

Developing Policies to Address Historic Contract Cheating and Misuse of Generative Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

When students submit written assignments for assessment, they are generally trusted to have completed these honestly, and to have benefitted from the opportunity to learn. Academic integrity breaches are sometimes detected during the assessment process. Some common examples of integrity breaches during students' academic writing include contract cheating, the unauthorised use of GenAI technology for completing assignments, and using AI tools to disguise existing work so that it appears to be original. None of these are new phenomena. Processes and procedures should be in place for managing suspected academic misconduct cases detected during the assessment process. But what happens when academic misconduct is detected retrospectively, sometimes after a student has moved degree programmes or graduated?

This position paper sets out the case for universities and other academic institutions having procedures in place to deal with historic academic misconduct. It provides examples of how institutions can become aware of misconduct, including through whistleblowing and through development of more effective detection software. The authors bring together legal and educational expertise to suggest considerations that individual institutions should make towards future policy development. The discussion considers that students must be supported and prepared for success, but that institutions cannot ignore the reputational risks associated with cases of historic misconduct.

Introduction

Academic institutions are at risk of reputational damage if they do not actively address breaches of academic integrity. Such breaches may be detected while a student is on a programme of study, but sometimes these are not detected until much later. Where assessments rely heavily on academic writing activities by students, breaches can happen through types of academic

misconduct such as contract cheating (where a student engages a third-party to prepare their assignment), other forms of assignment outsourcing, the misuse of artificial intelligence (AI), and other deliberate acts by students such as text manipulation that deceive institutional assessment procedures and practices (Roe & Perkins, 2022). None of these misconduct methods are new, with contract cheating being long established, AI used in tools for paraphrasing and translation, and through students having access to essay bots. Misuse of AI became particularly prevalent with the advent of GPT-3-enabled essay bots from 2020 (Crockett, 2023; Johnson and Isiev, 2022). However institutional policies to address historic misconduct of academic misconduct are not always in place. Since November 2022, the ChatGPT software has become almost synonymous with generative AI (GenAI) when considered with respect to academic writing, and the access it affords to students, and others, adds urgency to the need for policies to address historic misconduct.

Contract cheating and misuse of GenAI can be difficult for educators to detect and even harder to prove. Detection methods explored, amongst others, have included monitoring online requests (Clarke and Lancaster, 2007), training markers (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith, 2017), using learning analytics (Trezise et al., 2019), tracking student writing styles and stylometry (Crockett and Best, 2020; Crockett, 2023; Ison, 2020), and examination of metadata and other indicators (Crockett, 2023; Rogerson, 2017). Researchers have indicated how easily ChatGPT generated content can be embedded within existing documents (Curtis, 2023). Despite advances in understanding and technology, it appears that many cases of these types of cheating are not detected (Curtis et al., 2021).

This position paper is based on the discussion and experience of a group of authors who actively work in the academic integrity field. Amongst them, they conduct research, teach students, contribute to developments in national, international and institutional policy, develop forensic approaches, train others, liaise with sectoral organisations, and lead cross-institutional regional academic integrity networks. The authors have encountered many instances of evidenced contract cheating, including cases that arose after students graduated, and have seen awards rescinded. Although the actual details of such cases cannot be openly discussed, it is hoped that information shared in this paper will help other institutions to develop their own policy around historic cases.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the challenges of contract cheating and the misuse of GenAI are considered in more detail. Second, the paper discusses mechanisms known by the authors through which historic academic misconduct cases can come to light. Third, the paper notes the limitations of many current university policies in this area. Fourth, the paper addresses the associated policy implications of retrospective investigations. Fifth, the paper considers the legal and practical challenges associated with historic cases becoming known through whistle-blowers. Finally, the paper concludes with general remarks and recommendations for future work in this area.

False Authorship: Did the student write this?

Addressing historic academic misconduct with regard to written work often comes down to addressing the question: did the student who submitted this work write this for themselves? This can be a nuanced question, especially relating to AI, where a student may write a draft for themselves and then use a GenAI tool to support editing or, indeed, use AI-enabled software without appreciating the extent of the AI functionality.

In general, there is little nuance with contract cheating, which remains a major problem within higher education. Originally defined by Clarke and Lancaster (2006), contract cheating represents a major threat to educational integrity. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, contract cheating was thought to involve around 15.7% of students in UK Higher Education (Newton, 2018). Indeed, evidence collected during the midst of that pandemic suggests that contract cheating levels increased substantially during remote teaching and assessment (Lancaster and Cotarlan, 2021). Other studies have shown sophisticated marketing of these services at discipline level and the hijacking of legitimate websites to redirect to contract cheating providers (Lancaster and Salasevicius, 2023).

Consideration of use/misuse of AI is by its nature more nuanced. Writing tools with embedded AI functionality can be a great asset to education if used appropriately. The risk comes when AI tools are misused by students to generate content, effectively using AI as a ghost-writer, replacing the requirement for them to learn subject matter, develop as proficient writers, and to complete assessed work for themselves. GenAI has perhaps become best known across the educational sector following the release of ChatGPT in November 2022. GenAI existed before ChatGPT, but what ChatGPT did was to introduce a chatbot interface, making this technology widely available. Prior to ChatGPT, most students gained access to AI through essay bots, which were specifically designed to help students to cheat.

Other AI-tools must not be overlooked. In the academic misconduct context, paraphrasing tools such as Quillbot have been used to rewrite copied text so that it would appear as original to text-matching software (Rogerson and McCarthy, 2017; Roe and Perkins, 2022). Such tools also saw increased marketing during the pandemic period (Forgas et al., 2023). Automated translation software has been used by students to reuse work written in other languages, or to disguise it to prevent detection (Jones and Sheridan, 2015; Lancaster and Clarke, 2009). More recently, new paraphrasing and rewriting tools such as Phrasly.ai have been released, that are explicitly marketed for disguising AI-generated assignments.

The use of GenAI to complete assessments goes beyond the direct student market because of the links into contract cheating where ghost-writers and essay mills use AI to prepare commissioned assignments. That noted, since February 2024, there appears to be a developing trend of essay mills offering 'AI-free' as well as 'plagiarism-free' guarantees, and some essay mills have started to offer human rewrite services for students who wish to disguise AI-generated text (Marks, 2024).

The expectation is that when academic outsourcing is suspected at the time of submission, an academic institution will have policies and procedures in place to address this, with a range of available penalties, up to expulsion, depending on the specific circumstances. Academic penalties might be accompanied by support for students to improve their academic practice. However, the situation is more difficult when evidence of academic outsourcing, or other serious academic misconduct, comes to light after grading/moderation, or later during the same year of study, or in a subsequent year, or even after a student has left or graduated.

Routes by which Historic Academic Misconduct Can Come to Light

There are numerous routes by which evidence of historical academic misconduct can come to light. Three of the most common methods are summarised in the following subsections, but this is not an exhaustive list.

1. Access to Essay Mill and Ghost-writer Data

Australia's MyMaster scandal in 2014 provided the global education sector with one of the largest examples of historic contract cheating information (McNeillage and Visentin, 2014). In this case, journalists accessed the inner workings of an essay mill (MyMaster) operating in Sydney, Australia that focused its marketing towards the Chinese student community. The journalists involved claimed they had seen over 700 payments for a total of Aus\$160,000 to MyMaster in 2014 alone, indicating this company was doing substantial business. When the evidence of ghost-written assignments was released to universities in Australia, many had to retrospectively address historic contract cheating.

A subsequent investigation by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) saw 2,510 documents extracted from non-UK essay mills and linked these to submissions to 160 UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (QAA, 2022). It is likely that similar datasets exist in HEIs in other countries and, therefore, there is a need for institutions to have a way to address evidence from historic datasets if these become available.

2. Advances in detection technology

The challenges of detecting the misuse of GenAI have been widely documented in the literature (Crockett & Howe, 2024; Lancaster, 2023; Perkins et al., 2023). In brief, it is inevitable that GenAIs will continue to improve and produce ever more human-like text, with AI-text detectors

consequently becoming less accurate and reliable. However, detector technologies will continue to be developed with, possibly, improved capabilities in the detection of 'older' AI-generated text. There are also technologies for aiding the detection of contract cheating (Dawson et al., 2019). Thus, as technologies develop and new technologies emerge, and documents are continually reprocessed, certain historic student submissions may be flagged at some future point for further checking. For example, this could be in later years of a student's degree programme, or during master's level study following an undergraduate programme, or someone subsequently referring to a dissertation or thesis.

When the authenticity of student work is in doubt, it can be necessary for staff to go back through previous assignments by the same student to try and verify this; for example, by using stylometry to build a picture of a student's normal writing style (Crockett & Best, 2020; Crockett, 2023). Such activity can also bring further instances of academic misconduct to light for that same student: the same techniques that can establish a student's normal writing style clearly have the potential to highlight departures from that style and thus evidence potential academic outsourcing that had not been previously detected.

3. Whistle-blowing

A recommendation from the Council of Europe Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED) from the Committee of Ministers to member States on countering education fraud, adopted in July 2022 provides:

Member States and education institutions should ensure the freedom to raise issues linked to education fraud and academic integrity by providing a fair process for doing so, in addition to the protection provided under relevant national legislation for whistle-blowers. They should also ensure a fair and impartial process for persons and organisations accused of education fraud (Council of Europe, 2022).

A whistle-blower in this context is usually anybody who discloses information on a threat or harm to the public interest in their workplace setting, whether in the public or private sector. However, the results of the survey on education fraud circulated among ETINED members and presented at the 3rd ETINED Plenary Session in 2019, revealed that for 60% of respondents there is no specific legislation in their member states that protects individuals who provide information on education fraud (Draper et al., 2023). Consequently, ETINED recommended that member States support the adoption of procedures and practices to protect whistle-blowers at institutional level of education providers, including definition of channels for reporting and disclosure, and ongoing support for the development of practices and procedures to ensure a fair and impartial process for persons and organisations accused of education fraud. Specifically, the ETINED platform considered it important to define and implement, within national settings, relevant legislation and procedures covering the process of raising issues, the protection of the person raising it, and the process for persons and organisations accused of education fraud.

Contract cheating can also be reported directly to universities through whistle-blowing processes. This could be through a ghost-writer or essay mill, possibly alleging non-payment by a student. Sometimes approaches can be phrased in such a general form that they could apply to any number of students. Students may whistle-blow on other students, often because they know the dishonest student has been awarded higher marks than them for much less effort.

An allegation made through whistle-blowing does not always mean there was wrongdoing by a student. Some allegations can come with malicious intent. Reports by disgruntled former partners, for example, are not unknown, and neither are attempts at blackmail and extortion by third parties who have somehow obtained a student's email address. The institutional procedures for handling whistle-blowers need to consider all possible motivations for a whistle-blower and allow for the identity of a genuine whistle-blower to be protected.

Current Policies and Their Limitations

Academic institutions should regularly check the efficacy of their academic integrity policies, especially policies specifically addressing deliberate and more serious forms of integrity breaches. Threats to academic integrity are not static; they are often fuelled by developments in technology, which necessitates adopting an agile approach towards processes and timing for monitoring, reviewing and revising institutional policies (Glendinning, 2023).

The regulations for the five UK institutions where the authors of this paper are based were reviewed by sharing the details and analysing the content relating to managing historic cases. All five sets of regulations contained similar clauses and noted that awards could be rescinded with good cause, although the levels of detail varied between the different regulations.

The reasons given for rescinding an award with regard to historic academic misconduct include:

- Where awards were found to have been made following fraud, deception or unfair practice.
- Where academic misconduct related to a previous programme of study that is a necessary qualification to progress to a later programme.

Although these reasons collectively cover many situations of historic misconduct, they are neither entirely consistent nor complete and it is likely that loopholes and weaknesses exist. It is also likely that similar challenges with regulations and policies exist across the Higher Education sector.

All five sets of regulations required that the decision on rescinding an award must be taken or confirmed by the highest-level academic authorities in the institution, typically the Senate. Several of the regulations noted that a former student dissatisfied with having an award rescinded could submit a complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA). This is the final avenue of academic complaint for all UK institutions that reviews academic complaints after the institutional procedures have been exhausted.

Implications for Future Policy Developments

The previous discussion has motivated the need for the continual development of policy surrounding how historic breaches of academic integrity are dealt with. This section provides general prompts and considerations for institutions, although it is noted that institutions should fine-tune their approach according to their local needs and ethos. In particular, it is important that the revised policies are developed in consultation with students and other crucial stakeholders in the teaching and learning process (Glendinning, 2023), rather than being developed and imposed in a top-down manner.

The possibility of evidence coming to light at a future point, plus the possibility of new/improved technology revealing suspect submissions at a future point, in addition to the complexities of identifying outsourced academic submissions at the time of grading/moderation, all mean that having an institutional regulation providing for a time limit for reporting cases ('statute of limitations') is essentially self-defeating. Also, having a regulation along such lines could even be viewed as (indefensible) condonement of historical cases by the institution in question.

Thus, institutions should avoid having a time limiting regulation relating to any form of academic misconduct, particularly with regard to serious misconduct involving deliberate acts by students, including academic outsourcing. In a closely related context, there should be no time limits when considering ethics misconduct. At one extreme, there should be no time-windows that limit the reporting of suspected academic misconduct for currently enrolled students. At the other extreme, institutions need to have procedures for managing allegations of academic misconduct that surface after the assessments have been graded and, potentially, after students have graduated, necessitating that institutional regulations allow for downgrading or rescinding awards that have already been conferred.

Institutions might also wish to consider regulations or penalties to prevent or discourage students from uploading their (graded) assignments to essay banks and other file-sharing websites etc., thereby making them available to other students, possibly for payment. However, there are problems with the enforcement of such regulations, principally if the student holds the copyright, particularly if the uploading occurs after graduation; for example, how would an institution prove that the writer of an assignment uploaded it?

A salutary case in point emerged in Australia with the earlier mentioned MyMaster scandal, where some of the decisions to rescind awards were challenged by the graduates and became subject to judicial review (Levine and Evans, 2018). This experience provides a framework within which higher education providers may wish to consider their own processes (Levine and Evans, 2018). This typically involves a consideration of whether the institution has the authority to revoke, and the reasonableness of any decision to do so.

Another consideration is whether the student's conduct is unlawful. An international movement to make contract cheating illegal started some time ago, but there are limitations to such laws, and in many jurisdictions there is no legal impediment to a student commissioning work (Amigud and Dawson, 2019; Draper and Newton, 2017; Draper et al., 2023). In such cases, rescindment depends on the contract between the student and the institution via its internal regulations and statutes, and the consequent fair and transparent application of those regulations and statutes.

In any event, an implied power to rescind a degree will normally be a natural consequence of the power to award a degree. Institutions will be reluctant to invest the time and expense of judicial proceedings, with the potential for reputation damage, and therefore are best advised to have clear constitutional powers to rescind degrees in the event of historic academic misconduct being established after graduation.

A related question is what the appropriate penalty should be for a historic case of misconduct and when an academic award should be rescinded. One approach is to evaluate the case with the same penalty applied to an assignment or module as would be the case for a current student. If this would not leave the student with enough academic credit for their already conferred award, they could potentially be offered a lesser award in its place based on previous clean credits. The student could also be offered the opportunity to retake the assignment(s) in question or study additional credits to make up the deficit.

Furthermore, there will, in general, be external consequences in the event that an award is downgraded or revoked due to any form of integrity breach. There may be implications if the graduate is in professional practice that requires the rescinded degree, including professional accreditations that also depend on holding that degree, or in employment, or in higher level study for which they are no longer qualified, perhaps at a different institution. These points suggests there is a genuine need for institutions to be able to communicate details of academic misconduct cases with one another and with professional bodies. In addition, institutions need to consider how they would address the notification of a historic serious academic integrity breach by another institution, relating to earlier studies of a current student or of an alumnus.

Whistleblowing and Associated Policy Issues

A further complication for academic institutions arises when allegations of (serious) academic misconduct arrive through whistle-blowing procedures. Sometimes, whistle-blowers provide evidence to support their allegations. As stated earlier, some whistle-blowers carry malicious intent. Depending on the standard institutional practice, as a minimum sufficient investigation should be undertaken to determine the substance and nature of any such whistle-blow.

Institutions should have regulations that facilitate students, staff and third parties in the reporting of evidence of academic misconduct, particularly about students they know, or have grounds suspect they are engaged in (serious) academic misconduct, or facilitating other students in such activities. When designing whistle-blowing policies, institutions need to consider all the possible options and allow for the extra workload the investigations will require (QAA, 2020, pp. 30-31).

The issue of identity protection must be considered here, as must the question about whether or not an institution can consider reports by anonymous whistle-blowers. A simple message to acknowledge receipt may be sufficient, and for asking if the whistle-blower is willing to waive their right to anonymity.

Matters around anonymity are not straightforward. Institutions need to encourage and facilitate students and others who wish to whistle-blow whilst balancing legal requirements, such as freedom-of-information. Allowing anonymity, whilst arguably encouraging honest and evidenced allegations, can also attract malicious allegations. However, the key factor is the evidence provided. If a whistle-blower provides no evidence, and no other evidence emerges to support a claim, then there are no grounds for pursuing an investigation, with the strong possibility that the allegation is malicious. If a whistle-blower provides evidence that can be confirmed, then there are grounds for pursuing an investigation, even if the primary motivation for whistle-blowing is malicious. Thus, institutional policy needs to set out whether evidence from a whistle-blower, anonymous or otherwise, can be used as part of an investigation into current or historic integrity breaches.

Whether or not there is anonymity, or if a whistle-blower uses a fake name and identity for the purposes of the whistle-blow, their true identity could still be discoverable. Furthermore, there can be no guarantee that the accused student will be unable to identify the whistle-blower or, worse, mis-identify someone else as the whistle-blower. Any whistle-blowing policy needs to be able to accommodate investigation of allegations that turn out to be incorrect, to determine whether those were made in good faith or were unfounded and malicious, and, in the latter circumstances, disciplinary action could be taken against the whistle-blower. Wider institutional policy needs to be able to deal with students and staff who threaten or intimidate known or suspected whistle-blowers.

The possibility of a student who is whistle-blown for cheating making retaliatory threats against a student or staff-member they know or suspect to have blown-the-whistle cannot be discounted, and is a strong reason for allowing anonymous whistle-blowing. However, anonymity itself cannot prevent a whistle-blown student from threatening others they suspect, and it cannot guarantee that the whistle-blower remains anonymous. Clearly, anyone threatening students or staff-members under any circumstances needs to be subjected to appropriate disciplinary action. In addition, an institution owes a duty of care to all students, but particularly a student who helps to maintain academic integrity.

Institutions should also consider what support and advice will be made available to potential whistle-blowers, particularly where a student may have knowledge that another student has breached integrity. It is important that students feel comfortable to raise such concerns. A student-governed body, such as a students' union, may provide a suitable channel for independent advice and support in such a situation.

Any whistle-blowing policy needs to be able to accommodate investigation of allegations that turn out to be incorrect, to determine whether those were made in good faith or were unfounded and malicious. Further, where an allegation is deemed to be malicious, policy needs to be in place to take disciplinary and/or legal action against the whistle-blower. It is easy for whistle-blowers to create email addresses that are effectively anonymous, but email and Internet service providers may be legally required to disclose all the account information they hold.

Self Whistle-blowing

There may also be situations where a student decides to retrospectively declare their own historic academic misconduct (Draper et al., 2021). Since all students are on a learning journey, if handled well, a decision by a student to be honest about their inappropriate conduct should be seen as a major and welcome opportunity to help them to transform their behaviour and outlook on learning. However, it is only reasonable to allow a student to 'see the light' once, and any recidivism must be viewed in the same manner as any other habitual cheating. In any event, academic credit resulting from compromised work, either directly or indirectly via, for example, credits for intermediate assignments relating to a project-dissertation module that have been outsourced, cannot be allowed to stand.

The regulations and policies developed for use within educational providers should include access to student health and welfare: a student who confesses to cheating, a student facing whistle-blower allegations, and a student or staff-member who whistle-blows, are all likely to need support. Provision of support through a students' union or other similar body should be pro-actively offered and signposted during the investigation, particularly since institutional procedures for managing academic integrity breaches have been shown to be stressful for students (Pitt et al., 2020). The question therefore must be asked about who provides the support for a student facing a historic case of academic misconduct, particularly if the student has graduated.

Scams, Extortion and Blackmail

Institutions need to be aware about scams surrounding contract cheating and whistle-blowing. These should be considered in the light of data protection legislation and may require updates to address any changes to data protection policies.

Often, contract cheating providers possess a lot of knowledge about the students they have completed work for, as well as other students on the same course. Such knowledge can be gained, for example, when students give contract cheating providers access to the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Learning Management System (LMS), where the teaching and learning materials are stored for their course, by sharing their institutional login details (which itself might breach other institutional policies and carry legal implications). What the student may not realise is that this also often gives the essay mill or ghost-writer access to valuable teaching resources and information about themselves and their peer group, which can be exploited for marketing or malicious purposes. It is possible for unauthorised access of this nature, to be detected by monitoring Internet Protocol (IP) addresses of those accessing the VLE/LMS, but Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and a mobile student body, mean that it is not always possible to conclusively identify security breaches.

A particular type of scam used by malefactors to identify students, is to use similarity checking software to trace potential matches to ghost-written source documents and then use the software's semi-automated paper-request system to try to access submitted versions, noting that some of those submissions might contain name/identity information but, even if not (e.g. if a responding instructor completely redacts such information), a response from the institution to this request can confirm where a student is studying. Furthermore, students who submit ghost-written assignments to similarity checking software seldom consider the fact that as soon as they submit such assignments, that same software enables the ghost-writer to trace those submissions and, potentially, identify them or alert the institution where they are studying. Such requests can potentially arise from both compromised software, for example instructor accounts used by essay mills, and instructors effectively acting as agents for essay mills.

To avoid these types of data breaches, institutions are advised that rather than being sent to individual instructors, all requests for information via the software provider are routed to specific people within the institution who understand the legal implications of these requests. Furthermore, the software provider should be able to provide guidance on how to reroute such requests.

Another scam involves an external party contacting an instructor with an apparently innocent request, possibly a fake reference request, for example to confirm that a student they name is studying on their course or module. Sometimes they provide a partial or fake student name or identity information to lure a staff-member into providing a correct name, or even just to give a sufficiently accurate description of a student as deduced, for example, from essay-mill transactions.

A third type of scam, and one that has been increasing in recent years, is for facilitators working for essay mills to use fake student names or identities to penetrate bona fide social media groups in order to directly market to students.

Extortion and blackmail of current and former students by third-parties has become a commonly discussed phenomenon that all students need to be warned about (Gregory, 2021; QAA, 2022; Yorke et al., 2022). Recently, the authors have seen evidence of a new type of scam relating

to legislation about contract cheating. In essence, students are targeted by the scammers who send messages that, for example, threaten them with prosecution and/or exposure to their university authorities, for having used (illegal) contract cheating services, and telling them they can avoid prosecution or exposure etc. if they pay a 'fine' (which goes to the scammers). Clearly, these types of threat can be very frightening for students, not all of whom will have engaged in contract cheating, but might have naively signed up for 'tutorial support'.

It is therefore essential that institutions have regulations and policies in place that keep all members of staff alert to third-party phishing requests for current or former student information. This is even the case when they appear to be requests for references for graduate employment or to have come from colleagues at other institutions. Such considerations mean that determining an appropriate approach for dealing with historic cases of contract cheating whistle-blowing is one to which academic institutions need to give careful thought. To address threats to students of any nature, the institution needs to ensure there is a safe space for students to report their concerns and ask for help (Pitt et al., 2020). As mentioned earlier, a confidential advice service provided by a student body, such as a student union, is an ideal forum for students to consult, but they need to know that this service exists, what help it can provide, and how to access it.

Conclusions

This paper has discussed the challenging issue of how academic institutions should implement policies and processes to deal with historic cases of academic misconduct. This is an area that has been little considered in the academic literature, but which is likely to become a larger problem for institutions in future years, particularly in light of the increased availability and difficulties in detecting misuse of GenAI.

It can be difficult for institutions to know how to address scenarios like those raised in this paper. People within institutions with responsibilities for academic integrity policies are encouraged to join their regional and national academic integrity communities and to share their concerns, findings, knowledge and best practice. It has only been possible to develop this paper based on the findings of communities working on academic integrity in their own areas. In addition, involving students as active members of such discussions is equally important.

Many students may not be aware that historic cases of contract cheating and other forms of academic misconduct may come to light and have serious consequences later in their studies or after they have graduated. Sharing this information with students can serve as a powerful deterrent against all forms of academic misconduct. There have been cases where students themselves have only admitted to contract cheating as a way of escaping threats of blackmail and extortion (Yorke et al., 2022). Discussing these topics with students or graduates can be difficult and therefore care should be exercised and guidance is needed for those responsible for starting those conversations. However, messages about the short-term and longer-term dangers of academic misconduct are an essential element of the educational support that should be provided for all students.

The paper has suggested that it may prove inappropriate for academic institutions to have time limits within regulations for academic misconduct cases, and, indeed, can be counterproductive. Within the UK, a breach of contract claim must be brought within six years of the breach, but under the s.32 Limitation Act 1980 this six-year period does not begin to run until the claimant (university) has either discovered the fraud concealment or dishonesty, or could with reasonable diligence have discovered it. This does provide scope for institutions looking to investigate historic breaches of academic integrity.

An associated issue involves a student or graduate deciding to work for a contract cheating provider, or to even offer their own services to students on a programme of study they themselves have completed. For a student or graduate familiar with a particular programme, its content and marking practices, offering contract cheating services can provide easy money for them. Institutions may wish to consider whether this conduct is acceptable and whether such activities, which are likely to bring their own institution into disrepute, should also be grounds for an award to be rescinded.

Most importantly, a balanced view needs to be taken at all times. Malicious reports of contract cheating are happening, as are attempted scams aimed at students. The majority of students do not engage in contract cheating and would not consider doing so. Students who do not understand how to correctly use GenAI may find that they are accidentally breaching academic integrity. Policies, processes and procedures have to be developed in such a way to ensure that students are protected, but not allow students to benefit from qualifications that have been gained by unfair means, even if such information comes to light many years after a student has graduated.

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