



UNMASKING CONTRACT CHEATING IN ESWATINI: A CALL TO ACTION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS

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Abstract

The paper employs the Fraud Triangle framework to investigate the dynamics of contract cheating within the higher education space in Eswatini. Contract cheating, characterised by students commissioning third parties to complete academic work on their behalf, poses significant threats to academic integrity, the value of qualifications, and the overall educational landscape. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through questionnaires distributed to quality assurance focal persons in 36 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) registered by the Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC). This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the HEIs' perspectives on contract cheating. It further seeks to explore whether these institutions have established policies and strategies to effectively address the challenge of contract cheating. By gathering these insights, the study intends to propose proactive measures and contribute to the ongoing discourse on academic integrity in Eswatini, offering actionable strategies to combat contract cheating and safeguard the credibility of higher education. The findings reveal a complex landscape characterised by varied perceptions of the prevalence of contract cheating, as well as diverse and often conflicting dynamics in institutional policies aimed at addressing this issue. While a significant number of institutions report having mechanisms to address contract cheating, many lack effective implementation and enforcement strategies. The study underscores the necessity for educational workshops for both students and staff, innovative assessment methods, student support and the establishment of clear, comprehensive policies. It highlights the urgent need for a collaborative approach among faculty, administration, and students to foster a culture of integrity and accountability.



Keywords: Contract Cheating; Academic Integrity; Higher Education; Fraud Triangle; Quality Assurance; ESHEC; Eswatini

Introduction

“Academic integrity could not be more essential to academe. It is—and must be—at the core of our purpose, practice and the products of scholarly work. The degrees we confer (and the knowledge, skills and values they are supposed to represent) and the truths we disseminate (through research with integrity) must be beyond reproach” (Crossman, 2022, p. x1).

This integrity should be reflected in all that academia is—its history, research, curriculum, pedagogy, and overarching mission (Hughes, 2024). Upholding very high standards and fostering academic excellence is essential (Guerrero-Dib, Portales, & Heredia Escorza, 2020). However, evidence indicates that incidents of academic misconduct are on the rise, posing a significant risk to the integrity and overall sustainability of the sector. One of the most rapidly evolving forms of academic misconduct is contract cheating, which not only contributes to dishonest behaviour but also severely undermines the credibility of higher education (Rahimi, Jones, & Bailey, 2024).

Contract cheating is a form of academic dishonesty where students actively contract and pay a third party to produce work (assignments, tests, coursework, research, etc) that is subsequently submitted for academic credit under the students' name (Gamage, Dehideniya, Xu & Tang, 2023). The financial transactions typically involve students paying individuals or companies, often referred to as "essay mills", who usually advertise online, to produce essays, research papers, or other coursework on their behalf (Rahimi, Jones & Bailey, 2024).

Unlike plagiarism, which can be identified through technology and scrutiny, contract cheating involves the commission of original work created by someone else rather than the replication of existing content (Clarke & Lancaster, 2007). This independently crafted material is covertly submitted as the commissioner's own, with the author's consent (Lubinga, Ramnarain, & Tonkin, 2023). The covert act of collusion between the "cheater" and the author or essay mills renders contract cheating more insidious than other forms of academic misconduct (Sweeney, 2023). According to Glover, Kpodo, and Sosu (2024), this removes the "theft" aspect and reinforces the fraudulent and criminal nature of the act through mutual concealment and misrepresentation. In the same vein, Hughes (2024) asserts that the act of payment makes contract cheating deliberate, pre-planned, and intentional. Glover et al, (2024) astutely characterize contract cheating as a "cardinal sin," arguing that "in the realm of higher education,



there is one cardinal sin above all others” a transgression that could, figuratively, lead to the ‘death’ of academic integrity in higher education—contract cheating, (p. 3140).

Contract cheating has emerged as a significant and escalating global issue in higher education institutions, with statistics indicating a steady rise over the years. The contract cheating sector has evolved into a well-established industry where service providers operate commercial ventures and capitalise on students’ inability to meet academic demands (Lubinga, Ramnarain, & Tonkin, 2023). Predatory essay mills employ persuasive and enticing marketing strategies to prey on distraught, vulnerable, and credulous students, luring them into academic dishonesty (Glover et al., 2024).

Contract cheating has been found to not only be a global challenge but also to span various academic disciplines and assignment types. A study by Lancaster (2020) found that while fields like architecture, computer science, and law in the UK have higher engagement levels, contract cheating services are prevalent across all 19 disciplines examined. Likewise, the QAA (2020) reported that one in seven graduates in the UK has paid someone to complete an assignment for them. In Australia, Newton (2018) found that an average of 3.52% of contract cheating use among university students was reported by following an analysis of 65 studies totalling 54,514 respondents. Newton noted that since 2014, the percentage of students in Australia who admitted to having paid someone to do their assignment increased to 15.7%. Likewise, in South Africa, Mtshweni (2024) found a surge of contract cheating cases among students enrolled for master’s and doctoral studies.

In Eswatini, while studies have not specifically focused on the prevalence of contract cheating, advertisements for assignment and research assistance are widespread across various media platforms, raising significant concerns. These ads—offering help with essays, reports, and academic assignments—are commonly found on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as in daily newspapers such as the Times of Eswatini and the Eswatini Observer. This situation highlights a critical issue that demands immediate attention. The images found on Facebook below illustrate;

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We write your assignments for you at a fee. Do you understand? If yes, Talk to me on WhatsApp 📞 (79 [REDACTED])??
<https://wa.me/message/F36LMPT5XFR8G>

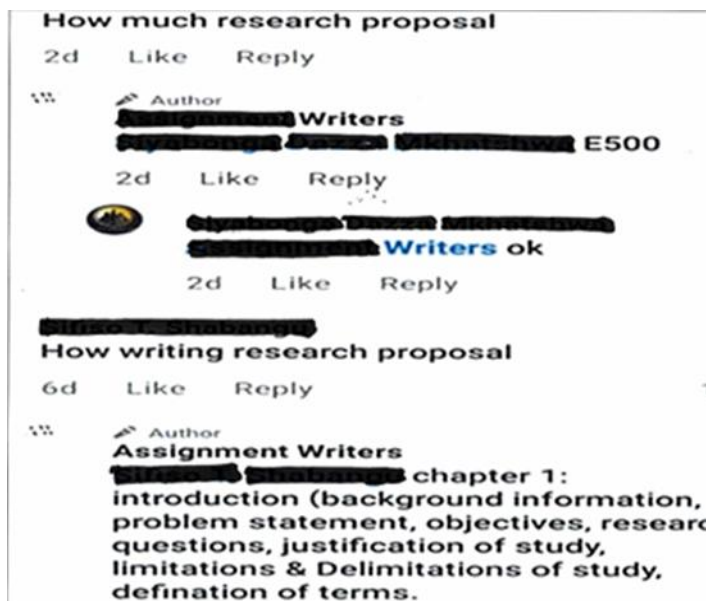
Professor: "What inspired you to write this essay?"
 Me: "The due date"



 **Teachers' Circle (its where we meet)** ...

Anonymous member · 5d · 👤

Yoh! 🤔🤔🤔🤔. Sanibonani bo T, ngicela munye T nkosiyami loneluvulo lotibambela mine sandla angisite nge project. Kubi bi!! Ngite imali yekubhadala labantelanako, ngiku contract. Lokuncane lengikuholako kutsatfwa yi tuition fee.
 Thank you in advance 🙏



The images depict advertisements from essay mills prominently displayed on social media and other platforms. These ads utilise vibrant colours, catchy graphics and language to capture students' attention, making the offerings seem appealing and accessible. The visual representation of students navigating and responding to these ads underscores the pressing relevance of this issue within contemporary academic life in Eswatini. The students' responses to the advertisements

often reflect a mix of curiosity and desperation, indicating a willingness to invest in these shortcuts to alleviate academic pressure. This phenomenon could suggest two critical implications: first, it highlights students' mounting academic pressure, pushing them toward potentially unethical solutions. Secondly, it may indicate that contract cheating is becoming normalised within the country, undermining the integrity of educational qualifications.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF CONTRACT CHEATING

The implications of contract cheating are not only multifaceted but also alarming, reaching far beyond individual concerns to encompass significant socio-economic repercussions for nations. This reality emphasises the urgent need to uphold academic integrity to protect and restore the quality of education and ensure the development of capable, ethical professionals. Key areas affected include the erosion of academic integrity, the devaluation of qualifications and institutional credibility, as well as the implications for students and higher education institutions, all of which contribute to workforce competency challenges.

The Erosion of Academic Integrity and Devaluation of Qualifications

Contract cheating represents an anti-intellectual agenda that erodes the value of education (Clare, Walker & Hobson, 2017, p. 2) and undermines the fundamental principles of fairness and merit that are supposed to underpin educational systems and qualifications. According to Lubinga, Ramnarain, and Tonkin (2023), as students increasingly resort to unethical means to complete their assignments, the foundational principles of honesty, accountability, and intellectual growth are compromised. Hughes (2024) agrees, stating that when original work is devalued, the incentive for

genuine learning diminishes, prompting students to engage with their studies superficially, ultimately stifling their intellectual development. If left unaddressed, the normalisation of contract cheating creates a vicious cycle that results in a workforce that is ill-equipped to meet the complexities of professional and intellectual demands (Sweeney, 2023).

The prevalence of contract cheating diminishes the value of qualifications (Rahimi, Jones & Bailey, 2024) and raises critical questions regarding the competency of graduates and the overall workforce. When degrees are conferred based on deceit rather than genuine knowledge and skills, the legitimacy of these qualifications comes into question, leading employers to doubt the rigour and reliability of the degrees awarded (Gamage, Dehideniya, Xu & Tang, 2023). Students who resort to contract cheating essentially earn degrees and certifications without truly engaging with the academic material, which leaves them lacking the essential knowledge and skills required in their respective fields (Hughes, 2024). Consequently, employers may find themselves compelled to import skills, as seen in Eswatini (National Skills Audit Report, 2021) or face the daunting challenge of investing additional resources in retraining new hires who possess degrees but lack practical competencies. This situation defrauds future employers (Mtshweni, 2024), hampers productivity and perpetuates a cycle of increased training expenditures for organisations, ultimately affecting overall workforce performance and efficiency (Rahimi, Jones & Bailey, 2024).

Implications for Higher Education Institutions and Students

Contract cheating has significant repercussions that jeopardise community confidence in the institutions involved (Sweeney, 2023). This unethical practice undermines the integrity of institutional assessments, putting the reputation of both the institutions and their students at risk while weakening their overall credibility (Ahsan, Akbar & Kam, 2022). For students, what may seem like a temporary solution to academic pressure ultimately deprives them of the opportunity to develop their intellectual capabilities (Mtshweni, 2024). The ramifications extend beyond immediate academic concerns; contract cheating negatively impacts their education, ethical development, mental health, and future career prospects (Hughes, 2024).

By outsourcing their academic work, students forfeit essential learning experiences and hinder their ability to cultivate critical skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective writing (Sweeney, 2023). Moreover, participating in contract cheating can foster a cavalier attitude toward ethics and responsibility, a mindset that may persist into their professional lives and adversely affect their conduct and decision-making in future careers (Gamage, Dehideniya, Xu & Tang, 2023).



Socio-economic Impact of Contract Cheating

The ramifications of a compromised educational system extend well beyond individual achievement; they pose significant threats to the overall economic landscape and societal progress. A decline in educational quality due to contract cheating can lead to stagnation across various industries and the economy (Guerrero-Dib, Portales, & Heredia Escorza, 2020). A workforce lacking foundational knowledge and skills hinders innovation, creativity, effective problem-solving, and technological advancement—key elements that drive economic growth (Mtshweni, 2024). In a globalised economy, countries compete vigorously in the marketplace. If an educational system is undermined by contract cheating, a nation's global competitiveness may dwindle, resulting in fewer foreign investments and partnerships, which further limit economic opportunities (Eneji, Petters, Esuabana et al., 2022).

Particularly concerning is the impact of contract cheating on Master's and Doctoral students, who are crucial for advancing specialised knowledge and research. Mtshweni (2024) emphasises that these graduate students bear responsibilities not only to their institutions but also to the broader public and scientific community. Engaging in contract cheating undermines their ability to cultivate deep knowledge and expertise necessary for high-quality research, impeding scientific progress and damaging the credibility of their academic contributions (Ahsan, Akbar & Kam, 2022). For instance, Eneji, Petters, Esuabana et al. (2022) conducted a study in Nigeria to assess the impact of academic dishonesty on the quality of graduates from Nigerian universities. Their findings indicated that institutions with high levels of academic dishonesty produced graduates of lower quality, who contribute little or nothing to national development.

As future leaders, researchers, and professionals, Master's and Doctoral students have the potential to shape industries and contribute to societal advancements. However, if they resort to dishonest practices, it perpetuates a cycle of inadequacy and erodes public trust in higher education (Sweeney, 2023). This erosion of confidence can ultimately affect workforce quality and the competitive standing of economies in a globalised world. Therefore, it is crucial to uphold academic integrity at all levels of education to safeguard the future of both individuals and society.

The Problem

The proliferation of essay mill advertisements on social media casts a significant shadow over Eswatini's future, raising serious concerns about the ramifications of neglecting education and failing to combat contract cheating. Given education's vital role in socioeconomic advancement and sustainable development (Hughes, 2024), this blatant compromise within the educational framework forces a stark reckoning: does Eswatini's future appear brighter or dimmer under this cloud of academic fraud?



Consider the implications of a system that allows individuals to attain qualifications without having truly engaged with the academic material. Might we find ourselves with healthcare professionals, lawyers, and teachers who have engaged with their studies only superficially and are ill-equipped to meet the complexities of professional and intellectual demands (Sweeney, 2023)? Could we be producing Master's and PhD holders who have been conferred with such degrees based on deceit rather than genuine knowledge and skills?

This scenario raises significant concerns about the competence of those entrusted with critical roles in society. If individuals enter the workforce without genuinely earning their qualifications, it raises concerns about their expertise and effectiveness in their roles. Incompetent students may secure key positions based on their credentials yet lack the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their duties (Mtshweni, 2024). As a country, could the fast-evolving trend of contract cheating exacerbate the existing skills mismatches in the labour market, where qualifications do not align with actual skills and graduates do not possess the skills required by the industry? This highlights the heightened need for Eswatini to address contract cheating, especially in the higher education space, as a matter of urgency, hence the purpose of the paper.

The Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the complexities of contract cheating within the higher education sector in Eswatini. It seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of institutional perspectives on contract cheating and academic integrity, examining existing policies and the strategies that higher education institutions employ to address these challenges. By gathering these insights, the study intends to propose proactive measures and recommendations that could cultivate a culture of academic integrity and actively curb the incidence of contract cheating.

The study seeks to answer two broad questions: (1) What is the prevalence of contract cheating within higher education institutions? and (2) What strategies do higher education institutions employ to prevent and address contract cheating? The findings are anticipated to serve as a foundation for the Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC) and education stakeholders to develop effective interventions that encourage honesty and originality in academic work. Ultimately, this endeavour will play a vital role in safeguarding the credibility and integrity of scholarly work, enhancing the overall quality of higher education in Eswatini, and establishing it as a credible platform for genuine knowledge advancement.



Theoretical Framework – The Fraud Triangle Theory

In tracing and reflecting on the broad dynamics of contract cheating, the Fraud Triangle theory framed the study. The Fraud Triangle was developed by criminologist Donald Cressey in the 1950s and serves as a theoretical foundation for understanding fraudulent behaviour (Owusu, Koomson, Alipoe et al., 2022), including contract cheating in academic settings. This framework posits that three key elements must converge for an individual to engage in fraud: opportunity, pressure (or motivation), and rationalisation. Opportunity refers to the circumstances that enable fraud to occur, often due to weak internal controls, inadequate oversight, or easy access to information (Fauziah Adia, Muhammed & Gita, 2019). Pressure encompasses the personal and professional pressures that drive individuals toward fraudulent behaviour (Owusu, Koomson, Alipoe, et al., 2022). Lastly, rationalisation involves the cognitive process through which individuals justify their fraudulent actions, often convincing themselves that their behaviour is acceptable or not truly criminal, viewing it as a means to an end (Rahman & Jie, 2024).

In the case of contract cheating, the Fraud Triangle postulates that for students to engage in fraudulent behaviour [contract cheating] there should be the opportunity to engage in the fraudulent behaviour without being caught, pressure to maintain high standards or manage heavy course loads and also find their actions justifiable and a norm (Rahman & Jie, 2024). Thus, the Fraud Triangle serves as a valuable analytical tool for understanding the complex interplay of factors that contribute to contract cheating, ultimately guiding institutions in developing effective prevention strategies.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, distributing a questionnaire that incorporated both open-ended and closed-ended questions to all registered Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Eswatini. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the research enabled data triangulation, which enriched the understanding of the current state of contract cheating and its management in Eswatini's higher education landscape. This comprehensive approach yielded valuable insights that informed subsequent analyses and recommendations, merging statistical rigour with the lived experiences and perspectives of the respondents.

A total of 36 out of 47 institutions participated, providing substantial data for the study. The qualitative data collected from the surveys were subjected to thematic analysis to identify prevalent themes and patterns. Concurrently, the quantitative data were analysed using Google Forms to generate summary statistics and visual representations. Additionally, an analysis of social media platforms and newspapers was conducted to investigate recent and ongoing issues related to contract cheating, including advertisements promoting such services in the country. This comparative



analysis aimed to juxtapose the current realities and prevalence of contract cheating in Eswatini against the mitigation strategies employed by higher education institutions. This analysis was carried out between June 2024 and February 2025 and uncovered approximately eleven (11) advertisements on social media for research and assignment consultancy services available for a fee.

Delimitation

The paper "Unmasking Contract Cheating in Eswatini: A Call to Action for Higher Education Stakeholders" focuses on traditional forms of academic dishonesty, specifically contract cheating through essay mills, where students pay third parties to complete assignments. While the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in this context is acknowledged, it is not the primary focus of the research. Instead, the study emphasises the human dimensions of contract cheating, particularly decision-making, pressure, and rationalisation framed by the Fraud Triangle theory.

By concentrating on established patterns of contract cheating, the study provides actionable insights and recommendations for higher education stakeholders. It addresses immediate concerns in academic integrity while also setting the stage for future research to explore how AI could reshape perceptions and norms surrounding academic dishonesty.

THE STUDY FINDINGS

The Perceived Prevalence of Contract Cheating in Higher Education

The findings present a nuanced understanding of the prevalence of contract cheating within higher education institutions in Eswatini. While a significant portion of respondents (40%) believe that contract cheating is not a widespread issue, a notable number remain uncertain about its prevalence. Specifically, 28% of those surveyed expressed uncertainty regarding the extent of contract cheating. Additionally, another 28% perceived contract cheating to be somewhat prevalent. Interestingly, 4% of respondents claimed to have no awareness of contract cheating, reporting that they had never encountered any instances of it in their institutions. The figure below illustrates;

How prevalent do you think contract cheating is at your institution?

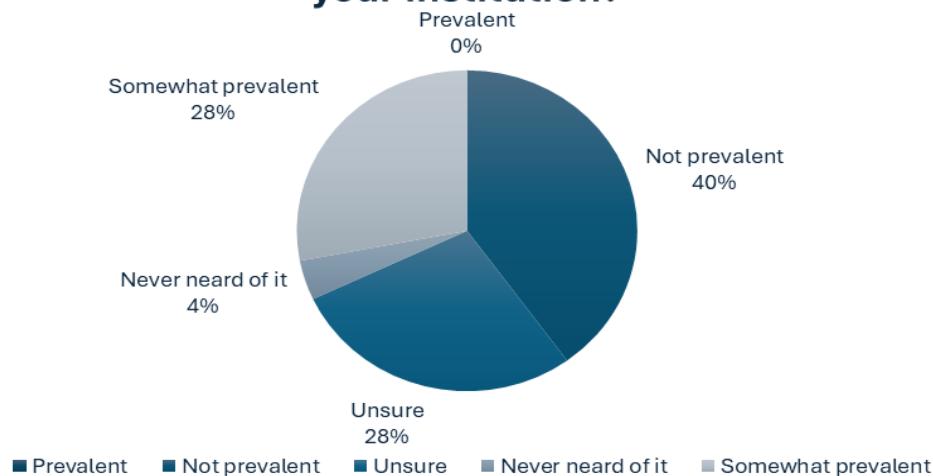


Figure 1 – Perceived Prevalence of Contract Cheating

The findings reveal a significant disconnect in how respondents assess the seriousness of contract cheating within higher education institutions in Eswatini. While a substantial portion believes that it is not widespread, others remain uncertain, and only a small percentage acknowledge that it is somewhat prevalent. Alarming, 4% of respondents have "never heard" of contract cheating, and no respondents characterised contract cheating as prevalent, raising critical concerns about the collective understanding of academic integrity within these institutions.

This divergence in perceptions and a lack of awareness are particularly alarming, especially given the accessibility of essay mills and online platforms that facilitate contract cheating. This situation underscores a considerable gap in knowledge, particularly among faculty, who play a pivotal role in maintaining academic integrity. The widespread availability of these services, coupled with the uncertainties expressed, suggests that contract cheating may be significantly underreported within the educational landscape. Although students may be engaging with these services, institutional awareness and reporting mechanisms appear insufficient, leading to a distorted perception of the problem's true scale.

Responses categorised as "not relevant" or "never heard of it" signify a systemic lack of information rather than an absence of the practice itself. The absence of firsthand experiences with contract cheating, combined with inadequate detection capabilities among academic staff, may create a misleading sense of security. Such complacency poses a substantial threat to academic integrity, indicating that institutions may not fully grasp the scope of this issue.

This discrepancy between perception and reality highlights deeper systemic challenges within educational institutions, suggesting that the extent of contract cheating is likely underestimated. Addressing these issues demands a concerted effort from institutions to elevate awareness, strengthen detection mechanisms, and foster a culture of academic integrity (Hughes, 2024). By doing so, they can better navigate the challenges posed by contract cheating and ensure that academic standards are upheld, safeguarding the integrity of their educational offerings.

STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO COMBAT CONTRACT CHEATING

This question sought to investigate the existence and effectiveness of measures in place to combat contract cheating. The findings revealed that approximately 71% of institutions have established policies to address this issue. However, 13% of respondents expressed uncertainty about their institution's policies, and 17% reported that no policies exist within their institutions. **Figure 2 illustrates.**

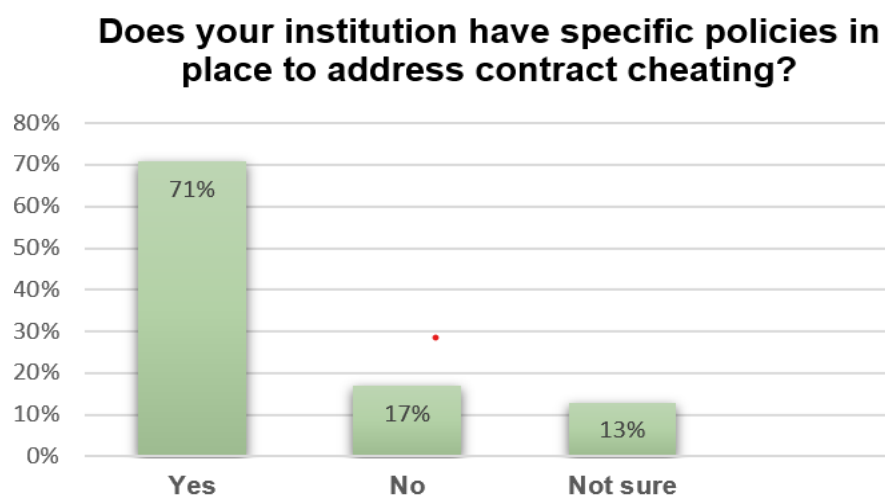


Figure 2: Policies to Address Contract Cheating

In addition to the policies, the study aimed to uncover any specific procedures institutions have implemented to tackle contract cheating. Results showed that about 56% of respondents believed their institutions had clear procedures for handling cases of contract cheating. Conversely, 20% were unsure whether any procedures existed, another 20% confirmed that their institutions lacked procedures, and 4% felt that this issue was not relevant to their institutions. The figure below illustrates;

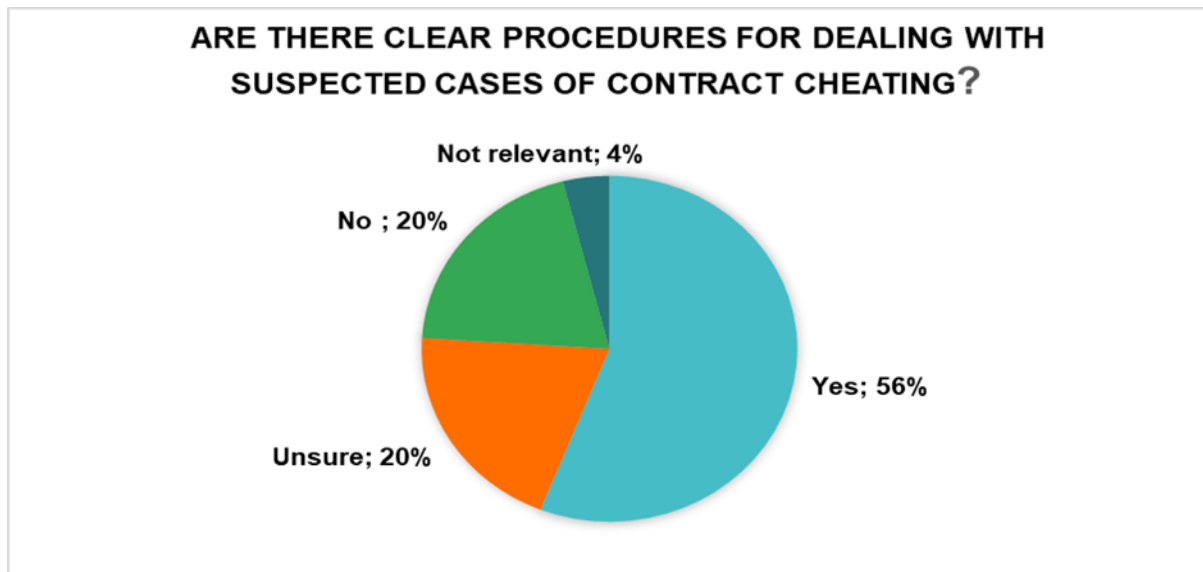


Figure 3 – Procedures to combat contract cheating

The findings offer a critical perspective on the current state of institutional policies and procedures aimed at addressing contract cheating in higher education, revealing a multifaceted landscape of both progress and significant gaps. Although 71% of institutions have developed policies to combat contract cheating, the fact that 13% of respondents remain unsure about these policies is concerning. This uncertainty suggests deficiencies in communication and awareness, which are vital for successful policy implementation.

Moreover, while the existence of policies is a necessary first step, their effectiveness hinges significantly on the accompanying enforcement procedures. The finding that only 56% of institutions have established clear procedures for addressing contract cheating highlights a critical gap between policy formulation and practical application. This disconnect raises questions about the commitment of these institutions to enforce academic integrity rigorously. The uncertainty voiced by 20% of respondents regarding their institutions' procedures is particularly alarming, as it indicates a potential lack of training and education on contract cheating. This gap in knowledge points to the need for institutions to invest in professional development aimed at equipping faculty and staff with the necessary tools and resources to combat contract cheating effectively. Enhanced training not only empowers educators to recognise and address these issues but also fosters a culture of integrity within the institution.

Additionally, the 4% of respondents who deem contract cheating irrelevant to their institutions reflect a troubling disconnect from the current realities of academia. Such attitudes may contribute to an environment where academic dishonesty is

underestimated or ignored, further exacerbating the challenges faced in addressing contract cheating. This lack of awareness among academic staff underscores the urgent need for comprehensive training and engagement strategies to address not just the existence of contract cheating but its implications for the academic community at large.

Effectiveness of the strategies employed - policies and regulations

The findings indicate that while most institutions (70%) have policies in place, and 56% have clear procedures for addressing cases of contract cheating, this acknowledgement does not consistently correlate with the perceived effectiveness of these policies and procedures. Respondents expressed significant uncertainty about their effectiveness, resulting in a range of opinions. Approximately 38% of respondents believed that these measures were very effective in combating and addressing cases of contract cheating at their institutions. In contrast, 13% expressed uncertainty regarding their effectiveness. Additionally, 29% considered the policies and procedures to be "somewhat effective," while 21% felt that they were not effective at all. The figure below illustrates.

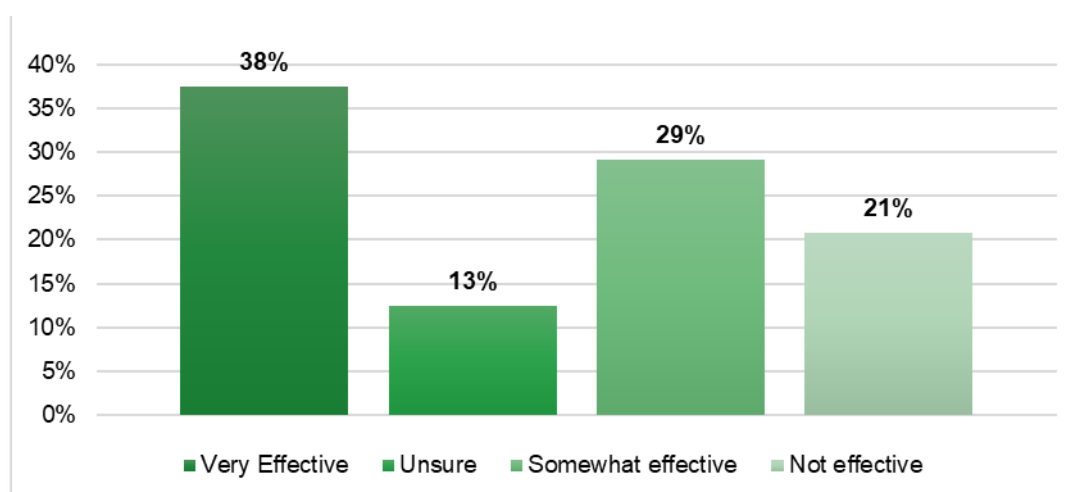


Figure 4: Effectiveness of institutional policies and regulations

The presence of policies and procedures in most institutions is a positive step; however, the significant uncertainty and mixed perceptions about their effectiveness pose a considerable challenge. While many higher education institutions express a commitment to aligning with broader academic standards, the methods to enforce these standards appear inconsistent and unclear. This situation suggests a potential for "institutional inertia," in which the acknowledgement of contract cheating is overshadowed by a lack of aggressive response. Contributing factors may include

resource constraints, competing institutional priorities, and a reluctance to confront student misconduct directly.

The uncertainty surrounding the effectiveness of these policies is concerning, as it creates an environment ripe for loopholes, enabling contract cheating, and may undermine faculty confidence in addressing suspected cases. This highlights the need for a robust framework that encompasses well-defined procedures and fosters a strong culture of academic integrity within institutions. The finding that 29% of respondents view policies and procedures as only “somewhat effective” raises questions about the inherent flaws in the policies themselves or their communication to the student body. This inconsistency underlines the importance of not only establishing policies but also regularly revisiting and updating them to ensure they remain effective, transparent, and widely understood within the academic community.

For universities to truly uphold academic integrity, they must prioritise the dissemination of clear and accessible information regarding their policies to both staff and students. Without a shared understanding of these guidelines, any efforts to maintain academic standards may falter. Again, without actionable and transparent procedures, policies may fail to serve as effective deterrents, ultimately undermining their purpose. As contract cheating becomes increasingly sophisticated and such services are easily available, institutions must adopt a proactive stance, including regular policy reviews, engagement with emerging technologies that facilitate cheating, and the cultivation of a culture that emphasises integrity in academic pursuits.

REFLECTIONS – INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Cultural and Institutional Context of Contract Cheating

The issue of contract cheating in higher education in Eswatini presents a multifaceted and complex challenge, illuminating significant contradictions and ambiguities within the academic system. This phenomenon raises critical questions about academic integrity and the intrinsic value of the nation’s higher education landscape. A closer examination reveals that many academics may underestimate the severity of contract cheating, failing to recognise its pervasive nature and the profound implications it has on both academic integrity and educational quality.

This oversight is alarming, especially when the ease of access to contract cheating services—often proliferated through newspapers and social media—facilitates not only student engagement in dishonest practices but also undermines the ethical framework that underpins the educational system. By neglecting this issue, which is not only normalised but actively marketed to students, academics inadvertently cultivate an environment that encourages the erosion of academic standards. This



collective underestimation fosters a culture of complicity, where students come to feel justified in their unethical choices due to the lack of acknowledgement and clear guidance from faculty and institutions. This complicity challenges the very essence of higher education, as it promotes an ethos where academic integrity is overshadowed by the pursuit of short-term academic success.

The normalisation of contract cheating is particularly alarming given that students could often be rationalising their actions by asserting that "*it is all over social media – and everyone else is doing it*" or by viewing participation in such practices as a necessary survival tactic within a high-pressure academic environment. This prevailing mentality not only reflects a troubling acceptance of unethical behaviour but also highlights a deeper, systemic issue within the educational landscape. The immense pressure to succeed academically frequently overshadows ethical considerations, leading students to prioritise immediate performance over long-term learning and personal development. Such a perspective ultimately diminishes the transformative potential of higher education, as it shifts the focus from knowledge acquisition to mere credentialing.

Against this backdrop, the measures currently implemented by higher education institutions in Eswatini to detect and prevent contract cheating appear critically insufficient. Existing policies are often underutilised or inadequately enforced, creating a significant disconnect between institutional perception and actionable response. This failure to address the issue effectively fosters an academic environment where contract cheating can flourish, yielding consequences that extend far beyond the academic realm. By enabling students to circumvent the rigorous intellectual demands of their education, contract cheating fundamentally undermines the foundational principles of higher learning. The integrity of qualifications earned and the authenticity of the skills acquired are compromised, ultimately devaluing the educational experience (Hughes, 2024).

The Influence and Implications of Contract Cheating Services

The open advertising of "contract cheating" services on the country's social media pages, often boldly displayed, serves as a potent counterforce that normalises, facilitates and gives ample opportunity for academic dishonesty. Such advertising directly challenges any institutional efforts to uphold standards of originality and scholarly work (Guerrero-Dib, Portales & Heredia Escorza, 2020). Even as some institutions strive to combat contract cheating, these ads represent a counterforce, potentially encouraging students to see academic dishonesty as an acceptable option. The ubiquitous presence of essay mills and other academic service providers serves as a constant influence and creates a supply that directly caters to the demand for unethical academic services. This normalisation, coupled with a lack of clearly



articulated policies and stringent messaging about the penalties for contract cheating, sends a troubling message to all Eswatini: that cheating is a viable option.

The study's findings suggest that the problem of contract cheating is likely far greater than the respondents recognise, with students accessing these services but institutions being unaware of the extent of the issue. This lack of consistent and proactive measures to address contract cheating is characterised as "institutional inertia," where the problem is acknowledged but not aggressively tackled (Guerrero-Dib, Portales & Heredia Escorza, 2020). When students perceive that they can engage in contract cheating without facing consequences, the likelihood of their participation in such behaviour increases significantly.

Overall, the reality of contract cheating in Eswatini reflects a deeper societal dilemma concerning values, integrity, and the genuine purpose of education. It underscores the urgent need for critical reflection on the motivations behind students' choices and the broader implications for the educational landscape.

STRATEGIES TO PREVENT AND DETECT CONTRACT CHEATING

According to Lubinga, Ramnarain, and Tonkin (2023), effectively addressing contract cheating in Eswatini requires all stakeholders and higher education institutions (HEIs) to acknowledge its existence, prevalence, and the serious consequences of neglecting this issue. Implementing decisive and immediate measures is crucial to prevent long-term detrimental effects on the educational landscape and the broader economic and social progress of Eswatini. This call to action must be accompanied by a strong sense of urgency.

Innovative Assessment Strategies

To effectively mitigate opportunities for contract cheating, higher education institutions should adopt innovative assessment strategies. This can include frequent low-stakes assessments and robust invigilation practices. Varied, authentic assessments—such as oral presentations, personalised tasks, formal examinations, and reflective video narratives—allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in practical ways (Mtshweni, 2024). Emphasising low-stakes assessments not only helps build student confidence but also reduces the temptation to engage in dishonest practices, especially when contrasted with high-stakes evaluations (Gamage, Dehideniya, Xu & Tang, 2023). Furthermore, by implementing continuous real-time assessments, institutions can diminish the appeal of contract cheating and foster a more engaged learning environment (QAA, 2020).



Academic Integrity Education

According to Lubinga, Ramnarain and Tonkin (2023), the foundation of academic integrity rests on clear communication of expectations and consequences. Raising awareness of contract cheating and educating students about academic integrity should be a continuous focus throughout the academic year, particularly during critical periods like module starts and assessments. Providing clear information and integrating academic integrity concepts into the curriculum is vital for shifting student attitudes regarding contract cheating (Lubinga, Ramnarain & Tonkin, 2023). Additionally, training academic staff on relevant regulations and the detection of contract cheating is essential to ensure they can effectively monitor and guide students. When students are aware of institutional policies on academic integrity, including specific penalties for violations, they are more likely to think critically about their choices.

Ultimately, the pathway to curbing contract cheating lies in fostering a culture of accountability and emphasising the intrinsic value of education, encouraging students to embrace the challenges of academic pursuit rather than evade them.

Enhanced Student Support Systems

Research suggests that students who encounter academic difficulties and lack adequate support from their supervisors are more likely to resort to cheating as a coping mechanism (Mtshweni, 2024). This vulnerability makes them prime targets for essay mills, which prey on frustrated students by offering promises of original, plagiarism-free content and marketing themselves as solutions to students' academic challenges.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) must therefore develop robust internal systems that promote student support interventions (Glover et al., 2024; Lubinga, Ramnarain & Tonkin, 2023). These support systems can address underlying issues such as assessment requirements, which are key factors contributing to academic dishonesty (Crossman, 2022). Many students resort to dishonest practices not merely out of a desire to cheat, but from a lack of understanding, preparation, or support. For example, Mathunywa-Dlamini, Malinga, Khumalo et al. (2022) found that students at a higher education institution in Eswatini were facing academic pressures, a lack of support systems, and personal circumstances. Similarly, a study by Dlamini (2020), also conducted in Eswatini, indicated that master's and PhD students reported minimal satisfaction with the extent to which the institution's library met their research needs. These factors could contribute to students engaging in contract cheating.

By offering resources like tutoring, adequate academic support, academic integrity modules, study groups, and writing assistance, HEIs can therefore enhance students'



connections to the academic community and clarify acceptable practices, ultimately creating an environment that encourages legitimate academic effort and reduces the likelihood of dishonest behaviour. Lubinga, Ramnarain and Tonkin (2023) further argue that when students perceive their institution as supportive, they are less likely to resort to dishonesty for fear of failure.

Strengthening Institutional Policies

Findings from Gamage, Dehideniya, Xu, and Tang (2023) highlight the urgent need for enhanced academic integrity policies to combat contract cheating effectively. Institutions must establish clear and comprehensive guidelines that outline the consequences of contract cheating, enforcing strict penalties such as automatic zero marks and program suspension. These measures not only reflect the institution's commitment to maintaining academic integrity but also serve as a strong deterrent against potential offenders.

Additionally, policies and procedures regarding academic integrity violations should be clearly defined and communicated to students in straightforward language, avoiding unnecessary legal jargon. This approach fosters awareness and encourages compliance (Glover et al., 2024). By conveying the seriousness of the issue and the potential repercussions, institutions can reinforce the importance of ethical conduct in academic work, creating an environment where integrity is paramount (Lubinga, Ramnarain & Tonkin, 2023).

Quality Supervision for Research Students

Research is crucial for fostering socio-economic development, which makes it essential for institutions to prioritise academic integrity among research students. High-quality research not only generates innovative solutions to societal challenges but also stimulates economic growth and advances knowledge across various fields. To ensure that students engage meaningfully and ethically in their scholarly work, universities must provide robust support systems, including high-quality supervision that incorporates regular progress meetings, constructive feedback, and encouragement (Sweeney, 2023). These practices create an environment where students feel motivated to pursue their research with integrity and without resorting to dishonest practices.

Moreover, supervisors themselves must be adequately supported through training in supervision skills, manageable workloads, and fair employment policies (Mtshweni, 2024). For example, findings from Mpofu and Madlela (2024) highlight significant issues within the supervisory system in Eswatini's academic environment, which can adversely affect students' educational experiences and outcomes. Students expressed frustration with supervisors who abused their authority, forcing them to



change research topics to address the supervisors' shortcomings, while providing delayed and unconstructive feedback. This abuse of power creates an atmosphere of fear and compliance, undermining intellectual growth and independence, as students may prioritise conformity over genuine academic exploration.

By enhancing the supervisory framework, institutions can create positive mentorship relationships that guide students toward maintaining academic integrity. Utilising thesis or dissertation defences as an assessment tool can also play a critical role in identifying potential instances of contract cheating. This approach allows supervisors to gauge students' understanding of their research and provide targeted assistance if issues arise (Lubinga, Ramnarain & Tonkin, 2023).

It is vital to recognise that graduate students may face limitations and challenges that their supervisors might not immediately appreciate. For instance, these students often encounter specific obstacles during their research journey, which may not be apparent to those guiding them. These challenges can include transition difficulties as they adapt to the heightened expectations of graduate-level work, a lack of understanding regarding the principles of research and academic integrity, insufficient support systems, diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, and the struggle to balance multiple commitments. By acknowledging and appreciating these nuances, institutions can create a more supportive environment that fosters ethical research practices and reduces the likelihood of contract cheating.

Recommendations for ESHEC - the Regulator of Higher Education

The situation surrounding contract cheating necessitates urgent intervention by the Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC) and individual institutions, as ignoring the issue of essay mills is no longer a viable option. A crucial step in addressing this problem is for the government, through ESHEC, to explore legal avenues to regulate and potentially ban essay mills, drawing inspiration from successful measures implemented in countries like the UK, New Zealand, and Australia. These nations have enacted laws that target the promotion and use of such services, effectively curtailing their prevalence. By developing a robust legal framework, ESHEC can create a deterrent against contract cheating, fostering a culture of academic integrity within Eswatini's higher education landscape. This proactive approach not only protects the integrity of academic qualifications but also reinforces the value of genuine student learning and scholarship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the pervasive issue of contract cheating in Eswatini's higher education landscape is not merely an institutional challenge; it is a societal imperative. As we navigate an increasingly complex academic environment, it is essential for



stakeholders—from students to policymakers—to recognise the profound implications of academic dishonesty on the quality of education and the integrity of qualifications. By fostering an environment that prioritises academic integrity, encourages ethical conduct, and actively engages with innovative assessment practices, we can collectively safeguard the future of higher education in Eswatini. It is time for a concerted call to action—a commitment to uphold the values of honesty and excellence that underpin true academic achievement. Only through collaborative efforts can we empower students, enhance institutional credibility, and ultimately ensure that the degrees conferred truly reflect the knowledge, skills, and values essential for professional success in a dynamic global landscape. Together, let us transform the educational landscape, reclaiming academic integrity as a cornerstone of a brighter and more robust future for all.

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