Contract Cheating: A Guide for Students

Introduction

All students are expected to undertake their studies with honestly and in adherence to the University’s policy on Academic Integrity. The behaviour of the vast majority of the University’s students is exemplary.

Contract Cheating is form of cheating where a student submits work to a higher education provider for assessment, where they have used one or more of a range of services provided by a third party, and such input is not permitted.

To deal with unacceptable behaviour the University has a Student Discipline Policy and Procedures that apply to all students of the University irrespective of their mode or place of study.

The University will not accept any form of Contract Cheating, and the University Discipline Committee (UDC) has the authority to impose a number of sanctions from voiding the particular course to expelling the student from the University. However, the University will also seek to support students who self-report themselves for admitting to making an error of judgement.

Student Expectations

Students are expected to not post information about their assessment on any form of social media, nor discuss their assessment with third party organisations, especially contract cheating service, commonly known as “essay mills”. Students who are found to have done so will be subject to the University disciplinary procedures.

Study Skills Support

The University offers a wide range of skills development opportunities on campus, and online. These opportunities can help you develop your digital, information literacy, IT, and study skills - to help you to work, research and study more effectively and to support your continuing professional development. There is a lot of support available to all members of Heriot Watt University for developing the academic skills needed to succeed at university and beyond.

Contract Cheating

By definition Contract Cheating applies to students who have actively engaged/hired or employed i.e. – contracted – someone else to do some part of their credit-bearing academic work for them, allowing the student to deliberately pass the work off as their own. The contract element usually involves some sort of financial exchange, but this is not a requirement to be considered as a form of contract cheating.
It is acknowledged that students may plagiarise unintentionally or even purposefully through making poor decisions under stress. However, a 'contract' follows a procurement process in which the student has made a decision to outsource coursework and enter in a contract, normally financial. This is purposeful, planned, and deliberate and, for the University Discipline Committee (UDC), evidenced by engagement in the contract.

The fundamental distinguishing features of contract cheating is that a student has deliberately and in a premeditated manner employed someone else to prepare the assessed work they have submitted, which can be immediately recognised as of sufficient significance that it must be dealt with by applying the most severe penalty. In the particular case of contract cheating, a student has consciously and deliberately commissioned someone to do their work for them.

Contract cheating includes, but not limited to, presenting the work of third parties as their own, whether it comes from ghost writers, essay mills, downloading from websites, proof-readers, family, friends, academic tutors, or “tutorial services”.

Inaccurate Student Perceptions

Students may believe that Contract Cheating is a minor or small issue and that they can present original pieces of assessed work that will not be detected by plagiarism software, not identifiable as being the work of anyone other than that of the students, and that the underlaying metadata will not compromise your submission. None of these statements are guaranteed to prevent detection of contract cheating, and students should not be fooled or deceived by claims of such organisations or individuals that there is no risk to them for contracting with the third party to provide a piece of academic work.

Consequences of Contract Cheating

Student who are caught cheating will be penalised under the University’s Student Discipline Policy and Procedures. The University Discipline Committee (UDC) has the authority to impose a number of sanctions from voiding the particular course to expelling the student from the University.

*Real-Life Example*

An Honours student who caught for contract cheating said, after receipt of their outcome letter, where their dissertation (60 credits) and two additional courses (2 x 15 credits) were voided by the University Disciplinary Committee, therefore resulting in them not being awarded their expected degree:

“That is a lot harsher than I thought …I feel so guilty, stupid, sad and broken and unforgiven for not thinking this through and now I am losing a whole degree because of one mistake. I hope no other student thinks of doing this.”

However, this is not the only consequence that the students should be aware of. There is a growing trend for organisations or individuals to extort further financial payment from the student (i.e. blackmailing the student into handing over more
money). Such organisations or individuals will indicate that if you do not pay the amount required, they will inform your University (regardless of whether you are an existing or graduating student) or your employer of your prior contract with them (irrespective of whether you actually used that material or not). Such “legacy for life” blackmails may continue indefinitely.

What to do if you are being blackmailed

The University is here to help students who are victims of blackmailing in respect to contract cheating. The University does not wish to see any student victimised in this way, regardless of the fact that the student has contracted to cheat in their assessed work. Students in such situations are strongly advised to contact either the University Student Conduct Office (conduct@hw.ac.uk) or the Student Advice Hub advice.hub@hw.ac.uk as soon as possible. The Student Advice Hub and the University will provide support to you so that you are no longer victimised.

Whilst informing the University that you have committed an academic offence will result in a disciplinary investigation, and an academic penalty is likely to be applied, this is preferable to having to continually pay the blackmailer for your offence.

Penalties

The University will not accept any form of Contract Cheating.

When the University is able to identify that this has happened in respect of work submitted for credit, it is compelled to apply the most severe penalty available.

All students are forewarned that the University Discipline Committee (UDC) will seek to impose the severest of penalties where, based on the balance of probability, there is appropriate evidence presented of Contract Cheating, however undertaken.

That is, the outcome may lead to the expulsion of the student from the University.

First Offence and Mitigating Circumstances

The University, however, does not wish to have to expel any student for contract cheating, though that is the ultimate sanction.

The University may allow, where it is the students’ first offense (subject to the below), or there are mitigating circumstances presented, and where the University Discipline Committee are satisfied that a more lenient penalty can be applied whilst upholding the academic integrity of the University, to impose a reduced penalty.

Such leniency will only be applied in the first offence, and where the student demonstrates that they are remorseful and willing to correct their offence with appropriate academic support and training, so that they do not feel that they have to repeat the offence again.

The University will consider a first offence on a case-by-case basis, and determine the outcome based on the severity of the cheating offence.
First offences leniency will not be accepted for final year students or students undertaking a postgraduate programme.

**Whistleblowing**

Students may be approached by organisations or individuals with promises that they can provide students with original pieces of assessed work that will not be detected by plagiarism software, not identifiable as being the work of anyone other than that of the students, and that the underlaying metadata will not compromise your submission. None of these statements are guaranteed to prevent detection of contract cheating.

Where a student is approached by an organisation or individual to provide such services, the student should contact the University Student Conduct Office (conduct@hw.ac.uk) or the Student Advice Hub advice.hub@hw.ac.uk.

Likewise, if students are aware that other students have submitted work that is not genuine, they should feel confident to report this to the University Student Conduct Office (conduct@hw.ac.uk) or the Student Advice Hub advice.hub@hw.ac.uk.

Students who do so will be treated in the strictest of confidence and will only be asked to assist in the University’s investigations by providing information where required. Students will not be penalised for bring such matters to the University’s attention, unless this is done with malice intentions.

Any form of Bullying or Harassment by another student, or member of staff, for reporting the matter to the University will not be tolerated, and will be investigated under the University’s appliable disciplinary procedures (for staff or students)

**Students who engage in contract cheating**

Any student (regardless of their level of study) who is found to have provided another student with assessed work, or support an organisation or individual in supply such work, in return for a contractual renumeration (however determined) will be investigated under the University disciplinary procedures. The UDC will seek to impose the maximum penalty available in such circumstances. That is, expulsion from the University.