

Contract Cheating Detection and Reporting: A Staff Guide



Introduction

Contract cheating is a growing issue in academia. To tackle this problem, it is necessary for all staff assessing student performance to be vigilant and to investigate and report all suspected cases. This guide provides staff with a clear four step process for tackling contract cheating.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) defines Contract Cheating¹ as follows:

“Contract cheating happens when a third party completes work for a student who then submits it to an education provider as their own, where such input is not permitted. Over the last decade, an industry has developed where companies, based in the UK or overseas, are paid to undertake this work. These companies have become known as ‘essay mills’, although many supply a range of services in addition to essay writing. Typically, the essay mill will outsource the commissioned work to individual writers engaged on an ad hoc basis. The term ‘contract cheating’ does not apply exclusively to essay mills. It can, for example, also refer to situations such as friends or family members completing assignments for students in whole or in part, and does not always involve a financial relationship”.

The fundamental distinguishing feature of contract cheating is that a student has deliberately, in a premeditated manner, sought to submit work that was written in full or in part by a third party. Third parties include anyone other than the submitting student, for example, ghost writers, freelance academic writers, online ‘essay mills’, family members, friends, academic tutors, and any service offering tutorial or homework support.

Step 1: Mitigating the risk of contract cheating

Assessment Practice and Design. Contract cheating can occur in any assessment type, regardless of discipline or course. Assessment practice and design play a critical role in reducing the risk of academic misconduct, including contract cheating. The LTA website provides a range of [assessment resources](#) including guidance on assessment design. There is also a Watt Works guide on [Understanding academic Integrity: Strategies and Interventions in Higher Education](#), which includes consideration of assessment practices.

Check before assessment release. Course leaders should routinely search for their assignment brief online before they release it to students. If you are repurposing an assignment used previously on your course (a practice that should be avoided) you might discover that it is already available online together with example solutions and even feedback. Inputting the name of your course, quoted parts of the assignment brief, or individual questions into a search engine is usually enough to reveal if it has been posted.

¹ <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/contracting-to-cheat-in-higher-education-2nd-edition.pdf>

Step 2: Detecting Contract Cheating

Check before marking. Course leaders should routinely search for their assignment brief online before any marking commences. Usually, contract cheated work is solicited online, either by ordering an assignment direct from an essay mill or posting the assignment on a contract cheating website where prospective authors make bids. For the latter, conducting an online search can reveal if your assignment has been solicited for contract cheating. Examples of some of the popular websites used by students soliciting contract cheating include chegg.com, coursehero.com, sweetstudy.com, bid4papers.com, and many more.

If you find your assessment has been posted online before you start marking, you should report this to the Conduct Office (Conduct@hw.ac.uk) and alert your marking team.

Telltale signs of contract cheating. As contract cheating usually involves the production of original work, use of current technologies such as Turnitin are unlikely to aid detection. Typically, contracted submissions will return very low similarity scores in Turnitin. Instead, markers are asked to look for anything suspicious in each submission. Highlighted below are several red flags that should cause concern.

Unexpected content	An assignment where only general terms are used, general topics are described, and the answer does not correspond to the methods, themes or topics discussed during lectures and tutorials, is an indication the work might have been contracted. Contract assignment writers often only have access to the assignment brief, not the materials you have taught.
Professional Templates	Contract Cheating 'essay mills' often have set templates for the work they write. This includes cover pages, running headers, contents pages, headings and referencing styles. You may come across the same template from different students across different courses. These 'essay mills' also have rules on the citations they can use, with some only allowing sources from the last three years, even when it comes to work from key authors published much earlier. This tends to be a strong red flag.
Inconsistency in quality	There may be mistakes in the cover page that seem inconsistent with the quality of the assessment content. Often, all a student must do before submission is change the information on the cover page and they sometimes do this poorly. Square brackets are used by contractors to indicate where the student should replace information, and at times students leave these in.
Unusual Reference list	Sources that are not common in your discipline, not appropriate or from very specific types of journals, <i>e.g.</i> , open access only, can be a red flag. Freelance essay writers might not have access to library resources, and this will impact the sources they use.
Inaccurate Citations	Freelance writers are paid per page, or per assignment, not by the hour. They take shortcuts to get work done as quickly as possible. The author will write the assignment and then use a journal article database to insert some contemporary citations at the end of sentences. Often these citations can be incorrect and do not fit with the text.
Document Properties	Downloading the submitted document (<i>without saving</i>) and checking the document properties (Go To: >File>Info) will reveal the name of the <i>original author</i> , the person who last modified the document and the total editing time. If

	the author or the person who last edited the document is not the student, this is a red flag. Sometimes searching the name of the author via Google may identify them as a freelance academic writer, a researcher or simply someone other than the student. Freelance writers often advertise their services via LinkedIn or may be found via Research Gate. Please note that searching for document properties may not always be possible within PDF documents, and in Microsoft Word, this information can be doctored or deleted. The student's name recorded as the <i>original author</i> does not in itself prove that contract cheating has not occurred.
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If one or more of these red flags occur, but you feel you need more evidence, the next step would be to look at other data about the student. These include the following:

Engagement	Students who have not been attending classes or engaging with materials on the Canvas VLE may be more at risk of contract cheating. Canvas analytics allows course teams to readily view the extent a student has engaged with a course, while attendance lists (when feasible) can indicate engagement with F2F sessions.
Consistency in Quality	Compare the submission with previous submissions, to see if the quality of work is similar. You can ask colleagues for access to the student's submissions in other courses if you have cause for concern. The quality of contracted work may be far superior to that achieved previously by the student. It is expected that there will be some students who improve their work considerably as they progress through their programme, but a sudden improvement in writing style and academic performance is an indicator that work may have been contracted.
Consistency in Language	A student whose first language is not English, who produces work that is grammatically perfect incorporating uncommon words in appropriate and effective ways, could indicate that the work is not entirely their own. Comparing these language skills with available email communications and other assessment submissions may help in confirming or negating any suspicion.

None of these factors alone are necessarily proof that contract cheating has occurred. However, they should cause suspicion and further action.

Step 3: Gathering Evidence

If you still suspect contract cheating, the next step would be to gather any available evidence to include in your Incident Report. This includes any relevant documentation there may be, as well as interview notes if you decide that a preliminary meeting with the student is necessary.

It is important to recognize that the standard of proof in judging an allegation of academic misconduct at Heriot Watt is based on the 'balance of probabilities', as in what is more likely than not that something is or is not the case (civil justice), rather than 'beyond all reasonable doubt' (criminal justice).

Relevant documentation accepted as evidence includes any or all of the following:

- Documentation that supports the suspicion that a third party wrote the submission in full or in part. This evidence might include:
 - The original submitted assignment in question with document properties unchanged
 - Original author details (if not the student) that you may have discovered on the internet
 - Other submissions by the student written in a very different style / of a different quality

- Documents demonstrating the student's own written word, *e.g.*, email exchanges, an earlier coursework submission, etc.
- A copy of the webpage where the assignment or exam questions have been posted
- Online solutions or evidence indicating that the question has been answered/solved even if you are unable to gain access to these,
- Engagement reports from Canvas suggesting little engagement with relevant online learning activities,
- Preliminary interview notes in which the student fails to satisfy suspicions of contract cheating,
- An admission of guilt by the student.

The preliminary interview. In all reported cases of alleged academic misconduct, the student will be invited to interview by the School's Disciplinary Committee (SDC), therefore it is not essential that you interview the student before submitting evidence. However, you may want to conduct a preliminary interview to help confirm or negate your suspicions. This is often useful if you believe there may be a simple explanation for the issues you have identified with the student's work. If you are reasonably confident that contract cheating has occurred and you have some of the documented evidence listed above, then there is no need to conduct a preliminary interview with the student. Ultimately it is a personal choice as conversations about contract cheating can be difficult. If you do decide to interview a student about suspected contract cheating, please refer to the guidance at **Appendix 1**.

Step 4: Reporting Contract Cheating

If you feel the student is *probably* guilty of contract cheating, the next step is to inform the student via email that you are referring an allegation of contract cheating to your School's Disciplinary Committee.

You should then complete and submit an Incident Report Form (IRF) to the Conduct Office (conduct@hw.ac.uk) together with the evidence you have gathered. Within the IRF, you must explain why suspicions arose regarding the submission and details of your investigation, along with attached evidence.

With this evidence, the relevant University Committees will interview the students and make a judgement of whether contract cheating has occurred. For further help and advice, contact the central Conduct Office: conduct@hw.ac.uk

Appendix 1

The Informal Interview: Guidance for Staff

When contract cheating is suspected, this interview is an opportunity for you to check student authorship by exploring how the student went about completing the assignment. How well the student answers these questions may determine if a case of contract cheating is to be reported to the Conduct Office. For fairness to the student, the interview should take place as close as possible to the date when suspicions were raised. If grades are due to be released prior to the scheduled interview, these should be withheld for the student in question.

Assessment designs differ greatly depending on the school, programme and course, and so universal interview questions would not be appropriate. However, an interview guide is provided below:

Content	<p>Students should be asked specific questions about the content of their assessments, the key concepts, theories, methods, and techniques, etc., involved. This is particularly important when they have presented unexpected material in their submission. Try to make your questions as specific as possible so that broad answers about a topic do not suffice. If a student is not able to answer these questions clearly, this is a red flag.</p> <p>However, being able to answer questions on the assignment content should not automatically negate suspicions of contract cheating. Like any document, being able to answer questions on its content may simply indicate that they have read it carefully.</p>
Approach	<p>Asking students questions on their approach to completing their assignment are more readily answered by the person who completed the assignment. Questions such as how did they collect their data? Which search terms? Which filters? Which databases? How did they analyse the data? Which methods did they employ? These are often answered poorly by students who have contract cheated. Often guilty students here will simply state "Google" and will not provide any further detail. This is effective for assignments that show great use of modern sources which can only be found using refined search terms and filters.</p>
Language	<p>Freelance writers will have their own writing style which reads like a fingerprint. As such, there may be phrases which seem highly unusual. Asking students to define a phrase they have used in their submission, and why they chose it can be effective confirming suspicions of contract cheating.</p>
Comparisons	<p>If the submission shows significant differences to previous work submitted by the student, in terms of writing style, English grammar and or quality of work, asking about the differences can help determine if contract cheating has occurred. If a reasonable explanation cannot be given, often students confronted with this will admit to having 'some help' from another person.</p>
Direct Questioning	<p>Students should be asked directly if the assessment has been contracted, or if anyone has assisted the student in their writing, research, or calculations. If the author properties are not consistent with the student, they should be asked for an explanation, or if the author properties are blank, then ask why they have been deleted.</p>
<p>Take notes during the interview and produce a short interview record. Bullet-points will usually suffice, rather than detailed notes, as these will be less open to interpretation later. The interview record may form a vital piece of evidence in an allegation of contract cheating.</p>	