

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Contract Cheating as Part of the Assessment Help-Seeking Continuum: Insight from a Principal Components Analysis of a Student Survey

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: Contract cheating has been increasingly researched over the last few years, looking to help in detecting such assignments, to design assessments to avoid this form of malpractice, and to understand why students' behaviour with respect to contract cheating. We took a view of contract cheating as an extreme form of students' help-seeking behaviour when working on their assignments. Using principal component analysis on the results of a survey about the assessment experience at university to explore the structure of students' perceptions of assessment processes and how they intersect with questionable assessment practices, we conclude that students' key concerns are with being able to perform their assessment tasks effectively and to enhance their learning. Questionable assessment practices form part of students' conceptualisations of the assessment experience, but to a lesser extent than the opportunity to work with peers and staff.

Paper:

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Contract cheating is an issue of increasing concern to academic integrity with suggestions around how to detect such assignments (e.g. Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2018), how to design them out of assessment tasks (e.g. Brown & Janssen, 2017) being widely investigated. Bretag et al (2018) surveyed students' behaviour in this context, concluding that a well-supported teaching and learning environment would contribute to a solution to the problem. We wanted to take a similar approach to contract cheating, conceptualising it as an extreme form of help-seeking behaviour in students working on their assignments. To explore this possibility, we designed an online survey about the university assessment experience which included questions about coursework assessment processes, sources of support and guidance as well as some items about fair assessment practices (academic integrity). The aim was to explore students' perceptions of assessment experiences including questionable practices to gain further understanding of where such practices sit in relation to other aspects of assessment.

Method

1124 University of Nottingham, UK students from undergraduate years 1 to 4 and postgraduate years 1 and 2 across all five faculties of the university completed the University Assessment Experience Survey online. The survey consisted of three main sections:

Section 1 was about students' assignment context and about experiences of doing coursework. There were nine items with a 5-point Likert-scale ('Always' to 'Never'), e.g. 'Module documents gave sufficient guidance on how to do tasks'. A higher score corresponds to a better assignment experience.

Section 2 was about the perceived ease of completing assignment tasks and reflected the processes students undertook in completing assignments. There were eight 5-point Likert-scale items ('Always' to 'Never'); e.g. 'I discussed with class mate(s) what to put in an assignment'. Higher scores reflect students experiencing the assessment process as easier.

Section 3 was about fair assignment practice and asked students to indicate their level of agreement with a series of eight attitude statements about questionable assessment practices measured on a 5-point Likert scale ('Strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'). The statements related to the fairness of help-seeking behaviours, e.g. 'It is not fair to share your work with class mates before submission'. A high score represented greater self-reported academic integrity.

Results

An exploratory principal components analysis (PCA) was performed to see how the survey items related to each other. An initial criterion for extraction of Eigenvalues > 1 was used, but inspection of the scree plot suggested that a five-factor solution might be more efficient. The PCA was repeated to extract 5 factors explaining 45.4% of the variance observed. A varimax rotation was used to minimise the overlap between the factors. Using a cut-off for belonging to a factor of $> .3$, the five factors extracted are characterised below.

Factor 1: Enabling assessment as a useful process (16.1% of variance explained; mean score 3.7/5)

This factor related to students' perceptions of the effectiveness of assessment to their learning process. This was reflected in the highest loadings relating to the accessibility of information about assignments, having sufficient guidance and support, and the process being perceived as fair and useful to learning and providing an effective output to the student in the form of useful feedback. This factor supports Bretag et al's (2018) claim that a supportive assessment context is central to an effective student assessment experience.

Factor 2: Working with peers during the assessment process (10.1% of variance explained; mean score 2.9/5)

Items related to working with others from all three sections of the survey clustered together. Opportunity to work together and asking colleagues for support loaded on factor 2, but so did an item about feeling pressured to help peers too much, suggesting that peer working processes form an important, but ambivalent aspect of assignment experiences. This matches the literature on groupwork in assessment – it is designed into many courses, can help support students' performance,

but is also associated with a series of challenges (Bramley, 2019).

Factor 3: The role of staff in assignment practice (6.9% of variance explained; mean score 3.1/5)

The interactions of students with teachers formed the core of this factor. This included seeking help from staff, knowing who would mark work, the usefulness of feedback, and whether tasks were seen as relevant to the self. It also related to the belief that cheating could be detected, but cheating was seen as surprising only about half the time. This maps onto Bretag et al's (2018) recommendation to foster strong staff-student relationships.

Factor 4: Questionable assignment practices (6.4% of variance explained; mean score 2.4/5)

This factor consisted of items related to fair practice in assessment. It comprised items about feeling tempted to make use of bespoke assignment services and it being good idea to ask for assignment support via social media, but also about feeling pressured by friends to help too much with coursework. Students tended to disagree with the item about being tempted to make use of contract cheating services but were neutral about the question of coming across adverts for such services.

Factor 5: Getting fair support and pressures around assignments (5.8% of variance explained; mean score 3.0/5)

This factor related to the idea that help from others (class mates or parents) is not fair, but also linked to time management and a sense that teachers can detect assignments not authored by a student. This suggests that there are situational factors like poor time management that may drive students to using questionable practices in completing their assignment. What is interesting here is that student on average responded in a neutral manner to the items loading on this factor.

In conclusion, the pattern of students' responses to the survey suggested that students' key concerns are related to their ability to engage with their assessment tasks effectively and to enhance their learning. Questionable assessment practices form part of students' conceptualisations of the assessment experience, but to a lesser extent than the opportunity to work with peers and staff.

References

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