

# Contract Cheating ‘Pseudepigraphy’. A Cardinal Sin in Higher Education? A Phenomenological Narrative of Andragogical Experiences, Insights and Reflections



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## ABSTRACT

This interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) study is a reflection on valuable insights gained by the authors in supervising graduate students' theses, dissertations, and project works/reports, active participation in seminars on ethics in higher education and first-hand andragogical teaching experiences in the Ghanaian setting. The study explored contract cheating among graduate students and strategic interventions used by faculty to address it. Using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) in a qualitative narrative paradigm, the study discussed the critical causal factors, strategic interventions, andragogy, heutagogy, support mechanisms and software employed to mitigate graduate students' indulgence in contract cheating in their final year thesis, dissertations, and project works/reports. Findings revealed that contract cheating among graduate students is influenced by personal, contextual, cultural, situational, institutional, and technological factors, as well as a misconception of widespread participation in higher education. The study recommends a paradigmatic shift away from the punitive and toward the developmental approach when responding to contract cheating. The study contributes new insights to enrich the ongoing scholarly conversation on contract cheating and interventions in Ghanaian universities.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Catholicism, there are mortal (Cardinal) sins and venial sins. A mortal (cardinal sin) is a more severe offence than a venial sin.<sup>1</sup> “Cardinal sin could lead to spiritual death,” so it is, “in the realm of higher education, there is one cardinal sin above all others”, called pseudepigraphy or contract cheating, which could, figuratively, lead to the ‘death’ of academic integrity in higher education.<sup>2</sup> Zachek posits that contract cheating is a form of cyber-pseudepigraphy involving the purchase or solicitation of work authored by a third party and passed off for assessment through collusion and false attribution of authorship to the commissioner. Curiously enough, numerous terms are used to describe this disturbing,

<sup>1</sup> Nathan Mahr, “Mortal vs. Venial Sin, Definition, Characteristics and Lits,” Study.com, January 26, 2023, <https://study.com/academy/lesson/mortal-venial-sin-overview-examples.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Zachek, “The History, Evolution, and Trends of Academic Dishonesty: A Literature Review,” *The Nebraska Educator: A Student-Led Journal*, no. 53 (2020), <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebeducator/53>.

endemic and menacing phenomenon. In the literature, the most commonly used are contract cheating, contract writing, pseudepigraphy and 'ghostwriting'. It is also referred to as galamsey or grandfather among Ghanaian tertiary students slang or argot. Contract cheating has become a global phenomenon, causing unease among faculty, administrators, and students in tertiary institutions.

While academic cheating encompasses various unfair, unethical practices and any deceitful behaviour intended to gain an undue advantage in academia, the question arises: Is contract cheating the deadliest of all? Although academic cheating is not new, it is an unethical practice that is detrimental to the core values of higher education and the principles of academic integrity. Zachek argues that students' proclivity to cheating has been a challenge for educators since the beginning of formalised education and, therefore, is not a new ill of contemporary society.<sup>3</sup> Despite its longevity with civilisation, and somehow anticipated, it is still deemed "unethical and evitable."<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging its life-long existence, faculty and administration are puzzled by the enigmatic and pervasive nature of this transgression in higher education circles. Unlike plagiarism detectable by technology and human diligence, contract cheating comes as a commissioned or outsourced, original, and independently created work and not copied from another or published domain, which has been clandestinely attributed to the commissioner of the work with the author's consent. The covert act of collusion between the "cheater" and the author makes contract cheating more insidious than other forms. This removes the "theft" aspect and reinforces the fraudulent aspect through mutual concealment and misrepresentation.<sup>5</sup> Recent research by Parnther, citing BBC, asserts that contract cheating (essay mills) services are fast emerging as a billion-dollar industry.<sup>6</sup> While recognising the magnitude of the phenomenon and its ethical dilemma, Walker and Townley advise faculty to be mindful of overblown media reports and avoid succumbing to 'moral panic'.<sup>7</sup> While abundant research on academic integrity worldwide exists, a noticeable gap exists in focusing on academic integrity in graduate research students.<sup>8</sup> However, graduate students' involvement in contract cheating is of current importance in learning communities, albeit understudied within the Ghanaian context, and to that extent, creating a gap in the scholarly literature.<sup>9</sup>

In Ghana, research findings suggest that about 4.7% to 62.4% of students in tertiary institutions have ever engaged in a type of academic dishonesty behaviour.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, research findings by Oduro-Marfo and Yekple, reveal an apparently widespread and steadily growing practice of proxy academic writing (contract writing) in tertiary institutions in Ghana, whereby students employ the academic services of others presumed to be more competent in their areas of study to write their higher-degree thesis or dissertations for them for a fee.<sup>11</sup>

From the foregoing, this study sets out to explore contract cheating among graduate students and strategic interventions used by faculty to address it. The study seeks to fill that gaping hole with respect to contract cheating among graduate students in Ghana from the perspectives of lecturers, supervisors, and administrators as bona fide stakeholders in tertiary education. It also examines the strategic interventions used to address the challenge. The underpinning questions for this study are: 1. Why do graduate students indulge in contract cheating, and what are the causal factors? 2. What regulatory policy framework, strategic approaches, andragogy, heutagogy, technology and software are employed to

<sup>3</sup> Zachek, "The History, Evolution, and Trends of Academic Dishonesty: A Literature Review."

<sup>4</sup> David Rettinger and Tricia Bertram Gallant, "Thirty Years of Active Academic Integrity Research and Engagement: What Have We Learned?," *Journal of College and Character* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 92–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2021.2017976>.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Walker and Cynthia Townley, "Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?," *Journal of Academic Ethics* 10, no. 1 (March 24, 2012): 27–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-012-9150-y>.

<sup>6</sup> Ceceilia Parnther, "The Rise of Contract Cheating in Graduate Education," in *Contract Cheating in Higher Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 251–69, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2_17).

<sup>7</sup> Erica J. Morris, "Integrating Academic Integrity: An Educational Approach," in *Handbook of Academic Integrity* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023), 1–20, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-079-7\\_96-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-079-7_96-1); Walker and Townley, "Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?"

<sup>8</sup> Saadia Mahmud and Tracey Bretag, "Postgraduate Research Students and Academic Integrity: 'It's about Good Research Training,'" *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 35, no. 4 (August 2013): 432–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2013.812178>.

<sup>9</sup> Parnther, "The Rise of Contract Cheating in Graduate Education."

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Amponsah, Nutifafa Eugene Yaw Dey, and Mabel Oti-Boadi, "Attitude toward Cheating among Ghanaian Undergraduate Students: A Parallel Mediation Analysis of Personality, Religiosity and Mastery," *Cogent Psychology* 8, no. 1 (December 31, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2021.1998976>.

<sup>11</sup> Smith Oduro-Marfo, "Worse than Plagiarism? Unpacking the Growing Practice of Proxy Academic Writing in Tertiary Institutions in Ghana," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 3 (2016): 1–14.

mitigate graduate students' tendency to violate academic integrity norms in their final year thesis? 3. What are the institutional constraints, and what is the way forward in fostering a culture of academic integrity among graduate students?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Study is guided by the constructivist learning theory by Piaget and the theory of planned behaviour espoused by Ajzen.<sup>12</sup> The constructivist theory states that learners actively construct their understanding of the world through experiences and environmental interactions.<sup>13</sup> By explanation, social constructivism underscores the significance of social and cultural influences in individuals' active construction of knowledge within an educational context.<sup>14</sup> In his influential study on the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), Ajzen postulates that a person's belief that performing a specific behaviour will lead to a certain outcome or experience influences their likelihood of engaging in that behaviour.<sup>15</sup> He further explains that every behaviour involves choosing among different courses of action, even if the only alternative to performing a behaviour is not doing it. He argues that the actual control over behaviours depends on a person's ability to overcome barriers and the presence of facilitating factors such as past experiences, assistance from others, and "unanticipated events such as insufficient time, money or resources, lack of requisite skills and other factors". While discussing the causalities, Ajzen opines that background factors like personality traits, intelligence, demographics, and life values can indirectly influence intentions and behaviour.<sup>16</sup> The study acknowledges the aphorism by Anderman et al., which states that theories do not only explain the 'Why' of undesirable behaviours (cheating), but they also "help us identify solutions to minimise them and enhance integrity and learning."<sup>17</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) paradigm as expounded by Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Schutz, van den Berg, and two contemporary philosophers: Dahlberg and Ashworth cited by Tuffour to address the research questions.<sup>18</sup> This approach helped in the experiential understanding of the inherent complexity, interrelationships, and interpretations of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. The approach was chosen because it is a forward-looking research method that uses a flexible and versatile design to understand people's experiences and how they live through them.

The discussion is structured to address the research questions through perspectives, perceptions, interpretations, and individual accounts shared by the authors who are lecturers. Additionally, the views of a few administrators are reproduced as quotes in a narrative format in this paper. For ethical purposes, these administrators are referred to as administrators A, B, and C whenever their quotes are included in the text. In this context, their perspectives could be projected to reflect the views of the registry.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition and Historical Context

"Pseudepigraphy, or the false ascription of authorship, has been known in Christian circles since antiquity, witnessed in the canon itself (2 Thess. 2.2) and the earliest canon list, the Muratorian."<sup>19</sup> He

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Piaget, *To Understand Is to Invent: The Future of Education* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973); Icek Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Xue Zhou and Lilian Schofield, "Using Social Learning Theories to Explore the Role of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Collaborative Learning," *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, no. 30 (March 27, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi30.1031>.

<sup>14</sup> Zhou and Schofield, "Using Social Learning Theories to Explore the Role of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Collaborative Learning."

<sup>15</sup> Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior."

<sup>16</sup> Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior."

<sup>17</sup> Eric M. Anderman and Alison C. Koenka, "The Relation Between Academic Motivation and Cheating," *Theory Into Practice* 56, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 95–102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2017.1308172>.

<sup>18</sup> Isaac Tuffour, "A Critical Overview of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: A Contemporary Qualitative Research Approach," *Journal of Healthcare Communications* 02, no. 04 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.4172/2472-1654.100093>.

<sup>19</sup> John W. Marshall, "Pseudepigraphy, Early Christian," in *Biblical Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195393361-0219>.

further posits that pseudepigraphical text has been contentiously argued in academic circles since Schmidt, Schleiermacher, and the Tübingen school in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, some modern scholars have questioned the authorship of some of the New Testament canonical epistles of Paul,<sup>20</sup> arguing that scriptures “purported to be written by Paul were not actually written by the historical Paul, but by someone writing in Paul’s name after his death.”<sup>21</sup> The practice of misattribution, found in biblical pseudepigrapha, is also seen in secular scholarship and academia, albeit with different terminologies and definitions.<sup>22</sup> They further suggest that “contract cheating is a form of cyber-pseudepigraphy and includes more than contract cheating on Clarke & Lancaster’s original definition.”<sup>23</sup>

In the literature, Clarke and Lancaster are widely credited with originating the term contract cheating, which describes the academic misconduct of students outsourcing their coursework to external contractors for a fee, subsequently passing it off as their effort for academic credit.<sup>24</sup> Since then, the phenomenon has evolved in nature, character, and sophistication, mainly due to technological advancement and the perceived commercialisation of education. This presents a degree of uncertainty around the terminology in the literature and definition conundrum to scholars. Many scholars seek to define it in a context that reflects their theoretical or conceptual considerations.

After coining the term ‘contract cheating’, Clarke and Lancaster initially defined it as “*the submission of work by students for academic credit which the students have paid contractors to write for them.*” In their trail-blazing study, which ignited research focus on contract cheating in academia, Clarke and Lancaster identified a specific form of non-originality of academic effort that they referred to as “contract cheating.” They further explained it as “the process of offering to complete an assignment for a student by a service provider.” Lee, while reaffirming the original definition, modifies it to encompass additional nuances and writes;

*“Contract cheating occurs when students engage a third party to complete an assignment, which they then represent as their own work. Can occur when someone other than the student—whether an essay mill, friend, or even a family member— completes an assignment on their behalf.”*<sup>25</sup>

This definition highlights actions that may constitute contract cheating. Lee expands it to include downloading a paper from a “free” essay site, which, to him, amounts to contract cheating. Again, while deviating from Clarke and Lancaster’s original definition of contract cheating, Lee and ICAI redefine it by delineating its deleterious effects on education and society, suggesting that students who indulge in it while in school may suffer credibility deficits in their future employment.

*“Contract cheating is simply a dismissal of the learning process. Not only does it undermine learning, contract cheating erodes learning environments, damages student-teacher relationships, jeopardises, and indicates future workplace dishonesty.”*<sup>26</sup>

Bretag et al., expatiated it and explicitly defined it 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 paid service, advertised locally or online.”*<sup>27</sup>

In their definition, Bretag et al. delineate a set of practices and deviant behaviours that constitute contract cheating, including collusion, fraud, and misrepresentation, either overtly or covertly. They further suggest probable participants or accomplices. Although differences in definition exist in the

<sup>20</sup> Armin D. Baum, “Authorship and Pseudepigraphy in Early Christian Literature: A Translation of the Most Important Source Texts and an Annotated Bibliography,” in *Paul and Pseudepigraphy* (BRILL, 2013), 9–63, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004258471\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004258471_003).

<sup>21</sup> Justin P. Paley, “Pauline Pseudepigrapha and Early Christian Literacy: Are the Clues Hidden Right in Front of US?,” *Religions* 14, no. 4 (April 14, 2023): 530, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040530>.

<sup>22</sup> Walker and Townley, “Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?”

<sup>23</sup> Robert Clarke and Thomas Lancaster, “Eliminating the Successor to Plagiarism? Identifying the Usage of Contract Cheating Sites,” in *Proceedings of 2nd International Plagiarism Conference*, 2006, 19–21.

<sup>24</sup> Clarke and Lancaster, “Eliminating the Successor to Plagiarism? Identifying the Usage of Contract Cheating Sites.”

<sup>25</sup> Christine Lee, “What Is Contract Cheating? What Does It Have to Do with Academic Integrity?,” *Essential Series Blog*, October 20, 2024, <https://www.turnitin.com/blog/what-is-contract-cheating-what-does-it-have-to-do-with-academic-integrity> Turnitin, LLC.

<sup>26</sup> Lee, “What Is Contract Cheating? What Does It Have to Do with Academic Integrity?”

<sup>27</sup> Tracey Bretag et al., “Contract Cheating: A Survey of Australian University Students,” *Studies in Higher Education* 44, no. 11 (November 2, 2019): 1837–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1462788>.

literature, there appears to be some agreement regarding the nature and traits of contract cheating as a fraudulent practice intended to gain an undeserved advantage over other students.

In this paper, contract cheating is defined as the practice in which a student employs or accepts the services of a third party, human or generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), to undertake some or all his/her academic work(s) in return for remuneration or other forms of exchange or favour against permissible assessment protocols. The definition has been broadened to include impersonation as a subset of contract cheating by which an examinee solicits the services of others presumed to be more knowledgeable in their areas of study (whether a colleague, a family member, a friend, or a professional service) to write their exam or on-line test on their behalf for a fee and or trade-offs. Proxy test-taking is an egregious form of contract cheating. In that context, a student who willfully assists another to circumvent the purpose of assessment through solicitation, cheating, collusion, or misrepresentation commits academic misconduct. It is further argued that the inherent severity of contract cheating as a threat makes it a cardinal sin (metaphorically), which is an affront to the objectives of higher education and, if not curbed, can lead to the 'death' of academic integrity in higher education.

### **Tertiary Education in Perspective**

Generally, tertiary education in Ghana has made significant progress. The rapid development is a mixed blessing for tertiary education because it presents new opportunities and challenges. However, increased privatisation, internationalisation, massification, and commercialisation of education have also brought about inherent ethical challenges to tertiary education.<sup>28</sup> This is not to imply that privatisation of higher education is inherently harmful. However, the concern lies in the potential commodification of tertiary education at the expense of quality. For example, the expansion of tertiary education in Ghana has led to a quantum rise in student enrollment with an incommensurate faculty and staff (poor student-faculty ratio) exacerbating existing challenges in tertiary education such as academic misconduct, particularly contract cheating, which is quickly eroding academic integrity values such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage.<sup>29</sup>

Another disturbing threat to academic integrity is the proliferation of unaccredited institutions and diploma/degree mills worldwide that provide academic credentials to persons who do not possess corresponding knowledge and skills.<sup>30</sup> Equally concerning is the high incidence of unrecognised foreign institutions awarding honorary degrees locally. This disturbing phenomenon not only jeopardises the quality of education and research but also erodes public trust in academic institutions and their graduates. Consequently, the integrity of higher education is on a decline, meaning quality education is at stake and at a crossroads. As predicted by Rettinger and Bertram Gallant, "contract cheating would present greater challenges for upholding academic integrity".<sup>31</sup> In the face of such dire predictions, what is urgently required is broad-based stakeholder engagements, a multidimensional interventionist approach, legislation, and a clear national policy.<sup>32</sup> In a proactive approach, Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand are leading the way in combating this global threat by implementing legislation to ban 'essay mills' and contract writing. Regrettably, African nations are yet to pass similar laws prohibiting contract cheating and outlawing paper mills in their respective countries.

Graduate studies involve the development of human capacities, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies for higher-level employment or entrepreneurial endeavours; adherence to ethical standards is crucial. For that reason, graduate students are taught critical and independent thinking methods and imbued with ethical values, including honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage.<sup>33</sup> Ordinarily, all students are expected to uphold acceptable academic integrity standards. As good as

<sup>28</sup> Elena Denisova-Schmidt, "Mitigating Corruption in Higher Education," in *The Promise of Higher Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 153–59, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67245-4\\_24](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67245-4_24).

<sup>29</sup> International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), "The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity." (3rd Ed.), 2021, <http://www.academicintegrity.org/the-fundamental-values-of-academic-integrity>.

<sup>30</sup> Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), "Strategic Plan 2023-2027," *Ghana Tertiary Education Commission GTEC STRATEGIC PLAN*, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Rettinger and Bertram Gallant, "Thirty Years of Active Academic Integrity Research and Engagement: What Have We Learned?"

<sup>32</sup> Holi Ibrahim Holi Ali and Awad Alhassan, "Fighting Contract Cheating and Ghostwriting in Higher Education: Moving towards a Multidimensional Approach," *Cogent Education* 8, no. 1 (January 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2021.1885837>.

<sup>33</sup> International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), "The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity." (3rd Ed.)."

reason, the stakes are even higher for graduate students. This is because there is a common assumption among faculty that graduate students already possess prior knowledge of academic integrity, ethics, and basic research proficiency to conduct graduate-level research within the proposed supervisory context.<sup>34</sup> However, research suggests that many graduate students are often not prepared for the demands of graduate studies, making them susceptible to engaging in contract cheating knowingly or unknowingly.

### Why do graduate students cheat?

The literature presents several reasons why students may engage in contract cheating.<sup>35</sup> While some factors are firmly rooted in empirical evidence, others are based on conjecture, anecdotal evidence, subjectivity, and purely theoretical propositions.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, contract cheating is on three levels: it is real, it is apparent, and it is perceived. Research further indicates that Dark Triad traits are associated with academic dishonesty by suggesting that the tendency to engage in cheating behaviour in an academic setting is positively correlated with the individual's psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism traits.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Ajzen posits that the actual control over behaviours depends on a person's ability to overcome barriers or the presence of facilitating factors, such as past experiences, assistance from others, and unforeseen events, which some researchers categorised as personal, situational, conjectural, institutional, and socio-cultural factors (emphasis added).<sup>38</sup>

Even though cheating is prevalent among graduate students, findings suggest that students acknowledge and understand the importance of developing personal integrity as a lifelong virtue that could earn them respect and honour. Therefore, even the most audacious student cheaters do so clandestinely to avoid exposure, embarrassment, or dishonour. Nonetheless, students seek to rationalise their academic misconduct by arguing that the prevailing dishonest practices, such as lying, fraud, cheating, and corruption among adults, not excluding influential figures and professionals across diverse fields, set negative examples for them to follow. As a result, they perceive their academic misconduct as a microcosm of the larger society and as preparation for their future roles in the real world. This deleterious mindset is undoubtedly worrisome and warrants attention. This study contextualises the causal factors influencing contract cheating among graduate students as inherent personal traits, exogenous and contextual factors.<sup>39</sup>

### Personal Traits

Multiple studies suggest some correlation and predictability between personal traits and students' propensity to contract cheating and other forms of academic misconduct.<sup>40</sup> As observed, some students struggle with a lack of confidence in their cognitive and writing abilities, while some erroneously believe that writing is by divine ability. This absurd mindset leads to fear of failure and avoidance of challenges. Furthermore, this lack of self-esteem hampers their ability to produce coursework of the required quality and standard. They believe they lack the knowledge, skills and competencies to complete their academic tasks independently. As a result, some students tend to cheat to avoid embarrassment and poor grades, impress faculty, and gain approval from friends, family, peers, or colleagues. When detected, such students are encouraged to work in study groups, creating a supportive environment that gives them psychological reinforcement and confidence. Uncomplimentary and unguided reproachful remarks from supervisors may compound the situation and, therefore, must be avoided.

To some extent, some graduate students grapple with fears of imperfection, anxiety, and impulsiveness based on previous history of poor academic performance. Therefore, they get apprehensive about the outcomes of their efforts and, to avoid failure, resort to contract cheating as a way out.

<sup>34</sup> Mahmud and Bretag, "Postgraduate Research Students and Academic Integrity: 'It's about Good Research Training.'"

<sup>35</sup> Sarah Elaine Eaton et al., "Contract Cheating: A Summative Look Back and a Path Forward," in *Contract Cheating in Higher Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 303–12, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2\\_20](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2_20).

<sup>36</sup> Walker and Townley, "Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?"

<sup>37</sup> Lidia Baran and Peter K. Jonason, "Contract Cheating and the Dark Triad Traits," in *Contract Cheating in Higher Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 123–37, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2_9).

<sup>38</sup> Ajzen, "The Theory of Planned Behavior."

<sup>39</sup> Baran and Jonason, "Contract Cheating and the Dark Triad Traits."

<sup>40</sup> Tiana P. Johnson-Clements, Guy J. Curtis, and Joseph Clare, "Testing a Psychological Model of Post-Pandemic Academic Cheating," *Journal of Academic Ethics*, August 29, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-024-09561-4>.

Conversely, some students are overly ambitious, have delusional confidence and are rebellious but yearn for a degree by any means necessary, either for social mobility, self-aggrandisement, or political purposes. It was also observed that some students engage in contract cheating as an academic Machiavellianism, which drives them to use any means necessary to obtain academic credits, with little or no regard for academic integrity standards and an absolute lack of remorse for their transgressions. Baran and Jonason elucidate this apparent deviant behaviour by emphasising the correlation between the concept of the Dark Triad traits and students' inclination to indulge in dishonest academic practices, i.e., contract cheating.<sup>41</sup> They posit that these three traits manifest as a sense of “grandiosity, egotism, fragile self-esteem, and self-centeredness (i.e., narcissism; Turner & Webster); manipulative behaviour, self-interest, exploitation of others, and a ruthless lack of morality (i.e., Machiavellianism; Jones); and recklessness, callous attitudes, antisocial selfish behaviour, and a lack of remorse (i.e., psychopathy; Cale & Lilienfeld).” Baran and Jonason conclude that “high levels of psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism might act as such sources because they lead to engaging in dishonest behaviours and are a risk factor for engaging in contract cheating”. Generally, these traits are symptomatic of cheaters. Lamentably, when individuals lack integrity, they resort to deception and fraud, making them untrustworthy.

Unconscionably, some students perceive cheating as a game of wits with faculty.<sup>42</sup> This is aggravated by negative social-medial influence and youth subcultures that put little or no premium on education, competence, and ownership of one's cognitive efforts in one's intellectual engagements. It has been observed that some students see the school system as their laboratory for experimenting with and learning deviant behaviours. As a result, they tend to manipulate faculty, administration, and colleagues for their own personal gain.<sup>43</sup> When student cheaters are ‘caught’ indulging in academic misconduct, they use a variety of neutralisation techniques (e.g. rationalisation, denial, deflecting blame to others, condemning the accusers) to explain their dishonest behaviour.” It is disappointing for students to irrationally believe that cheating is a necessary part of life. This is an affront to academic integrity culture. An academic cheater may become a dishonest professional.

Graduate students often face time management challenges due to multiple conflicting responsibilities, such as coursework, research, personal and professional commitments, and family obligations, among others. Consequently, students who exhibit poor time management habits, deficient organisational skills, and difficulty in multitasking are more likely to cheat as a coping mechanism against academic pressure. For example, some students place little importance on their academic work by underestimating deadlines and believe they need to be in the right frame of mind to do their academic work, leading them to procrastinate and pile up tasks until the last minute. This irrational behaviour leads to time constraints and self-imposed pressure to complete tasks, ultimately resulting in anxiety and desperation, motivating them to resort to unethical behaviour, such as contract cheating. In the same way, students who overindulge in co-curricular activities such as socialisation/entertainment, religious activities, student politics and competitive sports but are not good at multitasking and lack self-control tend to have too much on their plate and easily burn out. Even more, some students have trouble prioritising important tasks over tasks that do not align with their academic goals. In most cases, they tend to choose more manageable goals over challenging academic tasks, leading to their inability to meet core academic responsibilities and goals.

Considering that Ghanaians are predominantly religious and are quick to profess their faith publicly, it is reasonable to surmise that religiosity could impact the ethical conduct, integrity, and uprightness of Ghanaian students.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, in the literature, there are mixed and inconsistent findings of negative or minimal or no correlation between religiosity and the tendency of students to cheat.<sup>45</sup> However, recent studies have suggested a positive link between religious practices and academic

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<sup>41</sup> Baran and Jonason, “Contract Cheating and the Dark Triad Traits.”

<sup>42</sup> Walker and Townley, “Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?”

<sup>43</sup> Walker and Townley, “Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?”

<sup>44</sup> Amponsah, Dey, and Oti-Boadi, “Attitude toward Cheating among Ghanaian Undergraduate Students: A Parallel Mediation Analysis of Personality, Religiosity and Mastery.”

<sup>45</sup> Amponsah, Dey, and Oti-Boadi, “Attitude toward Cheating among Ghanaian Undergraduate Students: A Parallel Mediation Analysis of Personality, Religiosity and Mastery.”

integrity. That aside, there is a disconnect between students' beliefs and behaviour, known as 'cognitive dissonance,' because their actions do not align with their values or beliefs. For instance, the researchers were disappointed but not surprised to discover that even individuals of faith are guilty of contract cheating.

Surprisingly, some students cheat because they do not value their academic work and lack motivation, leading them to disengage and resort to contract cheating to meet assessment requirements. Such students may be more interested in obtaining certificates or degrees as a means to an end, such as employment or promotion, or to advance their career and get a better salary rather than acquiring knowledge or professional skills.<sup>46</sup> This situation can result in certified graduates with questionable competence and skills because they acquired their certificates or degrees through a third-party proxy, often through financial means rather than personal efforts. Consequently, their degrees may be devalued, falling short of public expectations and trust. Unfortunately, the craving for credentials over competence may be driven by the job market requirements and recruitment mode.

Recent research has identified the impact of generational attitudes on the evolution of academic misconduct. This is exemplified by "the societal shift from valuing an authentic self to valuing a performance self and the consequential influence on youth culture."<sup>47</sup> Again, research suggests that younger students tend to cheat more than mature students.<sup>48</sup> While the truism in the latter may hold, this study suggests the contrary. Findings indicate that mature students cheat more than younger students. In the researcher's view, this tendency is attributable to time constraints, other commitments, the availability of financial resources to purchase academic papers from essay mills, and a lack of enthusiasm for new knowledge, hence, disengagement with academic work. Again, other studies have submitted that men are more culpable than women.<sup>49</sup> However, this study could not empirically establish that factor. Nonetheless, ladies are overwhelmed by irresistible offers from friends, fiancés, and spouses (as abettors) to 'assist' them with their academic work and ostensibly coax them into unethical academic conduct such as contract cheating.

### Misconceptions

Research suggests that "students may form misconceptions due to exposure to inaccurate information, through faulty reasoning, or misinterpreting materials they read, hear or observe."<sup>50</sup> Indeed, some students ridiculously feel they must cheat to remain competitive since their counterparts are doing it anyway. Such acts of emulation are explained by the Social Learning Theory espoused by Albert Bandura which posits that learning is a cognitive process that takes place within a social setting.<sup>51</sup> It suggests that individuals learn by observing behaviour and its consequences. The learning process is affected by both facilitating factors and self-control deterrents. In this social context, learners are influenced by the practices and behaviour of their high-achieving peers. According to Hofstede's cultural relativism theory, within the context of the Individualism/Collectivism (IDV) paradigm, it is postulated that the extent to which an individual's interests and identities supersede the collective mindset of a group is contingent upon the individual's determination and resolve.<sup>52</sup>

### Exogenous and Contextual Factors

In the context of coursework, some students may not find value in a particular assessment because of the erroneous perception that supervisors may not thoroughly scrutinise and assess their work, making the probability of fraud detection minimal tends to motivate some students to outsource their theses.<sup>53</sup> Large class sizes and overburdened, ageing faculty exacerbate this perception. Massification, commodification,

<sup>46</sup> Clarke and Lancaster, "Eliminating the Successor to Plagiarism? Identifying the Usage of Contract Cheating Sites."

<sup>47</sup> Zachek, "The History, Evolution, and Trends of Academic Dishonesty: A Literature Review."

<sup>48</sup> Donald L. McCabe, Linda Klebe Trevino, and Kenneth D. Butterfield, "Cheating in Academic Institutions: A Decade of Research," *Ethics & Behavior* 11, no. 3 (July 2001): 219–32, [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327019EB1103\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327019EB1103_2).

<sup>49</sup> McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield, "Cheating in Academic Institutions: A Decade of Research."

<sup>50</sup> Stephen L Chew and William J Cerbin, "The Cognitive Challenges of Effective Teaching," *The Journal of Economic Education* 52, no. 1 (2021): 17–40.

<sup>51</sup> Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (Macmillan, 1997).

<sup>52</sup> Walker and Townley, "Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?"

<sup>53</sup> Walker and Townley, "Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?"



commercialisation, and internalisation of higher education leading to ever-increasing large class sizes, dwindling government funding, exorbitant graduate studies fees, and part-time or contract-teaching or 'borrowed' faculty creates an unmonitored academic environment that enables academic dishonesty, specifically contract cheating. This is aggravated by incommensurate resources and infrastructure.<sup>54</sup> These tend to diminish lecturers' ability to closely monitor individual students' academic development and cognitive writing styles, creating slip-through routes for cheaters to get away with outsourced theses. Moreover, the pressures on students, systemic changes, and unpredictable academic calendars resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have led to isolation, reduced or limited contact periods between students and their supervisors and poor supervision. As a result, there has been a negative impact on supervisor-student relationships or interactions, ultimately culminating in dissatisfaction and disengagement among students with the educational environment.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, some students are more inclined to seek external assistance by outsourcing their theses or dissertations. Again, students who are used to Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQs) mode of supervised examinations during their undergraduate studies often encounter challenges with writing coherent and analytically sound dissertations at the graduate studies level.

The learning environment, institutional policy, policy implementation mechanisms, approaches, and prescribed disciplinary measures can be causal or contrary factors. Weak institutional structures, lack of awareness, negligence, indifference, and apathy by the authorities create opportunities for academic misconduct. In instances where faculty and administration demonstrate a lackadaisical or lax attitude and lack of certitude as to what constitutes unethical academic behaviour and fail to curb academic transgressions within their institutions collectively, students may misconstrue that to mean hot and cold, mixed-message and tacit approval of unethical behaviours within the academic settings. Another emerging trend creating an unhealthy competitive academic environment is the flaunting of academic degrees as status symbols. This craving for credentialism is causing anxiety and peer pressure among graduate students, leading them to resort to contract cheating by any means possible, at any cost, to outdo each other and remain competitive and relevant in their peer groups.<sup>56</sup>

### Technological Innovations

The rapid advancement of technology has served as a catalyst for transformative change, presenting society with new opportunities and challenges. Notably, technological innovations have significantly enhanced higher education and academic research. However, they also present challenges to upholding global academic integrity standards in tertiary education. It brought new opportunities like distance learning and e-learning, increased flexibility for students' learning schedules and online assessments within the Ghanaian educational system, particularly during the disruptive COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>57</sup> Other studies by Kutbi, Al-Hoorie, Al-Shammari, and Hodges et al., posit that technologically induced remote teaching and learning has become an indispensable module in higher education post-COVID-19 pandemic, along with its assessment challenges.<sup>58</sup> While it signifies innovation and advancement, it has also negatively contributed to the transformation of contract cheating globally, as observed by Eaton et al., Lancaster and Cotarlan,<sup>59</sup> This has been exacerbated by the unethical use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), social media, and students' cognitive offloading of academic tasks to GenAI, with minimal human cognitive input. To aggravate an already lamentable situation is the topical online sharing culture and digital economy, which serve as intermediary websites suggesting and connecting students to contract cheating service providers making essay mills and contract cheating sites easily accessible and affordable, as well as quick ordering and delivery through flexible electronic modes of payment for

<sup>54</sup> Bretag et al., "Contract Cheating: A Survey of Australian University Students."

<sup>55</sup> Bretag et al., "Contract Cheating: A Survey of Australian University Students."

<sup>56</sup> Walker and Townley, "Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?"

<sup>57</sup> Johnson-Clements, Curtis, and Clare, "Testing a Psychological Model of Post-Pandemic Academic Cheating."

<sup>58</sup> Mohammed Kutbi, Ali H. Al-Hoorie, and Abbas H. Al-Shammari, "Detecting Contract Cheating through Linguistic Fingerprint," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, no. 1 (May 24, 2024): 664, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03160-9>; Charles B Hodges et al., "The Difference between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning," 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Eaton et al., "Contract Cheating: A Summative Look Back and a Path Forward"; Thomas Lancaster and Codrin Cotarlan, "Contract Cheating by STEM Students through a File Sharing Website: A Covid-19 Pandemic Perspective," *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 17, no. 1 (December 4, 2021): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-021-00070-0>.

outsourced services.<sup>60</sup> Research shows that unethical and illegitimate digital file-sharing behaviours are prevalent among students, making some students susceptible to academic integrity transgressions of cheating and collusion.<sup>61</sup> This is highly tempting to a vulnerable and unrestrained student. Paradoxically, students who are not technology savvy and cannot effectively use digital research tools and facilities such as research commons and search engines get frustrated and tend to outsource their academic tasks.

## DISCUSSION

In the literature, there are two schools of thought on contract cheating. Some researchers perceive contract cheating as a psychological (behavioural) challenge, emphasising the unethical and deviant conduct of the learner. Others consider it a pedagogical and learning challenge focusing on effective content delivery and mastery of assessment based on individual student needs. However, Rettinger and Bertram Gallant, Hartshorne and May contend that cheating must not be understood as a psychological phenomenon manifested by internal variables but as a sociological phenomenon influenced by educational surroundings.<sup>62</sup> Examining how lecturers and administrators perceive and understand contract cheating is essential because it informs their attitude and approach to curbing it and fostering academic integrity. Since the authors are lecturers, the study reflects their andragogical experiences and insights. For a fair presentation, the following section presents the perspectives of a few administrators. These professionals provided insider perspectives and narratives of their experiences and opinions on how to curb contract cheating.

**Administrator A:** *I have always thought it is highly unethical and unacceptable for a graduate student, who ought to know better, to outsource their thesis from a "contractor" or a "grandfather" thesis (thus copying an old thesis from a repository). I abhor such deviant behaviour, and in my view, it is utter disrespect to the supervisor and the university. This is generally dangerous to society because academic dishonesty leads to professional dishonesty.*

**Administrator B:** *Any form of academic dishonesty is a slap in the face of academia. As an administrator and a part-time supervisor, I consider contract cheating the most dangerous of all academic cheating because it is difficult to detect and prove beyond a reasonable doubt. It poses a serious threat to the credibility of our certificates and degrees. Having said that, we must relentlessly fight it before it becomes an albatross on our necks as a university.*

**Administrator C:** *Contact Cheating, like any other academic misconduct, involves fraud, collusion, and misrepresentation. Students who indulge in such deviant behaviours become dishonest professionals because they acquired their degrees through fraud. From my experience as a university administrator, students' proclivity to cheat is primarily influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, either individually or collectively. While faculty and administration's commitment to inculcating and safeguarding the institutional integrity policy is laudable, some colleagues are less concerned and do not report such cheaters to the authorities. Such acts of negligence of duty tend to motivate other students to indulge in contract cheating. These are the aspects that cause us grave concern.*

Major lessons to be drawn from these narratives are that university administrators perceive contract cheating as a student challenge, excluding faculty and administrators. Interestingly, one of the quotes highlights the undetectable nature of contract cheating and its evidential proof challenges. Again, they point to the uncontestable fact that contract cheating is deleterious to academic integrity and, therefore, unacceptable in any form whatsoever. They emphasised the need for a concerted approach to combating this academic menace. Research indicates that curbing contract cheating requires the support

<sup>60</sup> Kelum A A Gamage et al., "Contract Cheating in Higher Education: Impacts on Academic Standards and Quality," *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching* 6, no. 2 (2023): 1–13.

<sup>61</sup> Eaton et al., "Contract Cheating: A Summative Look Back and a Path Forward."

<sup>62</sup> Rettinger and Bertram Gallant, "Thirty Years of Active Academic Integrity Research and Engagement: What Have We Learned?"; Hugh Hartshorne and Mark Arthur May, *Studies in Deceit: Book 1. General Methods and Results. Book 2. Statistical Methods and Results* (Macmillan, 1928).

of the entire educational community as a collective responsibility, without which the menace will prevail.<sup>63</sup> The role of awareness and the professional responsibility of faculty in detecting and enforcing the institution's academic integrity policy is critical to curbing contract cheating among graduate students.

### Detection

Although contract cheating is evolving and remains elusive and highly undetectable by the uninitiated mind, it could be detected through vigilance and technological detection tools. Manual detection requires vigilance, monitoring, engagement with students, experience, detecting red flags, and the intuitive understanding of students' writing styles, cognitive thought patterns and valued judgement by supervisors. The University of Education, Winneba, uses Turnitin as the official detection software to verify the originality of the graduate student thesis. In addition to Turnitin, the authors use PlagScan and AntiPlag to scrutinise and examine students' thesis for instances of plagiarism and incorrect citations. These software tools compare the submitted thesis with online text to identify potential matches. However, since these tools cannot detect contract cheating, the authors rely on their professional experience by text-matching students' thesis with their previously submitted work to detect similarities in cognitive writing style or deviations. Furthermore, the authors also closely monitor students' progress through seminar presentations and linguistic fingerprint analysis as additional indicators to identify potential contract cheating, which are further investigated to determine the student's culpability. According to Kutbi et al., using a machine learning (ML) model is more reliable because it detects a deviation in the student's writing style rather than relying on text similarity.<sup>64</sup> Evolving technological detection tools, such as Authorship Investigation and Turnitin Originality, can complement traditional plagiarism detection methods in detecting contract cheating in students' initial thesis chapters. Early detection enables supervisors to offer timely guidance and support.

### Prevention, Policies and Practices

Scholarly literature abounds with different interventionist approaches to contract cheating, such as assessment designs, detection of contract cheating methods, legal solutions, pedagogy, student education and support where “students themselves become academic integrity champions,” among others.<sup>65</sup> Considering the inherent challenges in detecting contract cheating, it is essential to focus on prevention as the most effective means of curbing its prevalence among graduate students. In this context, faculty and administration's active involvement is vital in preventing this by upholding and enforcing institutional academic policy fairly, equitably, and consistently. As a preventive strategy, the authors use academic integrity lectures and seminars to raise awareness about contract cheating as academic misconduct and the need to avoid it by adhering to ethical standards in their academic works. More importantly, graduate students are educated about institutional policy and made to understand the repercussions and disciplinary measures associated with any academic transgression. Again, they are made aware of ‘essay mills’, their nature, operational dynamics, and their adverse effects on students who patronise their services. Additionally, students are taught how to discover, interpret, and expand knowledge in a specific field of study through a research process of formulating research questions or hypotheses, designing methodologies, collecting and analysing data, and drawing meaningful conclusions. Supervisors actively engage and monitor their student's progress from the proposal writing stage through the entire thesis writing period. This was done through objective, rigorous assessment and timely feedback with specific comments and suggestions to maximise student growth. As a duty, supervisors assiduously make the writing process transparent and enjoyable by providing erudite and timely feedback with guidance to boost students' confidence in their efforts, critical thinking abilities and writing styles. This gives the student encouragement and the impetus to do their best. In assessing students' thesis, supervisors prioritise the process over the final product.

Research indicates that students who struggle with their academic work and do not receive adequate support and guidance from their supervisors may be more inclined to cheat as a coping

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Lancaster, “Addressing Contract Cheating Through Staff-Student Partnerships,” in *Contract Cheating in Higher Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 219–32, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2_15).

<sup>64</sup> Kutbi, Al-Hoorie, and Al-Shammari, “Detecting Contract Cheating through Linguistic Fingerprint.”

<sup>65</sup> Lancaster, “Addressing Contract Cheating Through Staff-Student Partnerships.”

mechanism. This vulnerability leaves them susceptible to essay mills, which lure frustrated students with promises of plagiarism-free, undetectable, and original content. They brand themselves as help providers and the best solutions to students' academic nightmares and quandaries. Therefore, supervisors offer support to prevent credulous students from succumbing to these temptations. Furthermore, the authors encourage students to share their challenges with their mates and supervisors willingly. For instance, some students may be unable to access relevant data and reference materials. Others may also have challenges with critical research tools, data analysis, and critical thinking. A supervisor's intervention becomes critical at this stage of the student's work by stepping in to support, direct, redirect and reassure. It also encourages those on track and helps those who need support and encouragement. Early intervention in a student's thesis writing process could prevent a student from seeking unauthorised help or outsourcing their thesis in the 'eleventh hour'. These pedagogical interventions tend to enlighten the student on how to avoid any form of academic cheating and to imbue the graduate student with cognitive holism through intellectual adaptation and internalisation of academic integrity values. While some students may indulge in contract cheating ignorantly and are not cognisant of the gravity of their transgression and its potential ramifications, others do it, although they fully know it as an unacceptable practice.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, most students are unaware of the probability of blackmail by these essay mills in their future professional endeavours. Given that graduate students may become future workforce and potential managers, they must acquire, while in school, a firm ethical grounding to prioritise credibility and uphold integrity in their professional endeavours. In addressing this challenge, organisations such as UNESCO, the International Centre for Academic Integrity (ICAI), Globethics.net and researchers are creating awareness and promoting ethical standards in scholarship in higher education globally. The UNESCO conference held in May 2022 (Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education) marks an essential step in the operationalisation of the global convention aimed at promoting the recognition of qualifications in higher education worldwide.<sup>67</sup> For this reason, faculty and administration must do their best by designing appropriate and responsive evidence-based interventions to curb contract cheating in their institutions by emphasising strong ethical values and integrity to erase doubts and to enhance international recognition of locally obtained transnational education degrees. This extends well beyond just taking.

### **Professional Responsibility by Faculty and Administration**

Within higher education, the role of faculty and administration in fostering a culture of academic integrity and cultivating an enabling environment conducive to knowledge acquisition, ethical scholarship and research cannot be overemphasised. Faculty is responsible for nurturing graduates who embody integrity and contribute positively to society. In doing so, faculty should avoid being perceived by students as 'academic police or vigilantes'; instead, faculty should be understanding, resourceful and promoters of knowledge. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognise that, although erring students' unethical behaviour is not new generational attitudes are influencing its evolving nature and character.<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately, "some of the generational shifts have created an ideal cultural temperature for academic dishonesty in academia today."<sup>69</sup> This is creating concerns for faculty who are worried about the unsustainable justification of unethical behaviours by suspected cheaters. Notwithstanding, educators must continue to lead and guide students by bridging the gap between their current abilities and potential development. Faculty should eschew lax attitudes toward students' cognitive needs while maintaining equity and fairness in interacting with students. Faculty and administrators should exhibit ethical values in their conduct as role models to students. As such, faculty must consistently uphold the highest standards of integrity, trust, sincerity, and responsible mentorship. It is also imperative that faculty and administration act prudently with value judgements within regulations and procedures in instances of students' violations of academic integrity policies. This should be devoid of "any enforcements that appear arbitrary and capricious or inequitable, frivolous, and unjust," Faculty should avoid vigilantism, intimidation, persecution, and unwarranted

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<sup>66</sup> Parnther, "The Rise of Contract Cheating in Graduate Education."

<sup>67</sup> UNESCO, "Beyond Limits. New Ways to Reinvent Higher Education," May 18, 2022, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo>.

<sup>68</sup> Walker and Townley, "Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?"

<sup>69</sup> Zachek, "The History, Evolution, and Trends of Academic Dishonesty: A Literature Review."

punitive measures against suspected violators.<sup>70</sup> When there are suspicions, it is essential to conduct a thorough investigation and give the accused a fair hearing and a chance to present their side of the story. A fair process is necessary to reach a just determination to avoid any miscarriage of administrative justice.

### Implications

The prevalence of contract cheating has practical and conceptual implications on higher education by eroding trust between students, faculty, administration, and society. Generally, contract cheating devalues a certified graduate's credibility, employability, qualification, validity, and reliability of acquired knowledge and cognitive holism. As postulated by Lee, and ICAI, "contract cheating is a dismissal of the learning process."<sup>71</sup> Not only does it undermine learning, contract cheating erodes learning environments, damages student-teacher relationships, jeopardises the academic reputations of students, faculty, and institutions, and indicates future workplace dishonesty." Contract cheating poses a significant threat to academic integrity, especially in writing dissertations and thesis. It undermines genuine personal 'cognitive effort' and learning. It also has the potential to debase and compromise the quality and standard of higher education, failing to meet public expectations and resulting in a significant decline in public trust in higher education certificates and qualifications or credentials. For instance, cheaters who graduate with honours without the requisite skills and knowledge cannot deliver on their jobs as working professionals because there is a disconnection between their certificates and their competencies. Indulging in academic dishonesty in school could lead to professional dishonesty in adult life, culminating in a deviant citizen. It can also cause society to doubt true achievers.

This study has implications for faculty, researchers, administration, students, policymakers, and stakeholders in the education enterprise. Although this study does not provide statistical data, it reveals a narrative of the insiders' insights. Given that the scope and data are limited to graduate students from the School of Creative Arts whom the authors supervised, care should be taken in generalising the findings to represent other departments, disciplines, and institutions. Nonetheless, further studies could build on this primary reflection to conduct future studies on contract cheating in Ghanaian tertiary institutions.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made based on research findings and discussions. Faculty and administration should intensify and reinvigorate academic integrity programmes with student-focused interventions and enhanced lecturer-student engagements. It should be devoid of the traditional student-policing approach to academic misconduct. Discarding the traditional punitive approach for a student-centred andragogy and forward-looking approach is necessary. Today's graduate students require a clear understanding of the practical relevance of their learning tasks to their professional development. Additionally, their andragogical needs should be carefully considered and integrated into the course structure, including cognitive and non-cognitive competencies. Faculty should provide research and thesis writing support modules to graduate students. They should be invited as observers to thesis defences or viva voce, seminars, and workshops. Supervisors should acknowledge the limitations and challenges their graduate students face and not presume they have already grasped the principles of academic integrity during their undergraduate studies. The institution's academic integrity policy and procedures for resolving allegations of academic integrity violations must be clearly defined, devoid of needless legalese and explained to students to foster awareness and compliance. A proper orientation on academic integrity could help educate them about the importance of originality and ethical practices. Faculty should encourage open dialogue about ethical behaviour and the consequences of contract cheating.

Equally, the administration should take all necessary steps to ensure a conducive teaching and learning environment of initiative, creativity, and originality in scholarship, whose underlying principles

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<sup>70</sup> Frank J. Cavico and Bahaudin G. Mujtaba, "Making The Case For The Creation Of An Academic Honesty And Integrity Culture In Higher Education: Reflections And Suggestions For Reducing The Rise In Student Cheating," *American Journal of Business Education (AJBE)* 2, no. 5 (August 1, 2009): 75–88, <https://doi.org/10.19030/ajbe.v2i5.4072>.

<sup>71</sup> Lee, "What Is Contract Cheating? What Does It Have to Do with Academic Integrity?" "; International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), "The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity." (3rd Ed.)."

should include ensuring the highest academic integrity standards. In addition, fairness and equity should be guaranteed. To facilitate this, the administration should provide faculty with relevant tools, technical support, and resources. Additionally, all inadequacies in existing interventions should be addressed through staff development capacity-building programmes and keeping faculty abreast with the state of the act educational technologies. As duty bearers, faculty should be encouraged to report detected cases without fear or favour. Faculty cannot continue the same old trajectory, knowing that failure to act, impliedly, amounts to an endorsement of contract cheating. Cooperation and commitment in enforcing academic integrity by all is nonnegotiable because faculty and administration must always maintain the sanctity of their degrees and institutional reputation. MacCabe et al., assert that creating an ethical community on university campuses is necessary where the code of conduct is firmly embedded in the student culture.<sup>72</sup> Research indicates that traditional plagiarism detection technology is ineffective at detecting contract cheating.<sup>73</sup> However, combining technology with human diligence can enhance the ability to identify suspected cases of contract cheating. Detection tools like Turnitin Originality, forensic linguistic analysis, and probability algorithms can help identify unoriginal works.

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is becoming ubiquitous in higher education with the emergence of large language models (LLMs), like Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (ChatGPT) and other multimodal LLMs, such as Google's Gemini and Microsoft's Copilot, GPTZeroX, Winston AI detection, originality.AI, and chrome Extension, among others. These technological tools have revolutionised knowledge production, dissemination, promotion and consumption, altering the higher education ecosystem. In this regard, higher education institutions must rethink their academic integrity policies, prioritise, and strategies to reflect contemporary realities and for maximum impact against contract cheating. The improved policy should be experiential, behavioural, and forward-looking in nature. The institutional academic policy rethinking and enhancement should be done with students as bona fide stakeholders.

## CONCLUSION

The study addresses the phenomenon of contract cheating by exploring its definitional complexities, evolutionary characteristics, causal factors, interventions, deployment of detection technology and support mechanisms implemented at the University. It further emphasises that contract cheating among graduate students is influenced by personal, contextual, cultural, situational, institutional, and technological factors, as well as a misconception of widespread participation in higher education. However, there could be other underpinning factors that are yet to be unravelled. The phenomenon is evolving; technology is rapidly advancing and changing the character and nature of contract cheating. This is aggravated by generational mindset and the persuasive and enticing marketing strategies of predatory 'essay mills' to prey on distraught, vulnerable, and credulous students by luring them into avoidable "academic sin" (contract cheating). Therefore, the faculty, administration, and society cannot afford to ignore this threat. Addressing contract cheating requires a multi-pronged strategic approach through a concerted effort by the scholarly community and society. This call to action requires sustained collaborative commitment and unflagging advocacy for the universal outlawing of unscrupulous contract-cheating service providers. The narratives in this paper are reflections and interpretations of our professional experiences as lecturers, thesis supervisors and examination officers. It is important to note that these experiences may not necessarily reflect the situations in other departments and faculties within the University.

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<sup>72</sup> McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield, "Cheating in Academic Institutions: A Decade of Research."

<sup>73</sup> Walker and Townley, "Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty?"

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