Pedagogic research case study

Title	A framework for identifying contract cheating for transnational education partners
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Case study summary
Academic quality is the backbone of Higher Education (HE) systems and fundamental to demonstrating value and rigour associated with degree awards. A recent proliferation in transnational education (TNE) provision across the world has exposed HE institutions to greater complexity and challenges in maintaining quality and protecting reputation. The offshore nature of such delivery via distanced-based learning, franchises, validation, or partnership arrangements means senders of TNE programmes often operate in diverse cultures, navigating diverse learning environments and systems. These different ways of knowing and doing can impact understanding of academic integrity and therefore management and communication of quality policy and process, particularly in relation to academic misconduct. There is limited research specifically relating to plagiarism in TNE settings however, it is accepted that the different nature of the TNE environment may impact on plagiarism perception, understanding and practice (Palmer et al., 2018). A notable area of concern is that of third-party plagiarism or contract cheating, where students submit work prepared by a third party that they claim as being their own (Clarke and Lancaster, 2006). An increasingly widespread issue (QAA, 2022), contract cheating presents a particular challenge to TNE because of the lack of tools available for its identification and detection, making it difficult to share best practice with partner institutions. This case study will provide a brief overview of research on contract cheating and a discussion of how literature was used to develop a contract cheating detection sheet that was shared across our institution's overseas franchise partner sites. In our current TNE partners, contract cheating was not found to be a significant issue, however, the few instances that did exist were found by moderators in the UK rather than being identified by the partner overseas. As this was included in the external examiner annual report, it became a priority to provide partners with indicators that might support identification of misconduct.

Key outcomes
• **Thematic analysis of reviewed literature to develop key identifiers of contract cheating** • **Identifiers were then grouped under key headings** • **The key headings and associated identifiers became Leeds Trinity University Business School's Framework for identifying contract cheating in student submissions**

Case study

Contract cheating is acknowledged as a widespread global issue, with studies suggesting instances of cases ranging between 2% and 7% of submissions (Bailey et al, 2012; Curtis and Clare, 2017). One study with data relating to 2014-2017 recorded a staggering 15.7% of students had used essay mills, which could amount to more than 31 million students around the world (Newton, 2018). Much research advocates a holistic view on preventing contract cheating (McCabe, 2005; Morris, 2018; Perkins et al., 2020; Rogerson, 2017). Suggestions include regular, ongoing discussion with students on academic integrity, academic misconduct, and academic literacy (Palmer et al., 2019; Perkins et al., 2020; Rogerson, 2017), updating assessment tasks and including real-world or unseen assessment tasks (Rogerson, 2017; Slade et al., 2019), training academic staff (Dawson et al., 2018) and avoiding over-assessments and bottle necks in submission deadlines (Bretag et al., 2017; Rogerson, 2017). Prevention is undoubtedly significant in combatting contract cheating, however with increasing accessibility and availability of opportunity certain students will continue to opt to cheat meaning 'detection is now the priority' (QAA, 2022, p. 2).

Detection of contract cheating can be challenging and time-consuming with staff often left to develop their own detection methods (QAA, 2022). Currently there is no single detection tool available which leaves institutions vulnerable to missing occurrences of contract cheating. For TNE partners that may rely on part-time, temporary contract staff, detection may be even more complex. The development or organisation-wide detection methods may therefore prove useful in sharing best practice and creating parity in process and experience. Literature suggests that irregularities and patterns can be found in contract cheating submissions that offer 'clues' for identifying such misconduct (Rogerson, 2017). These range from inspecting references and similarity scores, to reviewing language, grammar and content (Crockett, 2018; Lines, 2016; Medway, 2018; QAA, 2022; Rogerson, 2022).

Document analysis
Checking the document properties such as authorship, total editing time, revision time and original creation date of the original submitted document may be an indicator of contract cheating (Crockett, 2018). Whilst none of these in isolation can predict an instance of contract cheating, authorship that is different to the student's name, an editing time of seconds or minutes rather than days and a creation date that precedes the assessment timeline may all be indicators of third-party intervention.

Similarity checker
Another indicator may come using a similarity checker (i.e. Turnitin). Often a score of 20% or below may not represent a cause for concern, however a very low or 0% score should raise a red flag (Lines, 2016; Medway et al., 2018; QAA, 2022). If students have referenced accurately, it is unlikely that such a low score is possible. A 0% score may indicate falsified references, the use of paraphrasing tools or embedding images of texts to avoid similarity detection (Rogerson, 2017). Similarly, a high score where the results suggest work has been submitted previously to another institution may indicate contract cheating. Essay mills for example will often patch together previously developed work created for other students and as such passages may have high similarity to work submitted to another institution (Bailey et al., 2012).

References and citations
It is crucial to take care in reviewing references as this can be a critical stage in identifying contract cheating. Rogerson (2017) suggests the quality, range, relevance, source and presentation of references should be inspected (see Figure 1). Contract cheating submissions will often have sources referenced based on keywords, but that are irrelevant or fall outside the discipline (Lines, 2016) i.e. the use of a biomedical journal in a business assessment. Reference

lists that have been submitted in their entirety or majority previously to other institutions against different work should also raise suspicion (Rogerson, 2017).

Figure 1: Clues in references and reference lists

1. A reference list is provided without any intext citations
2. The reference list and intext citations do not match
3. Inappropriate sources have been cited
4. Irrelevant sources have been included
5. Referencing/bibliographic criteria do not meet requirements set for the assessment task
6. The access date on internet / dates on internet sources do not reflect the assessment period
7. References are presented in foreign languages particularly where unrelated to the students' background
8. Old, dated references have been used and linked to contemporary organisations or recent concepts/findings
9. Bibliographic 'mashups' have been included where journal/source does not exist or the title has been alleged to be included in a certain journal that it does not

(Adapted from Rogerson, 2017)

Content
A significant clue concerns the content of the submission itself. Cases of contract cheating often provide a generic account of topics which lacks detail and examples (Rogerson, 2017). Often the task itself will not have been addressed in the way it was requested of students or discussed in unpacking sessions during class. Clues may include whether class material, theory, models or frameworks have been included and whether there has been any misrepresentation of terminology or concepts.

Language and style
Whilst poor language and writing style may be attributed to wider academic issues, it could also be a symptom of paraphrasing used to disguise using work prepared by others (particularly pre-written essays available online). Rogerson (2017) suggests clues lie in any shifts in font style, size, gaps in the document, changes in grammar and English proficiency, writing style, spelling and punctuation. Ideally this would be mapped across the student's profile, however with anonymous marking this may prove difficult in the first instance.

Summary
When reviewed and combined, this literature enabled the development of a comprehensive framework for detecting instances of contract cheating centred around five key areas (see Appendix 1). At the beginning of 2021 this document was shared and adopted across our TNE partners to aid in the identification of contract cheating. Since sharing the document, staff report feeling more confident in identifying contract cheating and the shift of detection has moved to the first marker. Staff also feel empowered to lead conversations with students when using document as a structure for handling misconduct sessions.

References

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Appendix 1: *LTU Framework for identifying contract cheating in student submissions (Dr K Lupton)*

Document
- Is the authorship of the document the same as the student's name that submitted it?
- When was the document created and edited? Does this coincide with the assessment period?

Similarity checker
- What is the Turnitin score? Work that has been referenced and includes citations yet has a low (particularly 0-2%) score should raise a concern.
- Are there any large chunks of work or passage submitted previously to other institutions?
- Is there evidence of multiple sentences throughout being submitted previously to other institutions?
- Has the reference list been submitted previously to another institution or is it of high similarity to online material (in its entirety or majority as we might expect individual references to have a rainbow of colour where individually they have previously been submitted across various institutions)?

Identify referencing and citation irregularities
- Does the referencing style match institutional requirements?
- Could the student have reasonably obtained the books and journals they referenced?
- Are there in-text citations and do these match the reference list? Are any missing?
- Are there obscure references included, particularly from foreign journals that are less likely to appear on library databases or Google Scholar searches?
- Have any old or out-dated references been used or linked to contemporary organisations or recent concepts/findings
- Are the books and journals referenced appropriate to the topic?

E.g. Patt, J. (2017) "Table 1: Summary of Brazilian Amazon Federal Protected Areas included in the analysis." Available at: https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.3902/table-1.

A reference relating to the Amazon rainforest when discussing the e-business Amazon.
- Does the reference list itself have a high similarity score on Turnitin (in its entirety or majority submitted to other institutions)?
- Is there any evidence of bibliographic 'mashups' where journal/source does not exist or the title has been alleged to be included in a certain journal that it does not

Review content, language usage, language consistency and text presentation
- Does the assessment submission address the task and meet the marking criteria?
- Were the broader criteria / help from any slides / assessment unpacking sessions integrated into the submission?
- Do the theory, frameworks and concepts included reflect what you would expect from students and current research in the discipline?

- Have specific examples and detail been included?
- Are there any unusual uses of language that may indicate 'paraphrasing' or using synonyms without consideration? For example, "There are some paramount portals in the market" may have originally been "There are some important openings in the market"
- Are there any typeface idiosyncrasies? This may include unusual adherence to fonts, font size and type changes.

Adapted from: Crockett, 2018; Lines, 2016; Medway, 2018; QAA, 2022; Rogerson, 2022

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