A THEORETICAL REVIEW OF CONTRACT CHEATING IN MASTER'S AND DOCTORAL STUDIES: SOME GLOBAL TRENDS AND PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The surge of contract cheating cases among postgraduate students enrolled for master's and doctoral studies is a serious challenge to the academic integrity of higher education qualifications globally. Evidence suggests that there is a dearth of studies on contract cheating at master's and doctoral levels of study. Most studies on contract cheating have focused primarily on undergraduate students. This article uses a theoretical review as a method of inquiry to examine the phenomenon of contract cheating among postgraduate students enrolled for master's and doctoral studies. The article explores the practice of contract cheating among postgraduate students from a global perspective while making reference to research conducted in African institutions of higher learning. Further, the article uses the neutralisation theory to unravel the underlying factors that contribute to contract cheating in postgraduate studies. The ramifications of contract cheating for students and higher education institutions are interrogated. Additionally, the article provides a discussion on intervention strategies that institutions of higher learning could consider, using a multi-sectoral approach to curb contract cheating, promote and instil ethical scholarship in master's and doctoral studies.

Keywords: academic integrity, contract cheating, doctoral students, higher education, master's students, postgraduate

INTRODUCTION

Pursuing postgraduate studies at master's and doctoral level is, undoubtedly, one of the most demanding tasks that students can encounter in their academic journey. At the master's level, students are expected to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the research process and the capability to conduct research independently, while at the doctoral level, students are expected to contribute new scholarly knowledge to the scientific discipline. Conducting research at postgraduate level (i.e., master's and doctoral studies) requires students to immerse themselves in wide-ranging research activities, such as conducting literature reviews and writing extensively. These activities may be systematic and, sometimes, taught by training institutions.

However, this does not make it easy for postgraduate students to navigate towards completing their qualifications. Postgraduate students often face serious challenges completing their theses and dissertations due to compounded academic and non-academic reasons such as family and work commitments, difficulty grasping what is required of them in the research process, the inability to write academically, and inadequate institutional support (Cahusac de Caux et al. 2017; Tomar 2016). Others may simply face challenges completing their theses and dissertations due to the perceived difficulty and demands of the research process.

Challenges associated with completing theses and dissertations cannot be disputed. These challenges, unfortunately, often lead students to resort to non-academic practices and mischief, such as soliciting or contracting third parties to complete theses or dissertations or parts thereof, on their behalf – a phenomenon popularly referred to as *contract cheating*. Eaton (2020) considers contract cheating as the process of hiring a third party to complete academic work on behalf of the student. It involves a "third party making contribution to the work of a student, such that there is reasonable doubt as to whose work the assessment represents" (Draper and Newton 2017, 1). For postgraduate students, acts of contract cheating could entail hiring a third party for services which include but are not limited to proposal writing, conducting literature reviews, collecting data, analysing the results, and writing the thesis or dissertation for the student (i.e., ghost-writing) (Singh and Remenyi 2016; Ahsan, Akbar, and Kam 2022; Aitchison and Mowbray 2015). These activities are considered a breach of academic integrity (Stoesz et al. 2019).

THE HISTORY OF ACADEMIC CHEATING AND RISE IN CONTRACT CHEATING

Academic cheating is not a modern phenomenon but dates to centuries ago. Academic cheating has been a challenge since the beginning of formal education (Arnold, Martin, and Bigby 2007). A seminal example of academic cheating can be traced to China approximately over 1400 years ago where a large scale of cheating cases were recorded among prospective civil servants in the *kējǔ* exam – a candidate selection exam for civil service (Blum 2009). Since then, academic cheating has become increasingly prevalent among students in formal education sectors, with some forms of cheating only showing a rapid increase in the last three decades (McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield 2001; Chala 2021). One form of cheating that came into a sharper focus during the 20th century is *paper mills,* which refers to unscrupulous businesses that profit from preparing papers (writing services) on behalf of "authors" (Katie 2022). The surge in paper mills was also documented by *Time Magazine* in the 1970s to expose the extent of the phenomenon in the United States of America (USA) (Time Magazine 1971; Eaton 2020). Due to the limited scope of the term *paper mills*, a new terminology, *contract cheating* was

introduced almost two decades ago to refer to all forms of outsourced academic work (Clarke and Lancaster 2006).

Contract cheating is a widely researched phenomenon among undergraduate students. The outbreak of COVID-19 and expansion of online learning has led to a further increase in contract cheating studies among undergraduate students. Conversely, contract cheating is largely undocumented and under-researched among postgraduate students. However, evidence suggest that the practice is increasing among postgraduate students globally (Eaton and Christensen Hughes 2022; Aitchison and Mowbray 2015; Kelly and Stevenson 2021). For example, the worldwide *Google Trends* data shows that between 2018 and 2022, the search terms "thesis writers" and "dissertation writers" peaked from 43 per cent to 100 per cent and from 0 per cent to 75 per cent, respectively (trends.google.com). Therefore, suggesting an increasing demand for thesis and dissertation support services. Studies demonstrate that the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia have recorded a surge in contract cheating services for postgraduate students and a notable increase in online "enterprises" offering various forms of assistance to master's and doctoral students (Marsh 2017; Kelly and Stevenson 2021). In Russia, approximately 10 000 or two-thirds of all dissertations conferred in 2006 were completed through contract cheating (Parnther 2022). In Africa, there is scanty research on contract cheating among postgraduate students. However, evidence suggests that the practice is increasing across the continent (Mushawatu 2022; Singh and Remenyi 2016).

Contract cheating is a vibrant international black market, which makes capital out of the growth of the higher education sector (Loussikian 2015). For instance, in the UK alone, an estimated GBP200 million is spent on contract cheating services annually (Taylor and Butt 2006). Furthermore, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (2019) highlighted that the global black market of contract cheating is estimated to be worth $1 Billion USD annually. Thus, signalling an endemic and lucrative challenge that may potentially erode the quality of the global education system by undermining the required academic standards.

CONTRACT CHEATING DURING THE WRITING OF THESES AND DISSERTATIONS – AN OVERVIEW

Studies on contract cheating among postgraduate students have mostly been conducted in countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK and the USA (Kelly and Stevenson 2021; Aitchison and Mowbray 2015; Eaton and Christensen Hughes 2022; Stoesz et al., 2019; Eaton 2020; White 2016). In Africa, a few of these studies have been conducted in Kenya and South Africa, respectively (Singh and Remenyi 2016; Bitrus-Ojiambo, Mwangi, and Mwaura 2022). These studies, however, do not focus exclusively on contract cheating among

postgraduate students but rather, refer to contract cheating in undergraduate studies.

The issue of limited studies on contract cheating among postgraduate students in Africa cannot be overemphasised. This limitation, however, does not suggest that contract cheating is not common among postgraduate students in institutions of higher learning in Africa. If anything, holding such a conviction may be an indication of obliviousness and amount to oversimplification of a complex issue, especially given the number of online "enterprises" and private individuals offering contract cheating services across several African countries, including South Africa. Indeed, Mushawatu (2022) posits that academic dishonesty is on the rise across universities in Africa and that there are several "companies" and individuals across the continent writing theses and dissertations for students in exchange for money.

Some narratives from personal experiences are provided to buttress the argument in this article. A colleague (now former) who had just completed his/her master's degree, approached me to ask if I could write a PhD for him/her for a fee. Without dwelling into much reasoning, I refused outrightly and expressed my dislike for the request because I believed it was unethical. In another separate incident, elsewhere, a colleague who was already in possession of a PhD, approached me and asked if we could co-author an article from his/her PhD study. Without much hesitation, I agreed to co-author with the colleague, and we had our initial meeting to conceptualise the article. During the meeting, and to my surprise, the colleague requested that I take the lead and become the first author. Expeditiously, the colleague also sent me the data set (quantitative) and asked that I go through it to see what form of analysis could be extracted. The data set was accompanied by a paragraph long conceptual paper, vague and written haphazardly. This co-authorship approach was demotivating, to say the least. I had a few questions about the conceptual paper and data set. Although this was not a question-and-answer session, during the latter part of our meeting, it became apparent that the colleague did not have clear answers to some of the questions I had and timidly conceded that he/she did not understand "quantitative research" or I suppose, did not have a statistical background. To summarise, the project never materialised. Nonetheless, I was left with more questions than answers, especially because the colleague's PhD thesis was based on a quantitative approach to inquiry. Of course, the main question that lingered was: How was the colleague able to complete the PhD without mastery of this key aspect of the quantitative research approach – statistical knowledge? Not to mention the analysis and interpretation of results.

The personal narratives provided above are just a few of many experiences that academics are likely to come across in their academic careers. Of course, the examples provided above are not exhaustive. For instance, in South Africa, there are occasional cases of reports whereby politicians are alleged to have solicited the services of academics and researchers to complete

their theses and dissertations (Mavuso 2020; Sibanyoni 2023). Conducting research and writing a thesis or dissertation can be a daunting and challenging task. Hence, universities tend to experience a great number of dropout rates between master's and doctoral students (Herman 2011; Zewotir, North, and Murray 2015). Students often struggle with their theses or dissertations since they require a substantial amount of focused work over an extended period (Singh and Remenyi 2016). In the same way, the expectations for students to produce written outputs that demonstrate advanced academic competency place them under increased pressure (Aitchison and Mowbray 2015). A combination of these requirements is often paralleled by an increase in the solicitation of contract cheating services to help students surmount their academic challenges (Aitchison and Mowbray 2015). That is, in the event of academic difficulty, some students are prone to buying their way out of difficulty by contracting third parties to do their academic work.

A plethora of "companies" and individuals play a role in fulfilling the academic needs of postgraduate students who encounter challenges in their academic journeys. These "companies" and individuals are easily accessible through internet searches (Aitchison and Mowbray 2015), personal referrals and networking schemes of contract cheating services. In some instances, these "companies" masquerade as legitimate consultancy businesses that offer non-essential services, such as language editing or proofreading, while offering contrary services from what they purport to offer. Others, however, are somewhat blatant about the services they offer. Their services would include, for example, writing proposals, problem statements, and literature reviews, assisting with data collection, data analysis and interpretation, writing the entire thesis or dissertation or some chapters (White 2016; Singh and Remenyi 2016), identification of research topics, writing of journal manuscripts and assistance with correction of examined research projects. Additionally, other providers of contract cheating services, through their advertisements, encourage students to buy theses and dissertations and save themselves time and distress associated with pursuing a master's or doctoral degree, while others claim to be a substitute of a less supportive supervisor (Kelly and Stevenson 2021). Thus, openly contravening institutional academic integrity policies.

Contract cheating has adverse effects on scholarly work, impacts traditional modes of learning, knowing and doing scholarship in higher education (Johnson et al. 2014). The outsourcing of research undermines the scholarship of master's and doctoral students as there are aspects of the scholarly process (i.e., "academic rites of passage") that postgraduate students ought to traverse for their intellectual development. For instance, activities, such as compiling the literature review, data collection and analysing results are often outsourced. Yet, these activities are important for master's and doctoral level studies and central to the academic

development of students enrolled for postgraduate studies (Singh and Remenyi 2016). Part of being a postgraduate student entails developing the skill to write academically for the scientific community and being able to communicate findings effectively. Unfortunately, important aspects of the research process, such as *writing*, are often outsourced to third parties. The ghost-writing industry offers services to write students' theses and dissertations, with some offering to write the entire thesis or dissertation (Singh and Remenyi 2016). These services should not be mistaken for language editing as they go beyond the mark of the editorial services. Writing constitutes an essential aspect of the research process in postgraduate students' journey and is the primary mechanism for credentialising the scholar and their knowledge (Aitchison and Mowbray 2015). Singh and Remenyi (2016) argue that having these key research activities, such as writing conducted by a third party, undermines the objectives of acquiring a degree. Moreover, having a thesis or dissertation written by a third party complicates the traditional notions of textual authorship and ownership (Aitchison and Mowbray 2015). This makes it difficult to attribute the work to the student. In some higher education institutions, intellectual property rights for research projects are owned by the student. However, in cases where contract cheating or third-party services are involved, it may prove to be difficult to determine the custodian or holder of the intellectual property rights emanating from the research project. This demonstrates that contract cheating could have far-reaching negative legal implications, not only for the postgraduate enrolees, but also for institutions of higher learning.

Contract cheating steals from students, the opportunity to develop intellectual capabilities and devalues academic offerings of institutions of higher learning. Eaton (2020, 21) cautions that "the contract cheating industry presents a direct and imminent threat to education systems at every level". There is a need for institutions of higher learning to strengthen their systems to address and combat contract cheating. To achieve this, however, there is also a need to first understand the underlying theoretical causes compelling master's and doctoral students to outsource their academic responsibilities. The next section provides a discussion of a theoretical framework underpinning the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Academic dishonesty and by extension contract cheating have so far been understood from the theoretical lenses deriving largely from criminology literature (DiPietro 2010). This is because academic dishonesty is regarded as a delinquent behaviour that is associated with academic offenses or contravening academic rules. The theory of neutralisation by Sykes and Matza (1957) which emerged from the field of criminology is used to understand the aetiology of contract cheating in this study. Sykes and Matza (1957) posit that delinquency is based on

unrecognised forms of defenses to crime through the justifications for wrong behaviour. The theory postulates that students are able to engage in acts of wrongdoing without damaging their self-concept, provided they can rationalise the acts and think of them as morally neutral as opposed to wrongdoing (DiPietro 2010). Students who engage in contract cheating justify their delinquent behaviour by embracing neutralisation strategies that deflect personal responsibility for their actions and shift blame to other persons or external circumstances (McQuillan and Zito 2011). The neutralisation theory converges with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. According to Freud, people use the *rationalisation* defense mechanism to justify unacceptable behvaiour with illogical reasoning to protect their self-esteem. The defense mechanism deters the individual from channeling the guilt from wrongdoing inward, but rather outward or to external factors. Sykes and Matza (1957) proposed strategies for neutralisation used by delinquents to justify wrongdoing. Students use these neutralising strategies to commit and cope with acts of academic dishonesty. The strategies include, (1) Denial of responsibility, (2) Denial of injury, (3) Denial of victim, and (4) Appeal to higher loyalties.

Denial of responsibility involves the offenders claiming that they are victims of circumstances and are forced into situations beyond their control. For example, masters' and doctoral students often lack support from supervisors. The lack of support could result in students viewing the academic system as unfair (McQuillan and Zito 2011), and thus consider themselves victims of the system. Students use this rationale to absolve themselves of wrongdoing and blame the academic system for creating a situation that deems contract cheating necessary to avoid negative outcomes such as academic failure. This rationale is of course flawed, as it seeks to portray contract cheating justifiable considering external circumstances that may potentially render the students' academic journey challenging. Contravening academic rules cannot be justifiable irrespective of external academic challenges – in other words, committing a crime cannot be morally justifiable despite one's supposedly impoverished or desperate circumstances.

Another neutralisation strategy of contract cheating is *denial of injury*, which involves the offenders characterising wrongdoing or contract cheating as a "victimless crime". In other words, students recognise that cheating is wrong but downplay their actions by claiming that they do not harm anyone. Therefore, justifying that it is acceptable to engage in contract cheating since it does not cause harm to anyone. While contract cheating does not have immediate harm, it could have long-term negative consequences since poorly trained or unskilled students will work with communities. Thus, posing a multitude of risks to communities and institutions in which graduates will work. *Denial of injury* has also been identified as a neutralisation strategy that underpins academic dishonesty and entails the

offender believing that the victim deserves the actions committed by the offender (Sykes and Matza 1957). For example, students may regard the lack of institutional support as unfair and use it as a pretext for engaging in contract cheating (i.e., the institution is unfair and deserves to be cheated). While the system may unfairly disadvantage students, this does not provide the basis for engaging in contract cheating as it violates the notions of scholarly work. Academic integrity cannot be traded off, is a non-negotiable principle in scholarly work and forms the crux of master's and doctoral learning process.

Students also use *Appeal to higher loyalties* as another neutralisation strategy to engage in contract cheating. Offenders neutralise wrongdoing by suggesting that their offence is for the greater good (Meng et al. 2014). For instance, students could resort to contract cheating when the potential benefits of cheating exceed those derived from ethical scholarship (McQuillan and Zito 2011). This may include for example, students cheating to obtain a qualification which will help them secure a permeant employment or promotion. Master's and doctoral qualifications increase employment opportunities for students and earn them prestige in the employment market. However, adhering to ethical scholarship is necessary to protect the very prestige of these qualifications. Curbing contract cheating, therefore, requires a focus on de-neutralising the reasons for engaging in academic dishonesty and emphasising the repercussions of unethical conduct to society, while also encouraging master's and doctoral students to assume personal responsibility for their studies (DiPietro 2010).

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO CONTRACT CHEATING AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS DURING THE WRITING OF THESES AND DISSERTATIONS

A constellation of academic and non-academic factors contribute to contract cheating among postgraduate students. These factors are discussed below.

Time management

Often students pursuing master's and doctoral studies are mature, have competing responsibilities such as family and work. An attempt to strike a balance between work and family responsibilities is not always easy and could even be more difficult when one is pursuing postgraduate studies. Kelly and Stevenson (2021) state that some of the challenges faced by postgraduate students are balancing work and personal life, and having enough time dedicated to research and writing. Kelly and Stevenson (2021) add that "companies" offering contract cheating services encourage students to save themselves from suffering academically and instead, dedicate their time to family and work responsibilities while they ["the companies"]

write the thesis or dissertation for students. Thus, using students' vulnerabilities to make a profit.

Limited research skills

Conducting research at the postgraduate level requires students to have the skills to conceptualise the research project from start to completion. This means that students have to be highly skilled and competent in performing key research activities. Tomar (2016) argues that institutions of higher learning admit postgraduate students who lack the required skills to conduct independent research. As a result, these students consider using contract cheating services. In their study on contract cheating in Chinese universities, Wang and Xu (2021) found that students who demonstrated poor research skills such as literature citation were most likely to use contract cheating services. Additionally, Tomar (2016) highlights that postgraduate students with a limited understanding of the academic language used to write a thesis or dissertation (often English) are likely to engage in contract cheating. This limitation, arguably, has sustained the ghost-writing industry and contributed in making it a somewhat acceptable practice in academic and non-academic fields. Other universities accept this practice and award degrees for the work based on ghost-written theses or dissertations (Singh and Remenyi 2016). Another category of students likely to resort to contract cheating are those who do not master the research methodology and processes to follow (Tomar 2016). Understanding the research process takes time, the same goes for mastering essential research skills such as compiling a literature review or analysing data. Hence, students tend to feel discouraged and see contract cheating as an alternative way to navigate the path towards making progress in their studies.

Lack of institutional academic support

Master's and doctoral students do not always have the required academic support from the institutions where they are enrolled. Research revealed that there is insufficient institutional support to assist postgraduate students develop research skills (e.g., writing programmes) (Aitchison and Mowbray 2015). This includes not only research training programmes for postgraduate students, but also the absence or limited support afforded to students by supervisors (Grossman 2016). Student supervision is an important cornerstone of master's and doctoral students' academic success. However, supervisory support is not always forthcoming. According to Takrimi, Khojasteh Mehr, and Eaton (2023), postgraduate supervisors lack time to provide quality supervision to students. Supervisors are usually overburdened with supervisory load, teaching responsibilities, administrative duties, and pressure to publish their own research work. Thus, making it difficult to dedicate time to their students. Consequently,

this puts students under increasing pressure and encourages them to seek alternative sources of support from third parties. In some instances, students may seek a non-official "co-supervisor" and pay them for their services. Complementary to this, contract cheating "companies" often claim that their role is to fill the supervision void and provide support where supervisors are failing (Aitchison and Mowbray 2015). Thus, highlighting the importance of adequate supervision support for postgraduate students.

Limited support for academic staff/supervisors

A study conducted among doctoral supervisors in South African universities revealed that supervisors are prone to working under less optimal conditions, coupled with an increase in student numbers, demands for accountability and pressure to produce graduates (Mouton, Boshoff, and James 2015). Mouton et al. (2015) add that these circumstances have led to supervision becoming a challenge and highly stressful exercise. When supervisors work under intense and unfavourable conditions, there is a likelihood that some of their supervision duties could be neglected. In turn, this could open the door for students to seek additional help from third parties. Lack of time for supervision is another challenge facing supervisors. Singh and Remenyi (2016) argue that in some universities, supervisors do not have sufficient time to know their students' work. This makes it difficult for supervisors to differentiate between students' work and research written by someone (Singh and Remenyi 2016). The lack of institutional support for supervisors is multidimensional. Academics who do not have security of tenure in their employment have been reported to render contract cheating services or work for contract cheating "companies" (Eaton 2020). According to Eaton (2020), these academics do not aspire to do contract cheating work but instead, render these services because they are underemployed and struggle to make ends meet.

Contract cheating is partly attributed to internal institutional factors. Therefore, instead of viewing the problem through distal lenses, the institutions of higher learning need to recognise their contributory role in the challenge of contract cheating among postgraduate students. Further, these institutions need to invest in staff and student support initiatives to promote ethical scholarship at the postgraduate level to minimise opportunities for contract cheating. This, however, will require an integration of ethics education as a core component of the postgraduate curriculum. A particular focus, therefore, should be on educating students on the importance of upholding the ethos of academic integrity through de-neutralising contract cheating strategies and vigorously de-normalising the practice.

RAMIFICATIONS OF CONTRACT CHEATING

Contract cheating is the foundation upon which incompetency, unethical conduct and corruption are nurtured. Through contract cheating, unacceptable behaviour is neutralised to gain academic prestige. Thus, undermining conventional rules that govern institutions of higher learning. Ahsan et al. (2022) argue that contract cheating threatens the integrity of institutional assessments, puts the reputation of institutions and students at risk, and weakens the credibility of both parties.

The academic integrity of master's and doctoral research has traditionally been the foundation of postgraduate education (White 2016), however, outsourcing research at postgraduate level causes significant harm to the process of becoming a competent and qualified graduate. For instance, contract cheating affects the relationship between the student and the supervisor, undermines the process of learning, and contributes to poor experience of students' postgraduate scholarship (Aitchison and Mowbray 2015). In turn, this may compel the student to discontinue or drop out of the programme and thus result in a waste of state's resources.

Contract cheating significantly erodes public confidence in the quality of the education system and could lead to potential dangers if students did not complete their studies honestly (Kelly and Stevenson 2021). For instance, incompetent students are likely to be employed in key or strategic positions based on their level of qualifications, while lacking the requisite skills or knowledge to perform on the job. Another repercussion of engaging in contract cheating is the possibility of blackmail. Eaton (2020) notes an increase in cases of blackmail by contract cheating "companies". According to Yorke, Sefcik and Veeran-Colton (2022), contract cheating "companies" may threaten to report students for academic misconduct if they do not continue to pay money for their services. In the same way, academics working for contract cheating "companies" may be threatened or reported to employers if they attempt to leave the "company" (Eaton 2020). This means that academics offering contract cheating services run the risk of facing disciplinary hearings, loss of employment and reputational damage to their careers. Furthermore, both students and academics engaged in contract cheating services may face criminal consequences subject to regional or country legislation (Eaton 2020).

Research has a socioeconomic value. For example, research findings, directly or otherwise, can contribute towards addressing a pressing socioeconomic issue. Contract cheating, however, undermines this value, since the research produced may neither be of quality nor advance any scientific knowledge. Such practice could result in a waste of research funds. Several higher education systems globally, have reported a notable decline in funding in higher education (Usher 2021; Pruvot, Estermann, and Kupriyanova 2021; Mtshweni 2022). Hence, a lack of quality and impactful research in master's and doctoral studies may exacerbate funding

issues in institutions of higher learning and minimise institutional research capacities. Therefore, warranting a need for upholding ethical scholarship.

Ethical scholarship is a fundamental aspect of postgraduate studies. While ethical scholarship has been recognised to play an imperative role in postgraduate studies, research indicates that adhering to ethical conduct in postgraduate education is a challenge because students often have minimal exposure to ethics education, while also lacking adequate supervision to help them distinguish between the rights and wrongs of the research process (Remenyi 1998). Remenyi (1998) further highlights that the public places confidence in postgraduate students during the research process. This means that master's and doctoral students are not only accountable to their academic institutions but also to the wider public and scientific community. Therefore, it is essential that students understand the responsibility they carry in the research process. "An important goal of postgraduate education is for students to develop an internal set of ethical standards that will guide them throughout their professional careers" (Deutch 1996, 56). Thus, ethical scholarship is important for postgraduate students because it prepares them to become capable professionals who can conduct research that is ethically sound (Folse 1991). This means that graduateness at master's and doctoral studies needs to reflect among others, an ingrained doctrine of ethics and a scholarship that is fully grounded in principles of ethical research.

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES TO CURB CONTRACT CHEATING AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Contract cheating is a violation of the rules of academic integrity and serves as an anti-intellectualism agenda that deprecates the value of education. Hence, there is a need to put in place multi-intervention strategies to curb this practice in the higher education sector globally.

There are several ways to strengthen and enforce academic integrity, and most importantly, to curb contract cheating among postgraduate students enrolled for master's and doctoral studies. *First*, there is a need to support postgraduate students throughout their academic journeys to ensure they do not feel neglected. Ahsan et al. (2022) posit that students should be made aware of all institutional support services and be encouraged to make use of them. Institutional support services may include, for example, academic writing workshops, research seminars, and peer writing groups. These services should be compulsory to ensure attendance. Institutional support services such as peer writing groups help students with networking, establishing peer support structures, crafting their writing skills and enhancing a sense of belonging towards the scholarly community (Aitchison 2009; Kelly and Stevenson 2021). These support structures may also help students to learn from one another instead of

seeking support from contract cheating "companies".

Second, the quality of student supervision is key to the academic success of postgraduate students. Hence, academics should strive to provide effective supervision to students. Effective supervision has been reported to detract students from seeking assistance from contract cheating services (Ahsan et al. 2022). Singh and Remenyi (2016) argue that the academic integrity of a thesis or dissertation is based on adequate supervision. According to the scholars, a thesis or dissertation should be co-created by the student and supervisor, with the student taking the lead while the supervisor monitors the process (Singh and Remenyi 2016). Effective supervision entails but is not limited to encouraging regular progress and frequent supervision meetings, having confidence in students' abilities, providing positive reinforcement, providing well-directed feedback in writing (Mainhard 2009; Kelly and Stevenson 2021), giving students a platform to demonstrate their capabilities, encouraging independent thinking, and teaching them to embrace feedback constructively. Supervisors should also commit to their supervision responsibilities, such as meeting deadlines and showing up for meetings. These commitments are important because they guarantee support to students and could avert feelings of neglect in the supervision process.

Third, supervisors should be accorded adequate support by their institutions. Often, supervisors are overburdened with many postgraduate students to supervise. For example, a study on supervision in African universities revealed that supervisors are overloaded with supervision responsibilities and thus, do not give their students sufficient support in the process (Bacwayo, Nampala, and Oteyo 2017). Supervision capacity challenges in African universities are due to a shortage of academic staff, which creates an imbalance between student and supervisor ratio (Callaghan 2018; Bacwayo et al. 2017). Furthermore, supervisors tend to be swamped with teaching and administrative work, therefore, making it difficult for them to attend to students and leaving them feeling neglected (Bacwayo et al. 2017). According to Roets (2016, 1), "supervisors find themselves under immense pressure to produce graduates as a result of the demands and expectations from their institutions, governments, students, their profession and industry demands". This suggests a need to revise institutional policy frameworks to reflect fair work allocation and supervision quotas.

Another issue that contributes to supervision challenges is the lack of necessary skills required to carry out the supervisory work. For instance, Callaghan (2018) reports that lack of supervision skills worsens the academic experience for postgraduate students. In response to this, Roets (2016) suggests the need for training to provide effective supervision. This implies the need for higher learning institutions to offer continuous professional development training on supervision skills. Support provided to supervisors by institutions should be multi-

dimensional. As indicated earlier, academics tend to engage in contract cheating due to underemployment and insecure employment often associated with low wages. Eaton (2020) claims that the contract cheating industry stands to lose highly qualified suppliers if underemployed academics secure permanent employment. To curb contract cheating, the institutions of higher learning need to revise employment policies and where possible, increase the security of tenure for academics employed on a contract basis.

Fourth, it is important to support postgraduate students in the research process and educate them about acceptable and non-acceptable practices. According to Williamson (2019), there is a need for institutions of higher learning to introduce compulsory modules on academic integrity to reduce contract cheating. That is, students should be taught and assessed on what constitutes academic dishonesty and ethical scholarship – A particular focus should be on de-neutralising reasons for engaging in contract cheating. Additionally, students, through the support of supervisors, should familiarise themselves with policies and guidelines of acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour, especially during the research process.

Fifth, one of the reasons for conducting a thesis or dissertation defence (also known as *Viva Voce*) is to allow students to demonstrate that they understand their study and research focus area. It is a process whereby the academic qualities of students are assessed and where they showcase their skills (van der Heide, Rufas, and Supper 2016). However, in the era characterised by a rise in contract cheating, thesis or dissertation defence could have multiple roles, such as strengthening academic integrity and ascertaining whether the work submitted was done by the student. Williamson (2019) emphasises that a thesis or dissertation defence can be designed to reduce the chances of contract cheating and increase opportunities for students to showcase an understanding of their work.

Sixth, since contract cheating can also take place outside the learning context, it is therefore unrealistic to expect institutions to curb this practice without additional support from governments. Williamson (2019) states that governments could assist institutions of higher learning to uphold academic integrity by considering the criminalisation of contract cheating. Countries, such as New Zealand and Australia have enacted legislation that criminalises contract cheating. Under this legislation (in New Zealand and Australia), it is illegal to offer contract cheating services and to advertise services relating to contract cheating (Parliament of Australia 2020; Williamson 2019). Williamson (2019) highlights that criminalisation of contract cheating is important as it could help root out the practice through large amounts of fines imposed on those who offer these services. Furthermore, academics who offer these services should be subjected to disciplinary action (Eaton 2020), and where possible, pay fines for misconduct.

Last, higher education is an integrated system consisting of multiple stakeholders and several accreditation and quality assurance bodies. Quality assurance bodies have to take the lead in addressing contract cheating (Eaton and Christensen Hughes 2022). Eaton and Christensen Hughes (2022) argue that it is essential that quality assurance bodies coordinate their efforts against contract cheating. This could include, for example, developing a national framework for curbing contract cheating and lobbying for a legislation that criminalises this practice.

Studies have demonstrated a consensus that contract cheating undermines academic integrity and ethical scholarship among master's and doctoral studies (Blum 2009; Eaton and Christensen Hughes 2022; Singh and Remenyi 2016; Kelly and Stevenson 2021). Further, studies have shown that contract cheating could erode trust in academic qualifications and the institutions of higher learning (Aitchison and Mowbray 2015; Kelly and Stevenson 2021). Additionally, research has also highlighted the complexity of contract cheating and emphasised a need for an integrated approach to eradicate the practice (Parnther 2022). Moreover, studies have emphasised a need to ban the solicitation and advertisements of contract cheating, and to educate students about the potential dangers associated with the practice (Williamson 2019; Parnther 2022; Draper 2022).

The global higher education system is composite and largely interconnected. Therefore, efforts to eradicate contract cheating among master's and doctoral students through legislation and other means could have a positive impact nationally or regionally. However, these efforts may not translate into any long-term benefits unless there is a multi-national strategy and commitment to amend multi-national legislation through mutual agreements. Hence, an international policy framework on contract cheating is required to eradicate the practice. Such a framework could have a broader impact and lead to a multi-institutional re-configuration of ethics education in postgraduate studies globally.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study brings to attention, a narrowly researched phenomenon of contract cheating among postgraduate students and highlights the essential role of ethical scholarship. The study, therefore, is centred on ethical scholarship and can be regarded as a frame of reference for understanding contract cheating and addressing challenges of academic integrity among postgraduate students – especially in contexts where there is a lack of awareness and paucity of research on the phenomenon of contract cheating among postgraduate students. Hence, supervisors, academic administrators, quality assurance bodies, and governments can use the findings of this study to understand issues of academic integrity in postgraduate studies,

formulate academic integrity policies and plan intervention strategies for curbing contract cheating. Thus, the study is crucial because it advances the higher education theory and academic development through advancing ethical scholarship, especially during post-pandemic periods when higher education institutions are radically transforming to adopt blended learning approaches and tussling various threats to academic integrity such as artificial intelligence technologies.

CONCLUSION

Contract cheating among postgraduate students is a global challenge. This study has demonstrated the depth of this issue to students, scholars, accreditation bodies, institutions of higher learning and governments. Based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that unless there is a concerted effort from various higher education stakeholders to eradicate contract cheating, the practice will mushroom, overshadow, and diminish academic integrity, and standards of higher education institutions. Hence, higher education stakeholders are implored to take a stance against this unscholarly practice to protect academic scholarship for the betterment of society through quality education.

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