

SCCJR Briefing Paper

Criminal grades: knowledge production, vulnerability, and organised cheating

Richard Kjellgren, University of Stirling

Dr Niall Hamilton-Smith, University of Stirling

Dr Alistair Fraser, University of Glasgow

Introduction

When a student outsources the completion of their assessments to a third-party, with the intention of submitting it as their own work, they are engaging in what has previously been defined as ‘contract cheating’ (Clarke and Lancaster 2006). In its essence, contract cheating involves a relationship between at least three actors: a student, their university, and the third-party completing the assignment (Draper and Newton 2017). Contract cheating as such does not necessarily entail a monetary transaction, and it is plausible that the majority of contract cheating occurs more informally through students’ personal networks (Bretag et al. 2018). Our research, however, is largely focused upon the commercial online market, rather than informal mechanisms of outsourcing, since the former may pose more risks to students engaging in contract cheating.

Contract cheating is frequently reported as being an increasing problem faced by higher education institutions across the UK (Newton 2018). Despite limited evidence on the extent to which contract cheating occurs, it is nevertheless clear that the commercial contract cheating market has proliferated online (Lancaster 2019a; Lancaster 2019b). Due to the unregulated contexts in which these transactions occur, students engaging with essay mills and other contract cheating service providers expose themselves to risks by purchasing assignments online (Yorke et al. 2020). It has previously been reported that students have been blackmailed by service providers, who have threatened to reveal their misconduct to universities unless further payments are made (Bailey 2020; Ross 2018). The process of being investigated for contract cheating and academic misconduct has itself been reported as being traumatic for students (Pitt et al. 2020), and being threatened with blackmail may also contribute to intensified anxiety. It is crucial to improve our understanding and responses to contract cheating and student vulnerability, not only from a point of view of academic integrity, but also due to the impact these issues can have upon student wellbeing.

Methods

Our research aimed to explore the online market for contract cheating, and the experiences of contract cheating and student exploitation within higher education institutions in Scotland. This research was designed to scope out the current evidence base, explore potential data sources, and serve as the starting point for future inquiries into contract cheating and student exploitation within Scotland. We first conducted a comprehensive literature review on contract cheating, student vulnerability, and academic misconduct. The findings and themes identified from the literature review informed our interview questions, which we used in semi-structured interviews with senior academics ($n = 5$) responsible for, or with comprehensive experience of, academic integrity at three Scottish universities. The qualitative data were subjected to a thematic analysis, and to better understand the online dimension of contract cheating, we also used web scraping and quantitative text analysis. The online data consisted of essay mill websites ($n = 100$), Gumtree adverts ($n = 100$), and Fiverr profiles ($n = 100$). Gumtree is a popular online classified in the UK, in which amongst other things, advertisements for contract cheating services are posted. Fiverr is a micro-outsourcing platform for various ‘gigs’ and makes up an important part of connecting students with contract cheating service providers. Our final analysis involved the triangulation of all data sources, and the themes identified were discussed in relation to one another. More details about the methods, literature review and, as well as a more comprehensive account of the findings can be found in the full report¹.

Findings

¹ Kjellgren, R., Hamilton-Smith, N. and Fraser, A. (2021) *Criminal Grades: knowledge production, vulnerability and organised cheating*. SCCJR Research Report.

In other cases of contract cheating, often the [faculty] are suspicious because the student's either not engaged with their supervisor or they've produced something which is publication standard when, you know, other things that they've written have been barely scraping a pass grade, and then suddenly produced this beautiful, polished piece of prose that the school just think, "there's no way that that student could ever produce work of that quality".
(Respondent 4, University 3)

Many of our findings corresponded well with the pre-existing international literature on contract cheating. It is clear, from both our qualitative and online data, that contract cheating poses a serious threat to both academic integrity and students themselves. Indeed, our findings highlight the enduring nature of contract cheating, with some of our respondents having experienced it long before the term was originally coined. Similarly, our findings also suggest contract cheating services are widely available and easily accessible. Whilst it is impossible to gauge the true extent of contract cheating – including both commercial and informal forms of outsourcing of

assignments – instances of contract cheating are occurring at the institutions examined in this research. However, due to the illicit and hidden nature of contract cheating, and that the assignments procured from service providers are designed to evade detection, the number of 'confirmed' or 'proven' cases remain few. Suspected cases of contract cheating were common, but, as highlighted by our respondents, proving contract cheating to have occurred is a significant challenge, and many of the proven cases we discussed relied on students' admitting to having purchased an assignment. We identified very few cases of student extortion and blackmail; these were confined to one institution, and the precise circumstances in which this had occurred is less clear. What is clear, however, is that students expose themselves to risks by engaging in contract cheating.

Our respondents also highlighted some complex decision-making processes and intertwined factors contributing to the propensity of students to engage in contract cheating, or more widely, academic misconduct. Stress and pressure were perceived as driving students to engage in academic misconduct, and contract cheating is one possible avenue to opt out of the learning process by completely outsourcing the production of assignments and coursework. In addition to this, a lack of sufficient English skills and key academic skills were also outlined as significant contributors. International students, and students with English as a second language, may experience particular forms of stress related to either cultural, familial or economic pressure, in addition to the challenges associated with doing a degree in a second language. Domestic students with other commitments outwith their education were also perceived as vulnerable to engage in different forms of academic misconduct, whilst international students were considered particularly vulnerable to engage in plagiarism, or other behaviours bordering to contract cheating. Some very serious mental health issues were disclosed to have affected students involved in academic misconduct, and student wellbeing must thus be at the centre of any responses to academic integrity.

On a more systemic level, the globalisation and commercialisation of higher education were seen as leading to larger international student bodies, putting additional pressures upon student learning and support services. Similarly, concerns were also expressed that academic expectations and good academic practice were not communicated effectively, or that entry or language requirements may be too low for certain degrees.

There was also a recognition that technology is playing an increasingly important role in mutating more traditional forms of academic misconduct, such as plagiarism. Some quite innovative approaches involving translation software and plagiarism were highlighted as a recent issue, or students writing assignments in their native language to then have them automatically translated into English and edited by a professional proofreader. Concerns were also raised about a blurring of the lines between proofreading and essay mill services, especially as the latter tend to portray themselves as professional student services, rather than in fact facilitating contract cheating.

In the context of the diffusion of contract cheating services, and the proliferation of the online market, legislation has been proposed to criminalise the advertisement of contract cheating services. There are currently two bills being considered in England and Wales, the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill², and the Higher Education Cheating Services Prohibition Bill³. Whilst it is currently, at the moment of writing, unclear precisely which bills will be accepted into legislation, and whether devolved governments of the UK will seek to introduce similar bills, there is little doubt, however, that such bills will be of more symbolic than instrumental value: they will send a clear message to students about the gravity of contract cheating; yet, considering how contract cheating companies tend to operate in other jurisdictions, and that it is potentially more common for students to outsource their assignments informally and without involving financial transactions, it is conceivable that such legislation will do very little to actually reduce contract cheating.

From the online research, it could be observed that the market prerogatives, and the strategies used to attract students, were differing and dependent upon the type of service provider in question. There is a somewhat covert element associated with contract cheating service providers: for instance, links could be established through shared IP addresses or textual similarity between essay mills posing as independent companies (see Figure 1 below). In fact, 28% of the essay mill websites sampled were connected in one way or another to another essay mill in the sample. It appears that one network may be operating several contract cheating websites – or virtual storefronts – to attract students from different disciplines and localities. Some websites are using deceptive or outright fraudulent marketing techniques, such as fake TrustPilot ratings, or displaying fake popular media coverage (such as being featured in *Forbes*).

Essay Mills: Networks

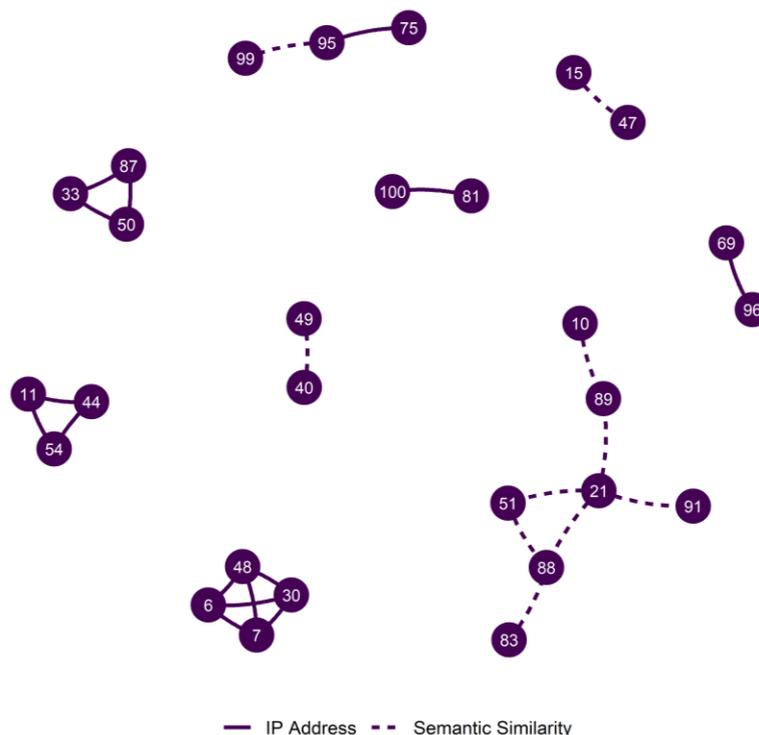
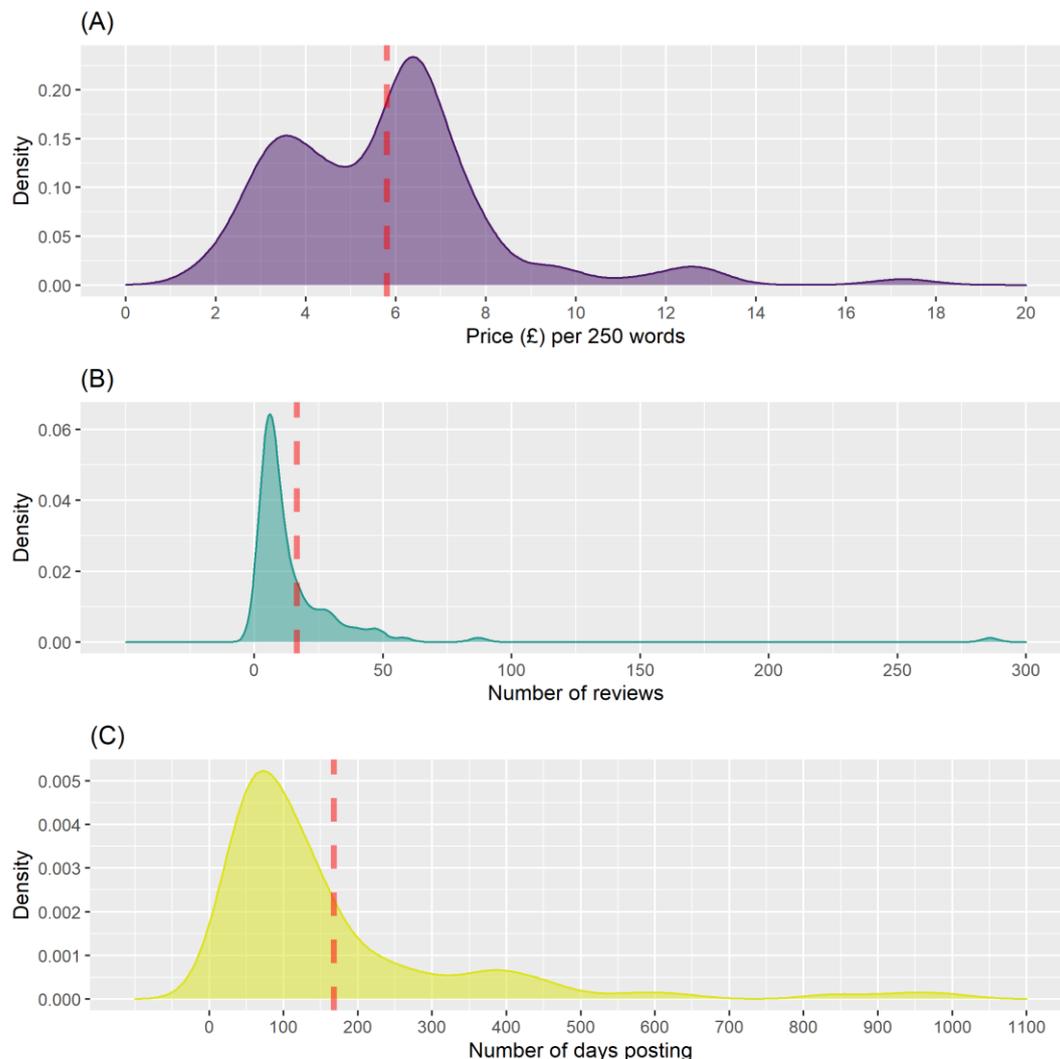


Figure 1. Networks amongst essay mills within the sample. Ties are constructed based on either semantic similarity (e.g. the same block of text on different websites) or sharing the same IP address.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/essay-mills-to-be-banned-under-plans-to-reform-post-16-education>

³ <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/higher-education-cheating-services-prohibition-bill-hl/>

Similar findings could also be observed for the sample of Fiverr gigs and the sample of Gumtree adverts. With regards to the former, the networks observed were almost exclusively Pakistani, and many of the advertised gigs had only been operating for a very short period of time, whereas writers from the minority world (e.g. the US and Canada) often had a large number of reviews and had been advertising gigs for several years (See Figure 2 below). Here, it is important to note that some of the observed essay mills or independent writers appear more transient in nature, and have a less prominent online presence, in comparison to more well-established essay mills, and these are perhaps



the companies and individuals that could potentially offer more high-risk service provision within the contract cheating market. This is perhaps particularly concerning with essay mills using not only deceptive but outright false marketing prerogatives.

Figure 2. Characteristics of Fiverr profiles ($n = 100$). (A) shows the distribution of price, (B) the number of reviews for each profile, and (C) the number of days in which the profiles have been active.

Using the services of our qualified specialists does not violate the academic **integrity** of any school or college. The materials you get from us are educational resources that can help you do homework easier and faster.
(Essay Mill 31)

There were relatively few overlaps in terms of how the different types of service providers communicate and advertise their services. The most prominent features, or keywords, are shown in Figure 3; the left column simply shows the term frequency (TF), and the right column shows the term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF). In short, the TF shows us how commonly a word is used, whereas the TF-IDF provides a measure of the relative importance of a word. The top 25 features of each type of service

provider are shown below in Figure 3. Our analysis, which involved a keyword-in-context analysis of these words, suggests these different type of actors frame their services differently. Essay mills tend to use language to highlight their professionalism, timeliness, and affordability, they frequently use

Comparison of top features

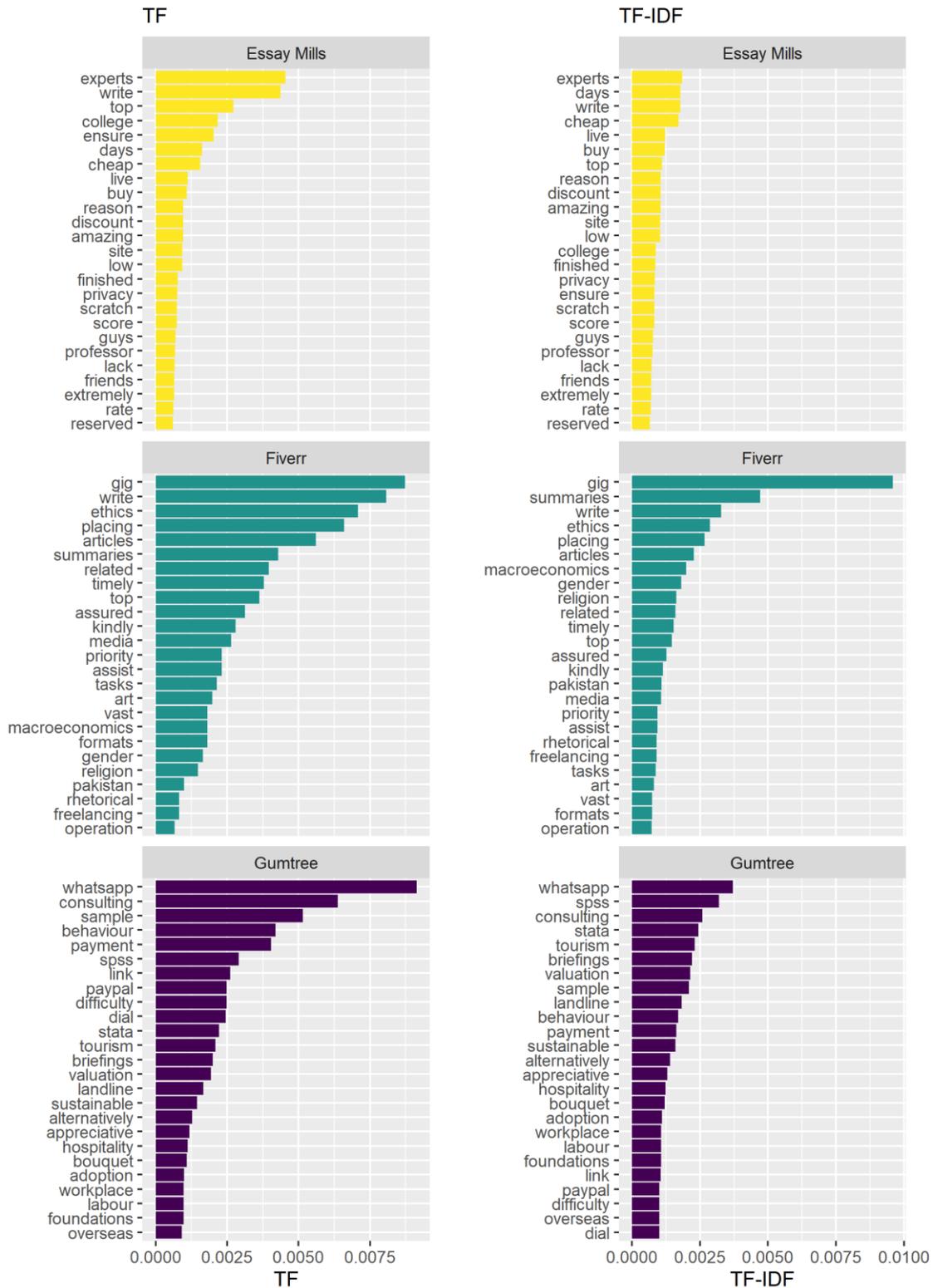


Figure 3. Comparison of top textual features of the three different types of online platforms (essay mill websites, Fiverr profiles, and Gumtree adverts). The left column is showing term frequencies and the right column term frequencies-inverse document frequencies (weighted).

emotional cues (e.g. stress, anxiety, pressure) to create a sense of empathy and justification for using their services. Similarly, they were also the only observed group that quite explicitly (and falsely) claimed their services are *not* to be considered cheating and that using their services will *not* violate academic misconduct policies. Fiverr profiles, on the other hand, are less formal in nature and tend to put more emphasis on the type of services they are offering, such as research summaries, articles and essays, or otherwise make specific references to the disciplines they are catering to. The adverts at Gumtree consisted of a mixture of what appeared to be essay mills and independent ghostwriters. Similar to Fiverr, they were also more informal and appeared more transient compared to some of the more established essay mills, with a strong online presence.

Implications

In terms of improving our responses to contract cheating and student vulnerability, there is a need for a more holistic approach involving partnership working across institutions, between students and educators, and between student support services and academic misconduct offices. Students need clear guidance on what constitutes contract cheating, and that engaging in it poses serious risks, both for their academic futures, but also in terms of potential blackmail or extortion. Whilst proposed legal changes may be of symbolic value to demonstrate the seriousness of the issue, the transnational and transient nature means that such laws are likely to have limited instrumental value. There is a need to consider how assignments can be designed to reduce opportunities for outsourcing, and educators must also be made aware of the potential indicators of contract cheating in student submissions. Effectively communicating academic expectations and instilling good academic practice must occur at an early stage. Most importantly, students involved in academic integrity processes may experience a significant amount of stress and anxiety, and it is crucial to create a supportive and fair process.

Limitations and future research

This research was exploratory in nature and only involved small samples of respondents and online data, and it is not possible to estimate the extent of contract cheating and student exploitation within Scotland from our data. One of the greatest limitations of this research is that it did not involve any interviews with students who have experiences of contract cheating or student exploitation. Given the severe impact that being suspected or discovered to have engaged in academic misconduct can have upon students – especially if they are under significant pressure – there is a dire need to explore student perspectives of these issues, and particularly those with lived experience of engaging in contract cheating and/or having been subjected to extortion or blackmail. On an institutional level, there is also a need to better capture data related to suspected and confirmed cases of contract cheating, and ideally, to probe deeper into the mechanisms behind the decision-making processes of students involved in academic misconduct. Future research would benefit from more qualitative research on student experiences of these issues, in order to better understand the underlying processes of engaging in academic misconduct, and the impact academic integrity processes can have upon their lives. There is also a need to systematically collate data – both qualitative and quantitative – from Scottish universities on suspected or confirmed contract cheating cases reported to misconduct offices, to better understand the scale and nature of these issues.

References

Bailey, J. (2020) *7 Ways the Contract Cheating Industry is Exploitative*. Copy Licensing Agency. Available: <https://www.cla.co.uk/blog/higher-education/seven-ways-the-contract-cheating-industry-is-exploitative> [Accessed: 14 July 2021].

Bretag, T., Harper, R., Burton, M., Ellis, C., Newton, P., Rozenberg, P., Saddiqui, S. and van Haeringen, K. (2018) Contract cheating: a survey of Australian university students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44 (11), pp. 1837-1856.

Clarke, R. and Lancaster, T. (2006) *Eliminating the successor to plagiarism? Identifying the usage of contract cheating sites*. Available:

<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.120.5440&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

[Accessed: 12 August 2021].

Draper, M. J. and Newton, P. M. (2017) A legal approach to tackling contract cheating? *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 13 (1), pp. 1-16.

Lancaster, T. (2019a) Social Media Enabled Contract Cheating. *Canadian Perspectives on Academic Integrity*, 2 (2), pp. 7-24.

Lancaster, T. (2019b) Profiling the international academic ghost writers who are providing low-cost essays and assignments for the contract cheating industry. *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, 17 (1), pp. 72-86.

Newton, P. M. (2018) How Common Is Commercial Contract Cheating in Higher Education and Is It Increasing? A Systematic Review. *Frontiers in Education*, 3 (1), pp. 1-18.

Pitt, P., Dullaghan, K. and Sutherland-Smith, W. (2020) 'Mess, stress and trauma': students' experiences of formal contract cheating processes. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 46 (4), pp. 659-672.

Ross, J. (2018) *Contract cheating websites 'blackmailing whistle-blowers'*. Times Higher Education. Available: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/contract-cheating-websites-blackmailing-whistle-blowers> [Accessed: 7 July 2021].

Yorke, J., Sefcik, L. and Veeran-Colton, T. (2020) Contract cheating and blackmail: a risky business? *Studies in Higher Education*, pp. 1-14.