites also appeals to a student's sense of helplessness rooted in their abilities. Specifically, the sites speak to loneliness, overwhelming, and despair. One site, speaking to all of these, presents the dissertation or theses as insurmountable, adding “accompanied by the long process of planning, research, and writing—it's possible that they don't have enough time to accomplish all their tasks. This throws many students in despair” (studybay.com).

This is presented as a type of commiseration or understanding. Once again, the companies presenting a solution to these negative feelings follow a prescriptive approach to comfort the student and remove personal responsibility. One such statement attempts to comfort students in distress “there is no need to panic! Would you believe it is easy to get help from a

team of professional dissertation writers who specialise in your field?” (papersowl.com).

By providing comfort, the reader may feel that contract cheating provides a solution to the problem. Relatedly, assurances that the service will alleviate the concerns around instruction, relevance, and knowledge are reviled with language directly addressing the above-mentioned issues. Specifically, the services’ knowledge, experience, and understanding act as a solution to the concerns rooted in misunderstanding and inadequate supervision. The sites suggest that these services may also provide the boost needed to succeed and perhaps enhance the writing process.

- Our writers know what your professors are looking for—they will produce you a legit, custom dissertation that is unique to your requirements (academized.com).
- We thus close the gap resulting from the lack of or insufficient supervision by the university and can help overcome certain types of writer’s block or to clarify specific questions (dissertation-writingservice.com).
- We only work with highly qualified writers who are working or have been employed in the academic field and therefore know exactly what is important when writing a dissertation (dissertation-writingservice.com).

Reassurances of the providers’ skill and efficiency are evident and appear multiple times on the websites. While the websites frame the problems plaguing graduate students as instruction and support, contract cheating services are presented as help, assistance, and support to struggling students. Additional challenges impacting the student experience directly align with the needs of graduate students. The sample showed concerns commonly referenced for adult students, specifically time, additional priorities, family obligations, and employment. As in the previous examples, the websites attempt to summarise the student experience. The sites appeal to the stress and helplessness students feel due to time constraints. Examples of this are clearly found on the home pages:

- Many graduate students have other full or part-time commitments (dissertation-writingservice.com).

- Those who are exhausted after a long day at work often do not have the motivation and energy they need to work out profound scientific theories in the evening or at the weekend (thesiswriting-service.net).
- The deadline is nearing, and it seems more urgent to hand it in on time than to start over (academized.com).

The websites most often refer to time, providing quick service and sharing options to speed up the process. Repeated indicators of this are found on the web pages and social media sites. A form requesting time requirements is listed on the overwhelming majority of the sites. In addition, chatbots ask about deadlines before providing quotes. Finally, in the narrative sections of the website, information reminds the reader of the problem. Examples of that include the following language:

- answer few questions about your assignment and deadlines to ensure that you'll get the perfect assignment right on time (kiwipapers.com).
- comprehensive service in a discrete, fast, and personalised manner (optimumresearchconsulting.com).

Service continued to be a demonstrated priority for the companies. Despite offering services that violate academic integrity, a significant amount of energy is spent ensuring potential customers of service, satisfaction, and potential rewards.

Contract Cheating as Performative Customer Service

Customer service is an integrated feature on nearly all ($N = 97$) websites. Chatbots welcome visitors to the screen within seconds of opening the homepage. Contact information in the form of a pop-up is a regular feature on the sites. Discounts with countdowns are prominently displayed, and “as low as” language is displayed to indicate low rates. While one site offers introductory rates as low as US\$7 per page, the average advertised rate was approximately \$13. Several sites note the importance of higher-quality work submitted for a graduate degree. Despite this, quotes for 150-page dissertations using a timeline of over 30 days resulted in quotes from US\$3052 to US\$6000. Additional discounts were offered in exchange for activities demonstrating interest, such as accepting cookies, adding an email address, or for repeat customers as an affiliate or loyalty bonus. Multiple revisions were a common feature across the sample.

Additional features included an almost universal 24/7 customer service claim, and most included assurances of confidentiality and a refund policy, as noted by when describing their services, “This personalised approach to dissertation assistance guarantees that you’ll have one individual working with you throughout the process so that you can feel confident that our assistance will be tailored to your specific needs and preferences at every stage” (dissertation-editor.com).

The majority of the sites disparage the potential quality of alternative contract cheating providers, describing poor work, including grammatical and plagiarism errors. The websites warn of wasted money, poor service, and general dissatisfaction. The providers attempt to assuage concern about these problems with premium or add-on services. Plagiarism checking, writers described as experts with a related degree, and fast turnarounds were offered as premium options at varying price points.

Contract Cheating and the Perception of Expertise

While many websites were clear about their services, notable sites were included that initially appeared to be dissertation support and editing sites. These sites focused exclusively on the challenges, some even offering skill-building and support. For example, the mission statement of one company includes language on the advancement and promotion of academic and professional excellence, continuous learning, and development. Websites ($N = 65$) included overviews of each section of the dissertation/thesis process, including tips for each section and defence. In each case, these overviews were written as blog posts designed to appear scholarly, with information spanning from dedicated pages to each section of the traditional dissertation or thesis format to one-sentence summaries. On six web pages, downloadable dissertation guides were available.

The websites made promises to potential clients of access and satisfaction, including providing quality “nothing but exceptional top-quality work” (thewritingplanet.com), authenticity, for example, a “guarantee that all work delivered is completely original and unique” (collegessay.org), and messaging ensuring that contracted writers will work tirelessly to alleviate pressure for busy students, stating “we work around the clock so that you don’t have to...we can complete all coursework in an effective and efficient manner such that you are—cleared to begin your dissertation project” (approvalreadyconsulting.com).

By framing customer service as quality, the contract cheating providers attempt to distance themselves from the behaviour itself, positioning the student as a customer deserving a quality product provided by an expert. The language used throughout the websites focused on assurances of expertise, an interesting finding given that none of the sites limited the academic focus of the services they provide. A few sites presented themselves as consultants and coaches, despite clearly indicating they would write entire dissertations and theses for a fee. The companies suggest they have writers uniquely capable of writing a dissertation that represents the culmination of a degree programme. The websites include language around freelance expertise. These include describing training and certification when describing the writers. Most companies include mentions of English proficiency, PhDs, professional writers, certification programmes, and highly rated writers.

The websites reviewed were mixed in terms of the customers' ability to choose a writer. As related to graduate students, emphasis was placed on the experience of writers who develop dissertations and theses. The websites included language speaking to the significance of the writing and the importance of hiring highly skilled professionals. Premium services also included writers who were degree holders from highly selective institutions. There were clear differences in the marketing of essay services for undergraduate students, with language focused on low cost and time, compared to graduate students focused on investment and quality. The price points, based on page number, bear out that point. Graduate students were advised to request services in advance to ensure the "expert" had time to prepare the manuscript adequately. Contract cheating providers also suggest that they are highly familiar with national and state laws around dissertation and thesis writing services. In two cases, Australian students were forbidden from using the website.

Many of the websites in the study assure students that purchasing a dissertation or thesis is a legal activity. To illustrate this, the companies include sections related to academic integrity, plagiarism, and legality. Examples of this language include statements falsely denying legal risks. In one example, [Essaybox.org](https://www.essaybox.org) describes the service as assistance, stating, "paying professional essay writers to write your essay is not illegal. It does not mean that you are cheating with the education system or doing academic cheating. It only means that you are trying to get help" ([essaybox.org](https://www.essaybox.org)). The site goes on to explain their position, arguing that "taking help from the dissertation writing service is not illegal and cheating because our company

offers 100 percent legal and legitimate work.” In another instance, [shark-papers.com](#) suggests that only papers with evidence of detected plagiarism are illegal, stating, “Working with a custom writing service or paying an essay writer becomes illegal when the writer is inexperienced and knows nothing about your course.” The site goes on to list tools used to plagiarise, including recycling older papers and using content spinners as illegal actions. Despite these assurances, the websites carefully use language to describe property rights and liability.

Contract Cheating and Legal Issues

In language related to sales, the suggestion is that student customers own the papers they are purchasing and that any material they submit to be reviewed is theirs as well. This language represents a significant disconnect with the language used in the terms and conditions. While the language that suggests a guarantee of success, approval, and graduation, the terms and conditions, terms of use, and legal pages associated with most sites ($N = 78$) referred to the resulting deliverable as a document for research purposes only. While these were not uniquely linked to graduate students, the language made clear that companies were not responsible for the quality of the content. Language in these policies expressly included plagiarism and grammatical errors. The companies also indemnify themselves against all consequences related to misrepresentation of the work as the student’s own. The language included in the vast majority of the terms and conditions suggested that the purchase of a dissertation or thesis was actually the purchase of a research or academic resource and should only be used as such. Some policies clearly state students should not alter the document in any way, including using the content in whole or part or placing their own names on the purchased document. Examples of these were found to clearly list these limitations:

- You cannot put your name on the completed Product. The Products delivered by our Company are for research and reference purposes only ([anywritinghelp.com](#)).
- We will not be held accountable if such unethical and illegal use of Our Products and Website content occurs ([thecollegehawk.com](#)).
- You can use our documents as a model to create your own piece of writing based on provided research results and using the documents as a motivation ([essaywave.com](#)).

Policies on the websites described academic integrity and academic honour as principles the companies uphold. An honour code on one website reads: “Essay Pro does not appreciate and will not engage in any type of academic dishonesty, nor facilitate cheating, the commitment of fraud, and the obtaining of unearned grades or degrees” ([EssayPro.com](#)).

The companies do not consider themselves responsible for the actions of freelance writers or third parties. In fact, the legal terms on almost all of the websites that include terms and conditions state the company has the right to keep and share personal information as necessary. The language contradicts the sales claims in price, use, and quality. The following language illustrates several points. First, the papers are not meant to be submitted to an educational institution, “the Paper is not to be used for obtaining any mark, grade or any achievement in any way connected with academics” ([valiantwriters.com](#)). Second, purchased papers are considered reference material “for investigation, quotation purposes, and/or to enable you to see how to correctly complete an assignment” ([tameraresearch.com](#)). Third, after using the referenced resource, the paper will be destroyed, “you agree to destroy any, and all delivered Products from the Company after Your research/reference purposes for the paper have been met” ([writepaper.com](#)). And fourth, prices are subject to change, even after the initial agreement, “We personally can decide that a different price is required for your Order than the one specified, we will notify you about it and offer a different fee” ([fusionessay.com](#)).

The companies, *not* the author or purchaser, retain clear rights to the purchased material. This position does not align with the common expectation that universities endorse a dissertation or thesis as an independently written and published work. In addition, the review of the terms and conditions demands the customer relinquish a right to privacy and ownership of any written material submitted to the website (or website affiliate links) for informational purposes. Further, ownership is a complicated maze involving the website entity, the larger company, and most often, a freelance writer. For example, language separates the website from the service, such as “this website is developed and advertised by affiliated partners working as independent contractors under the terms of an affiliate program” ([justdomyessay.com](#)).

The review of the *Terms and Conditions* indicates that a smaller number of private limited content management companies own nearly all of the sites, despite the countries they market to. The companies in this study are located in the United States, the United Kingdom, and outlying

territories, Cyprus, and Bulgaria. On Facebook, there is also a presence of companies with holdings in Malaysia, Pakistan, and the Philippines. However, most of the companies maintain ownership of the contracted work, as stated in the following intellectual property statement from writersscholar.com (2022):

all exclusive material intellectual property rights for all Samples and any other intellectual property objects created in the process of cooperation with the Company shall belong to the Company in full scope, including but not limited to: the right to use, possess and dispose of the sample, and all previously submitted Sample projects of Writers, in any tangible medium of expression, now known or later developed, from which it can be perceived, reproduced, or otherwise communicated, either directly or with the aid of a machine or device, including without limitation the rights to archive, republish, edit, repackage or revise any intellectual property object in any manner as the Company sees fit.

DISCUSSION

In a review of dissertation services, providers appeal to the emotions of stressed and frustrated students. The contract cheating business models identified by Ellis et al. (2018) are evident in the present study. Design features, terms, and conditions with shell company names, and promises of personalisation provide evidence. As related to andragogy, the companies appeal to the real worry and fear students are experiencing. Rather than describing abstract concepts, the companies identify problems and offer immediate solutions. Unfortunately, the balm they offer comes in the form of an excuse. Rather than acknowledging the consequence of not asking for help or waiting until the last minute, the discourse is framed to solely blame the institution or faculty member. Prior research on academic misconduct describes the phenomenon of misplaced responsibility as a justification for misconduct using neutralisation theory (Makarova, 2019; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

The contract cheating model prioritises immediate interaction and service through chatbots, email forms, and phone calls. Aligning with Rowland et al. (2018), companies present themselves as a solution to the problems students face, frequently referencing busy schedules, customer service, and convenience, important considerations often ignored in traditional academic settings. Likewise, andragogical approaches may also

appeal to graduate students. Students may find consolation in website language. Content that focuses on achieving milestones and intrinsic motivators, including grades, degrees, and defences, represents opportunities for career advancement or a faster time to degree.

Additionally, graduate students may value being viewed as a customer, with experts waiting to serve and support them, further rationalising contract cheating as an outsourced service needed for success. Professional writers, time savings, and an investment rationalised as aligning with the importance of the project are intentional strategies used throughout the websites. In addition, graduate students find appeal in choosing the topic, the expert, and the company that will assist them. Capitalising on this, contract cheating companies begin interactions by asking the student what they need instead of leading with what they provide, besides the obvious. Reviews, pictures of writers, credentials, specific disciplines, and dissertation titles all aid in personalisation. Some specifically target the rapidly growing online degree market, describing their services as personalised and one-on-one.

Implications

Contract cheating for graduate students represents a significant threat to academic integrity, particularly in writing dissertations and thesis projects. Companies are agile and intentional in their approaches. Students may choose to engage in misconduct without fully understanding the consequences of their actions (Ellis et al., 2018). Perhaps more important is the fundamental disadvantage of misrepresenting their expertise. If the practice continues to grow, it will represent a much larger share of the early career research and development in college. Beyond this, students will not demonstrate their expertise, a skill often necessary in leadership and research positions. As previous research warns, faculty and graduate student research advisors should be aware of these websites and explain the model and the pitfalls of contract cheating to students (Ellis et al., 2018).

For students with limited social capital or experience with graduate study, these sites represent an especially significant risk. As participation in postgraduate education increases, the impasse between traditional understandings of what a student has been exposed to or has not continued to grow. Faculty and administrators should not assume that all students understand contract cheating, especially with website language painting institutions as adversarial and product ownership nebulous. This review

indicates that contract cheating companies continue to expand and personalise their services in response to student demand. These providers represent themselves as content management organisations, often using multiple names and likenesses under one company. The companies rely on freelancers to avail themselves of responsibility yet host the identity, payment, and intellectual property data of both writer and student.

In most cases, the limited ownership of the documents may represent additional legal risks for any student choosing to misrepresent work as their own. The companies expressly warn of these risks, although students do not immediately see the terms and conditions associated with their actions. The details of the contract are not located easily. In addition, the rise in contract cheating providers' uses of alternative social media platforms further obscures the terms and conditions.

Becoming aware of the language on contract cheating sites allows instructors and graduate supervisors to be responsive by offering supportive alternatives. Interventions may include scaffolding the dissertation into smaller sections, expanding and differentiating academic supports based on student concerns and skill levels, writing supports, and demystifying the process to remove the fear and unknown. For example, inviting students to attend dissertation defences, providing exemplar materials, writing communities, and offering peer mentorship from recent alumni may offer students alternatives.

A larger conversation on dissertations and theses as a culminating assessment is also warranted. While the characteristics are field and institutional-specific, there is a case for critically reviewing the structure and intention of final assessments. The language used throughout the sites in this study demonstrates misunderstanding, frustration, fear, and helplessness with the process. Framing the utility of the culminating assessment assigns value and understanding. For example, some disciplines have instituted the three-article dissertation research development and synthesis utility. Students walk away with active manuscripts of publishable quality, and the required synthesis adds to the student's ability to refine a research agenda. While this is not a one-size-fits-all solution, it offers an alternative for demonstrating understanding. Teaching and learning in graduate education are often collaborative; however, the process of dissertation and thesis writing are independent endeavours. Most leaders and researchers rely on partnerships with others to address problems in research and practice. While individual competence is essential to demonstrate,

contract cheating is dependent on the fear and isolation normalised as part of the process.

Institutions responding to instances of contract cheating must contend with several issues. First is educating faculty, graduate research advisors, and students on the risks of contract cheating. Secondly, institutions should guide on how issues of contract cheating at the graduate level are handled, given the heightened expectations inherent in graduate work. This guidance should include instruction on managing the discovery of the content, addressing potential legal ramifications of the discovery, and addressing student responsibility. The response to each will determine the perceived severity of the action, a student's level of culpability, and an institutional endorsement or rejection of academic misconduct. Graduate theses and dissertations are especially fraught with risk, as a university endorsement represents confirmation of authentic and original research. Finally, institutions that discover contracted student work have a responsibility to address academic fraud and clearly state the consequences for these behaviours, including degree revocation.

Future research should consider how graduate students understand the purposeful marketing language and design used to promote contract cheating services. Research should include studies that measure student understanding of the risks, including, but not limited to, identity theft, bribery and extortion, academic misconduct charges, failing grades, and programme dismissal. Mapping the larger contract cheating companies to their smaller shell companies, ongoing work by others may provide a better understanding of the landscape in the global marketplace. Lastly, a more extensive review of the terms and conditions, honour codes, and academic integrity policies on contract cheating websites may provide additional considerations for students considering using the services. The risks of outsourcing core competencies, including content, literature reviews, research design, and analysis, are substantial. Contract cheating threatens the trust necessary to develop a research or policy agenda. The services erode the ability to adequately assess preparation and refine teaching and advising. On the other hand, the results represent meaningful opportunities to learn how contract cheating companies make sense of the struggles of disconnected, intrinsically motivated students. Students who are supported and engaged see independent research as an opportunity to engage in personally meaningful and creative pursuits. Instead, those using contract cheating services remove themselves from contributing and are also willing to risk their academic reputation and identity to gain a

credential. Educators should consider supporting students seeking meaningful gains in leadership and research opportunities by educating graduate students on the risks of contract cheating, reconsidering traditional assessment practices, and addressing the detrimental factors to their experience.

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