

# ADDRESSING CHEATING BY BALANCING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND ASSESSMENT SECURITY

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Cheating is changing: it has become more sophisticated, more technologized, and better marketed towards students. Estimates of the prevalence of cheating vary from study to study, but somewhere between 1 in 7 to 1 in 10 higher education students are getting someone else to do work for them. This guide focuses on how to balance two types of approaches to address cheating: positive academic integrity which seeks to develop students so they can do (and want to do) work ethically, and adversarial assessment security which tries to determine if students have done work in the conditions prescribed. It also explores a few key strategies within each category.

There are many reasons why we might care about cheating, but from an assessment perspective the main one is this: when students cheat we can't make judgements about what they are capable of. This threat to assessment validity reduces the value of the qualifications we award to students who have not cheated, and also threatens public safety when students graduate without having met the learning outcomes we accredit them for. The challenge is: what can we do about cheating?

The first main category of approaches to addressing cheating focus on developing students' academic integrity. The International Centre for Academic Integrity defines academic integrity as "a commitment to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility" (Fishman, 2014) with recent work by the centre adding in a sixth value: courage. Academic integrity is about equipping students so they have the capabilities required to be ethical scholars. Introductory modules for students about academic integrity that cover referencing,

ethical scholarship, and expectations at university are a common example of an approach in the academic integrity category. The logic of these modules is that for students to act in the way we want them to at university, we need to let them know what we expect of them. Unfortunately, academic integrity approaches do not completely solve the problem of cheating. Probably the most studied academic integrity approach is the use of honor codes, which are a set of statements about integrity that students sign at some North American universities. While the quality of research evidence in support of honor codes is strong, they are only associated with a relatively modest reduction in rates of cheating (McCabe et al., 2002).

Assessment security is the other necessary category of approaches required to address cheating. It can be defined as "measures taken to harden assessment against attempts to cheat" (Dawson, 2021). Exam invigilation and the use of text-matching software are examples of assessment security approaches, as they try to determine if a student has done the work themselves under the conditions the assessment designer intended. As with academic integrity, there is no perfect assessment security approach. Websites such as Wikihow contain fascinating guides on how to breach exam security without getting caught, and online paraphrasing tools make defeating text-matching tools trivial. This does not make them worthless as assessment security approaches, just imperfect.

Addressing cheating requires a mix of these types of approaches. Academic integrity approaches just don't do enough to reduce rates of cheating on their own. However, relying solely on assessment security is dismal and adversarial, and risks graduating students who did not cheat only because they were being watched. It also risks contributing to the impression that assessments are simply ways of measuring students' learning, rather than also opportunities for students to deepen their learning; an idea known as *Assessment for Learning*.

These two types of approaches are in tension with each other but they are not a dichotomy. Just as crime is addressed through a balance of crime prevention and policing, addressing cheating requires a balance of academic integrity and assessment security. Rather than looking for a single perfect intervention to address cheating, we can instead think about how to layer multiple imperfect interventions. Taking the metaphor of Swiss cheese, we can think about assembling multiple ways of addressing cheating,

each with their holes, in such a way that cheating is less likely to make it through all of them. Some important layers include:

**Providing students with ways to come forward and admit they have done something wrong and ask for a way to make it right.** In doing so, instances of cheating can be handled in more of a restorative justice approach than a traditional punitive model. The University of New South Wales' **Courageous Conversations** approach is an example of how one university has taken a constructive approach to allegations of academic misconduct.

Using **programmatic assessment** approaches to map out the key assessments across a degree, and identify which ones matter the most in terms of certifying what a graduate is capable of. Instances of assessment that matter the most should be resourced more heavily, for example through conducting a viva, and in instances that do not matter as much there can be less concern given to potential cheating. In first-year, first-semester tasks we may care more about developing students' academic integrity, whereas for important capstone tasks assessment security might be paramount. A programmatic approach should also consider the range of types of tasks throughout a degree; overreliance on a narrow range of tasks presents an assessment security risk.

**Interactive oral assessment** can provide a more secure way to establish what students are capable of. This approach has long been used in some disciplines and contexts but is relatively new in others. Griffith University provides a useful guide on how to conduct interactive oral assessment to support assessment security.

**Invigilated exams**, be they online or face-to-face, can play a role in assessment security. Being able to control the circumstances students undertake a task in and verify their identity greatly supports assessment security. This is especially important when assessing lower-level learning outcomes that focus on recall. However, it is important to acknowledge that exams are far from perfect. One large-scale Australian study found that students reported engaging in more third-party cheating in exams than in assignments – and educators reported catching less third-party cheating in exams than in assignments (Harper et al., 2021).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Cheating is a problem because it hurts our ability to make judgements about what students are capable of.
- Positive academic integrity approaches are essential because they support the development of our students as ethical scholars.
- Unfortunately, positive academic integrity is not enough, so we also need assessment security.
- We need to shift our focus from trying to make every assessment cheat-proof, to thinking about layers of interventions across a degree program.

## REFERENCES

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McCabe, D. L., Treviño, L. K., & Butterfield, K. D. (2002). Honor Codes and Other Contextual Influences on Academic Integrity: A Replication and Extension to Modified Honor Code Settings. *Research in Higher Education*, 43(3), 357-378. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014893102151>

## FURTHER RESOURCES

<https://www.unsw.edu.au/planning-assurance/conduct-integrity/conduct-unsw/unsw-courageous-conversations>

<https://enlighten.griffith.edu.au/interactive-oral-assessments-a-viable-model-for-covid-19-and-beyond/>

<https://lta.hw.ac.uk/understanding-academic-integrity/>

[https://discovery.hw.ac.uk/permalink/f/1nh9hb8/44hwa\\_alma5183231590003206](https://discovery.hw.ac.uk/permalink/f/1nh9hb8/44hwa_alma5183231590003206)

## NOTES

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Adapted with permission from the Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement, Edinburgh Napier University as part of an ongoing collaboration between Edinburgh Napier University, Cork Institute of Technology and Heriot-Watt University.