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Responsible but powerless: staff qualitative perspectives on cheating in higher education

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Abstract

Teaching staff play a pivotal role in the prevention, detection and management of cheating in higher education. They enact curriculum and assessment design strategies, identify and substantiate suspected cases, and are positioned by many as being on the 'front line' of a battle that threatens to undermine the integrity of higher education. Against this backdrop, the experiences of teaching staff with contract cheating were investigated by a large-scale Australian survey across eight universities. This paper reports on the qualitative findings from the survey's only open-text question: "Is there anything else you would like to tell us?". Of the 1,147 survey respondents, 315 (27.5%) completed this item. Respondents most commonly described contract cheating as a systemic problem, symptomatic of an increasingly commercialised higher education sector. Staff narratives revealed their distancing from, and powerlessness within, their universities, yet clear feelings of responsibility for a problem they struggle to address. Responses did not echo much of the existing literature in reflecting the construct of integrity as a battle between staff and students, but instead framed cheating as an unfortunate, ancillary issue of transactional teaching and assessment practices. This data illustrates a need to re-centre the educative role of teachers when designing institutional strategies that address contract cheating.

Keywords Academic integrity, Academic staff, Commercialisation, Contract cheating, Teaching

Introduction

Since its identification, contract cheating has evolved into a significant interdisciplinary field in higher education, encompassing both research and practice. This field informs institutional strategies, practices to mitigate contract cheating, professional development, and student education (Morris 2020). With many governments enacting legislation to combat commercial cheating industries, and quality assurance agencies establishing legislative standards for higher education providers, contract cheating has become a focal concern in the educational landscape.

In Australia, the location for this study, a series of media scandals in 2015 sparked federal government concerns that students were increasingly using commercial contract

cheating services to complete their assignments, and that universities were failing to detect it. Implications in some of the reporting that international students were amongst the users contributed to those concerns, as higher education was Australia's third largest export industry at the time (behind iron and coal), with international students comprising over 25% of the higher education population. The prospect of reputational or economic damage to universities, or the Australian higher education sector more broadly, by a narrative that suggested compromised integrity led to widespread investment in understanding and addressing the issue of contract cheating at national and local levels.

Demands on academics have expanded in parallel, with their roles given new administrative, research and pedagogical dimensions requiring new and evolving skills and resources. Their work requires a growing knowledge base that includes contemporary student behaviours that can undermine educational integrity, the individual, attitudinal and contextual factors that can motivate these behaviours, and security threats and cheating opportunities that may exist in the teaching and learning environment. This knowledge must then be applied in designing an engaging and supportive learning environment that develops students' academic integrity and academic practice (Gottardello and Karabag 2022), acknowledges and scaffolds students' diverse academic and linguistic abilities (Bretag et al. 2019; Slade et al. 2019), and utilises assessment practices that are authentic and meaningful, and as secure as practicable (Ellis et al. 2018; Dawson 2021).

For the most part these teaching and learning activities align with teachers' conceptions of their professional identity (Lynch et al. 2021). Less well understood is how teaching staff perceive their role in detecting and managing contract cheating and other forms of academic misconduct, particularly in an environment where academic misconduct responsibilities are increasingly distributed across different institutional roles (Ahuna, Frankovitch and Murphy 2023; Vogt and Eaton 2022). These roles may include faculty-based and/or centralised teams of academic integrity specialists who provide policy leadership, staff training, student education, or have responsibility for aspects of academic misconduct investigation and management. Roles may also include more senior academics to whom teachers are required to delegate certain forms of academic misconduct.

Research into the institutional management of academic misconduct has focussed on the development of policies and procedures to prevent, detect and respond to incidents (Birks et al. 2020; Bretag and Mahmud 2014; Stoesz et al. 2019). These policies and procedures typically position teaching staff as having a policing role that feels inconsistent with and even anathema to their conceptualisations of their role and identity as facilitators of learning. For instance, in a comparative study across six countries, Gottardello and Karabag (2022) found that academics are often required to adopt the role of 'intimidator' to ensure students understand the consequences of academic misconduct. With the rise of contract cheating, the act of evaluating assessment tasks has increasingly become infused with a level of suspicion, as evidence suggests that the detection rate of contract cheating improves when academic staff maintain awareness of its potential occurrence (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith 2018; 2019). The gathering of evidence to identify and substantiate a case can require quasi-forensic processes such as linguistic and stylometric analyses (Ison 2020; Mellar et al. 2018), nuanced interpretation of text-matching software reports (Bretag and Mahmud 2009; Lancaster and Clarke 2014), scrutiny of document metadata (Johnson and Davies 2020), and surveillance of Learning

Management System traffic to leverage information on user IP addresses (Dawson 2021). All this occurs against a backdrop of challenging organisational conditions that include dwindling resources, increasing workloads and increasing casualisation (Amigud and Pell 2021; Birks et al. 2020; Harper et al. 2019; De Maio et al. 2020).

In addition to their roles in teaching, learning and detection, teaching staff have been described by some as 'morally responsible' (Sattler et al. 2017, 1128) for the ongoing problem of student cheating, with others suggesting that a failure to prevent and detect academic misconduct actively is indicative of 'staff laziness' and 'lack of creativity' (Walker and White 2014, 679). Some of the language used in the literature frames the problem as a combative one and positions teaching staff as the 'guardians of integrity' (Amigud and Pell 2022, 312) who are on the front line (Burrus et al. 2015, p. 100; Singh and Bennington 2012, 115), 'in the trenches' (Atkinson et al. 2016, 197), in an 'arms race' (Birks et al. 2020, p. 13) and 'waging a losing battle' (Asefa and Coalter 2007, p. 43) against academic misconduct. The combatants portrayed in this war seem to be the teaching staff and students, staring at each other across a moral divide. Given the critical task of teaching staff to address contract cheating, the ways in which they make sense of and navigate their competing roles and responsibilities needs to be better understood.

The project reported in this paper was part of a nationally funded research project entitled *Contract Cheating and Assessment Design: Exploring the Connection*, which conducted parallel staff and student surveys at 12 Australian higher education institutions, including 8 universities, between October and December 2016. The surveys addressed four research questions:

1. How prevalent is contract cheating in Australian universities?
2. Is there a relationship between cheating behaviours and sharing behaviours?
3. What are university staff experiences with and attitudes towards contract cheating and other forms of outsourcing?
4. What are the individual, contextual and institutional factors that are correlated with contract cheating and other forms of outsourcing?

This paper reports only on the data gathered from the 8 universities. Notably, the data were collected at a time before the COVID-19 pandemic prompted an emergency pivot in teaching and assessment, and most significantly prior to the emergence of Large Language Model Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI). However, we assert that the fundamental challenges of 'cheating' remain the same, and that the organisational conditions and staff experiences illustrated here are only likely to have intensified as a result of the disruptions experienced since 2016.

Method

The staff survey contained 64 items and 63 of those generated quantitative data using either nominal or ordinal scales (5 point Likert scales). The findings from those items were reported in a previous paper (Harper et al. 2019). The questions were phrased to allow responses from people in a range of teaching roles, including casual tutors, lecturers and subject coordinators. The final item of the survey was open-response and used the following prompt: "Is there anything else you would like to tell us?" It was designed to provide data that may describe and explain the study's quantitative findings, and to provide an opportunity to unearth new ways of understanding an evolving phenomenon.

The survey was constructed online using Qualtrics, with piloting conducted and ethics approvals obtained at the lead institution[1]. On endorsement from participating universities, a link to the survey was distributed and promoted through each university's staff communication channels. A convenience sampling method was used given the two-year funding constraints of the project, and the fact that it would have been prohibitively time-consuming to coordinate random sampling at all eight participating universities. Of the 1,147 respondents to the staff survey, 27.5% ($n=315$) provided answers to the open-response item (see Table 1 for selected demographic data). When compared to the demographic profile of all respondents to the survey, females were slightly less likely to answer the qualitative item, as were those teaching primarily in face-to-face mode, and non-academics. There was also some variability across the disciplines.

Responses from this item were added to NVivo 12, and a two-phase coding approach, derived from grounded theory, was used to code them (Charmaz 2006). This approach is concerned with identifying actions in the data rather than topic areas, the aim being to develop an understanding of what is *happening* in the respondents' settings. In the initial phase of categorising, labelling and summarising segments of the data, respondents' 'telling terms' (Charmaz 2006) were used as much as possible to create in-vivo codes. During this phase, seven invalid responses or those not addressing the question (e.g. 'nothing to add', 'the survey was too long') were removed. During the focussed coding phase, attention was given to respondents' points of view (e.g. use of first, second and third person) and grammatical voice (active or passive) to identify the subjects and

Table 1 Selected demographic details of qualitative item respondents compared to survey respondents overall

	Survey ***n*** **= 1,147**	**Open text item** ***n*** **= 315**		**Survey** ***n*** **= 1,147**	**Open text item** ***n*** **= 315**
Gender			**Programs taught ***		
Female	59.2%	56.4%	Pathway/Foundation	7.1%	9.1%
Male	39.2%	41.4%	Undergraduate	68.7%	84.3%
Other	0.3%	0%	PG Coursework	35.8%	50.5%
Prefer not to say	1.3%	1.6%	PG Research	28.4%	33.5%
Main campus location			**Main teaching mode**		
Work from home	8.0%	10.0%	Internal (F2F)	61.4%	56.7%
Metropolitan	83.1%	81.8%	External (online only)	4.5%	5.6%
Rural/regional	8.5%	7.5%	Blended	34.1%	37.3%
Transnational	0.4%	0%			
Discipline			**Employment type**		
Health Sciences	21.1%	19.7%	Continuing	48.7%	49.5%
Education	13.7%	12.9%	Fixed-term	21.4%	21.9%
Business & Commerce	13.4%	13.2%	Casual/Sessional	29.9%	28.2%
Architecture & Buildings	1.7%	0.9%	Level of employment	16.0%	12.2%
Arts/Humanities	10.0%	11.9%	Non-academic	11.9%	14.4%
Creative Arts/Performance	1.7%	1.9%	Associate Lecturer	21.9%	21.0%
Earth and Env. Sciences	2.4%	2.8%	Lecturer	18.7%	22.3%
Engineering	6.0%	7.5%	Senior Lecturer	7.5%	8.8%
IT	2.7%	1.9%	Associate Professor	6.4%	5.0%
Law	5.7%	6.0%	Professor	17.5%	14.7%
Maths	2.4%	1.6%	Not sure		
Media/Comm. Studies	1.3%	1.9%			
Science	10.2%	7.8%			
Other	7.8%	8.2%			

* Respondents were asked to select all that applied, so responses total more than 100%

[1] Ethics approval was granted by the lead institution's E1 Committee Review Group (Ethics ID: 35921).

objects involved in the situations described, and the respondents' standpoints in relation to these. Linguistic elements such as these are an important focal for critical discourse analysis (for example, see Fairclough 1989, 1995), as they can highlight matters of identity, group identification and relationships, including power relations. Given the research broadly sought to understand contract cheating behaviour and its drivers, the social dynamics and meanings that can be illuminated through linguistic analysis are very relevant.

The most common themes were used to analyse and synthesise the initial codes. Where the original NVivo codes remained representative of the synthesised data, they were retained as node labels. The responses were coded into nine 'parent' nodes (each with a range of 'child' nodes) and eight small outlier nodes that could not be synthesised. Data was coded against all nodes that applied. The four most common parent nodes are discussed in this paper. In the findings below, words and phrases taken directly from the data are indicated in 'inverted commas'. This reporting approach has been used to demonstrate the diversity of statements from which the themes were derived. Drawing on Glaser and Strauss (1967), Charmaz and Thornberg (2020) highlight that descriptions of data that are 'detailed' and 'vivid' enough to enable readers to 'hear and see the participants' contribute to credibility in grounded theory research (314), which the researchers' qualitative approaches are informed by.

Findings

The four most common nodes are shown in Table 2, representing 71% of all responses.

Cheating is aided by university priorities

The most common theme in responses was the attribution of blame, specifically towards 'institutions' and 'universities' (n = 122). Responses most commonly linked contract cheating to:

(1) 'efficiencies' in teaching and assessment practices, including reduction of resources;
(2) contradictions between public/policy 'rhetoric' and practices on the ground, and.
(3) commercialisation of higher education, which included the retention of students 'at all costs'.

Teaching and learning 'efficiencies' were discussed in almost half of the responses in this node. Staff described a general 'reduction' in resourcing for teaching, and more specifically 'large class sizes', 'reduced contact time', and 'inadequate' marking time. Moreover, prevention, monitoring and investigation of contract cheating were reportedly not 'mentioned', 'included', or 'recognised' in workload models. This was particularly the case for

Table 2 The four most common participant response nodes

Parent node	Description	Files	References
Cheating is aided by university priorities	Universities create an environment in which academic integrity suffers and cheating thrives	122 38.7%	268
Prevention of contract cheating	Strategies for minimising contract cheating, both perceived and personally used	116 36.8%	182
Detecting contract cheating	Strategies for detecting contract cheating, both perceived and personally used	95 30.2%	146
Students cheat because…	Reasons for student cheating related to motivations and opportunities	93 29.5%	160

casual/sessional staff in the context of marking, as they already 'skim read', 'mark quickly', and 'struggle' to stay within a 'pathetic' time per student 'allocation'.

In addition, respondents described 'guidelines', 'pressure' or a 'requirement' to 'reduce the number of assessments' in subjects. Related to this was the pressure to use certain assessment types – specifically group work, online quizzes and exams – in order to 'reduce workload' or 'get the work done' within resourcing constraints. The result is that only 'obvious' or 'glaring' breaches are detected, and there was a feeling that much of what occurs 'goes under the radar'. Moreover, when breaches are identified, some staff actively 'avoid' referring cases to a decision-maker due to the 'significant' and 'additional' workload involved in the investigation process.

Over one-third of responses in this node also pointed to this environment to highlight contradictions between institutions' policy 'rhetoric' and practices on the ground. Staff described an atmosphere of 'hypocrisy', in which cases are regularly 'swept under the carpet', 'dismissed', or subject to outcomes that are 'too lenient', despite policies that are 'tough on cheating', as exemplified by the following excerpt:

> *Why do we even have these policies in place if they are never actually enforced?*

Related problems identified pertained to 'consistency' and 'collaborative effort' among staff, whereby 'some' staff, the 'same staff every semester', 'take the issues very seriously' while others do not 'hold the line'. Some raised the absence of any 'recognition' or 'reward' for 'doing the right thing' as a 'disincentive' to acting on suspected cases. Some also suggested that an over-reliance on student evaluations for 'performance review', 'promotion' and 'contract renewal' means that it is 'to people's advantage' to do nothing. A small number of staff even reported being 'discouraged', 'resisted', 'penalised', 'bullied', 'vilified', and 'labelled as trouble-makers' by managers for pursuing suspected breaches.

A further third of responses in this node related these conditions to increasing commercialisation in the higher education sector. They cited 'market share', 'rankings', 'income', 'profitability', 'funds', 'KPIs', and 'bums on seats' to suggest that the need or desire for income led universities to 'turn a blind eye' to contract cheating. The following respondents' comments are indicative of the responses in this node:

> *I cannot help but think that economic strains on universities created by the defunding of higher education provide strong disincentives to fail or punish any students, especially full fee paying students. This is inadvertently creating a culture of academic misconduct that goes unpunished and ultimately means that universities are graduating students who do not possess the relevant knowledge or skills of their degrees.*
>
> *The upsurge in third-party cheating is due to students' perception of university degrees as a commercial transaction due to university management's focus on the business of education, such that marketing of university 'products' becomes more important than the education process itself. By tying of university degrees with permanent residency, the Government is complicit in this focus on the business of education.*

Clearly evident in these extracts (in the phrases 'full fee paying' and 'permanent residency') is also an implicit linking together of a commercialised sector and contract cheating with international students.

The language used in this node is worth noting. Staff referred to 'the' university more than five times as often as 'my' university, and sometimes spoke of the institution/university 'I work at'. In addition, there was very little use of the first person 'we' to describe the features or actions of the universities staff belonged to. The university was discussed in the third person, and often as a subject taking action: the university 'accepted the student's defence', 'does not allow enough time', 'sends confused messages', 'would blame me'. The grammatical choices in these narratives served to distance staff from their universities, indicating that they did not see themselves as complicit in the settings they described.

Prevention of contract cheating

The second most common theme among respondents was the sharing of preventative strategies ($n=116$). Just over half of these responses were based on *perceptions* of useful strategies, and the remainder were descriptions of strategies that respondents were implementing in practice. A total of 18 strategies were *perceived* to be useful, most commonly 'assessment design', academic skills development, and education in 'ethics', 'values' and 'integrity', both 'academic' and 'professional'. No single strategy was raised by a critical mass of respondents. The most common (assessment design) was discussed by only 18 respondents in this node, indicating that there is a wide range of views on approaches that might be preventative.

Among respondents who discussed strategies that they were implementing in practice, a similarly wide range of 13 strategies were discussed. The most common, discussed by 17 staff, was 'getting to know' students. This was closely followed by the related strategy of 'in-class assessment', often employed by respondents as a means for getting to know students. This was described as good educational practice, in that the 'formation of positive relationships' helps a teacher become familiar with students' 'interests', 'abilities', and 'voice', as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> *If you connect with the students and allow them to feel comfortable with making mistakes/asking questions in non-assessable forums, then you gain trust. The students feel like they can "risk" being themselves, rather than purchasing/ borrowing the previously successful work of others.*

There were no responses describing strategies that had been evaluated and shown to reduce cases of contract cheating. This was a notable silence in the narratives, which provided a picture of activity without a corresponding picture of impact. In a few responses this silence was given voice: 'I try', 'I hope', 'I have made a greater effort', 'I have endeavoured to', 'I think I have better control', but 'I can't be sure that it's working'.

The language used in this node is markedly different from that used in the previous one. Here, the first-person pronoun 'we' was used to discuss staff as a collective and indicate that 'we' (teachers) 'need to' and 'should' take action: 'wake up to new assessment procedures', 'look more at assessments', 'be setting new exams every year', or 'focussing on the morality of it'. So, while staff did not position themselves as responsible for their institutional conditions, they did describe themselves as having a commitment to, and a clear role in, the prevention of contract cheating.

Detection of contract cheating

The third most common theme among respondents was the detection of contract cheating ($n=95$). Almost half of the responses in this node discussed *methods* of detection, typically ones that they were using in practice. For most, these were based on getting to know students, thus showing a significant degree of overlap with the previous node. Staff narratives illustrated that they draw on a range of 'contextual data' to 'alert' them to the suspicion that a student is 'incapable' of working with the 'precision' shown in their submitted work. They look for 'uncharacteristic' work, a 'mismatch' or 'disparity' between 'drafts' and 'completed assignments', between 'in-class work' and 'submitted assessment', between 'tutorial and exam marks', between 'performance in workshops', 'class discussions' and 'final assignments', and between 'faltering oral language' and 'perfect flowing written language'. Many respondents, however, expressed frustration that this form of evidence was not considered 'concrete' or 'rock solid' enough to substantiate a case at their universities, as in the following example:

> *I feel there is not enough recognition of individual tutors as teaching professionals who not only hold expertise in their areas but who also spend weeks developing relationships with and becoming aware of the capabilities of individual students in their classes. This should mean if alarm bells are raised when a piece of work contrasts significantly with what they know about a student through their in-class observations and discussions then their concerns should at least be acknowledged; for instance by keeping a record for later follow up should concerns be raised.*

This creates a somewhat paradoxical situation:

> *Third party cheating, while sometimes easy to identify, is incredibly difficult to prove.*

Woven through these responses were other common themes: that contract cheating is 'difficult to detect', and that text-matching software is 'limited'. These narratives described situations in which universities' processes for detecting and managing cases gave priority to evidence from text-matching tools and, when such evidence was lacking, cases were dismissed.

> *An example I can think of where I suspected third party cheating was impossible to prove as it had a very low match on [text-matching software].*

Staff expressed frustration because text-matching software 'does not make it clear', 'does not have the capability', and 'is useless', suggesting they were not equipped with appropriate strategies for 'proving' or substantiating cases of contract cheating.

Some respondents reported that drawing on staff knowledge of students' abilities in order to substantiate cases of contract cheating needed to be recognised and written into university policies and procedures in order for it to be allowable, as in the following examples:

> *The assessment of integrity is completely wrong. Instead of a quasi-court case to demonstrate cheating, with the burden of proof resting on the shoulders of the academic to demonstrate wrong doing, a quick testing of knowledge of the material would be much more straightforward and relevant.*

In these contexts, the teacher was positioned more as an investigator than an assessor of academic integrity. Their role as an educator – to assess students' abilities to meet the subject or program learning outcomes – did not appear to have *value* in the context of academic integrity inquiries.

Some narratives indicated other approaches that staff relied on to provide evidence of their suspicions:

> *There is very little ability to substantiate my suspicions unless a student confesses when interviewed.*
> *I did spend a considerable amount of time trying to match the submitted assignment with any online or other sources I could locate in the area but to no avail.*
> *I only check the higher (30%+) similarity reports because we do not get any time allocated to that at all.*

The narratives described scenes in which teachers, constrained by workload and professional expertise or experience, were struggling to reach the standards of evidence required to substantiate cases of contract cheating at their institutions.

The language used in the detection node therefore expressed an undercurrent of disempowerment. Similar to the first node, when staff referred to their institutions they referred to 'the' university six times as often as 'my' university. This again reflects a distancing from institutional conditions surrounding the detection and management of contract cheating and underpins concerns about 'ineffectual' processes that overlook the critical role of teacher knowledge. However, there was extensive use of the first person 'we' to discuss actions that should be or are being taken to detect and manage contract cheating: 'we' are 'making changes', 'using tools', 'encouraging students', 'missing some', and 'not detecting it'. But also 'we are given no training', 'we get no specific hours', 'we do not get any time', and similarly, 'I would like us to be able to …'. It appears that staff do understand themselves to be part of a collective, and one that is responsible for the detection and management of contract cheating. However, they see their roles operating within a larger context that does not adequately share and support that responsibility.

Students cheat because

The fourth most common theme among respondents was factors that 'enable' or 'prompt' students to engage in contract cheating ($n=93$). A total of 15 reasons were given, indicating a wide range of views. The most common, shared by 27 respondents, was that students are 'unclear' about appropriate assignment practices because they are 'poorly prepared', 'lacking' in academic confidence, don't have sufficient 'English competence', or 'do not see' certain practices – particularly collaboration and sharing – as cheating. Almost all these responses expressed a great deal of empathy for students as in the following example:

> *I couldn't say that I strongly agreed that cheating at uni is wrong, I do think it is wrong but I very much understand the factors that may influence a student to cheat. Pressure to pass from family and society, poor literacy, being time poor, panicking at the last minute etc., etc. I always deal with it 'softly' in the first instance with a strong warning followed by very close attention to subsequent work.*

The second most common reason given for student cheating in this node was assessment design, thereby drawing students' actions back to the broader institutional context in which they are situated. Similarly, 16 responses in this node drew explicit links between student behaviours and the commercialised higher education environment that so many staff saw as 'aiding' cheating:

> *As the price of university courses increase, the marginal cost of having someone else do on-line courses for you decreases … Students can get a job and earn rather than wasting time studying, and finish with a lower debt than the economically irrational students who actually turned up to class.*

Again, these responses were largely expressed with empathy, or at the very least a sense of pragmatism, recognising that the economic positioning of universities effects not only the institutional teaching and learning contexts in which students are studying, but the motivations of students themselves.

Across all responses over 10% of comments ($n=33$) made direct reference to international students, with respondents expressing their perception that international students cheat more often than domestic students. This was frequently attributed to 'poor', 'inadequate' and even 'dire' standards of 'written English' and 'academic English' particularly when students are 'under pressure'. International students were also described as having multiple 'extenuating circumstances', including a lack of knowledge of referencing conventions, 'family and financial pressures', and unscaffolded immersion into an 'unaccustomed' Western context of academic practice. Responsibility for this was attributed to a higher education system experiencing 'economic strains' due to 'defunding' and therefore 'enslaved by the income' derived from 'full fee-paying students'. This reliance on income has implications for the way universities respond to cheating by international students. Staff reported decision makers 'turning a blind eye' with 'inadequate' and 'lenient' outcomes such as 'a rap on the hand' or 'a slap on the wrist'.

Of the four thematic nodes discussed above, one respondent's narrative usefully captures them all, and the relationships and interdependencies between them:

> *In my discipline we have the largest numbers of students, the greatest numbers of international students, and staff who are overworked and not supported by the faculty and institution to design appropriate assessment or stamp out this behaviour. It would be a dream to be able to individualise assessment tasks or have an innovative approach where students can be assessed in class doing individual oral presentations. We make do…but the most frustrating thing is that when we do identify third party cheating (which I believe is only the tip of the iceberg - some years ago a past international student told me what the "industry" was like and how much they could make completing assignments for others), the follow up takes a minimalist approach to penalties. Despite collecting copious amounts of evidence, and the enormous emotional and time drain to prepare these reports, management usually let students off - or find they have no case to answer. I would like to see more action on changing the culture by starting at the top - they need to be more accountable… but it needs to be in the form of an official audit (regularly - not just when accreditation time comes around) - totally over the 'talk fest' and lack of commitment.*

This particular response evidences desire ('it would be a dream') and emotional commitment to the moral purpose of higher education. It attests to unrewarded commitment to piecing cases together, and then frustration at perceived failures in decision-making when students are 'let off' in the face of good evidence. And it expresses an 'us' versus 'them' positioning, not in regard to the students, but in relation to university management.

Discussion

This analysis aimed to extend understandings of contract cheating from the existing literature and those developed by this study's quantitative analysis of survey data. Specifically, this paper sought to explore factors that contribute to contract cheating and staff experiences and attitudes with contract cheating and other forms of outsourcing and sharing. The quantitative analysis (Harper et al. 2019) highlighted that 67.6% of respondents had identified suspected contract cheating on at least one occasion, signalled mainly by their knowledge of students' abilities. Yet 44.2% of those staff typically did not refer the cases for formal investigation, mainly due to a perception that it would be impossible to prove. More broadly, staff reported four organisational factors in particular were impeding the prevention of contract cheating at their universities; in addition to insufficient workload for teaching, the data indicated that a lack of recognition and reward and the use of performance management and student evaluations of teaching may be disincentivising their actions to minimise contract cheating.

The central and unifying theme in the qualitative data elaborated on issues such as these, illustrating the broader contextual landscape in which they are situated. Staff described contract cheating as a systemic problem, symptomatic of an increasingly commercialised higher education sector in which a range of factors in the macro environment contribute to contract cheating and other forms of academic misconduct. Financial imperatives to admit and retain more students, particularly those who pay fees, place downward pressure on standards, leading to increasing numbers of students who are unable to pass without significant assistance – authorised or otherwise. The same financial pressures often lead to managerial interventions in curriculum and assessment that aim to minimise the costs of teaching but have the effect of obstructing staff from engaging in practices that help to prevent and detect contract cheating. These interventions were labelled 'efficiencies' by one respondent, and highlighted in inverted commas, to signal their ironic and oppositional reading of the term, a reading implicitly echoed in the narratives of others. The data formed a picture of disingenuous institutional settings, in which staff are not always supported to, held accountable for, or recognised for upholding institutional policy, and so feel a sense of distance from and alienation within their universities, a feeling echoed in a Canadian study of academics' experiences of managing academic misconduct (Robinson and Openo 2021). Academics from five of six countries investigated in Gottardello and Karabag's study (2022) similarly reported that academic misconduct requires holistic approaches, yet the issue of inadequate institutional support persists, in addition to a lack of agreement about the roles and responsibilities of those who teach.

Comments by respondents illustrate an incongruity in the espoused objectives of higher education where academic integrity as a fundamental value does not appear to be upheld by all stakeholders. Staff describe displacement from their status within

an academic community to a distanced and disempowered position within the corporate university and its managerial models. Moreover, commodification has positioned students as 'customers', consumers of credentials as a product, therefore at odds with faculty expectations of learning and education as a mutually experienced process. The adoption of the Neoliberal model of higher education has resulted in a shift in the structure of, and power relationships within, organisations leading to a "transformation from knowledge generation to service delivery with multiple and often conflicting objectives" (Nadolny and Ryan, 2015, 143).

Against this backdrop, staff sought to describe what it is they are doing – or felt they could or should be doing – to prevent and detect contract cheating. Staff who drew on perceptions rather than experience tended to advocate for 'assessment design', academic skills development for students, and education in 'academic' and 'professional' 'ethics', 'values' and 'integrity'. Staff who drew on their own experience instead advocated for 'getting to know' students, often through 'in-class assessment'; importantly, this was the strategy most commonly linked to the detection of contract cheating in this study's quantitative data (Harper et al. 2019). Worth noting is that these strategies aligned with their professional identities as teachers as noted by Lynch et al. (2021), rather than with more imposed positionings as gatekeepers or police.

Staff expressed frustration at institutional processes that do not readily acknowledge teacher expertise in the investigation and decision-making process. What teachers can contribute to a contract cheating investigation is an evaluation of a student's ability to meet the assessed learning outcomes. For example, an informal viva that probes aspects of a suspicious assignment can trigger an investigation and contribute to a suite of evidence that, on the balance of probabilities, will substantiate a case of contract cheating (Ellis et al. 2020). Teaching staff responses, however, described institutional processes in which teacher judgement was regarded with suspicion, or treated as less valid than other forms of evidence. There is an implication that teacher expertise is less trustworthy than a text-matching score, a student confession, or a transaction invoice, and therefore not robust enough to stand up to external scrutiny.

Recent work by Ellis and Murdoch (2024) provides a new lens with which to consider the distribution of staff responsibilities: the educational integrity enforcement pyramid. Drawing on regulation theory and assessment security research, they suggest that approaches for preventing, detecting, and managing academic integrity breaches on the one hand and contract cheating on the other should be qualitatively different. As contract cheating is undertaken by students who are unwilling and possibly unable to engage in the required learning, more formalised and punitive strategies are needed. Academic integrity breaches are typically seen in the work of students who are attempting to learn but may be confused or careless, so approaches that include monitoring, education and academic skills development are appropriate: situated primarily with teachers. Automated breach detection using big data and a specialised workforce, they argue, are critical for ensuring each layer of the pyramid is appropriately delegated, resourced, and supported. Approaches should also ensure adequate professional development for those in specialised roles (Vogt and Eaton 2022).

Given the institutional contexts described, in which teaching and assessment are tightly prescribed and staff often feel disempowered and devalued, it would be unsurprising to see narratives in which staff absolve themselves of responsibility for contract

cheating and adopt a position of helplessness. It would also be unsurprising to see them turn their frustration toward students. Staff who responded to this survey did neither. Respondents, on the whole, adopted and welcomed responsibility for preventing and detecting contract cheating. Moreover, their comments even demonstrated a sometimes fatigued, usually pragmatic, empathy for the students. This contrasts with the portrayal in the literature of staff and students as adversaries in the "battle" over academic integrity and the rising tide of cheating. Eaton (2021) notes that this portrayal "propagates the kind of moral binaries and adversarial relationships with students that we need to avoid" (174).

The language of the comments provided by respondents creates a narrative of distance from 'the' university, disempowerment in their 'work', marginalisation in their contribution to pedagogical decision-making, and frustration with the zeitgeist of an increasingly massified and commercialised higher education sector. This contrasts somewhat with a US study (Ahuna, Frankovitch and Murphy 2023), which found that faculty staff felt more autonomy in their work than administrators in determining where and how to focus their time in addressing academic misconduct, which led to an increased sense of agency. Yet some of those same staff also identified a lack of support from line managers and recognition from the institution that they have relevant expertise to contribute.

Drawing parallels with other literature, the comments in this study describe some of the key antecedents of 'burnout'. This presents a significant risk to the sector and its ability to manage contract cheating. It is therefore worth considering how our data might be understood when theories of 'burnout' are applied. Research on burnout and demoralisation provides a set of lenses that can be applied to our data to highlight the status of academic work life as it relates to academic misconduct. Maslach and Leiter (2008) identified six dimensions of the psychosocial experience of work life: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. They describe an individual's psychological relationship to their work on a spectrum from 'engagement', when a person has energy, resilience, sense of efficacy and fulfilment, to 'burnout' where they usually exhibit emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional efficiency (Maslach et al. 2012, 296–297). Santoro (2019) proposes a position of 'demoralisation' that we suggest may occur as a midpoint along this spectrum:

> *Burnout implies there is nothing left ("spent and done"), whereas demoralisation acknowledges the passion and energy remaining in the frustration of dissonance between their value/ethics and the created circumstances (Santoro 2019, p. 30).*

Our respondents' relationships to work could be understood as being impacted by the six dimensions of the psychosocial experience of work, and also by the macro higher education environment.

It is vital to note that this data was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the long-term effects of this on the sector remain to be seen. The widespread re-evaluation of work across all sectors drove increased disengagement, demoralisation and burnout, leading to what was dubbed 'The Great Resignation' (Sull, Sull and Zweig 2022). If teaching staff have been reconsidering their roles and identities within academic work life post-COVID, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence which enables cheating on an unprecedented scale presents a significant risk. Our data suggests that without systemic change that recognises the symptomatic nature of contract cheating and other threats

to integrity, teachers' commitment to education, and belief in the inherent value of the work they do may be entirely corroded.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations, in addition to the collection period of the data. The use of convenience sampling can impact the dependability of data, as respondents may be those who hold strong views about a topic, contributing to potential bias. The survey's design (63 quantitative items followed by an open, qualitative item) may also have led to suggestibility bias, in which the quantitative items led respondents to focus on or ignore certain topics in the qualitative item. While there were four main nodes as discussed here, the remaining 29% of the data spanned a long tail across five parent nodes and eight additional child nodes, each with low numbers of respondents. This breadth may indicate that suggestibility bias is of limited concern. The opportunity presented by the funding to gather a rich and extensive dataset about contract cheating led researchers to develop an extensive survey that incorporated as much extant knowledge as practicable into the survey items. This coverage may also have contributed to the breadth of responses.

Another potential limitation is the distinctive context of Australian higher education where the study took place, which may limit its transferability. For example, the extent to which Neoliberalism and managerialism are impacting the educational environment will likely vary significantly from country to country, and with that teachers' experiences of autonomy and agency. Australian universities are regulated by legislation which specifies minimum quality standards for higher education providers and their courses,[2] and subject to performance-based funding from the federal government. Ensuring ongoing compliance and funding means that designing assessment across a program of learning is a highly co-ordinated activity, and individual academics are rarely provided complete autonomy by their institution's assessment design policies, a feature that will only increase as the sector moves to adopt programmatic assessment in response to Generative AI (for example see Charlton and Newsham-West 2022).[3]

Conclusion

This paper extended the quantitative findings of a large-scale survey on contract cheating by analysing responses to one open-text item: "Is there anything else you would like to tell us?". The responses collectively provided a rich illustration of staff experiences with and attitudes towards contract cheating and other forms of academic misconduct (research question 3), and some of the individual, contextual and institutional factors that are correlated with its occurrence and management (research question 4). In academics' accounts of managing contract cheating in higher education, we see a group of staff who are positioned as guardians of integrity but unable to meet the myriad demands that this requires. Their message is 'we make do', which articulates that desire and a commitment to quality and integrity remain, but that the environment has intensified their workloads, depleted both their control and reward, eroded their sense of fairness and

[2] The legislation is the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021*, available here: https://www.teqsa.gov.au/how-we-regulate/higher-education-standards-framework-2021.

[3] Australia's national higher education regulator, TEQSA, have provided advice to universities to adopt programmatic assessment approaches in the following resource: https://www.teqsa.gov.au/guides-resources/resources/corporate-publications/assessment-reform-age-artificial-intelligence.

community, and challenged their values. The longstanding 'battle' metaphor in academic integrity discourse has traditionally pitted staff against students. The narratives in this data, however, suggest instead that the battle they wage is against the organisational and operational effects of an increasingly commercialised higher education sector.

The data provides new insights into the organisational ecosystems that support academic integrity, and help to illuminate why teachers do not consistently report suspected misconduct and often feel let down when they do. Although many institutions in Australia and worldwide now have designated and specialised roles for managing different aspects of academic misconduct, including contract cheating, the data from this and more recent studies suggests that the distribution of roles and responsibilities is not always clear or agreed, or adequately supported with appropriate expertise, resourcing, workload, training or decision-making authority – the components that would demonstrate a fully enacted organisational commitment to academic integrity. This means that in addition to a range of educational roles, discussed further below, staff are trying to play a contract cheating detection and reporting role. While they may well be in the best position to discern inconsistencies between students' capabilities and their submitted work, this method of detection relies upon staff and students having sufficient time for connection to enable staff to get to know them. Given the impact of managerial efficiencies on the relationality of teaching, detection using this method is likely to be limited and uneven. Moreover, the increasing use of institutional system data to flag potential contract cheating far more efficiently and at scale should prompt a reconsideration of whether the detection of contract cheating is an effective use of teachers' time.

Given that, for many teachers, this kind of policing role sits uncomfortably with their identity as educators, it would seem ideal to delegate the systematic detection and management of contract cheating to specialised staff, as described by the work of Ellis and Murdoch (2024). Where teachers do have a role is academic integrity and academic practice education, and assessment design. However, this study demonstrates that they may need clearer, evidence-based guidance about what that should include. Universities must also therefore ensure that teachers are incentivised and supported to engage in ongoing professional learning about the prevention of contract cheating, and encouraged to take an appropriate role in detecting and managing other forms of academic misconduct. Universities therefore need to have adequate in-house expertise to guide this work, clear and efficient reporting mechanisms, workload allocations that account for the academic misconduct tasks, and a performance review and reward environment that recognises good practice and holds accountable those who do not contribute to enforcing policies. While the role of teachers is vital, a systemic problem requires systemic solutions which go beyond the role of the teacher and encompass university leadership, management, and other support staff.

Abbreviations

GenAI Generative Artificial Intelligence
KPIs Key Performance Indicators

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Author contributions

The lead author conducted the data coding and prepared the findings. Both authors reviewed and analysed those findings and contributed equally to the text.

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Data availability
The data cannot be made available as there are identifiable comments within many participants' responses and they cannot feasibly be removed due to the size of the dataset.

Declarations

Competing interests
None to declare.

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