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Applying a Holistic Approach to Contract Cheating: A Canadian Response

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Abstract

This paper traces the development of a contract cheating action plan, introduced by the Academic Integrity Council of Ontario (AICO), Canada. The action plan offers a holistic response to contract cheating, involving multiple and diverse stakeholders from postsecondary education. Created by an AICO subcommittee, three of its founding members detail the action plan and provide a perspective on its strengths, challenges, and ongoing implementation.

Keywords: academic integrity, academic misconduct, contract cheating, essay mills, higher education, postsecondary education, plagiarism, Ontario, Canada, holistic approach, quality assurance

Introduction

Contract cheating is an issue creating uncertainty in postsecondary institutions around the world. It has been at the heart of media exposés (Bomford, 2016; Jeffreys & Main, 2018), books (Tomar, 2012) and academic scandals, most notably the MyMaster scandal in Australia (Visentin, 2015). As a result of these incidents and publications, contract cheating has garnered attention in the media, inciting strong concerns about educational quality and eroding public confidence in postsecondary education standards. Concerned groups and countries have responded in a variety of ways. The Quality Assurance Association (QAA) in the United Kingdom (UK) has developed a “deterrence framework” (QAA, 2017, p. 7) for institutions to adopt. The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has completed several rulings against UK contract cheating websites for misleading advertising (ASA, n.d.). The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) in Australia developed an advice and best practice guide for institutions, with a “holistic and multi-stakeholder approach” (TEQSA, 2017, p. 8). Academic integrity organizations such as the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI, 2019) and the European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI, n.d.) have also been working on projects and initiatives to address contract

cheating. Furthermore, in New Zealand, Ireland, Australia, and several states in the United States, legislation to regulate the work of contract cheating providers, also known as essay mills, has been passed or enacted.

Canada has also had its share of academic misconduct allegations in the media (Eaton, 2020), several which suggest that Canadian institutions are not immune to contract cheating. According to Clarke and Lancaster (2006), Canada is “among the top four nations where students engage in contract cheating” (Eaton & Edino, 2018, p. 3). Contract cheating occurs when a student outsources their academic assignments to a third party and then submits the work for academic credit or advantage (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006). While it is difficult to quantify the amount of contract cheating that occurs at any one institution, a walk across campus will often reveal the advertisement of explicit contract cheating services (Boisvert, 2019). Anecdotally, academic integrity practitioners are aware of students, graduate assistants, teaching assistants, and faculty being approached on social media and email to contribute to file-sharing sites, essay mills, and tutoring companies. The practice of contract cheating is not new; however, its business practices have changed with advances in technology (Ellis et al., 2018; Rigby et al., 2015), and the rise of social media (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019). Scholars have also questioned whether systemic challenges in academia are influencing the growth of the contract cheating industry, such as teaching work precarity, growing academic workloads, and the commodification of education (Walker & Townley, 2012). These systemic challenges affect the student experience including their satisfaction with the teaching and learning environment, which research has shown is a variable in the likeliness of contract cheating (Bretag et al., 2019). Advocating for resources to support teaching staff and enhance teaching and learning frameworks benefit all stakeholders. While detection and consequences are necessary, a long-term investment to adequately resource faculty development and support the student experience (well-being and academic success) is considered a priority in a holistic approach.

Canadian postsecondary institutions are starting to acknowledge the issue and respond. One example of this response is that in Canadian postsecondary institutions, academic integrity policies are starting to reflect definitions of contract cheating (Stoesz et al., 2019). Canadian academic integrity practitioners are responding through engaging in greater education and prevention on their campuses. They are also organizing through meetings, symposia, and knowledge dissemination (e.g., University of Calgary, 2019). Canadian researchers in the field are also engaged in cross-institutional research collaborations on academic integrity (see Crossman et al., 2019) and specifically, contract cheating (see Eaton, 2019) in the Canadian context. These collaborations promote shared

understandings about academic integrity (Eaton et al., 2020) and support evidence-informed decision-making regarding policy, procedures, and initiatives across the sector.

In Ontario, the Academic Integrity Council of Ontario (AICO) has developed a Contract Cheating Action Plan. This plan is holistic, with multiple stakeholders with a strong focus on educational initiatives. As noted by Eaton and Edino (2018), “Canada’s philosophical, policy and educational approaches to academic integrity differ significantly from the United States in some respects” (p. 3). A holistic approach (Bretag, 2013; HEA, 2010; Macdonald & Carroll, 2006), moves away from a moralistic and punitive response to academic misconduct, and works towards providing a framework that is educative, inclusive, and engages with stakeholders across the sector. From the authors’ perspective, this holistic approach includes educational and awareness initiatives (for students, educators, staff, academic, and the broader community); prevention and reduction strategies (e.g., course design, assessment design); deterrence and detection strategies (e.g., laws, text matching software, exam invigilators, sanctions); transparent and robust policy and procedures (for students, educators, and staff); and an ongoing engagement to develop and promote a shared understanding of a culture of academic integrity. This paper traces the development of a Canadian holistic response to contract cheating. It shares AICO’s Action Plan and presents the progress and perspectives on its ongoing implementation.

Background: Academic Integrity Council of Ontario

Contract cheating is one of the concerns of AICO. Consisting of mostly southern Ontario university institutions at the time of its genesis, AICO has grown considerably over the years and now consists of 31 member institutions across Ontario, including publicly-funded universities and colleges. As of 2013, AICO became an affiliate group of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU). As an affiliate group, AICO is governed by a Constitution (ratified in 2013), and its overall mission has been to “provide a forum for academic integrity practitioners and representatives from postsecondary institutions in Ontario to share information, and to facilitate the establishment and promotion of academic integrity best practices in Ontario colleges and universities” (AICO, n.d.). AICO is an unfunded organization, which relies on voluntary leadership and uses a rotation model for hosting meetings at member institutions. Consistent with best-practice frameworks found in the literature (Bertram Gallant, 2008; Morris, 2016), AICO promotes an approach detailed by East (2009) that includes a “need to align policy, teaching and learning practices” (Bretag et al., 2011, p. 5), and a focus on education to prevent breaches of academic integrity policy and support the teaching and learning experience. Eaton and Edino (2018) suggest that “this includes developing a culture of integrity in which both students and educators are clear on the expectations and processes involved and the focus is on cultivating integrity as an educational process” (p. 1). In May, 2017 a new AICO Executive Committee (Angela

Clark, AICO Secretary/Outreach Coordinator; Andrea Ridgley, AICO Co-Chair; Emma Thacker, AICO, Co-Chair) was elected, and soon after a new aim was realized: to work together to confront the issue of contract cheating at Ontario postsecondary institutions.

AICO's Contract Cheating Subcommittee

AICO meets once or twice during each academic year. Typically, these meetings offer an opportunity to network, discuss hot topics, share information, new initiatives, and best practices. During the November 17, 2017 AICO meeting, hosted by Ryerson University, the issue of contract cheating was addressed by the keynote speaker, Christopher Lang, Past Advisory Board President, ICAI. Mr. Lang outlined the phenomenon to AICO members, shared current research, and demonstrated how easy it was for students to access contract cheating services online.

A call to action was put forward for AICO members, and the Contract Cheating Subcommittee was formed in April 2018 which, at the time, consisted of ten members across seven member institutions (college and university), and two external advisors. Subcommittee membership consists of academic integrity practitioners, researchers and scholars, teaching staff, a dean, and members working in governance and quality assurance (QA). This range of educational players has been a tremendous strength. Aligning with AICO's approach to academic integrity, the subcommittee began with the premise that multiple academic stakeholder groups must be involved to make sustainable, positive change. In addition, given that the problem of contract cheating exists beyond our institutional walls and academic communities, the subcommittee was determined to "align with the growing international movement to reduce the threat of contract cheating in our institutions" (AICO, 2018, p. 2). The subcommittee meets regularly by tele/video conference and in-person to move the action plan forward.

AICO's Contract Cheating Action Plan

To develop the action plan, the subcommittee engaged in a review of the contract cheating literature, a member attended a workshop offered by the QAA to gain further perspective, and several meetings and consultations were had to discuss the approach, the development of buy-in, and finally the details of the draft action plan itself. The draft action plan was circulated to the wider AICO membership in a variety of ways to receive feedback and ultimately to seek endorsement. The plan was presented at the subsequent AICO meeting at Seneca College on November 18, 2018. Discussion groups were formed to discuss the plan and to collect feedback. Feedback was also collected via email. This was a critical stage of plan development. AICO members provided many ideas on how to raise awareness and shared information on current practitioner challenges, such as detection and case evidence.

Discussion groups also shared trepidation about the challenges of advocacy work, including the time commitment and expertise required to act reliably on the plan.

The action plan was written with a view that to reduce contract cheating in universities and colleges, diverse stakeholder groups must be engaged. The action plan includes five elements as follows:

1. Raise awareness about contract cheating within all constituencies of our own member institutions (e.g., administration, students, staff, faculty, academic community);
2. Raise awareness about contract cheating with relevant provincial and national education stakeholders;
3. Develop and share contract cheating reduction strategies (e.g., develop guidelines/best practices, engage in research);
4. Explore advocacy for legislation to offer a legal pathway to prosecute contract cheating providers; and
5. Engage with international stakeholders to work collaboratively on initiatives and build international capacity.

Awareness

AICO meetings often provide professional development around academic integrity research and issues. As the topic of contract cheating became more common at meetings and professional gatherings, it was apparent that even for those engaged with academic integrity, contract cheating is still largely an unknown. Raising awareness was a critical first step, and this included all members of the academic community. It was determined that to mobilize resources and bring about change, a shared understanding of the issues was needed, taking into account the ecosystem of the academic institution. The approach to awareness includes not just the involvement of all groups (faculty, students, staff, administration, families, associations, broader community), but also to share a range of information. This includes information about contributing factors, student and institutional risks, current research and best practices, and related provincial AQ requirements. To share information, AICO uses social media, a member listserv, a website, and regular meetings for members to network and take back information to their institutions to raise awareness and develop strategies.

Drawing on the QA expertise of subcommittee members, it was decided to leverage the existing provincial QA framework to support the action plan. In 2006, the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV), who is affiliated with the COU, adopted a Degree Level Expectations (DLE) model (OUCQA, 2013). This came into effect in 2008 as part of the QA framework for all Ontario institutions offering degree programs. At the undergraduate level, as part of the DLE category 'Professional capacity/Autonomy', the competency reads, "behaviour consistent with academic integrity and social responsibility" (OUCQA, 2013, p. 3). At the graduate level, under the same competencies category, it reads, "The ethical behaviour consistent with academic integrity and the use of appropriate guidelines and procedures for responsible conduct of research" (OUCQA, 2013, p. 5). The subcommittee thinks that these QA expectations require heightened awareness and rigour. As such, the expectations have been drawn into various presentations and awareness initiatives to gain traction with the action plan. Where resources may not currently exist for academic integrity initiatives, all institutions will have some resources in place to support QA responsibilities. Tapping into these resources and existing accountability framework supports a holistic approach and folds academic integrity into the fabric and process of program review and development.

In order to raise awareness with relevant provincial and national education stakeholders, members of the subcommittee met with staff at the COU who are focused on policy and sector collaboration. After discussing the issue of contract cheating and outlining the action plan, the subcommittee was invited to present to the OCAV, which took place in November 2019. Here, subcommittee members (from Humber College, Ryerson University, and the University of Waterloo), outlined the risks of contract cheating, current research, and presented the action plan. The group engaged in dialogue and shared concerns for students who are at risk from predatory services. A similar presentation to the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) is scheduled in 2020. Colleges Ontario, an advocacy organization representing the provinces 24 public colleges, has also been approached to meet with the subcommittee. There are other provincial and national organizations that the subcommittee will reach out to, in order to foster communication and possible collaboration, including, but not limited to, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, and Universities Canada.

Since the drafting of the action plan in 2018, local, national, and international media have invited subcommittee members to participate in many (over 20) media events, including on television, radio, web, and in print (e.g., Ridgley, 2019). While a media strategy is not articulated as part of the action plan, the subcommittee continues to respond to media and provide relevant information. In addition, a holistic approach must extend beyond the internal academic community. As part of the action plan consultation phase, AICO members

indicated that it was critical to ensure that contract cheating issues are reflected with sensitivity and accuracy, and that while being transparent about all known risks, it is important not to lean on media sensationalism and fear to inform. While the media can be a useful tool to disseminate information to a broad audience, it is not without its challenges. Subcommittee members share trepidation about speaking on behalf of a very large group of diverse institutions and the quality of media coverage on a phenomenon that is fraught with complexity and issues of equity.

Strategies

In regards to developing and sharing contract cheating reduction strategies, the subcommittee pooled their contract cheating resources and placed it in a single shared online folder, making the folder available to all AICO members. AICO members were also invited to contribute. This folder continues to grow with contract cheating reduction resources such as presentation slides, research papers, best practice reports, and web resource lists.

Several subcommittee members are contributing to research projects on the topic of contract cheating in Canada (e.g., Stoesz et al., 2019; Thacker & Gagne, 2019). These projects vary in size and scope; however, they aim to contribute to knowledge about academic integrity and contract cheating in Canada. Results and analysis will support decision-making around contract cheating reduction strategies for Canadian institutions, for example, by identifying gaps in policy, and faculty development offerings. While we are aware that the QAA and TEQSA have created rich contract cheating reduction strategies aids and guides as mentioned in the introduction, and that these documents provide tremendous value, we are mindful of the Canadian postsecondary education context as guidelines and best practices are developed and implemented in Ontario, Canada.

The subcommittee continues to support existing strategies, such as encouraging member institutions to participate in the International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating (ICAI, 2019), an initiative developed and promoted by the ICAI. The action plan has also been included on the AICO website (AICO, n.d.), and the subcommittee is in the development stage of creating a position statement.

Legislation

Another goal is to explore advocating for legislation as a pathway to prosecute contract cheating service providers and to provide a measure of deterrence. Since the action plan was developed, this idea has been explored and discussed, and we note that the AICO membership has not reached consensus. While most agree, including researchers in the

field (Bretag, 2019; Draper & Newton, 2017), that having laws to make contract cheating services illegal sends an appropriate and symbolic message to those undercutting the education system, some AICO members are concerned with unintended outcomes for institutions and students. One view is that Ontario postsecondary institutions have existing policy, procedures, and sanctions that respond to breach of policy and that stepping beyond this is not the role of academic integrity practitioners and administrators. Another view is that continued university and college autonomy around academic misconduct is critical and advocating for regulation may place this at risk. In addition, research indicates that legislation has had little effect on the supply-side of contract cheating (Amigud & Dawson, 2019), raising the question of whether efforts are better placed on the demand side. With academic integrity resources being so limited, some members would prefer to focus energies on more potent education and prevention strategies. The issue of legislation is a conversation that continues to unfold as we raise awareness with provincial groups that represent the colleges and universities (i.e., COU, Colleges Ontario) and the subcommittee continues to discuss, stay informed, and seek advice.

International Outreach and Collaboration

The subcommittee members regularly attend the annual conferences held by the ICAI and the ENAI. The AICO Executive presented the action plan at the ICAI Conference in New Orleans, LA (Clark et al., 2019) and at the Canadian Symposium on Academic Integrity in Calgary, Alberta (Ridgley et al., 2019). There are several other international organizations that the subcommittee plans to reach out to including, but not limited to, the QAA, TEQSA, and the ENAI to explore options for working collaboratively on initiatives and research, and to build international capacity.

Discussion

The development of academic integrity skills and perspectives is a critical part of the education process. Contract cheating is not just about fair assessment, it disrupts our trust in knowledge, education, and the quality of an academic credential. It also brings to the forefront the challenges and systemic issues affecting the local and international academic landscape. It challenges our notions around academic equity, access, and merit. The subcommittee recognizes a need to act now - to act in accordance with our holistic action plan.

The process of developing the action plan has had several strengths, in that it was the first time the entire AICO membership worked on a shared initiative of this size. This process allowed the AICO Executive and subcommittee to have a fresh understanding of member perspectives, priorities, and expertise. Our plan and work has also strengthened our collaborations, the cross-pollinating of information and the forging of new networks and

strengthened relationships. More Canadian research is needed. Another strength of the subcommittee is the level of interest in and commitment to collaborative research projects. That said, implementation of the action plan, while fueled by passion and commitment from its members is often done off the side of desks, during lunch breaks and over weekends. The unfunded nature of the organization allows for various freedoms; however, it also acts as a constraint. The subcommittee volunteers their time and some take on personal costs to attend events and contribute to initiatives. Not all institutions are organized with formal offices of academic integrity, and this can mean that some members have additional advocacy to do locally, to garner resources, support, and attention. That said, the collaborative nature and diverse membership of AICO is a strength, and this contributes to the development of a shared vision of academic integrity, support for a holistic approach, and a view that we each play a role in the prevention of contract cheating.

Conclusion

Contract cheating is a complex phenomenon, requiring institutions to work collaboratively to protect students, the value of programs, credentials, and “the credibility of science” (Bretag, 2019, p. 599). As AICO’s Contract Cheating Action Plan unfolds and evolves, the subcommittee offers a standing invitation. An invitation for Ontario postsecondary academic institutions who are not members to join AICO in its pursuit to support faculty and students and strengthen the foundation of our institutions with a strong holistic framework that reduces contract cheating. We also invite others from around the globe, with similar goals and interests, to reach out in the spirit of collaboration. A holistic approach engages all stakeholders across the academic community and demands proactive and preventative strategies to support inclusive teaching and learning.

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[membership as of January 2020]

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