

Combating student cheating in Academia

Robert W Brown

RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia
rwb@rmit.edu.au

***Abstract:** World wide, the stakes in education are higher than ever. An academic qualification can be a ticket to a better world and even to a better country. Frequently, university fees of around \$20,000 or more a year are incurred in studying for a degree. Entrance into a desirable educational institute depends on good grades. The pressure to cheat, and the opportunity to do so has expanded enormously. The Internet and explosion of information sources, together with high technology, make the methods of cheating much more diverse and effective. Apart from age-old cheating in examinations, tests and assignments, cheating by having a substitute sit the examination is also becoming common. With the large growth in numbers of students attending many academic institutions, staff frequently does not personally know the students and thus cannot easily detect substitute candidates. Distance learning, where the academic may not meet the students at any stage, gives rise to easy opportunities for substitution. Student ID cards are not difficult to forge with readily available technology. Such is the state, that the reputations of academic institutions is at risk and it is well to be aware and to combat cheating of many and varied types. In this paper, some of the typical manifestations of cheating are described together with some traditional and some recently developed automated remedies.*

***Keywords:** cheating, academia, remedies.*

Introduction

Many idealistic academics don't want to believe such practices are occurring and literally don't want to hear about it. The institutions often react weakly to detections of cheating. Fear of bad publicity, desire to avoid hostile legal action and the expediency of sweeping the matter under the carpet, often result in little or no penalty for those caught behaving dishonestly.

Ultimately, the reputation of the universities and the trust of employers and society in academic qualifications stand to be seriously eroded, with consequent unfair damage to honest and honorable students.

Academics and their universities first face the problem of cheating when selecting new students, particularly offshore students as the university has little ability and resources to check claims or documents. In a report in *The Age*, (14 May 2001, p. 8) Bangladeshi college students went on a rampage because their attempts to cheat in an English examination were foiled by police. *"The students became violent when they failed to get prepared answers for the English question paper, one police officer said."*

At RMIT as reported by Hunt (2003), a computer science student paid his tutor \$800 to sit his examination. The tutor was not charged and the student was later allowed to re-sit the examination. The newspaper article claimed “a survey revealed cheating was rife in Victorian universities. Almost 8 per cent of students surveyed confessed to some form of dishonesty.” In the same article, a survey conducted by the info-tech faculty at Monash University, of 700 undergraduate students at Monash and Swinburne universities, reported that 3% of students in info-tech admitted hiring someone to sit examinations for them.

Professor Allan Patience professor of political science at Victoria University expressed the following fear: “We are in very serious danger of making degrees totally meaningless and unleashing unqualified graduates into the community.”


But the problem is not specific to any one country. As reported by Kelly (2000), Professor David Presti of the University of California, suspected that some cheating was occurring in his advanced-level neurobiology classes. He used an online service providing checks for plagiarism and found that 45 of the 300 papers submitted to him had significant plagiarized content, despite the students being warned beforehand that plagiarism checks would be conducted. This number exceeded the total of all other cases of plagiarism detected by other methods that year in the whole university.

The problem extends beyond what might be called one-way plagiarism. Web sites are now online that offer a range of services for cheating, extending from a catalog of standard project reports that are not original, to new original reports written to specification for the customer. Such reports, being quasi-original, are very difficult to detect as being not the work of the student. However, even such “original” reports, if written for a number of customers on the same topic by the same author, will contain surprising commonality that is readily detected by plagiarism detecting software.

Two typical sites supplying written essays are www.cheathouse.com and www.cheater.com. One comment recorded in the first site is (sic): “College Application Essay for Computer Science Major. I wrote it and used it, got accepted to the 3 schools I sent it too, now someone else can use it too!”

This site claims to have 15,000 essays online on a range of topics. Cost is around \$9.95 per month and this allows unlimited access. Custom written essays typically cost \$20 to \$30 per page and can be supplied in as little as five days. A representative web page of schoolsux.com is shown in Figure 1

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Figure 1: Schoolsux web page.

A different type of cheating is direct purchase of fake qualifications, usually to obtain a job but often to gain admission to a university or college. In the Singapore newspaper, the Straits Times, Kin (2002) reported on a “Buy a Degree” website operation. One cheat who was caught, had procured a forged university law degree purportedly from the University of London. He received a fine of \$10,000. As a test, Kin bought a Cisco Systems-certified database administrator qualification for \$4000 and subsequently verified that, as promised, his name was listed on the Cisco Systems website as having passed the necessary examinations. He also bought a fake degree for \$6000 and had his name registered at the Lancaster University as having attended and passed the course.

A less complex method of fabrication of qualifications, is to have the certificate or degree forged. A Melbourne woman employed a calligrapher to provide her with a fake university law degree certificate. The fake qualification was only exposed when she appeared before the courts on charges of defrauding her own family of a large sum of money whilst practicing as a lawyer.

Universities have little control over forgery of various qualifications and academic record. Such cheating is a major problem for academic institutions when the fake records and qualifications are used to gain admission to degree programs. Since admissions officers have little other information to go on in accepting and enrolling students, particularly for overseas students, this is a grave problem.

Cheating in Examinations

Many ingenious methods have been detected, ranging from substitute students to use of text-based messages (SMS) on high tech cell-phones that appear to be calculators. Calculators have also been used to carry large amounts of textual information into examinations.

In another case, a student managed to obtain a copy of the script paper before the examination and filled it with notes. He then left it in plain view on the desktop, knowing it would be mistaken for one of the script books handed out for recording the examination. The ruse was only detected because another student brought the deception to the attention of the supervisor. Leaving material hidden in lavatories and elsewhere is also common according to veteran supervisors. In a recent case of a more ingenious method of obtaining notes in examinations, a student having an examination in a “clash” room, bluetacked a sheaf of notes under the desk in which he was to sit some hours later. Unfortunately, the seating order was scrambled under a new policy to prevent pre-arranged copying between adjacent students. This particular student upon discovering this change to his careful plan, modified the seating list that was outside the room by “whiting out” the name of the student in “his” seat and swapped it to the seat he had been given. He cheating was later detected in the examination only because the Bluetack gave way and all his notes fell on the floor.

With large numbers of students and multi-choice questions, it is relatively simple to copy the adjacent student’s numerical selections, as the seats are often only a few tens of centimeters apart. Multi-choice questions are becoming the questions of choice for many examinations as they can be automatically graded, a critical cost saving with large cohorts of students. Thus such cheating of this type is a considerable problem.

Assignments, projects and laboratories written outside the supervision of the university, are wide open to copying of data and other forms of cheating. Candid admissions by past students to having “workshopped” the laboratory report or assignment, with a circle of fellow students, is common. This being so, such assignments and reports are virtually useless for assessment purposes.

Remedies

In the case of multi-choice question examinations with large numbers of student, a simple remedy to copying from nearby students, is to run two examination papers, each down alternate rows. The examination papers contain the same questions, but in different order. This is most effective in confusing the issue for would-be-copyers and is simple to effect. The

author has caught a few students “doing the other paper” but knowledge of two versions of unknown variation is usually enough to inhibit copying. In any case, cross copying between scrambled-order papers is automatically punitive with grade results reverting to those for random choice of answers.

Laboratory exercises should be written up and submitted before leaving the laboratory. Students hate this, as extensive preparation must be done in order to have any chance of completing the experiment on site. However, the beneficial affect of such preparation on learning is, in the author’s experience, profound. The other objection to the practice of immediate write-up and submission is that the students need time to think about the results and to process them. This may be so, but with rampant copying, the gains are arguable. The benefit in comprehension and learning, of intensive preparation required for on-site completion of the laboratory, is of major benefit. In any case, the integrity of later write-up and project execution can only be made verified by supplementary supervised testing on the produced material. Without this the operation is often a charade.

Excessive trips to the lavatory or bathroom during examinations need to be carefully controlled to prevent rendezvous and sharing of information between students. Pre-clearing of any information in the toilets can also be effected.


Substitutes are more difficult to detect. Distance learning courses where the material is delivered remotely, using online facilities or mail, are particularly prone to substitution cheating. It is essential that clear photographs of the candidate be obtained early in the course to preclude later opportunistic substitution. In one instance, the author was startled by the unsolicited statement in a social context by two young students from another university, that paid substitutions between students at different universities located nearby, are not uncommon, with the example given in this case in an accounting course.

The only remedy appears to be vigilance and use of smart cards or at least photo-ID, although even photo-ID can be readily forged.

Fake entry qualifications and academic records are an ongoing and vexing problem. Their considerable use is suspected in postgraduate programs offered to overseas students. The payoff for the successful offender can be high as such programs, in effect, are also commonly defacto immigration schemes in Australia. Once the degree is obtained, the recipient can apply for permanent residency. Enrolment officers frequently cannot employ independent tests, verbal or otherwise, to quickly expose such fraud. It has been the practice of the author to fire simple questions at students asking for course exemptions because of other equivalent experience. In one memorable case, the student was not able to answer any one of thirty very basic questions. He clearly knew nothing about the topics, despite having paper qualifications that indicated that he knew the subject well. However, such verbal checking is resource-intensive and thus has very limited application.

One of the factors in the increase in cheating, the web, can also be also used to combat cheating. Online services, such as <http://www.turnitin.com> can be used to check for plagiarism. This facility, available to individuals or institutions at commercial rates, will accept electronic versions of essays for example, and do a web search to check for plagiarism from web sites. An example of a report from this facility is given in Figure 2

mail this student: jdoe@turnitin.com

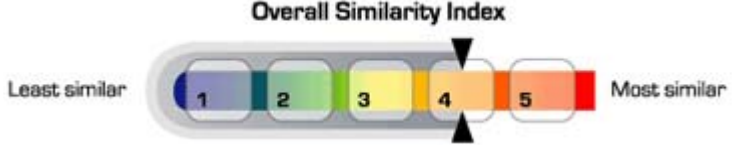


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database link 1	10%	

Figure 2: Example of an online plagiarism report.

Another electronic defence is in the form of plagiarism-checking software, that checks for copying within groups. In one recent incident, 20% of submissions were found to have large areas of commonality. It was found that a tutor was writing essays for his students for \$300 per essay. Although “original”, the essays had large commonality as they were produced from the same mind and on the same topic.

Conclusion

Cheating by students is rising and becoming a serious problem for academic institutions and employers in particular. The main forces driving the rampant increase are high financial and personal stakes for students, the ready availability of resources for cheating - both online and amongst peers, the change in culture that regards cheating as quasi-legitimate, and the high probability of the fraud not being detected or seriously punished.

The tendency of authorities to cover up or ignore instances of cheating also has contributed to the growth in cheating. The naiveté of some academic staff who often accept on face value, scraps of official-looking paper as a true academic record of the student presenting it, is also sometimes startling. Others “want to focus on the happy bits” and thus ignore if possible, the unpleasant need to deal with cheating. Both mindsets promote abuse and degrade the academic processes.

The willful disregard, by developers of online remote assessment, for the problem of ensuring integrity makes their efforts futile in the long term. Nevertheless, universities are generally proceeding down this path, with the promise ultimately of further destruction of university and graduate reputation and despair of employers.

Simple remedies combined with sophisticated techniques such as plagiarism checking software, can be very effective in a range of situations but solutions to false academic records is difficult to counter economically.

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