

*The link between paper mills and contract cheating:
Systemic enablers and recommendations*

Sarah Elaine Eaton, PhD. COPE Council Member
Editor-in-Chief, International Journal for Educational Integrity
Associate Professor, University of Calgary, Canada
20 September, 2022

I would like to acknowledge the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3.





Overview

- Overview of contract cheating
- Links between contract cheating and paper mills
- Historical insights into contract cheating
- Questions that remain about paper mills
- Recommendations and next steps



Contract Cheating

There is no universally accepted definition of contract cheating, but there are some characteristics that scholars agree on: (1) outsourcing of academic work to a third party; (2) occurs in just about every discipline; (3) happens at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Eaton et al., 2022).



“third party makes a contribution to the work of the student, such that there is reasonable doubt as to whose work the assessment represents” (Draper & Newton, p. 2017, p. 1).





Purpose statement

Understand the link between contract cheating and paper mills

Paper mills do not exist in a vacuum.

Paper mills exist within a larger eco-system of academic fraud and malpractice that includes contract cheating, and other forms of third-party interference that threatens the integrity of science, scholarship, and higher education.

Some of what we know about contract cheating can be transferred to paper mills, but there is still a lot we do not know about paper mills.



Quick facts about contract cheating: Overview

15+ years of research among a global community of academic integrity scholars

- The term “contract cheating” was coined by Clarke and Lancaster (2006) in the UK.
- Contract cheating includes various kinds of academic outsourcing in text and non-text disciplines: essay mills, assignment completion services, exam impersonation and student proxy services, thesis-writing services, etc. (Bretag et al., 2019a, 2019b; Ellis et al., 2019).
- The market for outsourcing of graduate student work is becoming more prevalent (Parnther, 2022). This is particularly relevant to paper mills. If graduate students rationalize contract cheating as acceptable, this has implications for their future professional conduct in research and scholarship.



Quick facts about contract cheating: Industry size and scope

15+ years of research among a global community of academic integrity scholars

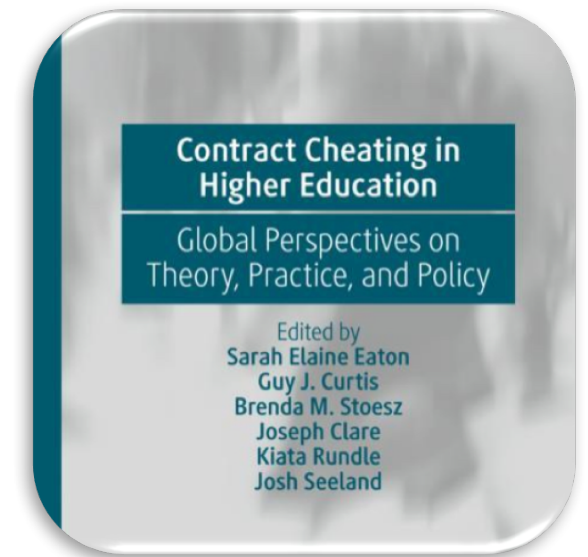
- Sophisticated global industry, that today operates mostly online.
- Industry value estimated to be at least \$15 Billion USD (Eaton, 2022)
- A meta-analysis of the literature showed a conservative estimate of about 3.5% of students worldwide engage in contract cheating (Curtis & Clare, 2017).
 - Newer estimates show up to 4x higher than that (Curtis et al., 2021)
- About 2/3 of students who engage in contract cheating are likely to become repeat offenders (Curtis & Clare). In other words, contract cheating can become a pattern of behaviour.
- The provision and/or advertising of contract cheating services is now illegal in UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and 17 US states.



Forthcoming book

Eaton, S. E., Curtis, G., Stoesz, B. M., Rundle, K., Clare, J., & Seeland, J. (Eds.). (2022). *Contract cheating in higher education: Global perspectives on theory, practice, and policy*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://link.springer.com/book/9783031126826>

Chapters include insights into contract cheating in graduate education (Parnter, 2022) and historical and current understanding of the field, of which some findings may help to inform what we know about paper mills.



Contract Cheating in
Higher Education

Global Perspectives on
Theory, Practice, and Policy

Edited by
Sarah Elaine Eaton
Guy J. Curtis
Brenda M. Stoesz
Joseph Clare
Kiata Rundle
Josh Seeland



Historical perspectives on contract cheating

Key points from a new qualitative study (Eaton, Stoesz, & Seeland, 2022)

First known accounts of the commercial enterprises employing a team of staff date back to 1939.

In other words, the industry is not new. It did not start with COVID or the Internet.

The Internet has catalyzed the industry but did not cause it.

Qualitative analysis of accounts of individuals who have worked for the industry show that suppliers exist all over the world.

A key finding from our work was a through line in accounts of contract cheating suppliers from 1939 to the 2000's: ***the higher education system itself creates the conditions in which contract cheating flourishes.***

The higher education system creates the conditions that allow contract cheating to flourish. Legal and policy loopholes create opportunities for suppliers.

“

- “most curricula overload the student” (Benjamin, 1939, p. 159)
- “Many students hardly know what a good essay looks like. Professors as a rule fail to discuss them and do not let students read the essays submitted by other members of the class. My papers stand as models and examples for the students” (p. 160)

”



The American Mercury: June 1939

Source:

<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/7438935/the-american-mercury-june-1939-ludwig-von-mises-institute>



Further considerations about paper mills

There is still much we do not know...

- No clear valuation of the industry. We know it is global and growing. If what we know about contract cheating is an indication, the industry could potentially be massive and worth hundreds of millions or billions of dollars.
- No clear sense of how many scholars engage with paper mills. The question is not only one of prevalence, but more importantly, one of impact. If even a small percentage of scholars engage with paper mills, the impact to science can be massive.
- We must consider the ways in which academia and scholarly publishing create the conditions which allow paper mills not only to operate, but to flourish.



Recommendations

Next steps and implications

- More collaborative research needed among academic integrity researchers and scholars of publication.
- The links between contract cheating in graduate education and paper mills requires deeper attention, especially when considering the rates of repeat offenses in contract cheating.
- There is a role for quality assurance bodies to play in paying attention to the quality of publications produced at research-intensive universities.
- There may be a role for legislative bodies to play with regards to extending contract cheating legislation into paper mills (but much more dialogue is needed.)
- Organizations such as COPE play a very important role in education and advocacy. This work can be supported by and promoted by COPE members and others.



References

- Benjamin, R. (1939). Ghost goes to college. *The American Mercury*, 157-160. <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/7438935/the-american-mercury-june-1939-ludwig-von-mises-institute>
- Bretag, T., Harper, R., Burton, M., Ellis, C., Newton, P., Rozenberg, P., Saddiqui, S., & van Haeringen, K. (2019a). Contract cheating: A survey of Australian university students. *Studies in higher education*, 44(11), 1837-1856. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1462788>
- Bretag, T., Harper, R., Burton, M., Ellis, C., Newton, P., van Haeringen, K., Saddiqui, S., & Rozenberg, P. (2019b). Contract cheating and assessment design: exploring the relationship. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(5), 676-691. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1527892>
- Clarke, R., & Lancaster, T. (2006, 19-21 June 2006). *Eliminating the successor to plagiarism: Identifying the usage of contract cheating sites* Second International Plagiarism Conference, The Sage Gateshead, Tyne & Wear, United Kingdom.
- Eaton, S. E. (2022). Contract cheating in Canada: A comprehensive overview. In S. E. Eaton & J. Christensen Hughes (Eds.), *Academic integrity in Canada: An enduring and essential challenge* (pp. 165-187). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83255-1>
- Ellis, C., van Haeringen, K., Harper, R., Bretag, T., Zucker, I., McBride, S., Rozenberg, P., Newton, P., & Saddiqui, S. (2019). Does authentic assessment assure academic integrity? Evidence from contract cheating data. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1680956>
- Draper, M. J., & Newton, P. M. (2017). A legal approach to tackling contract cheating? [Article]. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 13(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-017-0022-5>
- Eaton, S. E. (2022). Contract cheating in Canada: A comprehensive overview. In S. E. Eaton & J. Christensen Hughes (Eds.), *Academic integrity in Canada: An enduring and essential challenge* (pp. 165-187). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83255-1>
- Eaton, S. E., Curtis, G., Stoesz, B. M., Rundle, K., Clare, J., & Seeland, J. (Eds.). (2022a). *Contract cheating in higher education: Global perspectives on theory, practice, and policy*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://link.springer.com/book/9783031126826>.
- Eaton, S. E., Stoesz, B. M., & Seeland, J. (2022b). Listening to ghosts: A qualitative study of narratives from contract cheating writers from the 1930s onwards. In S. E. Eaton, G. Curtis, B. M. Stoesz, K. Rundle, J. Clare, & J. Seeland (Eds.), *Contract cheating in higher education: Global perspectives on theory, practice, and policy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Parnther, C. (2022). The rise of contract cheating in graduate education. In S. E. Eaton, G. Curtis, B. M. Stoesz, K. Rundle, J. Clare, & J. Seeland (Eds.), *Contract cheating in higher education: Global perspectives on theory, practice, and policy*. Palgrave Macmillan.



25 YEARS OF PUBLICATION ETHICS

Contact information

Sarah Elaine Eaton, PhD
Associate Professor, Werklund School of Education
University of Calgary
2500 University Dr. NW
Calgary, AB, T2N 1N3 Canada

seaton@ucalgary.ca

25 YEARS 25 YEARS 25 YEARS 25 YEARS

25 YEARS 25 YEARS 25 YEARS 25 YEARS

25 YEARS 25 YEARS 25 YEARS 25 YEARS

25 YEARS 25 YEARS 25 YEARS

25 YEARS 25 YEARS 25 YEARS

25 YEARS 25 YEARS

25 YEARS 25 YEARS

THANK YOU

Sarah Elaine Eaton, PhD
seaton@ucalgary.ca





25 YEARS OF PUBLICATION ETHICS

publicationethics.org

Registered charity No 1123023
Registered in England and Wales, Company No 6389120
Registered office: **COPE** New Kings Court, Tollgate, Chandler's Ford,
Eastleigh, Hampshire, SO53 3LG, United Kingdom

©2022 Committee on Publication Ethics (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

 facebook.com/publicationethics

 [@COPE](https://twitter.com/COPE)  [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/publicationethics)

PROMOTING INTEGRITY IN SCHOLARLY
RESEARCH AND ITS PUBLICATION