

QUANDARIES OF CONTRACT CHEATING IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: THE WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to examine the quandaries of contract cheating faced by higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. Based on a desktop study utilizing unobtrusive research methods such as documentary analysis and conceptual analysis of authoritative sources to conceptualise and provide context to contract cheating, the data drew secondary data from published journal articles. Findings demonstrated that the key quandaries of contract cheating are attributed to limited awareness of the concept, the undetectable nature of the action, the lack of law (*lacuna*) from the national point of view, gaps in existing institutional policies on misconduct, ambiguity in the conceptualisation, and expansion in the availability of this practice as evident in the increase use of custom essay websites, essay mills and file-sharing sites across the globe. To address these challenges, South African HEIs need to acknowledge that contract cheating is a problem which exists in institutions. Therefore, South African HEIs must revisit institutional policies on intellectual integrity and include a delineation of contract cheating, making a clear distinction between plagiarism and collusion. Additionally, South African HEIs must raise awareness of contract cheating amongst their students, invest in software that detects authenticity, such as Authorship Investigate, AI-Emma or Ouriginal, and design student-support-intervention marketing strategies to deter students from turning to contract cheating websites.

Keywords: Contract cheating, essay mills, higher education institutions, lacuna, academic misconduct.

INTRODUCTION

Although contract cheating was first coined in 2006, empirical studies investigating the extent

and significance of contract cheating within South African higher education institutions (HEIs) remains scarce and fragmented. Whilst most institutions have taught their students about intellectual integrity and its consequences, contract cheating has not been extensively publicised. This is mainly attributed to the extent to which the practice is unknown, ambiguity in the legal definition thereof and lack of knowledge on how to detect it. In South Africa, despite all institutions having policies pertaining to plagiarism and other academic misconduct, few refer to contract cheating or make available a tangible definition of contract cheating. Currently, none of the South African HEIs has software to address this problem. Moreover, despite the business of cheating becoming a highly developed industry with providers running business enterprises and making a profit from students' inability to meet academic demands, its existence is not always acknowledged.

Given the growth of this practice, as evidenced by the widespread growth of custom essay websites and the increased involvement of additional actors, such as family members, relatives and tutors in the process (Amigud and Dawson 2020, 101; Lancaster 2018, 74; Rowland et al. 2018, 654–657), research into contract cheating in HEIs is necessary. In addition, the act has become a major academic challenge in recent months since several institutions have adopted take-home assessment strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its existence can devalue qualifications, disadvantage conscientious students and create the possibility for unskilled, unqualified contract cheaters to secure employment; therefore, contract cheating can no longer be ignored (Clare, Walker, and Hobson 2017, 2). With the above in mind, it has become important to unpack the concept of contract cheating, the challenges educators face in dealing with it and explore what educators and institutions can do to overcome this problem in South Africa. This article is important for lecturers at all levels who deal with student misconduct as it creates awareness on contract cheating, a problem that has been unheeded in many institutions of higher learning. Also, given that contract cheating services are widely available and accessible, the findings from this article could contribute to the knowledge of the educators and institutional policy makers when it comes to clearly discerning contract cheating from plagiarism and collusion.

This article is divided into four sections: the conceptualisation of contract cheating, the contextualisation of contract cheating from a South African higher education perspective, the examination of the quandaries of contract cheating faced by South African HEIs and recommendations on how to address the quandaries of contract cheating.

METHODOLOGY

This article utilized a qualitative approach to explore the quandaries of contract cheating faced

by South African HEIs. Information was gathered through a comprehensive literature review, employing unobtrusive research methodologies like documentary analysis and conceptual analysis of authoritative sources to establish a conceptual framework and context for contract cheating. Secondary data was sourced from published journal articles following principles governing source selection, including authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning (Mogalakwe 2006, 224). Rigorous efforts were made by the researchers to confirm the authenticity and coherence of all included sources, ensuring they encompassed a comprehensive collection of pertinent documents authored by leading experts on the subject.

CONTRACT CHEATING: AN OVERVIEW

In recent years the issue of contract cheating has garnered heightened concern as it affects academic institutions across the globe, especially those involved in the delivery of higher education (Harper et al. 2019, 1858–1859). Despite the spike in academic circles, the term *contract cheating* is not new. In 1989, New Zealand recognised the clear distinction between plagiarism, cheating, copying and contract cheating. In Section 292E of the New Zealand Education Act 1989 No. 80, contract cheating was declared illegal, with the service provider liable, on conviction, to a fine not exceeding \$10,000 (New Zealand 1989). Contract cheating is still prevalent, as discussed in Section 293 of the Education and Training Act 2020 No. 38 (University of Auckland 2020a).

Universities in New Zealand have also acted against contract cheating. The tertiary institutions' academic integrity policies clearly distinguish between the different forms of academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism, copying, cheating and contract cheating. For example, the University of Auckland has its own contract cheating policy, the same as third-party assistance (University of Auckland 2020b). The policy recognises students' need to seek assistance and illustrates how and where to find it. The policy seeks to ensure that students and staff members are aware of the benefits and limitations of asking third parties for advice on undergraduate or postgraduate coursework (University of Auckland 2020b). The University of Auckland Student Academic Conduct Statute also explicitly references contract cheating and penalties and resources are made available to lecturers on how to detect contract cheating (University of Auckland 2020c).

Contract cheating has also been declared illegal in Australia, and Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency has also provided guidelines on how to detect and investigate contract cheating (University of Auckland 2020d). In June 2021, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Amendment (Prohibiting Academic Cheating Services) Bill 2019 was accepted and enacted into legislation in 2020. In terms of this Tertiary

Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2021 No.80, there is a ban on offering academic cheating service for financial gain and such a person commits a criminal offence. The service provider, irrespective of whether they operate in the jurisdiction of Australia, will be liable to a penalty of two years' imprisonment or civil penalty point (fines) or both if they provide an academic cheating service to any student studying an Australian qualification (Section 144C). The Act aims to "protect and enhance the academic integrity of courses provided by higher education providers by prohibiting academic cheating service" (Section 3). However, there is no prohibition on the students, and they are only subject to the policies, procedures and sanctions of the institution (Australian Government 2021, 102).

In the United Kingdom (UK), universities have called for legislation prohibiting contract cheating. Currently, the UK is working on the Higher Education Cheating Services Prohibition Bill – thus, it has not yet been enacted. This Bill makes it illegal to advertise or provide contract cheating services, and it will be labelled a criminal offence (UK Parliament 2021). The HEIs in the UK appealed to the government to target contract cheating service providers:

"Legislation will not be a magic bullet; it is, however, a vital part of the broader package of measures. Legislation would, amongst other advantages, shut-down UK-based essay mills; prevent the advertising of their services near campuses and in public places such as the London Underground; enable the removal of essay mills from search engine findings and prevent UK-based companies from hosting online advertisements for essay mills" (UK Parliament 2021).

Nonetheless, despite the forward-thinking and legal challenge underway, prosecution and curbing of contract cheating is still largely uncharted territory due to the limited legislative measures in place. As a result, the criminalisation of contract cheating service providers does not necessarily curb the student demand.

CONTRACT CHEATING VS PLAGIARISM

Contract cheating is a form of academic dishonesty that takes place when a student recruits a third party to complete an assignment or other academic work (Ullah 2020) on their behalf and without being acknowledged (Clarke and Lancaster 2006). The person in question may be an individual, tutor, family member, friend, document-sharing website, editing service or even ghostwriter (Clarke and Lancaster 2006; Ullah 2020). Louw (2017) argues that many of the definitions of contract cheating and plagiarism contain grey areas around the extent of the paraphrasing required or the difficulties with judging a student's ability to find, apply and integrate content. Thus, it is crucial to recognize the intersection between plagiarism and contract cheating as failing to attribute the source can be a common element in both forms of

academic misconduct. However, it should be noted that the two concepts are different.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, plagiarism is “the process or practice of using another person’s ideas or work and pretending that it is your own” (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). Race (2001) adds to this definition by arguing that plagiarism is *intentionally* using other people’s words or ideas without due acknowledgement. Whilst this concept seems simplistic and easy to understand, what constitutes plagiarism is quite complex and might not necessarily be regarded as contract cheating. To put this into context, for example, when someone plagiarises, they do not acknowledge the sources consulted; they copy and paste chunks of information into their work, using synonyms to pass it off as their original ideas. With contract cheating, students make use of a third-party contractor, some form of exchange or contract between two or more people takes place, and the third party produces a clean, well-referenced piece of work (New Zealand 2020; University of Sydney 2018).

Subsequently, there is a difference in the detection of contract cheating and plagiarism. Software like SafeAssign and Turnitin can be useful in detecting cases of plagiarism, but pinpointing contract cheating is more difficult (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith 2019) because original content is being created, making text-matching software ineffective. In addition, there is the commercial aspect of contract cheating. Unlike in the traditional “cut-and-paste” plagiarism that often equates to intellectual theft, where the original author is not acknowledged or given recognition for their contribution (Walker and Townley 2012), in contract cheating, the original author is contracted to work with or for the secondary author. Hence, the theft aspect is removed, as one pays for the service. Furthermore, unlike in plagiarism, contract cheating involves a contract. A contract is a reciprocal agreement between two parties where they bind themselves to certain rights and obligations. The elements of a contract are consensus, capacity, legality, possibility and formalities (Schulze et al. 2020). If one looks at it in terms of contract cheating, one needs to acknowledge the legal synonyms which include, inter alia, third-party assistance and ghostwriting. A student (the client) and a contract cheating provider (the service provider) enter into a valid agreement the moment the student makes it clear what they want to be done, and the other party agrees to deliver it. The payment thereof and what the parties intend to do with the academic work are irrelevant. Payment can also come in the form of an exchange, where the student supplies a piece of academic work in return for another.

Some might argue that this action is fraudulent, which is embodied in most institutional policies as plagiarism. However, to establish fraud, it is necessary to demonstrate that a student knowingly and deliberately engaged in deceptive conduct that resulted in tangible harm or posed a potential threat to another party (Snyman 2021). Thus, contract cheating does not constitute fraud, as one cannot prove prejudice to another party or the state. It is also challenging

to prove intention. The service provider can also be innocent of fraud, as their terms and conditions exclude their liability for what the student does with the piece of work provided (Harper et al. 2019, 1870). It is also essential to understand that the authorities are reluctant to prosecute cases internal to tertiary institutions and deem them to not fall within any court's jurisdiction (Harper et al. 2019, 1867). The *Iusacceptum* rule asserts that the court cannot convict an individual of a crime unless a law explicitly designates the behaviour as criminal. The court's role should solely involve interpreting the current legal framework (Tonkin 2019). The *Iuspraevium* rule further states that an individual can only be deemed guilty of a crime if their actions were legally defined as criminal at the time they occurred. Consequently, no legislation establishing a criminal offense can apply retroactively (Tonkin 2019). A further problem faced in South Africa is *Paltriness*, also known as *de minimus non curatlex*, which means that the court does not concern itself with trivial things (Tonkin 2019). The court will not make a conviction in such a case. To understand the concept, institutions must look at the current legal position in South Africa.

CONTRACT CHEATING: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Contract cheating has persisted for over ten years, and a substantial proportion (15.7%) of students have openly acknowledged outsourcing their academic assignments, potentially encompassing approximately 31 million students globally (Newton 2018, 6). Despite this, South Africa currently has no law regulating contract cheating. South African legislation, albeit a synthesis of laws and legal systems, does not regulate plagiarism or the copying of academic work. South African intellectual property laws do exist, but the gap is still present with regard to academic work. Intellectual property laws in South Africa cover only four areas: trademarks, patents, design and copyright (New Zealand 1989). Thus, an attempt to interpret any legislation in South Africa to recognise contract cheating will be futile; the *lacuna* still persists. In South African law, a plaintiff only has recourse against a person who stole their intellectual property; thus, paying for academic work is not a crime, nor can it lead to civil action, as no misrepresentation was made to the contracting party. Thus, it may not constitute fraud when a student enters into a valid contract with the service provider. In terms of the South African legal system, the onus is on the party alleging a crime to prove that all elements of the crime have been committed before any act is deemed a crime. The mere definition of contract cheating falls short of this onus.

According to Snyman (2021), where there is no penalty, there can be no crime. So, if we apply the same principle to academia, where there is no rule and penalty, there is no infringement of academic integrity. Considering this, even when caught, a student cannot be

punished, as there are no provisions stating that buying academic work is a breach committed by the student. Therefore, the onus is on the institution to prove that the student was guilty of contract cheating on a balance of probabilities. Thus, one could argue that contract cheating is *contra boni mores*. This leaves South African HEIs with no recourse other than their internal policies with their internal sanctions and penalties. The question then is, what is the stance of South Africa's HEIs towards contract cheating?

Looking at four randomly selected higher education institutional policies on plagiarism in South Africa, findings indicate that these institutional policies on misconduct or plagiarism do not provide an independent definition of contract cheating and its consequences (University of Cape Town 2021, 1; University of Johannesburg 2013, 12; University of KwaZulu-Natal 2009, 4–6; University of the Free State 2018, 1). The definition of plagiarism is broadly presented across all four institutions, and within this definition, three institutions allude to contract cheating under other forms of misconduct – although they do not refer to it as contract cheating. Only two institutions mention buying or hiring someone to complete academic work or purchasing assignments. Moreover, in all the institutional policies, no guidelines deal with contract cheating. As an example, in University A, no explicit mention of contract cheating, but reference is made to ghostwriting and the difference between plagiarism and other forms of misconduct. For example, “purchasing of assignments, dissertations, and theses via the Internet, or using a [ghost-writer] and presenting this person's documents as one's own work”. In University B, no mention of contract cheating, but the following can be derived from the policy: “If a student or researcher's work is not authentically his/her own, such work does not qualify as an academic output, whether this is a student assignment or employee research, and will be viewed as plagiarism”. In University C, there is no mention of contract cheating at all. Whilst in University D although there is no explicit mention by the institution; the following could be derived from the plagiarism policy that somewhat relates to contract cheating that “Obvious forms of plagiarism include: buying or borrowing a paper and copying it, hiring someone to write the paper or thesis for you” (University of the Free State 2018, 1; University of Johannesburg 2018, 12; University of KwaZulu-Natal 2018, 3; University of Cape Town 2021, 1).

Stemming from the above, it is clear that there is an understanding of the distinction between the different forms of academic integrity infringements; however, South Africa's institutional policies on misconduct are lacking when it comes to clearly discerning contract cheating from plagiarism and collusion.

DISCUSSION

The detection challenges

According to the literature, contract cheating yields authentic content, making it less probable to be detected through conventional text-matching plagiarism-detection tools like Turnitin and SafeAssign. Furthermore, according to Amigud and Dawson (2020, 98) and Dawson and Sutherland-Smith (2019, 721), educational institutions possess restricted capabilities in verifying the authorship of student-generated work on a large scale as it is difficult to prove and reporting is cumbersome. This argument is further substantiated by the fact that when students partake in acts of contract cheating, they are not copying someone else but rather paying someone to provide original work that they can pass off as their own. Furthermore, according to Lancaster (2018, 74), detection methods employed by educational institutions centre on identifying similarities in word usage between student submissions and established sources. However, content acquired through contract cheating is individually crafted with a commitment to customers that it will be free of plagiarism. To put this into perspective, in 2016, Lines examined the services provided by the 30 top-ranked contract cheating websites; in his findings, of the 13 master's essays purchased and graded, six failed, three received a pass, two a credit, one a distinction and the other a high distinction. Of the 13 undergraduate essays purchased, four failed outright, seven received a pass, three a credit and one a high distinction (Lines 2016, 899).

The *lacuna* and inadequacy in institutional policies

Despite the existence of policies on misconduct in South Africa, many of these policies speak only to plagiarism and not contract cheating. For example, in most institutional policies, the definitions are incomplete or lack important details about contract cheating. In other instances, the available policies look at contract cheating as a subcategory of plagiarism – despite the fact that the two are completely different concepts.

In South Africa there is no national law, what some may refer to as *lacuna*, pertaining to contract cheating. Furthermore, as alluded to by Amigud and Dawson (2020, 104), it is challenging enough to enforce laws against illicit online activities like drugs, terrorism and human trafficking, so contract cheating has a lower priority level for law enforcement agencies. Consequently, enforcement rates in cases of contract cheating tend to be lower as well.

Elsewhere, such as in the UK, Australia, the USA and the Netherlands, where legislation and litigation to control contract cheating is available, this legislation has not been effective, as following a relevant search, paid-for advertising with a plagiarism-free guarantee is still clearly visible (Draper and Newton 2017). Moreover, even in the presence of legislation that prohibits

the operation of a contract cheating enterprise, it does not exist in all jurisdictions; thus, preventing students from accessing contract cheating services that operate in different legal jurisdictions is challenging. Additionally, such legislation does not restrict the contractors' capacity to relocate their operations to areas where contract cheating remains unrestricted. (Amigud and Dawson 2020, 101).

Ambiguity in the conceptualisation of contract cheating

Originally publicised in 2006, the operational definition of contract cheating has evolved as a result of studies, discussions and publications on the topic, which have created a high level of ambiguity in the definition itself, making it challenging to differentiate contract cheating from legitimate student support and services related to non-academic content creation (Harper 2019, 1857). According to a study by Ullah in 2020, the current definitions put forward by institutions are incomplete. They also lack important details; for example, in Ullah's study conducted amongst seven Australian universities, only three define contract cheating within their academic misconduct policies (Ullah 2020). In the South African context, despite all the institutions having policies on plagiarism and sections pertaining to other academic misconduct, few refer to contract cheating or make available a tangible definition of contract cheating in its own right.

Academics and students' lack of awareness of contract cheating

The empirical research exploring the prevalence of contract cheating in HEIs remains limited and fragmented. In South Africa, the concept is often referred to as plagiarism or seen as parallel to plagiarism. Additionally, whilst most institutions have taught their students about intellectual integrity and its consequences, contract cheating has not been extensively publicised. The reasons behind this vary, as there is a grey area associated with the concept. For example, regarding special needs students in various institutions, it can be challenging to determine where the boundary should be defined. Would one regard the use of a tutor as contract cheating, as this offers one student an advantage over others? In the same breath, looking at the postgraduate level, would data analysis support or editing services be considered contract cheating? All these uncertainties make it difficult to draw the line, as in reality, they offer an advantage to the student who opts to use these services over those who do not.

Growth of the practice as seen in the expansion of custom essay websites, essay mills and file-sharing sites

Although contract cheating websites have been declared illegal in the UK, Netherlands and Australia, in most African countries – particularly South Africa – there is still no law that deems

essay mills illegal. Contract cheating websites operate freely where students, acting as customers, usually submit a form describing the nature of the assignment they want assistance with, specifying the desired length and their deadline for completion (Sutherland-Smith and Dullaghan 2019). According to the research, these services are widely available and accessible, crafted to be persuasive and user-friendly, with customer service chatbots open 24/7 to provide support or assistance (Alin 2020, 2). For example, as students show interest and indicate the topic, the employees on the plagiarism sites search through requests to determine what looks interesting, and can be written quickly with ease of meeting the required page numbers. Subsequently, based on the extent of payment made to an essay mill, a student can access various distinct services. Among these offerings, the highest-priced option entails receiving a fully composed essay, or even a dissertation, which can be submitted by the student. It is noteworthy that these requested papers can adhere to precise instructions provided by the student, encompassing requirements such as the utilization of a designated number of sources, addressing a predetermined topic, and achieving a specified grade (Bartlett 2009).

In addition, there is also the problem of a false identity portrayed by the essay mills, where some claim to only provide support in the form of sample guidelines when questioned by the clients. According to Sutherland-Smith and Dullaghan (2019), some contract cheating websites have devised methods for formulating strategies in compliance with legal regulations by including terms and conditions clearly advising students against utilising the product/s they offer for assessment purposes (Sutherland-Smith and Dullaghan 2019). According to Amigud and Dawson (2020, 101), some individuals or entities function within the realm of academic assistance services, which may encompass activities like tutoring, academic guidance, as well as editing and proofreading. All these make it extremely difficult for one to establish a connection between providers selling papers to students and those genuinely providing academic support in the form of solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Acknowledge that contract cheating is a problem and it exists

Institutions must acknowledge that contract cheating exists and requires urgent attention. For example, according to the literature, the act is not new and appears to be growing fast (Amigud and Lancaster 2020, 541). According to findings from a 2018 research study undertaken by Newton, the data suggests a growing trend in contract cheating. In samples collected from 2014 to the present, approximately 15.7 per cent of students admitted to outsourcing their academic work to others, potentially accounting for 31 million students globally (Newton 2018, 6).

Additionally, the contract cheating sector has evolved into a well-established industry, where service providers operate commercial ventures and capitalise on students' inability to meet academic demands. For example, in an environmental scan on contract cheating websites conducted by Rowland et al. (2018, 657), it was found that 25 sites offered services across the globe. Moreover, according to research by Clarke and Lancaster dating back to 2006, the RentACoder site is a good example of a mechanism for buyers requiring a computer system solution; however, when one looks through the bid requests on RentACoder, 12.3 per cent of were identified as contract cheating. The study identified 236 contract cheaters, and over half of these individuals had made between two and seven requests (Clarke and Lancaster 2006, 3–4). This clearly indicates that contract cheating exists, is habitual and must be acknowledged. See Table 2 illustrating the top 25 contract cheating websites operating globally.

Table 1: List of Top 25 contract cheating websites

1. https://buyassignment.com/	2. australianwritings.com
3. myassignmenthelp.com	4. buyassignmentservice.com
5. needpaperhelp.com	6. assignmentexpert.com
7. thepensters.com	8. domyassignment.net
9. assignmentvalley.co.uk	10. australianessay.com
11. writemypapers.org	12. customwritings.com
13. assignmentcompany.com	14. writemyassignmentt.com
15. ordercollegepapers.com	16. assignmentland.co.uk
17. assignmentlabs.co.uk	18. essaylib.com
19. moveableonline.zendesk.com	20. iga.edu
21. assignmentbox.co.uk	22. essaywriters.com.au
23. hoglezoo.org	24. alluniversityassignments.com
25. speedypaper.com	

Source: Rowland et al. (2018, 657)

Revisit institutional policy on intellectual integrity

As alluded to by Ullah (2020), HEIs need to revisit their intellectual integrity policies to incorporate a precise definition of contract cheating, making a distinct separation from plagiarism and collusion. This misconduct needs to be labelled and not simply disguised under other forms of misconduct, as the ongoing ignorance may erode the same academic quality that makes South African HEIs take pride in themselves. Furthermore, just as guidelines on dealing with plagiarism have been provided, institutions must provide clear guidelines/procedures to academics on how to deal with contract cheating – if detected. Lastly, penalties for the offenders must be clarified.

Create awareness of contract cheating amongst students and lecturers

Just as attention and awareness campaigns on plagiarism and its implications have been driven across HEIs, the same awareness strategies must be focused on contract cheating. If students are aware that contract cheating exists, is detectable and has dire consequences, they will refrain from it. Also, if there is awareness, it will be difficult for students to capitalise on ignorance if caught.

Institutions can consider investing in software that detects authenticity

Given that contract cheating has proven difficult to identify with the human eye, South African institutions must invest in software that detects authenticity and authorship, such as the *Authorship Investigate* tool that is part of Turnitin, is crafted to assist higher education administrators in combatting contract cheating. Through the utilization of forensic linguistic analysis and natural language processing, this tool adeptly discerns variations in written content and assembles the necessary evidence for the examination of potential instances of contract cheating (Turnitin 2019).

In addition to the above is Unicheck's AI-based *Emma*, which is also designed to prevent contract cheating (Alin 2020, 5). This tool is part of the Unicheck plagiarism checker and automatically verifies the authorship of student papers and shares thoughts on their authenticity (Unicheck 2019). According to Unicheck, Emma serves as a valuable assistant by simplifying the procedures associated with authorship verification and student grading. Additionally, Emma maintains its dedicated section within the similarity report, where it autonomously provides its insights and highlights noteworthy aspects. All of these functionalities are seamlessly integrated within Unicheck's plagiarism checker (Unicheck 2019).

Equally useful is *Ouriginal*, "a software solution that combines text matching with writing style analysis, enabling educators and users to assess the authenticity of any text. It not only records the degree of the matches but also considers any paraphrasing, usage of synonyms and any evidence of ghostwriting and contract cheating" (Ouriginal 2021). Irrespective of the language in use, the software algorithms have the capacity to identify similarities among the most commonly employed languages (Ouriginal 2021).

Re-look at student-support-intervention marketing

According to the research, two reasons why students cheat are: a lack of support or the feeling that they do not have support and desperation to succeed. This creates a gap in the institutional support services and room for contract cheating websites to offer solutions to students under the guise of support by using aggressive, persuasive marketing campaigns. For example,

Rowland et al. (2018) uncovered that contract cheating websites employ a diverse array of reputable, interactive and informative components crafted to incentivise student to engage with their services. These websites offer the assurance of highly skilled writers, quality work, secure payment processes, affordability, timely delivery and the possibility of a refund in the event of unsatisfactory deliverables (Rowland et al. 2018, 657). As a result, the number of students searching for academic support on contract cheating websites has increased tremendously. It is recommended that institutions improve their student support strategies to deter students from turning to contract cheating websites. This can be done by updating their marketing strategies for academic student-support services by borrowing the persuasive language of contract cheating websites. Furthermore, considering that mathematics disciplines such as algebra, calculus, and statistics exhibit the highest levels of outsourcing, followed by subjects like English and history (Amigud and Lancaster 2020, 542), institutions must design more focused academic student-support interventions for these modules.

CONCLUSION

This article analysed the quandaries of contract cheating faced by HEIs in South Africa. The findings demonstrate that the key quandaries of contract cheating are attributed to limited awareness of the concept, the undetectable nature of the action, the *lacuna* from the national point of view, gaps in existing institutional policies on misconduct, ambiguity in the conceptualisation, and growth in the supply of the practice as seen in the proliferation of custom essay websites, essay mills and file-sharing sites across the globe. These findings reaffirm that contract cheating is a problem that must be addressed by South African HEIs, and a problem that academic institutions may not be able to win now, let alone without the necessary laws. Many steps are necessary to address the problem of contract cheating, and places of higher learning must start by

- Creating advanced awareness of the concept;
- Revising their institutional policies on misconduct by clearly discerning it from plagiarism and collusion;
- Investing in software that detects authenticity; and
- Designing student-support intervention marketing strategies to deter students from turning to contract cheating websites

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