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'We' share but 'They' cheat: student qualitative perspectives on cheating in higher education

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Abstract

This paper addresses the marked absence of student voices in contemporary research on academic integrity, and in doing so challenges a number of persistent ideas about cheating in higher education. We report the qualitative findings from a large-scale survey of Australian university students ($n = 14,086$), in which 4,915 students responded to one open-text item: 'Is there anything else you want to tell us about cheating in higher education?'. Responses indicated that the survey's focus on 'contract cheating' was misdirected, reporting that other forms of cheating are far more prevalent and accepted as behavioural and ethical norms. Most critically, responses articulated a 'we' group (domestic students) and a 'they' group (international students) and their behaviours – while similar – were judged differently. The 'we' group described their participation in a social economy of assessment, through which students share assignments and work together to 'help each other'. The 'they' group, in contrast, were described as outsourcing assignments and relying on others to 'probably cheat'. Evidence of othering and double standards reflected a racist discourse, and indicated a potential relationship between the social and academic exclusion of international students in Australia and commercial contract cheating, the scandalisation of which we aim to challenge in this paper.

Keywords: Academic integrity, Contract cheating, Assignment outsourcing, International students

Introduction

Since contract cheating was first identified as a phenomenon (Clarke and Lancaster 2006), research has focussed on understanding its prevalence and the factors that influence it. Prevalence varies widely according to discipline (Bretag et al. 2019a; Foltýnek and Králíková 2018), country (Awdry 2021a; Newton 2018), and student population (Bretag et al. 2019a; Rigby et al. 2015; Curtis et al. 2021). Prevalence also varies according to how contract cheating is defined, with the prevailing discourse emphasising its commercial manifestations. Commercial contract cheating, Newton argues (2018, 2), is 'qualitatively different' to plagiarism or collusion, as it indicates

the behaviour is 'deliberate, pre-planned and intentional'. This view reflects much of the research, good-practice advice and institutional policy on contract cheating.

In Australia, studies suggest that 2–8% of university students have engaged in commercial contract cheating (Bretag et al. 2019a; Curtis et al. 2021). Contributing factors include dissatisfaction with teaching and learning (Bretag et al. 2019a), and perceptions that there are opportunities to cheat (Bretag et al. 2019a; Curtis and Clare 2017), but the most commonly reported factor is speaking a language other than English (LOTE) (Bretag et al. 2019a; Rigby et al. 2015; Curtis et al. 2021). Perhaps as a result, international students are over-represented in students' self-reports of contract cheating (Bretag et al., 2019a), and in university staff perceptions of who is most likely to engage in commercial contract cheating (Awdry and Newton, 2019).

Commercial contract cheating is supported by a range of industries and platforms including custom academic writing sites, learning or tutoring sites, freelancing and community marketplace sites, paid exam takers, and file-sharing sites (Ellis, Zucker and Randall 2018). While it is vital to investigate commercial contract cheating, research continues to highlight that students most commonly outsource assignments to people they know: family, friends and peers (Awdry 2021a; Bretag et al. 2019a; Foltýnek and Králíková 2018). Moreover, assignment outsourcing is not new: in Bowers' 1966 survey of students across 99 US colleges, 14% of students reported submitting papers written by another student. Commercial contract cheating should therefore be understood as one contemporary extension of a perennial problem, rather than an entirely new phenomenon.

The relationship between commercial contract cheating and other forms of outsourcing, collusion and plagiarism is still poorly understood. This is highlighted by the two largest studies to date on contract cheating (Awdry 2021a; Bretag et al. 2019a), which found that when students have obtained work from commercial services, many *did not submit it* as their own work. In the Australian study by Bretag et al. (2019a) this was the case for over 31% of respondents. In Awdry's international study (2021), only 9% reported submitting the work as purchased, while 51% used the work for reference and 40% edited the work prior to submission. Students clearly engage with commercial cheating services for a variety of reasons, so the drivers of student behaviour should be better understood.

Developing such understandings has been hampered by a lack of qualitative research. In a review of the literature, Morris (2020, 121) identifies that 'the student voice is not strong' in studies aimed at understanding student behaviours. She concludes that unearthing this voice is 'vital' for explaining 'why the majority of students do not ever engage in [commercial] contract cheating' (122). Similar calls can be seen in other studies (Newton 2018; Awdry and Ives 2021).

While dated and few in number, qualitative studies from the field of academic integrity indicate that peer culture and the notion of 'help' may be significant in understanding contract cheating. In a large US study (McCabe et al. 1999), students identified these as important contextual factors for explaining students' behavioural and ethical norms:

> *Fraternities/sororities have files of old exams/homeworks and this is well known and basically accepted. . so it really isn't considered cheating (219).*

> *Helping another person out is not cheating (219).*

Similar themes emerged in a UK study (Ashworth et al.1997) which found that students' views of cheating have a strong ethical foundation in peer loyalty and a commitment to learning:

> *I don't mind helping anyone if they're genuinely stuck, but I won't give someone*
> *information if they can't be bothered to go out and even try and find it (190).*
> *Allowing someone to look at your work is teaching (193).*

The motivation to help other students was related to the anonymous university experience of large classes, didactic teaching, and minimal staff contact, which left students feeling 'let down' (197), making collaboration and cheating more justifiable and likely. Worth noting is that the desire to help peers extended mainly to one's immediate friendship circle and not beyond (Ashworth et al. 1997), a finding supported by other studies (Scrimpshire et al. 2017).

Given the value of qualitative data for understanding student behaviour, the study reported in this paper sought to gather the student voice, with the aim of extending empirical understandings of contract cheating and its relationship to other forms of cheating and academic misconduct. It formed part of a nationally-funded research project entitled *Contract cheating and assessment design: Exploring the connection*, which conducted parallel student and staff surveys at 12 Australian higher education institutions, including eight universities, between October and December 2016. The federal government's interest in funding research into contract cheating was sparked by a series of media scandals in 2015 which suggested there was a problem of widespread and undetected use of commercial contract cheating services by university students. Much of the reporting implied or stated that it was particularly common amongst international students, and at that time higher education was Australia's third largest export industry (behind iron and coal), with international students comprising over one quarter of the higher education population. Any compromises to the perceived integrity of Australian higher education could therefore have significant economic implications.

Universities in the study were selected for their diversity in size and scope. The surveys were designed to address 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 students' 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?

Of the 56 items in the survey, 55 generated quantitative data that have been published elsewhere (Bretag et al. 2019a; Bretag et al. 2020; Harper et al. 2019b; Harper 2021). This paper reports on the university students' responses to the survey's qualitative item.

Method

The final item in the survey was an open-text item: 'Is there anything else you want to tell us about cheating in higher education?'. It was designed to provide data that might be capable of describing and explaining the study's quantitative findings, and to provide an opportunity to unearth new ways of understanding an evolving phenomenon. The qualitative item was kept deliberately broad due to concerns that limited awareness of contract cheating among students would limit the insights gained from the data. While the survey's promotional materials included the phrase 'contract cheating', the survey items did not ask about 'cheating' directly. They instead described concrete behaviours with neutral language to mitigate the effects of social desirability bias (Tourangeau and Yan, 2007).

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 student 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.

Responses were obtained from 14,086 students, representing 4.38% of the total student population at the eight universities surveyed. The gender of respondents (57% female, 41% male) is broadly consistent with the higher education population in 2016 (which was 55% female), however only 15% of respondents were international students (compared to 27% in the higher education population)[2]. From the 14,086 survey responses there were 4,521 responses to the qualitative item, representing an item response rate of 32.1%. International students comprised 12.6% of qualitative responses, so were slightly less likely to complete this item than the rest of the survey. LOTE students comprised 17.7% of qualitative responses.

The openness of the question led the researchers to apply a coding approach based on Charmaz's (2014) 'initial' and 'focussed' coding. Earlier pilots of coding (involving other researchers) had failed to achieve reliability and therefore saturation. In this study, during initial coding all qualitative responses were placed in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and descriptively coded, creating a 'tabular inventory' (Saldana 2021) of a total of 10 topics or themes that emerged repeatedly. During this phase, invalid responses or those not addressing the question (e.g. 'not in particular', 'thanks', 'n/a') were removed. Each response was then coded against all themes that applied and 84.9% of responses ($n = 3,840$) aligned with four main themes (shown in Table 1). Using high level topics at this stage allowed researchers to achieve consensus (and saturation) on the main themes to be explored.

To prepare a representative dataset for focussed coding, 40% of responses from each of the four themes were randomly sampled, yielding 1,536 comments. Duplicate comments (those that had been coded against more than one theme) were removed, resulting in a final set of 1,160 comments that were imported to NVivo 12. This sampling approach

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

[2] This annual data is available from the Australian government's Higher Education Statistics resources: https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2016-student-summary.

Table 1 Results of initial coding

Theme	Description	Responses *n* and % of sample
Sharing and collaboration	Descriptions of sharing and collaboration behaviours, most commonly including how students behave and the reasons why	1,785 46.5%
Assessment design	Comments on the relationship between assessment design and cheating, including comments on tests and exams	1194 31.1%
International students	Comments making explicit reference to international students	533 13.9%
University responses to cheating	Comments on the actions (or inaction) of universities and their staff when faced with cheating behaviours	328 8.5%

was used to generate a manageable dataset given the protracted nature of earlier coding pilots. It was agreed that if saturation had not been achieved then further sampling would be undertaken, however saturation was achieved with the initial sample. Using an in-vivo approach, respondents' 'telling terms' (Charmaz 2006) were used to refine and develop the four main themes as parent codes. The second and fourth themes in Table 1 were brought together as a single parent code. Figure 1 shows the resulting coding schema with three parent codes and their corresponding child nodes. Data was coded against all nodes that applied.

During focussed coding the NVivo 12 Case Classification tool was also used to classify responses at Codes 1 and 3. As shown in Fig. 1, responses at these codes described student behaviours. In addition, 54.9% of responses ($n = 625$) contained ethical *judgements* on those behaviours; that is, whether they were considered to be 'cheating' or otherwise. Responses containing such judgements were classified in one of the following ways:

(1) Yes, it's cheating (e.g. 'I think that's cheating').
(2) No, it's not cheating (e.g. 'That isn't cheating in my view').
(3) It's ambiguous (e.g. 'I'm not sure if that's cheating').
(4) It's unfair (e.g. 'I feel disadvantaged by others' behaviour').

Respondents' language and grammatical choices were also analysed, including the use of personal pronouns. Personal pronouns are an important field of analysis in critical discourse analysis (for example, see Fairclough 1989, 1995), as they can highlight subjects and objects involved in situations, and 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 pronoun analysis are very relevant. All data was co-coded by two researchers until a reliable schema was established. Coding was then done independently in batches of 50–100 comments, with comparisons conducted after each batch to maintain reliability.

The detailed findings are reported below. Words and phrases taken directly from the data are indicated in 'inverted commas' or indented quotations. This reporting approach has been used extensively to demonstrate the diversity of statements from which the themes were derived. Drawing on Glaser and Strauss (1967), Charmaz and Thornberg
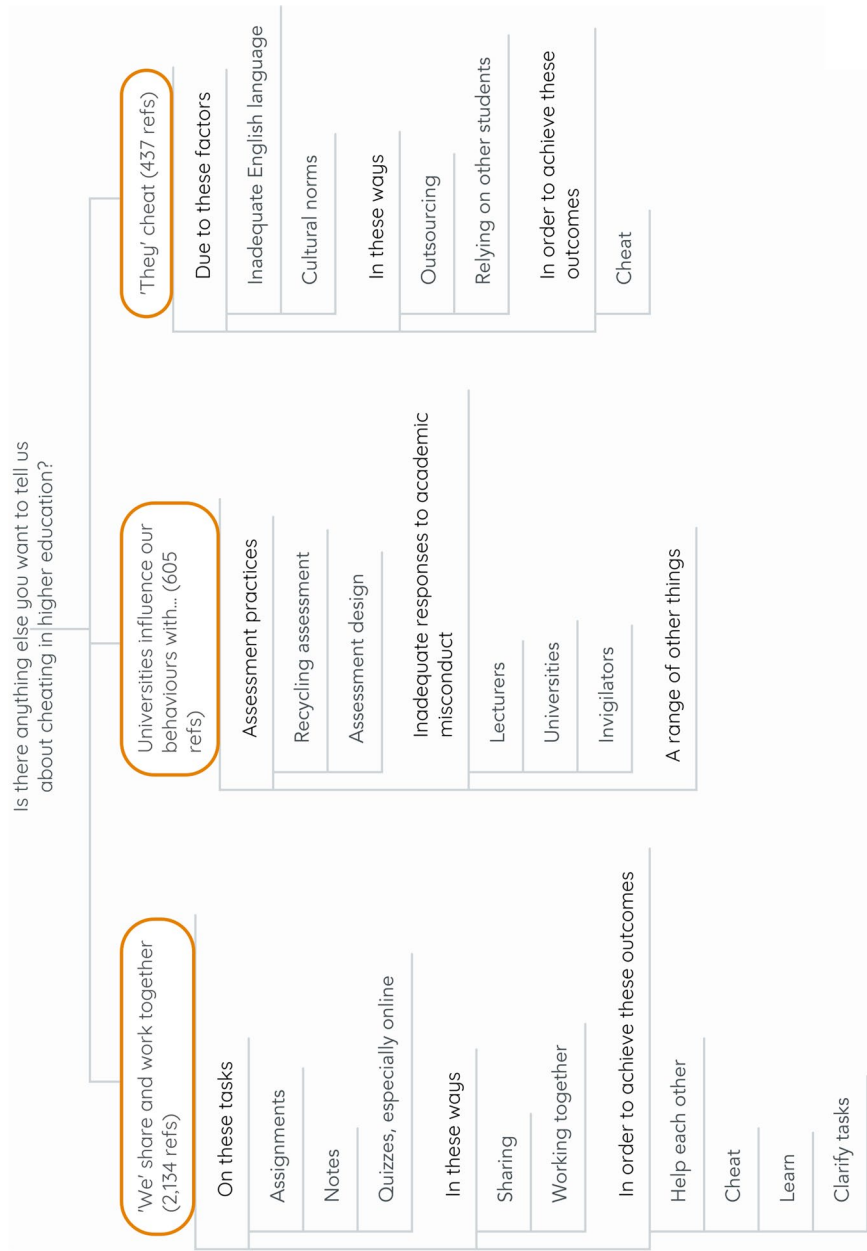
Is there anything else you want to tell us about cheating in higher education?

'We' share and work together (2,134 refs)

On these tasks
- Assignments
- Notes
- Quizzes, especially online

In these ways
- Sharing
- Working together

In order to achieve these outcomes
- Help each other
- Cheat
- Learn
- Clarify tasks

Universities influence our behaviours with... (605 refs)

Assessment practices
- Recycling assessment
- Assessment design

Inadequate responses to academic misconduct
- Lecturers
- Universities
- Invigilators

A range of other things

'They' cheat (437 refs)

Due to these factors
- Inadequate English language
- Cultural norms

In these ways
- Outsourcing
- Relying on other students

In order to achieve these outcomes
- Cheat

Fig. 1 The final coding schema, including the number of references at parent codes

([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. Italics are used to highlight the names of codes and nodes from the final coding schema.

Findings

There was a notable absence of comments about commercial contract cheating. Only 17 respondents mentioned some variation of 'contract cheating', and a further three mentioned essay or paper 'mills'. One response included both:

> *I have never heard of contract cheating, but am aware of students using paper mills, is that the same?*

The absence was highlighted by responses that questioned the survey's perceived focus on paid outsourcing:

> *the majority of cheating … does not fall into the categories outlined in this survey.*
> *the way you've conducted this survey is indicative that you don't understand the students and their methods of 'cheating'.*

Responses suggested that the survey's focus was misdirected and overlooked forms of cheating that are more prevalent and accepted, as detailed below.

Code 1: 'We' share and work together

Node 1.1: On these tasks

Respondents most commonly reported sharing and working together on 'assignments', 'notes' and 'quizzes'. Assignments included 'reports', 'essays', 'practicals', 'tests', and 'labs'. Quizzes included 'tests', particularly those that are 'online', but also 'in-class', 'weekly', 'regular' and 'small'. Respondents reported benefits to sharing and working together on 'notes', as they offer course material in language that students understand: 'just like a textbook but more compact' and 'student-written'.

Node 1.2: In these ways

Respondents reported *sharing* both vertically and horizontally. Sharing vertically is when, 'older peers', 'previous students', and 'students from past years' provide 'complete assignments', 'marked assignments', 'assignments with feedback', 'examples of assignments that got a good mark', and 'exam questions and answers' to students who are 'expecting to take the unit at a later date', 'new students', and students 'a year lower'. Sharing horizontally is when students studying together in the same subject 'give' or 'swap' assignments, 'show each other our assignments', and 'discuss possible answers' 'before submission'.

Respondents also reported *working together* in ways that could be described as co-creation, particularly in 'online quizzes' and 'individual assignments'. 'A lot of students', 'literally everyone I know' will 'do online quizzes together'. In 'a group' we 'complete parts', 'swap answers to one question for answers to another', and 'co-operate and collaborate on answers'. In 'individual assignments', students will 'get together' to 'hash out' answers and 'feed off other people's ideas'. They share 'knowledge', 'perspectives', 'tips',

and 'feedback'. Other students' assignments provide a 'guide', 'scaffold' and 'reference', to 'compare', to see 'I'm on the right track', 'that my work agrees with theirs', to see how they 'laid it out' or 'approached it', or to 'give someone a small nudge'.

Node 1.3: In order to achieve these outcomes

Respondents reported that the intent of sharing and working together is primarily to *help each other*. Respondents said they intend to 'assist other students', 'help people', 'help out friends' so that 'everyone improves'. They 'turn to each other for support', say that 'group interaction is needed' and they value 'peer assisted studying'. Respondents reported that students sometimes share and work together with the intent *to cheat*, but this was largely in relation to quizzes and occasionally exams.

Closely related to helping was *learning*. Respondents said they share and work together to provide a 'learning aid', a 'learning tool', 'collaborative learning' and 'co-operative learning'. It is used for 'understanding' and for 'widening our thoughts'. A final related reason for sharing and working together was to *clarify* tasks. Respondents 'clarify expectations', 'what is required', and 'how to structure' assignments.

Responses at this code described highly social learning cultures. They described 'the importance of building relationships'. 'The student body is SO close knit, we exchange so much'. 'I build an extensive database with learning material and old assignments for the whole of my study and it is provided to all students within my circle and often beyond'. 'Most times you don't even have to ask people for their stuff, they'll just offer it to you for free. Transferred from USB to USB, or backpack to backpack', 'via Dropbox or Facebook', 'binders … transferred from student to student'. These cultures were not viewed positively by all respondents, however:

> *I think this is a form of cheating, as it provides them with an unfair advantage over students who don't have a group to work with.*

Table 2 shows a map of the ethical judgements that 54.9% of respondents made about the behaviours described above. Overall, 45% of those respondents judged the

Table 2 Map of ethical judgements at Code 1

	Yes it's cheating	No it's not cheating	It's ambiguous	It's unfair
'We' share and work together	35%	45%	16%	4%
- On these tasks				
Assessments	27%	51%	17%	5%
Notes	9%	74%	13%	4%
Quizzes, esp. online	61%	15%	19%	5%
- In these ways				
Sharing horizontally	18%	1%	41%	40%
Sharing vertically	33%	36%	23%	8%
Working together	36%	30%	32%	2%
- In order to achieve these outcomes				
Help each other	16%	65%	17%	3%
Learn	5%	72%	18%	4%
Clarify tasks	8%	74%	18%	0%

behaviours they described as 'not cheating', 35% judged them to be 'cheating', and 16% judged them to be ambiguous. The ambiguous nature of cheating was illustrated by responses describing a 'grey area' or 'fine line' between collaboration and cheating that is at times 'very blurred':

> *The only form of cheating I have engaged in was not listed - this is the cheating where you have an out-of-class study group but *gradually*, discussion of the content shades from abstract discussion of issues into swapping specific tips to get a specific question done, or specific solutions to tricky problems … That's way more "fuzzy" and subtle than having a special exam earpiece, and also, IMO, way more likely.*

Related to this were descriptions of assignment submissions that are 'mixtures of cheating and own attempt', or 'a reflection of them and their closest three class mates'.

Responses showed that students use factors including efficiency of time and effort and level of engagement to determine what constitutes cheating:

> *why spend several hours trying to understand a question when you can approach a friend who's already done it, see their answer, and derive yours off theirs in a fraction of the time.*
> *as long as you don't give 0 effort and submit 100% of it as your own then it's fine.*
> *learning by tinkering with a completed work is more engaging than starting from scratch.*

For many respondents, the line between collaboration and cheating was variously unclear, unrealistic, or unreasonable.

Table 2 illustrates the extent to which different task types, behaviours and intentions influenced respondents' ethical judgements. For example, where responses described students sharing and working together on *assessments* 27% of respondents judged the behaviours as 'cheating'. In contrast, where *quizzes* were referenced, 61% judged the behaviours to be 'cheating'. Respondents were much more likely to judge sharing *horizontally* as ambiguous (41%) or unfair (40%) than any other node, while judgements about sharing *vertically* and *working together* were more distributed. What can be seen clearly is that ethical judgements were most strongly determined by the outcomes students were seeking to achieve. Where the intention was to *help each other* (65%), to *learn* (72%), or to *clarify a task* (74%), respondents overwhelmingly judged any associated behaviours as 'not cheating'.

Code 2: universities influence our behaviours
Node 2.1: Assessment practices
Respondents said universities influence the behaviours described at Code 1, primarily through assessment practices. Chief among these was *recycling assessment*. Assessment tasks are 'reissued', 'rehashed', and 'hardly change from year to year', so 'floating around' are the same 'assignments', 'exams', and 'deferred exam papers'. 'Just changing a couple of words doesn't change anything'. We are being 'practical' and 'resourceful', 'without having to figure it out ourselves'. But this 'makes it possible', or 'very easy to cheat'. The 'temptation is too strong' so 'cheating is expected' or 'commonplace': we 'can't avoid cheating'.

Respondents said universities further influence behaviours through *assessment design*, particularly exams. Respondents reported observing considerable cheating in exams, asserting 'get rid of exams'. They 'don't reflect the real world', 'have nothing to do with learning', and are 'useless in determining students' capabilities' beyond 'encyclopedic knowledge which everyone can google'. Related comments discussed assessment design more generally, reporting that many assessments are designed to be 'easy to grade', but 'instructions are so unclear', 'vague' and 'poorly worded' with 'cryptic assignment criteria' and 'absurdly complicated methods of citation'. Lecturers are 'woefully inadequate at communicating' requirements, and 'refuse' to provide 'guidance', 'exemplar assignments' or 'past exam papers'.

A final component of assessment practices that influenced students' behaviours was *group assessment*. 'Group assignments are the biggest threat to cheating'. 'One or two students do all the work' and the 'free loaders' 'cruise through' and 'get the same mark'. 'No matter how many meeting we've hold, how much we've discussed … the majority of teammate still contributed nothing', 'but have their name on the final hand in'. 'This is the same as cheating, but is condoned by the institution': 'awarding of marks to those who haven't done the work'.

Node 2.2: Inadequate responses to academic misconduct

Respondents reported that 'everyone cheats at uni because there is no punishment'. Responses referred to 'lecturers', 'markers', 'tutors', and 'supervisors' who 'don't care' and 'don't do anything'. They 'feign concern' but either 'turn a blind eye', 'take no action', 'secretly forgive' or 'allow it'. They should 'be more vigilant' and 'take greater measures' to 'monitor', 'detect' and 'punish'. Responses also pointed to inadequate invigilation, both in exams and in-class tests. 'Most cheating I've seen … is during exams where there are not enough invigilators'. Exams are 'monitored under very lax conditions'. 'ID cards aren't always checked', and 'invigilators are busy talking with each other or just moving around without watching'.

Code 3: 'They' cheat

Code 3 contained assertions that cheating is a particular problem among international students. Critical to note is that responses at this code came from both domestic and international students. If taken at face value, responses could be read as 'evidence' of higher rates of cheating amongst international students. Yet the language of the responses highlighted a process of 'othering' that warranted attention. The following quotes are indicative (emphasis added):

> *The international students really need to be monitored. They'll do whatever it takes to get those grades. It is extremely unfair to the domestic students as we work our backsides off. We work extremely hard (domestic student).*
>
> *There have been a lots of cheating in higher education. Especially involving the international students … but not all of them and it is irritating whenever they have higher marks in assignment or test. It is obvious when they talk to each other during the test/exam in their own language (international student).*

Node 3.1: Due to these factors

Respondents said that international students cheat due to *inadequate English*. Respondents reported hearing international students' spoken English in class, and on that basis either questioned their ability to complete their own assignments or assumed they were cheating.

> There are numerous international students who I am pretty sure cannot do many of the assignments set in my courses, because their English is very poor. Someone must be doing them for them.
>
> I do not understand why international students are not tested for appropriate fluency before commencing … My bet would be that Unis are too eager for money.

Respondents also said that international students cheat due to *cultural norms*. Norms included 'competitiveness', 'shame', 'cultures which prioritise high grades and rote learning', 'ethics', and attitudes towards cheating.

Node 3.2: In these ways

At Code 1, respondents described students engaging in vertical and horizontal sharing and working together. Many responses at Code 3 reported similar behaviours amongst international students:

> [They] create groups with other international students where papers are bought/sold/traded.
>
> Students from [X country] work collaboratively.
>
> Many international students … take photos of the questions and answers [in online quizzes] and share it if the person got a good mark.
>
> there's a lot of online databases that are in foreign language where people upload answer sheets and work.

Far more commonly than sharing and working together, however, respondents reported that international students *outsource* their work:

> I have heard about people writing their essays and completing exams for them.
>
> I believe that many international students utilize services online to cheat.
>
> I suspect that those who pay others to complete assignments for them come from an international background.

Note the language in these (and previous) comments, which acknowledges that claims of cheating are not based on observation, but on rumour, suspicion, and assumption.

Responses at this node also said that international students *rely on others* to pass, particularly in the context of group work:

> looking over at people's work, asking to look at others essays.
>
> I have had to do group work with international students who wanted to submit a report that was word-for-word the same as one of their friends.
>
> International students regularly submit plagiarized work directly from Wikipedia as their portion of group assignments … we avoid having them in our groups since we end up having to do their part of the assignment as well as our own.

Notably, while these behaviours mirror those that were described positively by the 'we' group at Code 1 as constituting helping, learning and clarifying, here in relation to international students they carry a more negative sentiment.

Node 3.3: In order to achieve these outcomes
At Code 1, respondents said that students' behaviours were driven by a range of intentions, including to help each other, to learn, to clarify assessment tasks and sometimes to cheat. Responses at this node were one-dimensional however: international students' intentions are to cheat. The map of responses at Code 3 shows this clearly (Table 3). Of all responses that referred to international students at this code and also included an ethical judgement, 91% classified the described behaviours as cheating – even when the behaviours mirrored those described at Code 1. While the ethical judgements of the 'we' group at Code 1 were most strongly determined by students' *intentions*, international students' behaviours were instead described as an outcome of poor English language proficiency and cultural norms.

Discussion
This paper sought to extend understandings of contract cheating that were initially developed by the quantitative analysis of this study's large-scale survey and other extant literature in the field. Specifically, this study was interested in exploring the nature of the relationship between sharing and cheating behaviours, contributing factors to cheating, and students' experiences and attitudes with cheating and other forms of outsourcing and sharing. It also sought to remain open to emergent understandings and unanticipated insights.

In a large-scale survey on cheating in higher education across eight Australian universities, the absence of student comments about commercial contract cheating is notable. This study's quantitative findings showed that 5.78% of students had engaged in one or more of five contract cheating behaviours (Bretag et al. 2019a). In revealing the student voice at scale, however, this study showed that 'contract cheating' is not part of the discourse of Australian university students. The student voice instead illustrated forms of cheating which respondents reported are far more prevalent and accepted.

The largest code by a factor of four was '"we" share and work together', indicating the centrality of sharing and collaboration to learning in higher education. It

Table 3 Map of ethical judgements at Code 3

	Yes it's cheating	No it's not cheating	It's ambiguous	It's unfair
'They' cheat	91%	0%	3%	6%
- Due to these factors				
Cultural norms	88%	0%	0%	12%
Inadequate English	82%	0%	8%	10%
- In these ways				
Outsourcing work	96%	0%	2%	2%
Relying on others	70%	0%	5%	25%

described longstanding, and highly organised sharing cultures, which include systems for the collection and distribution of notes, test answers, completed and marked assignments, and exam papers and answers. These cultures include vertical (cohort to cohort) and horizontal (within a cohort) sharing, via systems that are physical and digital in nature. This may explain why commercial file-sharing and study help sites, which monetise the sharing of student work (Harrison et al. 2021; Rogerson and Basanta 2016), had been used by only 1–3% of this study's respondents, while over one quarter of our participants admitted to providing another student with a completed assignment (Bretag et al. 2019a).

The assessment submissions resulting from these practices are cause for concern, providing important insights into the relationship between sharing and behaviours that academics would understand to be cheating. Responses described submissions that reflect little or no direct engagement with primary, secondary or tertiary sources – an assumed foundation for university assessment. Student work is now collected and shared on such a scale that it constitutes a global and infinitely reconfigurable bank of 'quaternary' sources, and *this* is the material from which many students derive their submissions through copying, collating and 'tinkering' with texts, sometimes in collaboration with peers. These findings suggest that students may be operating within a paradigm in which university assessment is approached as a kind of 'circular economy' (Geissdoerfer et al. 2020). Students reported that their assignments do not make a meaningful contribution to the 'real world', so their investment results in an educational waste product. Students have therefore developed 'resourceful' systems that enable the recycling, refurbishment and reuse of that perceived waste product, thereby saving themselves time and effort.

Despite the integrity risks inherent in this circular assessment economy, respondents did not perceive that it constituted cheating per se. The only notable exception was in relation to tests and quizzes (especially online), where respondents tended to describe their sharing and collaboration as 'cheating'. For most respondents it was *intention* that determined whether a behaviour was cheating or not, rather than the behaviour itself or the nature of the assignment submission produced. Respondents reported that students' intentions are largely supportive: to help each other, to learn and to clarify assessment tasks. These findings support the numerous studies which have found that 'helping others' is central to defining the ethical norms of student learning cultures, and to students' justifications of their behaviours (Ashworth et al.1997; Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke 2005; McCabe et al. 1999). One respondent used the term 'consensual cheating' to indicate that the sharing of assessments and unauthorised collaboration can be seen as legitimate activities. These attitudes are consistent with findings in the quantitative data from this study that show students are largely unconcerned that people may be engaging in contract cheating in higher education (Harper et al. 2019b).

Students legitimised these behaviours as a response to university practices, which they describe as a contributing factor to a range of sharing and cheating behaviours. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with depleted and transactional learning environments, which lead to assessments designed to be efficient rather than meaningful and engaging. Respondents pointed particularly to assessments that are recycled,

unclear, unfair or inauthentic. Concerns with assessment were then compounded by educators who are unable or unwilling to explain or provide exemplars, and by staff and institutions that fail to maintain secure assessment conditions and respond to obvious cheating when it occurs – particularly in group assessment. In this context respondents felt justified in adopting approaches to assessment that were focussed on minimising effort and maximising efficiency, echoing earlier findings from Ashworth et al. (1997).

The most troubling findings in the data related to the discourse about international students, which could be seen in responses from both domestic and international respondents. Responses described a 'we' group (domestic students) and a 'they' group (international students), and their behaviours were described very differently. Most commonly, respondents reported hearing others' spoken English in class, and on the basis of any deviations from standardised English (i.e. accent, intonation, pronunciation and lexicon) assumed that the students were international and assumed that they 'must be' cheating. This is a clear example of linguistic racism, whereby the categories of LOTE and international are conflated, and students are then othered and excluded on the basis of spoken English. This builds on findings from other studies in the Australian university context that have observed linguistic racism and explored its impact on international and LOTE students' experiences (Dobinson and Mercieca 2020; Dovchin 2020).

Beyond the stereotyping and marginalisation outlined above, racism could also be seen in the double standards applied across the 'we' and 'they' groups. 'We' help each other, while 'they' rely on others. 'We' act with intentions that are largely supportive and conscientious, while 'they' act with intentions that are deceptive. 'We' cheat due to extrinsic factors such as university practices, while 'they' cheat due to intrinsic factors such as English language proficiency and cultural norms. 'We' are 'SO close knit' but we 'avoid having them in our groups'. Previous academic integrity research has found that students' peer-to-peer behaviours and associated ethical norms tend not to extend beyond students' own social constructs (Ashworth et al.1997; Scrimpshire et al. 2017). Our data indicates those constructs include a clear linguistic and cultural dimension.

Given that domestic students provided 87% of responses to the qualitative item they are over-represented in the data, so the main themes fail to fully reflect international student perspectives. This is important to note and should form a critical follow-up study. Yet the findings reported here provide vital insights into the discursive framings and social dynamics that underpin learning cultures in Australian higher education. International students are *talked about* – even by international students – and therefore positioned as an object. The pronoun of 'they' was routinely used to designate those who cheat, as distinct from 'we' – those who do not. This is perhaps not surprising given the socially illicit nature of cheating and the role that students' moral attitudes, social norms and guilt play in predicting cheating behaviour (Curtis et al. 2022). However, 'they' were most commonly described as international students.

A related finding is that international students appear to be largely excluded from domestic students' sharing networks described at Code 1. Previous studies have suggested that a lack of access to peer networks can underpin a student's decision to use a commercial cheating service (Bretag et al. 2019a; Foltýnek and Králíková 2018). Our

findings provide critical insights into why it may be that LOTE students are more likely to use these services (Bretag et al. 2019a; Rigby et al. 2015; Curtis et al. 2021). They seem to be excluded from the sharing cultures that domestic students report relying upon to support their learning. Given that work acquired from commercial services is often not submitted as purchased, but rather used as a guide or edited before submission (Awdry 2021a; Bretag et al. 2019a), it seems possible that LOTE students are turning to commercial cheating services for the same reasons that domestic students turn to each other: for help, to learn, to clarify assessment tasks and sometimes to cheat. Given that sharing behaviours are significantly more common amongst students who self-report engaging in cheating (Bretag et al. 2019a), a deeper interrogation of non-commercial forms of outsourcing is warranted.

These findings challenge the sharp distinction in research and policy between commercial contract cheating and other forms of plagiarism or collusion. The distinction has reflected a widely held view that the paid nature of contract cheating renders it uniquely 'deliberate, pre-planned and intentional' (Newton 2018, p. 2). This is based on a conflation of payment with intention, however, and does not account for the social mechanisms that may contribute to LOTE students' over-representation in the contract cheating data. Domestic students are engaged in highly organised and deliberate *social* assignment outsourcing. Yet the use of *commercial* contract cheating services is scandalised in the media and attracts the most severe penalties in university policies. This study should prompt a reconsideration of how contract cheating is defined and operationalised to ensure that efforts to foster academic integrity do not inadvertently exacerbate the exclusion of international and LOTE students.

Limitations

The use of convenience sampling can attract the participation of respondents who hold strong views about the survey topic, so the data may not reflect the views of more moderate or neutral students and may contain inherent bias. The survey's design (55 quantitative items followed by an open, qualitative item) carries the risk of suggestibility bias, whereby the preceding items influence or constrain respondents' inclusions in the final item. Given the strongest themes emphasised student behaviours that were not covered in detail by the survey, this may not be a significant concern. However, it may be that students took issue with the inclusion of a small number of items related to sharing behaviours in a survey that was promoted using the term 'cheating'. If this is the case, students may have neglected to report on other aspects of cheating at university in order to correct what they saw as a misperception. An added limitation already noted is the under-representation of international students in the qualitative data. Understanding the experiences of international and LOTE students in higher education, their experiences with linguistic racism, and its relationship to the use of commercial contract cheating services, would be a valuable focus for future research.

Conclusion

This study addresses a marked absence of the student voice in contemporary research on cheating in higher education. The openness of the survey item means that there is much that can be taken from the findings, including insights into assessment design, teaching

practice, and the management of suspected breaches by staff. In our view, however, two findings emerged as particularly significant.

Firstly, there is a circular assessment economy at work in Australian universities. While students do not generally perceive that it constitutes cheating, they recognise that their behavioural and ethical norms do not always align with those of the academics who teach them. This calls for a clearer articulation of 'the line' between appropriate and inappropriate practices, and as noted by other researchers, between collaboration and collusion (McGowan 2016; Young, Miller and Barnhardt 2018). It also calls for the educative development of shared values and skills in scholarship: that is, the practices through which academic integrity is actually demonstrated. Students themselves called for this in a large 2014 study by Bretag et al. (2014) saying 'teach us how to do it properly!' (1161). They reported wanting hands-on, academic integrity and academic practice education woven into the curriculum.

More recent studies indicate this need remains, at least in Australia. An increasingly common way to provide academic integrity education for students is via mandatory, centralised online modules completed towards the beginning of a student's course, which tend to focus on plagiarism, referencing and rules (i.e. what *not* to do) (Sefcik, Striepe and Yorke 2020). While these programs seem to be effective for driving good completion rates, the researchers questioned whether students would come to 'value' integrity (40). The same study found that 68% of institutions did not have a corresponding academic integrity program for staff which would build their capacity to extend academic integrity education throughout the curriculum. This is interesting when considered against previous findings from this study (Harper 2019b), which indicated that teaching staff were substantially more likely than students to perceive that they were teaching students the scholarly practices of their disciplines, and more likely to perceive they were talking to students about contract cheating and its consequences. When considered together, these studies suggest a disconnect between what universities, staff and students perceive to constitute good academic integrity education. Where a rules-based approach is not preceded or complemented by education in disciplinary knowledge-making practices, students will have little context for understanding and applying the rules of integrity.

A second and more urgent finding, however, is the problem revealed by our data, summarised neatly by one respondent:

> *There is a perception among students that international students are most likely to cheat. The consequences of this perception - true or not - are worrying.*

In focussing on the language in comments about international students, rather than the prima facie narratives, the goal was not to question the legitimacy of students' experiences. Rather the analysis aimed to highlight the assumptions and double standards apparent in many students' perceptions. The sector's intense focus on contract cheating has scandalised the use of commercial contract cheating services disproportionately to other forms of cheating, based on an assumption that students using these services have adopted a calculated and transactional approach to learning and a decided intention to cheat. Our findings disrupt that assumption by illustrating the ways in which LOTE and international students may be excluded from the social networks that enable more overlooked forms of cheating. Numerous studies have evidenced the exclusion of

international students on university campuses, both in Australia (Marginson et al. 2010; Arkoudis and Baik, 2014) and internationally (Guo and Guo 2017). Our findings point to a potential relationship between this exclusion and the sector's most high-profile problem: contract cheating. This is an opportunity to confront a culture of unacknowledged racism exposed by students' accounts of cheating, and commit to standards that ensure genuinely inclusive practices in higher education, such as those exemplified by Dewsbury and Brame (2019).

The emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) is magnifying some of the challenges illustrated in this paper, including the availability of ready-made or easy-to-generate assignment responses, and access to 'help' in the form of a chatbot. In Australia, the federal Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) has released advice for higher education providers entitled *Assessment reform for the age of artificial intelligence* (Lodge et al. 2023). It recognises that the sector's longstanding approaches to course and assessment design, undermined by contract cheating, are now unsustainable in a time of Gen AI. It recommends the adoption of programmatic approaches to learning and assessment (Schuwirth and Van der Vleuten 2011; Baartman, van Schilt-Mol and Van der Vleuten 2022) which are generally known within medical education but not widely adopted at scale across diverse disciplines or institutions. These approaches de-emphasise the use of continuous summative assessment and instead prioritise learning experiences that maximise feedback and an ongoing dialogue between students and staff about their development of the learning outcomes. While the impact of this advice remains to be seen, Australian universities are now actively working on interpreting, contextualising and applying these recommendations, which will no doubt generate a rich body of research on the evolving relationship between learning, teaching, assessment design and academic integrity.

Abbreviations
Gen AI   Generative artificial intelligence
LOTE   Language other than english
TEQSA   Tertiary education quality and standards agency
USB   Universal serial bus

Authors' 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.

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
The authors declare no competing interests.

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