



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

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Contract Cheating in Higher Education

“Contract cheating represents a looming disaster for post-secondary education, and this collection provides coverage of basic concepts, advanced theory, and practical solutions that are suitable for teaching faculty, policymakers, and scholars alike. The editors and contributors represent the most sophisticated thinkers on this topic and a wide range of perspectives that will set the agenda for the study and prevention of contract cheating. This volume is an invaluable contribution to the field.”

—David Rettinger, President Emeritus, *International Center for Academic Integrity, USA*

“This is a timely book, global and multi-disciplinary in scope, that will serve to establish a coherent body of knowledge on the problem of contract cheating from some of the world’s leading academic integrity researchers. It should be added to the library collections of higher education providers worldwide.”

—Rowena Harper, Director, *Centre for Learning and Teaching, Edith Cowan University, Australia*

“Contract cheating is a virus infecting quality teaching and learning around the world, supported in part by unwitting educators and educational leaders who create the conditions under which this virus thrives and spreads. This first edited book on contract cheating provides the life-saving vaccine as long as educators, educational leaders, quality assurance agencies, and world leaders choose to apply its lessons towards the goal of eradicating this virus and saving our global education system.”

—Tricia Bertram Gallant, Director, *Office of Academic Integrity, UC San Diego, USA*

“This book is both timely and invaluable. It addresses the growing challenge of contract cheating to the standards and the reputation of higher education from a rich diversity of perspectives. It is sometimes difficult to see beyond the boundaries of the University when addressing these issues, but through the expertise of these authors, we see how contract cheating is a global industry and equally how we all have agency in tackling it.”

—David Sadler, Chair, *Universities Australia Academic Integrity Working Group*


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ISBN 978-3-031-12679-6 ISBN 978-3-031-12680-2 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2>

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

In the time between this book being an idea and becoming a reality, we lost a giant in the field of academic integrity, contract cheating research, and advocacy—Professor Tracey Bretag. Tracey was a friend, mentor, and colleague whose work on contract cheating has been, and will remain, highly impactful, as can be seen by her name being peppered liberally among the citations in this book. Tracey is sadly missed, and we encourage people to get to know about her lasting influence on our field and our lives through the tributes to her published in the journal she founded: the International Journal for Educational Integrity (see Eaton et al., 2020).

It was really Tracey who brought the editorial team and authors of this book all together, however indirectly, through her constant commitment to building a global community for academic integrity. In her final book, A Research Agenda for Academic Integrity (Bretag, ed., 2020), she laid the groundwork for future research on academic integrity, including contract cheating. Her work continues to inspire many of us all over the world and this book is evidence of her enduring impact on the field.

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PREFACE

Contract cheating is an emerging hot topic in higher education generally and academic integrity specifically. Although the term contract cheating was first published in 2006, more than half of the academic journal articles on contract cheating have been published since just 2019 (Lancaster, 2022). The International Center for Academic Integrity publishes a “Reader” of journal articles so that people new to the field of academic integrity can become familiar with key literature. In the first edition of the Reader in 2012, there were no papers on contract cheating. In the second edition of the Reader in 2022, nearly 30% of the papers listed are on contract cheating (Rogerson et al., 2022). The 2016 *Handbook of Academic Integrity* contained three chapters on contract cheating. The forthcoming second edition of the *Handbook* has a dedicated section on contract cheating containing ten planned chapters. And, here, we have released the first ever book on contract cheating.

According to *The Simpsons*, there are three ways to do something: the right way, the wrong way, and the Homer Simpson way—which is the wrong way, only faster. We can now add a fourth way to this list, the way we produced this book—which is the right way, only slower.

This book started as two projects, with two teams of three editors, each team based on separate continents, with editors living in four cities. The book finished as one project with one team of six editors based on two continents, with editors living in five cities. Even though most of us have barely been allowed to travel in the past two years because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been quite a journey.

The story of how this book came together starts with the Australian team (Kiata, Joe, and Guy). In mid-2019, Kiata presented research on “reasoning and individual differences underpinning contract cheating,” at the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia’s annual conference. This presentation caught the eye of a publishing representative from Palgrave who was aware of the increasing interest in contract cheating as a topic and had noticed a lack of theory-based perspectives on it. The representative contacted Kiata, who was working on her PhD under the supervision of Joe and Guy, to ask whether she would like to consider proposing a book. As a PhD student, writing a whole book looked a little daunting, so Guy suggested an edited book, with separately authored chapters. This seemed like a more manageable idea, especially as Kiata, Guy, and Joe, had just co-written a chapter in another edited book and felt as though they knew how this was done. Leaving Kiata to focus on her PhD, Guy began slowly putting together a book proposal in the first half of 2020, which included contacting prospective chapter authors.

Half a world away in Canada, the team of Sarah, Brenda, and Josh were doing much the same thing. Separated by more than 1100 kilometres, the three of them correspond regularly via email about academic integrity and contract cheating. Sarah proposed that the three of them start working on an edited volume. The book idea started with a series of emails one day when Josh, as he was sitting in on a webinar offered by a commercial file-sharing company, backchanneling to Brenda and Sarah, who were unable to join the virtual event in real time (J. Seeland, personal communication, 10 June 2020). The exchange ended with Sarah suggesting an edited book and the other two agreeing. Sarah’s original idea was that the book could be released in 2022, which would recognise the 50th anniversary of the first attempt to legislate against contract cheating in Canada (see Eaton, 2022), catalysing further action towards legislation that exists in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland. Within a few weeks, they had a book proposal under development.

As Guy’s list of chapters and authors was coming together nicely, in August 2020 he received an email from Phill Dawson letting him know that Sarah was also working on a contract cheating book—Sarah had asked Phill to write a chapter, but Phill declined because he had already committed to write for the Australian team. Phill said that, as far as he knew, Sarah and her team had their book in the proposal stage, just like the book being

developed out of Australia. With this new information to hand, Guy emailed Sarah to discuss their separate projects.

Guy and Sarah managed to organise a meeting via a Zoom video call, which felt like a solid first achievement being 14 hours and an international-datetime apart. They discussed various ideas, with two main ones in mind: (1) pushing on with separate, potentially competing books with some overlap and differences in content, or (2) joining forces to make one book and make it the best it can be. You know which one we picked, and that's the way we all became the Brady Bunch.

From this point on, progress on the book was steady and consistent. We got the hang of Zoom calls across anywhere between three and five time zones—depending on the seasons. We contacted authors who had agreed to write two chapters with the good news that they now only had to write one. The proposal took shape, and it got submitted, reviewed, revised, and approved. From there, the writing and editing commenced. What we have now, about three years since Palgrave first suggested that a book on contract cheating would be a good idea, is a book on contract cheating.

We began as an editorial team who had never met in person and knew one another only from reading each other's published works. Even if we had wanted to meet up in person during the project, travel restrictions resulting from COVID-19 prevented that. So, we committed to the book and to each other and we got on realising our shared vision. At the conclusion of the project, we still have yet to all meet face-to-face, but through regular synchronous virtual meetings, email, and asynchronous work, we have developed friendships that transcend geographical distance and a new appreciation for the need to address contract cheating at a global level.

Calgary, Canada
Perth, Australia
Winnipeg, Canada
Perth, Australia
Murdoch, Australia
Brandon, Canada

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although a six-person editorial team is rather a lot for one book, we, and the chapter authors, are not the only people who have contributed to it. We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of our book proposal, who provided helpful feedback on the initially devised content and structure. We would also like to thank the helpful team from Palgrave, who were quick to answer our questions and were on-the-ball with reminders about our deadlines.

There are many more people for us to thank, including our partners and families, who put up with us working extra-long days and nights to make this book a reality. To our families and close friends and colleagues who support us, we are forever grateful for you.

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Contract Cheating: An Introduction to the Problem

*Guy J. Curtis, Joseph Clare, Kiata Rundle,
Sarah Elaine Eaton, Brenda M. Stoesz, and Josh Seeland*

Contract cheating is the outsourcing of students' assessment work in an educational context. We have a bit more to say about the definition of the term contract cheating later, but this will do for now. Although the term contract cheating is relatively recent, students outsourcing assessment work in higher education is not. For example, as a college student in the 1960s, the 45th President of the United States is reported to have outsourced both his exams and his homework. As his niece, Mary Trump, explains:

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Aware of the Wharton [Business] School's reputation, Donald set his sights on the University of Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, even though [his sister] Maryanne had been doing his homework for him, she couldn't take his tests, and Donald worried that his grade point average, which put him far from the top of his class, would scuttle his efforts to get accepted. To hedge his bets he enlisted Joe Shapiro, a smart kid with a reputation for being a good test taker, to take his SATs for him. That was much easier to pull off in the days before photo IDs and computerized records. (Trump, 2020, p. 72)

Outsourced cheating for payment has appeared in the storylines of recent popular television shows. For instance, in the series *Sex Education*, a school student character, Maeve, supports herself financially in the absence of her parents by charging other students to do their homework. This scheme ultimately leads to blackmail when the headmaster's son, Adam, wins an essay prize for a piece that he had paid Maeve to write. Maeve threatens to reveal this fact and embarrass the headmaster in order to save herself from expulsion. In the crime drama *Ozark*, the precocious teenager Jonah Byrde runs a profitable "homework service", which, in one episode, he uses to launder \$5000 in drug money.

Back to reality, instances of contract cheating have been exposed widely in the media in recent years. A cheating service called EduBirdie paid hundreds of highly followed YouTubers to promote their website (Bretag, 2019). The *New York Times* reported the existence of a Facebook group of over 50,000 people who are paid to write students' assignments (Stockman & Mureithi, 2019). *Forbes* magazine interviewed 52 students who use the services of a multi-billion-dollar "study help" company—48 of these students (over 92%) used the site for cheating (Adams, 2021). In 2021, the Tertiary Education and Quality and Standards Agency in Australia sent 34 universities over 2600 cases of suspected contract cheating that had been identified by researchers (Matchett, 2021).

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As the example of Donald Trump’s SAT exam impersonator illustrates, the problem of contract cheating is not limited to written assignments. Research indicates that all kinds of assessments are vulnerable to contract cheating (Bretag et al., 2019b). In fact, students who outsource exams are caught relatively less frequently than students who outsource written work (Harper et al., 2021). Contract cheating services can provide students with answers to tests or dissertation proposals, pre-prepared presentations and speeches, or mathematics and statistics calculations, computer code, multiple-choice test completion, and annotated bibliographies—just to name a few of the options for sale in the market (Rowland et al., 2018). Intuitive wisdom among higher education teachers is that authentic assessments (those which more resemble real life and specific local knowledge) should be hard to outsource, yet contract cheating providers readily provide ghostwritten responses to authentic assessments (Ellis et al., 2020). Even an oral defense of submitted written work, often called a *viva*, can be outsourced (Bretag et al., 2019b).

But, just because contract cheating is happening, why should those who work in educational contexts care? Is contract cheating just a peccadillo that peeves persnickety pedants or is it catastrophic clandestine criminality? Alliteration aside, for our part, we think it is acutely serious. When a student engages in contract cheating their education assessment work is substantially, if not wholly, completed by another person. If the outsourced assessment is not detected as being outsourced, the student receives academic credit toward their qualification that may not reflect their own knowledge, skills, and abilities. Moreover, outsourced work means that the student did not engage in the study and the learning that the assessment task was designed to promote. The gravity of this situation is best illustrated with a literal concrete example involving gravity. Imagine an engineering student who pays another person to complete their major assignments on how to design sturdy and resilient physical structures. This student is awarded their degree, obtains a job in construction engineering, and designs a bridge that will not bear the weight of the traffic that passes over it. The bridge turns to rubble shortly after construction with some drivers plunging to their deaths while others are crushed in their cars below.

Aside from raising serious questions about the integrity of credentials in higher education, contract cheating poses a diabolical problem for higher education institutions and markers to detect outsourced student assessments. Worldwide, higher education has become increasingly “massified” in the past three decades (Bretag et al., 2019a). Massification means that

higher education is delivered to many more students than in the past, without resources increasing at the same rate as student numbers. This mismatch between student numbers and resources has led to larger classes and less personalized relationships between teachers and students. In an early twentieth-century model of higher education, where a single academic staff member tutored a handful of students, it may have been relatively easy for the educator to recognize assessment work that was different from what the student typically produced and thus suspect that the work was written by someone else. However, in contemporary classes, where student enrolments can number in the thousands and marking of assessments may be undertaken by low-paid time-poor precariously-employed adjunct teachers, it is unlikely that those grading students' work will know their students well enough to detect inconsistencies in writing quality and style.

A technological solution that has been widely adopted in higher education to help ensure academic integrity is text-matching software. Text-matching software compares the text of students' assessments to databases of academic journal articles, books, websites, and previous students' papers (Davis & Carroll, 2009). The software conveniently highlights matching text that allows markers to assess whether uncited or improperly cited text may constitute plagiarism. Such plagiarism often involves a lack of awareness of rules for citation and referencing on the part of the student, and detection of matched text can provide opportunities for education professionals to assist students to learn these sometimes-arcane conventions. Indeed, evidence from the past 30 years suggests that the implementation of text-matching software has aided students' understanding of referencing and corresponded with a decline in rates of copy-paste plagiarism (Curtis, 2022). However, although text-matching software may help to detect plagiarism by students bamboozled by referencing rules, students who engage in skullduggery by coopting another person to produce a freshly written assignment may evade detection by text-matching software. Indeed, evidence from numerous sources suggests that outsourced assessments commonly go undetected (Ahsan et al., 2021; Awdry et al., 2021; Bretag et al., 2019b, 2019a).

DEFINING CONTRACT CHEATING

Various authors have used definitions of contract cheating that include and exclude certain behaviors, actors, and contingencies from the definition. For example, it is an ongoing question whether contract cheating is

limited to assessment outsourcing that is done for payment by a third party who is a stranger to the student, whether this term also applies to assessments that are freely completed by a student's family member, and whether the term applies to both bespoke and pre-written assessments.

Clarke and Lancaster (2006) were the first authors to publish the term contract cheating, where they used it to describe “the submission of work by students for academic credit which the students have paid contractors to write for them” (p. 1), and also “the process of offering the process of completing an assignment for a student out to tender” (p. 2). This definition drew from their work examining the outsourcing of students' assessments in computer coding via an internet-mediated site where coders bid for jobs. The specific use of the word “contracting” implies an agreement between a buyer and a seller to undertake commissioned work.

The influential work of Walker and Townley (2012) expanded upon Clarke and Lancaster's (2006) definition by removing the necessity for a tender process. Walker and Townley described contract cheating as “a form of academic dishonesty, where students contract out their coursework to writers or workers, usually found via the internet, in order to submit the purchased assignments as their own work” (p. 27). Nonetheless, the definition retained the concept that contract cheating is the provision of made-to-order assessments for payment.

The definition of contract cheating was broadened substantially by Bretag et al. (2019a), who conducted the largest survey to date of student assessment outsourcing. They suggested that the term “encompass[es] a cluster of practices relating to the outsourcing of students' assessment to third parties, whether or not these entities are commercial providers” (Bretag et al., 2019a, p. 1838). Specifically, they defined contract cheating as:

...where a student gets someone – a third party – to complete an assignment or an exam for them. This third party might be a friend, family member, fellow student or staff member who assists the student as a favour. It might be a pre-written assignment which has been obtained from an assignment ‘mill’. The third party may also be a paid service, advertised locally or online. (Bretag et al., 2019a, p. 1838)

Bretag et al.'s (2019a) definition explicitly adds examinations as an assessment that can be outsourced, not limiting contract cheating to pre-done assessments. Additionally, their definition captures pre-written work

in addition to newly written assessments. Moreover, the definition removes the need for outsourcing to be paid to be considered contract cheating. In contrast, some authors have taken to using the term “commercial contract cheating” (e.g., Newton, 2018; Curtis et al., 2021) to distinguish contract cheating that necessarily involves an exchange or payment for a commercial purpose, from outsourcing that may be unpaid. From the development of definitions, and the recency of both broad and specific definitions, we can see that agreeing on a settled definition is still a work in progress.

Another question to consider in the definition of contract cheating is whether it falls within the broader concept of plagiarism. Plagiarism itself is a word with “no singular or absolute definition” (Eaton, 2021, p. 1), but is generally taken to mean the use of others’ words, work, or ideas without proper attribution. Within this general definition, then, students submitting assessment work completed by someone else in order to obtain academic credit for themselves fits the definition of plagiarism (Eaton, 2021). Before the term contract cheating was first published, Walker (1998) defined seven forms of plagiarism in higher education. According to Walker (1998), plagiarism in the form of *ghostwriting* is defined as “assignment written by third party and represented as own work” (p. 103). Defined in this way, ghostwriting as a form of plagiarism involves the outsourcing of assessment work by the student to another person, whether paid or unpaid, and therefore aligns with Bretag et al.’s (2019a) definition of contract cheating. Indeed, it is common to see authors on contract cheating refer to the suppliers of outsourced assignments as ghostwriters. Still, who or what constitutes a ghostwriter is itself a contested definition (Eaton, 2021).

In this book, authors have used, either implicitly or explicitly, various definitions of contract cheating—and related terminologies such as ghostwriters, essay/paper mills, and plagiarism. To reflect the evolving nature of the term contract cheating, as Editors, we have taken a neutral position on the definition, and not imposed a single definition within the book.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Contract cheating is a problem with many moving parts. To tackle contract cheating successfully, there must be barriers against it at the societal, institutional, and individual levels (Rundle et al., 2020). To understand

how best to construct these barriers, we must also know how much cheating happens, how contract cheating businesses work, why students cheat, and what actions against cheating are effective. To do all of these things, we can draw on basic theoretical, translational, and applied research from numerous fields of study to inform best practices in reducing contract cheating.

This book contains chapters by expert authors and leading researchers in academic integrity and contract cheating who come from a diverse range of academic backgrounds including education, faculty development, psychology, library sciences, law, criminology, computer science, and business. The chapters present a diversity of perspectives covering the what, why, where, and how questions about contract cheating from complementary perspectives. The book brings together the latest research in a series of chapters that, taken together, provide a broad and deep overview of the problem of contract cheating in higher education. A starting point for the book is the question: How many students engage in contract cheating and how often do they do it?

Various studies have attempted to estimate what proportion of students engage in contract cheating (i.e., the prevalence of contract cheating) and how often they do it (i.e., the incidence of contract cheating). Some of these studies have made dramatic media headlines, for example, “Contract cheating ‘ripe to explode’” (Ross, 2018 reporting on Bretag et al., 2019a) and “Are you part of the 11 per cent who have cheated at University?” (Karvelas, 2021 reporting on Curtis et al., 2021). However, the academic studies these media stories report differ in their definitions of contract cheating and their methods and sources of data collection. As a consequence, the prevalence of contract cheating has been estimated in various studies as anywhere between about 0.3% and 45% of students (Newton, 2018).

In truth, we do not know what proportion of students engage in contract cheating or how often they do it. Still, this does not mean that we cannot make some educated guesses and consider what we would need to know to make our estimates more accurate. Two chapters in this book consider the question of how to estimate the prevalence and incidence of contract cheating (Clare & Rundle, 2022; Krásničan et al., 2022). Krásničan et al. reviewed the methodology of studies that have used self-report surveys to estimate the prevalence of contract cheating and provided guidance for future researchers on how to increase the validity of such work. Drawing on criminology methods, Clare and Rundle

(2022) discuss the many sources of information that can potentially be triangulated to estimate the extent of contract cheating in higher education.

Contract cheating occurs within wider societal, legal, commercial, educational, and administrative environments. Draper's chapter outlines legal responses to contract cheating, including moves to outlaw academic cheating services in various jurisdictions. Rogerson's (2022) chapter positions academic file-sharing in the larger context of the sharing culture promoted by social media. She explains how file-sharing can underlie contract cheating and how students may be unaware of the ethics and consequences of file-sharing. The chapter by Seeland et al. explains how existing copyright laws may be employed to counteract academic file-sharing.

Why do students engage in contract cheating? A neat and plausible answer is that it is easier for someone else to do a student's assessment work for them than for them to do it for themselves. However, as H. L. Mencken (1920) said, for every question there is an answer that is "neat, plausible, and wrong" (p. 158). As noted above, contract cheating suppliers are easily accessible and contract cheaters may be rarely caught, yet the varied estimates of contract cheating's prevalence always suggest that it is something only a minority of students do. Thus, researchers have asked not only why students engage in contract cheating, but also why they do not (e.g., Rundle et al., 2019).

In this book, several chapters provide theory-based discussions of why students do, and do not, engage in contract cheating. Citing evidence that students who are dissatisfied with the educational environment engage in more contract cheating (Bretag et al., 2019a), Sutherland-Smith and Dawson (2022) explain how principles of Self-Determination Theory may be applied to assessment design to make completing assessments more satisfying for students. By extension, more satisfied students should be less inclined to engage in contract cheating. Stoesz et al.'s (2022) chapter provides an alternative assessment-and-teaching-based strategy, explaining how developing students' critical thinking skills may reduce contract cheating.

According to singer Hank Williams, the pangs of conscience experienced after infidelity mean that eventually: "your cheating heart will tell on you." This idea that a cheating heart will experience remorse, possibly leading to a confession of wrongdoing, assumes that bad actors will feel guilt-ridden. Thus, students who cheat and feel guilty may own up to their actions, but what of students who do not tend to feel guilty? Baran and Jonason's chapter considers "dark" personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) in students that may be associated

with contract cheating and academic misconduct, and how personality predispositions to cheating may be attenuated. Their chapter may also help us understand the contract cheating by the famously narcissistic Donald Trump that we mentioned earlier. Similarly, Curtis and Tindall's (2022) chapter considers students' attitudes, current emotions, and anticipated emotions as potential psychological drivers of contract cheating behavior. In contrast, Clare's (2022) chapter outlines deterrence strategies for contract cheating based on situational crime prevention theories. This chapter's contentions inherently assume that contract cheating is less likely to occur the more difficult the situation makes its occurrence, without regard to the psychological predispositions of students.

In whatever way educators and administrators in higher education deal with the problem of contract cheating, it must be a multi-faceted approach (Rundle et al., 2020). Chapters by Crockett (2022) and Ellis et al. (2022) provide concrete practical advice for higher education professionals on how to detect contract cheating by students, with an aim of making markers and investigators the nemesis of nefarious cheating service providers. Glendinning's (2022) chapter focuses on policy design to counteract contract cheating within wider quality assurance frameworks. Considering engagement with, and contributions from students in counteracting contract cheating, Lancaster's (2022) chapter outlines successful collaborations between students and academic staff that promote academic integrity and seek to reduce contract cheating. Veeran-Colton et al.'s (2022) chapter discusses the inherent risk to students of placing themselves in a position where someone (i.e., the ghostwriter) knows that they have cheated. Importantly, they outline research which shows that alerting students to the risks of being exposed as a cheat reduces students' willingness to engage in contract cheating.

Several chapters in this book also consider the methods of contract cheating businesses and writers. Parnter's (2022) chapter outlines original research that investigates how contract cheating businesses market their services to postgraduate students. Eaton et al.'s (2022) chapter examines ghostwriters' own accounts of their experiences in the contract cheating industry and elucidates common themes among the narratives of ghostwriters who worked across a span of time, academic disciplines, and geographical locations. A new perspective on the collaboration between contracted writers and their student customers is outlined in Thacker's (2022) chapter. Thacker (2022) describes situations ranging from guided collaboration to co-authoring of papers between students and ghostwriters, which highlights that contract cheating is not universally a case of hands-off outsourcing.

In sum, this book is the most comprehensive work on contract cheating assembled to date. Our hope, as an editorial team, is that the book will provide a go-to reference for educators, researchers, and administrators who are attempting to deal with the problem of contract cheating.

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