



Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)

Feedback on “Tackling Contract Cheating”

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Compiled with the assistance of the staff and office bearers of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and its affiliated member organisations.

Prepared by Natasha Abrahams (President), Owen Myles (Policy and Research Advisor), and Lara McKenzie (Research Officer)

Level 1, 120 Clarendon Street, Southbank, VIC, 3006

0430 076 993

www.capa.edu.au

Foreword

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the peak body representing the interests of the over 425,000 postgraduate students in Australia. We represent coursework and research, as well as domestic and international, postgraduates. We are comprised of 28 university and campus based postgraduate associations, as well as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA).

CAPA carries out its mission through policy, research, and activism, communicating the interests and issues of postgraduate students to higher education stakeholders as well as Federal and State Governments, Opposition parties, and minor parties.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute our view on the idea to legislate the provision of contract cheating services for Australian university students. We support the idea of making it an offence to provide or advertise contract cheating services. This is one important way to promote academic integrity and the quality of an Australian university education. In this submission, we discuss the role of student associations and their associated advocacy services; we suggest that these bodies are consulted in efforts to reduce instances of contract cheating. We make the following recommendations:

Recommendation one: That legislation be implemented which makes the sale or advertisement of commercial cheating services an offence.

Recommendation two: That the HESP, universities, and other decision-making bodies engage with student organisations to implement interventions addressing causes of contract cheating.

Recommendation three: That decision-makers draw on the expertise of independent advocacy services in efforts to tackle contract cheating.

Recommendation four: That student associations are provided with adequate funding to support and staff an advocacy service, in order to manage and prevent cases of academic misconduct.

Contract cheating legislation

Currently, students who are caught assisting their peers to cheat face consequences through their university's policies. However, university policies have no scope to address professional contract cheating companies which are external to the student population. Such companies advertise their services to students, often targeting international students. Among the postgraduate population, some students are concerned about the academic integrity of their peers, and possible reputational damage to their degrees because of prevalent cheating.

The Government proposes to make the provision or advertisement of contract cheating services an offence (DET, 2018), on the advice of the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP, 2017). We believe that this legislative response will assist in promoting academic integrity in Australian universities. This legislation would not criminalise those students who purchase contract cheating services. It will only apply to those who engage in the sale of cheating services (some of whom may be students themselves).

The HESP advised that the legislation would make it an offence to “provide or advertise cheating services.” We believe that the intention of this legislation is to stamp out professional cheating services, rather than cheating or borderline-cheating behaviours which occur informally between peers. In our view, this legislation must clearly specify that illegal cheating services involve the exchange of money (either advertised or actual). It is imperative to avoid criminalising students who, for example, share an essay with a friend which their friend then submits as their own work. This behaviour should be addressed through a university response, rather than a legal response. We agree with the HESP’s view that the legislation should not be applicable to individual students.

Recommendation one: That legislation be implemented which makes the sale or advertisement of commercial cheating services an offence.

Causes of contract cheating

Most instances of cheating occur between students and their peers and acquaintances, rather than between students and professional cheating services. Moreover, as the definition of contract cheating has expanded to encompass any type of outsourcing students’ assessments, much contract cheating also does not involve the exchange of money (Bretag et al, 2018). Therefore, making the sale of contract cheating services an offence will not directly impact most instances of contract cheating.

This section draws on the results from a recent survey by Tracey Bretag and colleagues (2018) which examined students’ experiences with and attitudes towards cheating and sharing behaviours. They found that 6% of students admitted to engaging in contract cheating, with a minority of these involving a professional service.

Reducing opportunities to engage in contract cheating is just one aspect of promoting academic integrity. As noted in the HESP advice and the Government’s response to that advice, there is a need for other actions to reduce cheating behaviours. The main suggestion made by the HESP on this point is to create a commitment to academic integrity which international students must sign as part of their onboarding. We caution that this tick-box exercise will have minimal impact on instances of cheating unless it is supported by not only an educative strategy at universities, but also efforts to address the substrates of contract cheating. As Bretag and colleagues found, cheating and non-cheating students had similar attitudes towards statements on their understanding of academic integrity policy and contract cheating, and the consequences they face by not complying with these policies (2018, p. 10). This suggests that other interventions are likely to be more effective than improving awareness of the consequences of cheating.

Bretag and colleagues found that:

“cheating behaviours were primarily explained by students’ International or LOTE status, higher levels of dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment, and perceptions that there are lots of opportunities to cheat” (Bretag et al, 2018, pp. 10 – 11).

Of these, the latter two variables can be alleviated. The proposal to introduce legislation would go some way to dispelling the notion that there are many opportunities to cheat. We suggest that efforts be targeted at improving satisfaction with the teaching environment, in order to promote respect for the value of one's degree and therefore foster ethical academic conduct.

To correctly identify where improvements can be made, consultations must be undertaken with students, including with democratically elected student representatives. Input should be sought from campus-based student associations, as well as from CAPA and other national student organisations.

Recommendation two: That the HESP, universities, and other decision-making bodies engage with student organisations to implement interventions addressing causes of contract cheating.

Defending the rights of students

When students experience difficult situations relating to their studies, including being caught engaging in cheating (contracted or otherwise), it is essential that they are able to access an advocacy service to enable them to navigate university policies and procedures, ensure that they are being treated fairly, and connect with other relevant support services. Advocates (also known as student rights officers at some organisations), when employed by the university's student association, offer students a confidential and independent service which they can trust.

Advocacy services can also provide support and advice to students experiencing difficulty, but where no academic misconduct has yet occurred. A well-resourced advocacy service is essential not just in ensuring fair processes for students who have been accused of academic misconduct, but also to prevent academic misconduct occurring by assisting students to access academic and language support services, apply for assignment extensions or special consideration, and explain the consequences of being caught cheating. For example, the Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) in 2018 designed a program, as part of their advocacy operations, to reduce the increasing number of academic misconduct cases particularly relating to cheating in exams. The MPA liaised and worked together with several faculties, with staff advocates giving a short presentation at the first lecture of the most at-risk courses and specific units. The presentation included an explanation of the different types of academic misconduct, what the consequences were for students, and encouraged students to make smart choices and access help early. Subsequently, that year the number of academic misconduct cases from those specific at-risk units was significantly reduced. They attributed the program's success to MPA's reputation as independent and therefore trusted by students.

Advocacy services keep statistics on academic misconduct cases, and therefore are a key source of information on trends relating to cheating behaviour. Due to their expertise from handling these cases, they can also provide advice to policy-makers on the causes of cheating and how to reduce cheating instances. We suggest that advocacy services be engaged throughout the processes of creating legislative and other responses to contract cheating in Australian universities.

Recommendation three: That decision-makers draw on the expertise of independent advocacy services in efforts to tackle contract cheating.

As noted by the University of South Australia Student Association submission on contract cheating, demand for advocacy services is anticipated to increase with increased scrutiny and changes in university procedures catalysed by the expected implementation of contract cheating legislation. It is therefore imperative to ensure that funding for advocacy services is in place prior to the legislative changes.

An independent advocacy service is an essential aspect of preventing and managing academic misconduct. However, not all student associations are given sufficient funding to hire professional advocacy staff. In our 2018 response to the New South Wales Ombudsman discussion paper on postgraduate supervision complaints, we identified that five of the seven CAPA-affiliated student organisations provide an in-house advocacy service (CAPA, 2018). Associations receiving funding to hire advocacy staff often find that they do not receive sufficient funding to meet demand. The University of South Australia Student Association wrote in their submission on contract cheating that their advocacy service is under-staffed, with each advocate working on hundreds of cases each year. These services must be fully funded to service the student population to ensure that fair and just outcomes occur in academic misconduct cases.

At universities without a student association advocacy service, this gap is sometimes filled by the university itself. Where university-provided advocacy services are non-existent or perceived as untrustworthy, this results in student volunteers attempting to perform the role of an advocate with no training, resources, or payment. Therefore, we recommend that universities fund their independent student associations to provide this service.

Recommendation four: That student associations are provided with adequate funding to support and staff an advocacy service, in order to manage and prevent cases of academic misconduct.

Summary and recommendations

In this submission, we have outlined our commitment to promoting academic integrity and our approval of the proposal to create legislation criminalising the sale of contract cheating services. We have recommended that this be part of a holistic approach to reduce incidences of cheating, with student associations' expertise utilised throughout this process. We have also concurred with advice presented in the USASA submission, particularly that advocacy services must be supported by universities to manage academic misconduct cases.

References

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