

Profiling the international academic ghost writers who are providing low-cost essays and assignments for the contract cheating industry

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Abstract

Purpose – Students have direct access to academic ghost writers who are able to provide for their assessment needs without the student needing to do any of the work. These ghost writers are helping to fuel the international industry of contract cheating, raising ethical dilemmas, but not much is known about the writers, their business or how they operate. This paper aims to explore how the ghost writers market their services and operate, based on observable information.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviews data from providers actively offering contract cheating services available to the public on Fiverr.com, a low-cost micro outsourcing site. The search term write essay is used to identify providers, finding 103 Gigs from 96 unique providers. Visible information, such as provider marketing, advertised services, pricing information and customer reviews, is analysed.

Findings – The results demonstrate that bespoke essays are readily available to students at a low cost. The majority of providers operate from Kenya. Revenue calculations indicate a price point of US\$31.73 per 1,000 words, below the cost of traditional essay mills, but show that these 96 providers have generated around US \$270,000 of essay writing business between them.

Originality/value – This study affords a look into a complex and established industry whose inner workings are normally kept private and for which little published information currently exists. The research adds to what is known about the extent, location and operation of the contract cheating industry.

Keywords Academic integrity, Contract cheating, Essay mills, Fiverr.com, Micro outsourcing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper reviews and analyses publicly available data relating to contract cheating providers advertising their academic writing services on Fiverr.com (2010). Fiverr.com is a micro outsourcing website where providers from around the world advertise services for prices starting at US\$5. Buyers can then place orders directly with these providers.

When students purchase academic ghost writing services on Fiverr.com and submit the resulting work for assessment, they are contract cheating (Clarke and Lancaster, 2006). They are also bypassing learning and may receive academic credit that they do not deserve. In surveys from 2014 to 2018, 15.7 per cent of student say that they have committed contract cheating at least once (Newton, 2018).

To understand the vast international market that is associated with contract cheating and the opportunities available to dissuade students from using contract cheating providers, it is useful to understand the individuals involved in writing assessments on behalf of students. Formal research into these writers and providers is only just beginning to emerge (Sivasubramaniam *et al.*, 2016), although some insights are available through analysis reported in the media and through web channels.



This paper begins by reviewing contract cheating literature with a focus on those sources that discuss the individuals involved in the academic writing process. A classification of the types of writers known to be working as contract cheating providers is given. An orienting framework is used to inform the research design, in which data available from contract cheating providers advertising on Fiverr.com is analysed. This provides insight into the scale of the contract cheating problem, how services frame their offers, the assessments they have completed for students and the writers themselves. Most contract cheating providers do not make such information viewable, so this analysis addresses a current deficiency in the contract cheating literature base. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the research and making practical recommendations for both instructors and researchers in this field.

Background research

Contract cheating literature

Contract cheating describes the activity where a student outsources the assessments that they should have completed for themselves (Clarke and Lancaster, 2006). When a student then submits this for academic credit, they are also completing a form of plagiarism.

Studies into the contract cheating industry, including how this is organised, marketed and promoted, have begun to appear (Hersey, 2013; Hersey and Lancaster, 2015; Ellis *et al.*, 2018). They have demonstrated that the advertising of contract cheating services has become widespread and is often focused towards international students (Kaktiņš, 2017). Researchers have also estimated contract cheating industry revenues as being a minimum of US\$100m per year (Owings and Nelson, 2014).

Contract cheating has been observed outside of written assessments, for instance in computer programming (Jenkins and Helmore, 2006), practical science courses (O'Malley and Roberts, 2012), business simulations (Baird and Clare, 2017; Wellman and Fallon, 2012) and within formal examination settings (Lancaster and Clarke, 2017). Research has shown that contract cheating solutions can be returned quickly (Wallace and Newton, 2014) and with high quality (Lines, 2016).

Many recommendations exist in the literature regarding how academics should respond to contract cheating (Lancaster and Clarke, 2016). Academics should be mindful of the potential for students to cheat when setting assessments (Lancaster and Clarke, 2016) and when marking them (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith, 2018). Current plagiarism detection technology, which relies on finding word use in student submissions that is similar to known sources, has been shown to not be suitable to detect work acquired through contract cheating, which is produced in a bespoke manner (Lancaster, 2013). New alternative methods of detection are beginning to be investigated instead. These include mark profiling (Baird and Clare, 2017; Clare *et al.*, 2017; Rogerson, 2017) and the automated tracing of assignment requests posted online (Clarke and Lancaster, 2007).

Literature on academic ghost writers

Table I outlines nine groups of individuals who may be writing assessments for students. It extends upon groups originally proposed by Lancaster (2016a) and provides sources that demonstrate that each of these groups is known to exist.

The groups in Table I are neither necessarily complete nor mutually exclusive. For example, contract cheating services have been observed being established by former academics. Likewise, further subclassifications may be possible. For instance, some contract cheating providers are former students who have completed courses, become an expert in that course content and set up a business supporting students at the university from which they graduated (Sivasubramaniam *et al.*, 2016).

Group	Example	Sources
Accidental academic ghost writers	Individuals joining sites advertising writing work, without realising such work involves completing assessments for students	(Boyd, 2016)
Business opportunists	Those individuals realising that contract cheating offers them a short or long-term opportunity to make money	(Tomar, 2014)
Desperate individuals	Those people who have taken up academic ghost writing due to desperation and financial necessity, perhaps following the loss of a previous job	(Anonymous, 2013; Mills, 2017)
Would-be academics	People who have not been successful in gaining an academic job, some of whom may have a high level of academic qualifications and who have begun work as an academic ghost writer instead	(Bomford, 2016; Reddit, 2015)
Internationally qualified academic ghost writers	Academic ghost writers who have completed a qualification outside their home country, then have returned home and begun offering ghost writing services for students	(Sivasubramaniam <i>et al.</i> , 2016)
Career academic ghost writers	Individuals who have decided that academic ghost writing offers a suitable career for them, perhaps due to the type of work or the flexibility of this work	Private examples given to author by current ghost writers
Student peers	People producing assessment for other members of their class, perhaps for a fee or for other mutually beneficial reasons	(Yiqian, 2017)
Previous graduates	Those individuals who have become highly specialised in the content of a particular course and are able to offer academic ghost writing services for it	Private examples given to author by universities
Friends and family members	Those people who have a vested interest in the success of a student and provide help, which may include the production of assessed work for that student	(Clarke and Lancaster, 2007; Owings and Nelson, 2014)

Table I.
Groups of
individuals observed
acting as academic
ghost writers and
enabling contract
cheating

Contract cheating is an area full of ethical dilemmas and grey areas, of which using a proof reader is one such case (Quality Assurance Agency, 2017). For instance, consider a student for whom a family member proof reads their assessment and, in the process, rewrites several paragraphs that they do not believe makes sense. At what stage does this become contract cheating? Similarly, consider the same service completed by a commercial provider for which money changes hands. Is this any more acceptable?

Fiverr.com

[Fiverr.com](https://www.fiverr.com) (2010) is a digital marketplace that connects together service providers and buyers, with all services priced at a minimum of US\$5. Providers are traditionally individuals, but Fiverr.com is sometimes also used by companies. Although Fiverr.com was not set up as a contract cheating site, it is used by providers of contract cheating services.

There are two ways in which Fiverr.com providers and buyers can connect:

- (1) *Request model*: A buyer can request a service and allow providers to bid against each other and state their price to complete this service.
- (2) *Gig model*: Providers can advertise one or more services directly to buyers. In Fiverr.com terminology, each service is known as a Gig. Gigs can have varied pricing option, for instance a provider may offer to complete an order faster for a higher fee.

In both cases, Fiverr.com manages the sale process. When a buyer purchases, their funds are placed in escrow and released to the provider when the buyer is happy with their order. A portion of each fee is paid to Fiverr.com as commission.

The request model operates rather like the contract cheating auction site model described in previous research (Clarke and Lancaster, 2006). A difference is that these are not public requests and so cannot be directly observed or analysed by researchers. This makes it difficult to estimate how widely Fiverr.com is used for cheating using the request model. A small-scale study of contract cheating under the request model on Fiverr.com saw 16 offers made within hours, 9 of which asked for payment of US\$13.33 per 1,000 words, suggesting that essays were obtainable quickly and at a price point affordable by students.

The Gig model on Fiverr.com appears to be much more commonly used and has not been previously studied in the contract cheating literature. Each Gig has its own listing page on Fiverr.com where buyers can read marketing copy, see pricing information, read reviews from previous buyers and order the Gig. The number of reviews a Gig has provides a lower bound as to how many times it has been completed, bearing in mind that not all buyers may elect to leave a review. A listing of all the Gigs offered by each provider, as well as general information about their business, is available on Fiverr.com on a designated page about that provider.

Research design

Research question

This paper aims to address the research question:

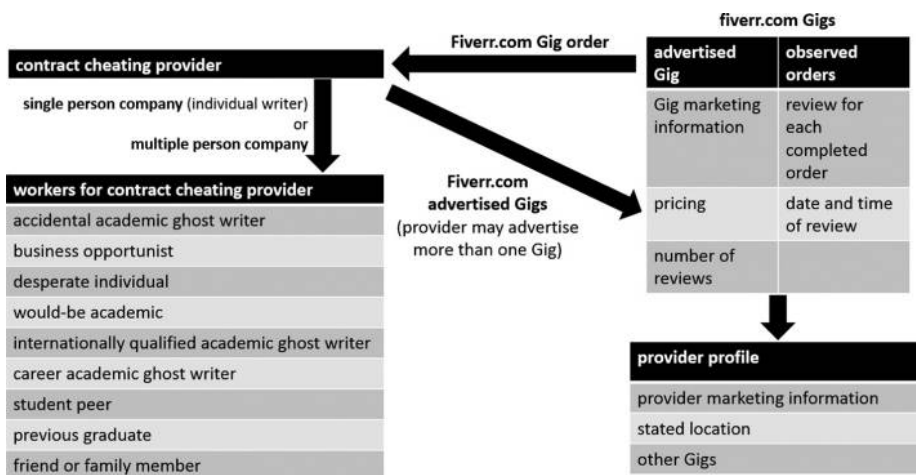
- RQ1*. What can be observed about the providers of contract cheating services on Fiverr.com from publicly available data?

Figure 1 provides an orienting framework for the design of this research study, based around the ideas explored earlier in this paper. The intention is to use visible information to investigate the demographics of these providers including which type of workers are involved, how contract cheating services are marketed, pricing information and sales figures. Figure 1 also identifies the available data that can be used to form data sets.

The study is timely and important because little is known about the firms and individuals providing contract cheating services, how they operate and how they encourage students to buy. The Gig model for contract cheating has not been previously studied in the literature. A wider understanding of the contract cheating industry is useful to raise awareness and to aid academics looking to address this challenge.

Data set formation

Data related to contract cheating providers were manually collected from Fiverr.com during a single day in June 2016. Table II provides an indication of the scale of Gigs available that may have been associated with contract cheating activity on that date.



Contract cheating industry

Figure 1. Orienting framework for study of the contract cheating industry on Fiverr.com

Search term	No. of gigs	Notes
Application	2,707	Largely not contract cheating, but may include technical assessments, for example mobile application
Presentation	2,499	Gigs can include presentations for assessments and for wider uses
Assignment	1,935	
Essay	866	This search term also captures essay editing Gigs
Business plan	767	This may include business plans produced for assessment
Write essay	395	
Homework	284	
School	228	
Personal statement	44	Primarily academic related Gigs, for instance offering to write a personal statement to enable a student to gain a place at college or university

Table II. Volumes of Gigs offered on Fiverr.com for contract cheating related search terms

To attempt to cleanly capture a data set of active Gigs relating to contract cheating, the search term *write essay* was used. This captured such Gig titles as “I will write essays and assignments in 24 hours”, “I will diligently write your essays in no time” and “I will write matchless Assignments, Essays and Researches”.

The following inclusion criteria was used to identify in-scope Gigs:

- The Gig must have appeared when the search term *write essay* was used.
- There must have been at least one successfully completed order recorded against the Gig in the past 30 days (completion was verified by looking at reviewer comments).

This process identified 103 in-scope Gigs from 93 different providers, as some providers advertised more than one of these Gigs.

In total, 64 of the 93 providers allowed customers to order directly from their Gig page and listed their pricing structure. The cost of 2,000 and 5,000-word reports was captured. Where providers listed their pricing in pages instead of words, a standard of 275 words per page was assumed. Where providers offered several pricing options, the cheapest option, usually the slowest turnaround time, was selected.

Where a single provider offered two or more Gigs, the mean pricing across their Gigs was used.

All but one provider advertised pricing in US\$. One provider used Great British Pounds (GBP). Their pricing has been converted using the official UK June 2016 rate of £1 GBP = US\$1.469.

Limitations of study

This study relates to data that is publicly available on Fiverr.com, but not all data relating to transactions is available. The data set only considers Gigs where buyers have left reviews, indicating the exchange of money and services. There may have been more transactions that have not been reviewed. The cheapest advertised pricing, such as a delayed turnaround time is assumed. In many cases, buyers will have paid for a faster option, particularly if requesting an assessment close to a deadline. There may also be hidden transactions that took place using the Request Model. As such, the financial data only represent a lower bound and may underestimate the scale of contract cheating.

Where Gigs are visible, only partial information is available. This does not, for example, include the subject of the essay. Standard charges are visible on many Fiverr.com Gigs, but the actual amount paid is not. It is possible for buyers to negotiate their payments and this would not be captured through the visible information.

The data set collected relates solely to the term *write essay* and to those providers who were active at the time of processing. It does not include Gigs offering contract cheating services using other terms, for instance *complete dissertation*, or for non-written types of assessment. It does not include all historical data, particularly where providers may have deleted their account or changed the Gigs they offered. There may be a small amount of data which does not relate to essays, particularly where providers have advertised Gigs with options of different types of writing, for instance along the lines of a (fictitious) Gig entitled “I will write your essay or blog post”. This would only represent a tiny proportion of the entire data set, as the high volume providers were all manually checked and found to exclusively offer academic ghost writing services.

The data set captures providers with multiple active Gigs under the same account. The possibility exists that some providers may work under multiple account names to capture different sectors of the market, although this is against the Fiverr.com Terms of Service.

Finally, the results assume that the information given by providers is accurate. Some published information is verified by Fiverr.com, for example a customer cannot leave a review unless they have paid for a Gig. Many providers have verified locations and credentials, although theoretically it could be possible to fake these. A provider writing marketing copy could lie about their expertise and qualifications. As such, this paper can only give an overview of the style of provider working on Fiverr.com and their claimed credentials.

Results

General

The in-scope data sets of 103 Gigs, 93 providers and 64 providers with known-pricing were analysed. [Table III](#) indicates the Gigs broken down by the Category they were advertised on in Fiverr.com, indicating that, in the absence of an Academic Writing category, 86 of 103 (83.5 per cent) of providers relate this work to either “Creative Writing” or “Research & Summaries”.

Providers

Cumulatively, the 93 providers had completed 4,294 orders through active Gigs containing the *write essay* term during their time on Fiverr.com. This reflected that they had completed an average (mean) of 46.2 essay writing orders each, with a standard deviation of 95.7.

The high standard deviation here reflects some providers working at a large scale. In total, 12 providers had completed 100 or more of these orders each, with the top provider having completed 716 orders. By contrast, 42 providers had completed 9 or fewer orders. Considering only the 10 providers with the most completed Gigs indicates that they had provided 2,542 out of the 4,294 orders (59.2 per cent). This indicates that there is a small group of large scale providers who are dominating the contract cheating market on Fiverr.com.

Table IV shows the claimed location of the 93 providers. This indicates 28 out of 93 providers (30.1 per cent) being based in Kenya. Some information about other countries may be suspect. One provider states their location only as “European Union”. Another large provider, with 97 projects completed, lists their location only as A1. 25 providers suggest that they are in the USA, but this may be being done to make their services appear more desirable. Although many likely are in the USA, there are also some profiles with deficiencies in their English language that suggests they are a non-native speaker. One so-called US provider separately states that their nationality is Filipino and another is immediately suspect due to having a male name with a female photograph.

Assuming that the location data is accurate in the majority of cases, the countries from which most of the contract cheating is generated can also be calculated. This indicates that 1,865 of the 4,294 orders (43.4 per cent) were completed by workers from Kenya and 1,357 out of 4,294 (31.6 per cent) were completed by workers in the USA.

Table III.
In-scope essay
writing Gigs, by
category

Category	No. of gigs
Articles and blog posts	8
Creative writing	44
Other	8
Proofreading and editing	1
Research and summaries	42
<i>Total</i>	<i>103</i>

Table IV.
Claimed location of
essay writing
providers

Location	Frequency
Kenya	28
USA	25
Pakistan	15
India	7
Serbia	4
UK	3
Nigeria	2
South Africa	2
Other (1 each)	7
<i>Total</i>	<i>93</i>

Provider marketing

The manner in which the contract cheating services market their offers is of interest.

Although providers can advertise Gigs of different types, many of the 93 providers chose usernames indicating that offering a writing service. Example terms included as part of longer usernames included “writer”, “writewell”, “essay” and “Shakespeare”. This shows that they had considered their offer as providing an academic writing service from when they originally joined Fiverr.com.

Many of the Gig providers focus on the offer of plagiarism-free work as a reason for students to buy their service. This is occasionally illustrated in the Gig titles, for example “I will write Plagiarism free essays in 24 hours”, but most often it is contained within the text. Example statements include “I pass it through plagscan systems that use Turnitin database”, “0 per cent Plagiarism (Plagiarism report is provided)” and “Plagiarism free Unique work (plagiarism reports available on request)”. One provider offers a plagiarism report as an upsell for US\$5, a service also available through other Gigs on the site.

Many of the providers indicate that they hold professional positions. One states that they are “a researcher in a University”, another that they are “a teacher and tutor by profession”. Others promote based on academic qualifications, including a “degree in Secondary English Education” and two Kenyan providers, one with a “master’s degree in journalism and communication” from a UK university, the other as a “PhD graduate”. Others indicate that they are taking qualifications, including being “a mechanical engineer in the making”, “an Honours student” and “a student of M.Phil”. A more unusual choice of promotional advertising is a US-based provider with 59 completed essay writing orders who advertises themselves as a “past Spelling Bee champ”.

Other providers promote themselves based on their specialism in writing. This includes an “experienced author having composed 5000+ papers and websites”, another who is a “professional Academic Writer with over 10 years experience” and a writer who says they have “published 25 papers in different journals”.

Many providers indicate that they the orders will be processed through a larger team. This may be directly stated in the text, for example as part of a “team of capable research assistants and writers” or just by using the word “we”. The teams also use additional mechanisms to sell their services, such as showing their ability to meet deadlines, as in they “can also deliver urgent orders that are required within 12 h”.

Essay pricing and revenue

The pricing information has been analysed based on the 64 providers with known-pricing.

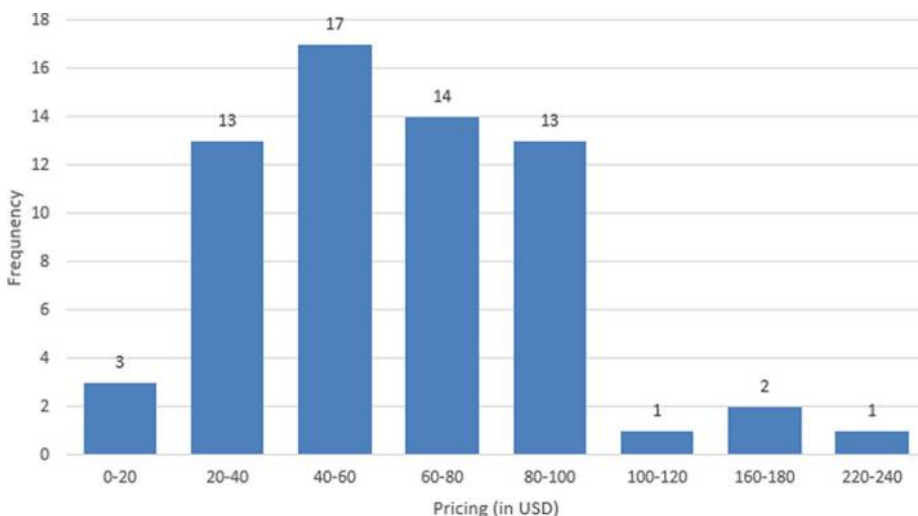
The mean advertised price for a typical 2,000 words essay is US\$59.54, with standard deviation of US\$37.53. [Figure 2](#) classifies the advertised provider pricing, based on a 2,000-word essay.

These values are largely scalable to shorter and longer documents. For example, for a longer 5,000-word report, the mean advertised price would be US\$150.65, with standard deviation US\$89.60.

Pricing also varies slightly across providers from different countries. Considering the mean price of a 2,000-word essay from the four countries with the most providers, the mean prices would see Kenya at US\$72.03, Pakistan at US\$64.09, the USA at US\$59.60 and India at US\$53.33.

Further analysis indicates the substantial scale of the essay industry.

The largest single provider, operating from Kenya, charges US\$40 for a 2,000-word essay and has completed 716 orders on their essay writing Gig. Their profile indicates that this profile may represent a group of writers, rather than an individual. Assuming the essays are



Contract
cheating
industry

Figure 2.
Advertised pricing
for 2,000-word essay
from contract
cheating providers on
Fiverr.com

all of a typical 2,000-word length, this would equate to revenue of US\$28,640 for that provider from this single site alone.

The same calculation can be applied to all 3,430 orders completed by these 64 providers, giving total revenue of US\$217,630 and average revenue per order of US\$63.45 (or US\$31.73 per 1,000 words). This is a slightly higher price point than looking at the purely advertised figures indicates, perhaps suggesting that the dominant and established contract cheating providers are able to provide more.

Assuming that this figure is consistent across the providers who did not supply pricing information, across the total of 4,294 orders from 93 providers, the total revenue would be US\$272,449.

Discussion

This paper has analysed activity on one of several large sites providing contract cheating services to students. The site, Fiverr.com, differs from many essay mills as some activity is publicly observable.

Several trends identified based on the information of the site have wider implications for higher education and assessment. They deserve further discussion.

Individual providers use micro outsourcing sites to connect directly with customers

The traditional contract cheating business creates a barrier between students and the individuals who are writing essays for them. By using micro outsourcing sites students and providers can directly connect together.

It is difficult to estimate exactly how many individual writers operate on Fiverr.com, as some accounts represent individuals and some represent teams. Bearing in mind that this paper has only looked at a subset of the overall number of providers operating on the date of study, the likely number of writers seems likely to be in the low hundreds. The number of assignments completed by each provider is generally low, with mean values increased by the larger companies. Previous research has also shown that a further group of providers exists, happy to take essay orders from students, but not wishing to openly advertise that

they do this as Gigs (Lancaster, 2016b). Further, there is no reason why providers cannot also be active on other sites, or use Fiverr.com to find customers who they then communicate with outside the system.

Academic ghost writing is a high turnover, low paid profession

With providers advertising turnaround times of as little as 12 h and several seemingly having access to a whole team of writers ready to work, it looks likely that academic ghost writing is being completed. This may reflect the idea that many assessments and essays are routine work for experienced writers, who have developed the techniques needed to provide materials that meet the needs of markers without having to become an expert in that subject. As the contract cheating literature has widely observed, for example in Wallace and Newton (2014), there are writers who can turn around a new assessment every day.

The essay pricing through Fiverr.com seems lower than other previously documented sources. The actual orders analysed for this research suggest a typical essay price point of US\$31.73 per 1,000 words. Table V compares this to literature estimates of pricing through an agency website and a typical essay mill, which both cost at least 3.5 times the Fiverr.com price point. The assumptions made are conservative and so the actual multiple may be even higher. This suggests that students are able to reduce the cost of custom essays by going directly to micro outsourcing websites and connecting with providers.

This low pricing, affordable by students, supports the idea that providers need to complete assessments quickly to have a reasonable income, particularly as such freelance work is not continually guaranteed. There are also indications that providers are developing the skills to market themselves, including presenting their qualifications and achievements to prospective buyers. Such marketing skills are necessary for academic ghost writers wanting to make themselves stand out in a crowded market.

Why contract cheating providers are choosing to work for themselves, rather than through an essay mill, is a question worthy of further research. One thought here is that the rates received by these ghost writers from Fiverr.com are equal to or higher than those received by writers from essay mills, after the service owners have taken their cut. There are also many online discussions from writers about how they have had their pay from essay mills reduced through a system of fines, for instance if the essay they produced contains errors or they deviate slightly from the expected number of words. Writers may wish to avoid such fines, may wish to keep more of the payments or just to be responsible for their own success rather than relying on an external essay mill.

The low payments also indicate that students wishing to contract cheat can benefit from pricing lower than that offered by traditional sources. The trade-off here for students is that

Downloaded by INSEAD At 09:38 23 October 2018 (PT)

Table V.
The indicative pricing of contract cheating services, based on literature sources

Provider	Pricing per 1,000 words (in US\$)	Notes	Source
Fiverr.com	31.73		This study
Agency site used for contract cheating	112.83	Study suggests pricing at £150 GBP per project (US\$225.66 using the historical exchange rate). Typical project length not given in the paper, but assumed to be 2,000 words	(Clarke and Lancaster, 2013)
Essay mill	109.09	Paper indicates low end pricing of US\$120 for a four-page paper (1,100 words)	(Owings and Nelson, 2014)

more work is involved for them in finding, selecting and monitoring providers to ensure that work is delivered as ordered and that they are not putting their own security at risk.

Essay mill like operations exist within Fiverr.com

Several of the large-scale providers analysed indicated that they use a team of people to return essays. They have set pricing available through online calculations. They have carefully constructed advertising listing the subjects and types of assessments they can help students with including statements informing students that they will not receive plagiarised work. As such, these large providers really are essay mills operated from within a third-party website.

There is nothing to suggest that this is the only place from where these providers advertise. They could have their own site. They could be advertising through classifieds, operate on agency sites and freelancing websites and directly market to customers discussing essays on social media. The fact that the Fiverr.com channels are so busy suggests that the academic community needs to be alert to new ways in which contract cheating providers are extending their reach and access to customers.

It is also interesting to consider how larger contract cheating providers operating on micro outsourcing sites can still price their services similarly to individual writers. It suggests some writers are willing and able to work for even lower rates than are typical once the profile owners have taken their cut of the proceeds.

Plagiarism detection software is susceptible

Several providers on Fiverr.com advertise that they will return copies of the similarity reports used to check for plagiarism, including from the large-scale software solution Turnitin used by many universities. This is concerning as it suggests that these providers have access to software which is meant to be restricted for monitored academic use.

Software designed to track the writing style of students is under development. This would notice where the writing style changed between student submissions, suggesting that someone other than the student was producing the work. There are indications in the data set collected that students are forming relationships with providers and using the same writers repeatedly. For instance, one feedback comment from a repeat buyer in the sample collected stated that the student was “waiting on grade but I’m pretty sure I got a 100 like most assignments you’ve done for me”.

Where a student does use the same writer repeatedly, or an essay mill redevelops their system to connect students with writers to ensure as much this would immediately defeat the capabilities of this new type of detection software. One possible solution would be for universities to ensure that writing samples from students are collected under supervised and controlled conditions.

The advertising of contract cheating services is blatant

Most essay mills advertising outside Fiverr.com skirt around the edges of legality by claiming to only offer model essays to students that are not designed for them to submit. At the same time, they promote that they are providing essays which are plagiarism free and which will never be resold.

Contract cheating providers operating on Fiverr.com are blatant about the services they offer. Disclaimers about them only providing model solutions and sample essays are rare.

Some providers do use an alternative form of disclaimer, which instead discusses the marks that students will receive. Such disclaimers would not be possible if the provider was not aware that students were submitting the essays produced for academic credit.

Two such examples of alternative disclaimers are “We write to satisfy our clients and not a third party (their teacher/instructors), we take no responsibilities for grades awarded by a third party (teacher)” and:

I am not responsible for the grades given or decisions made by any third party viewer, I write specifically based on what my client provides for information and what they desire the result to be.

The issue of Kenyan academic ghost writers circumventing academic integrity needs to be addressed

There has been little research looking at contract cheating on a localised scale, whether such research is considering students, essay mill companies or providers. One dominant finding from this research is the need for more work to be undertaken on the involvement of ghost writers from Kenya. Ongoing research by [Walker \(2017\)](#) has estimated that 20,000 people work as academic ghost writers in Kenya, often at low wages. This is a country with high levels of unemployment.

This study found that the single largest provider of contract cheating services on Fiverr.com was based in Kenya. It showed that providers from Kenya represented 30.1 per cent of those providers considered to have recently helped students to commit contract cheating and completed 43.4 per cent of all orders.

Working for a traditional essay mill is not always an option for writers with Kenya. Some essay mills limit the geographic locations from where writers can sign up or require them to pass tests. A market in buying and selling academic writing accounts exists, with writers expected to pay between US\$180 and US\$220 for “an account with no negative history” ([Essaylancers, 2017](#)). Fiverr.com may be being used by ghost writers for Kenya as it is a viable alternative to traditional essay mills.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the research question “what can be observed about the providers of contract cheating services on Fiverr.com from publicly available data?” The orienting framework has demonstrated observable data that captures the relationship between contract cheating providers and students in a manner that is impossible within the closed walls of an essay mill. Data collected from Fiverr.com have been used as the basis of research that has demonstrated that this site is regularly used by individual writers. Business on scale is being facilitated through this site.

Earlier in this paper, [Table I](#) introduced nine groups of people who had been observed working as academic ghost writers to complete assessed work on behalf of students. This study of the micro outsourcing site Fiverr.com has provided further evidence for the existence of four of these groups, including business opportunists, internationally qualified academic ghost writers, career academic ghost writers and previous graduates. Some may also qualify as part of the fifth group of desperate individuals, although this cannot be inferred directly from the marketing materials.

Many more opportunities for further work in this field exist. Fiverr.com is just one site where partial information relating to academic ghost writers, and the projects they complete for students are visible. A real picture of how contract cheating operates, necessary to inform future solutions, can only really be developed by understanding more about these sites. This is always difficult, as contract cheating providers continue to update their approaches as technology changes. There are also research opportunities to look at particular countries and subject areas and to develop more case studies into contract cheating.

Recommendations for individual academics and teachers are necessary. These people need to be increasingly vigilant about the types of assessment they set and whether a trained writer with limited subject knowledge would be able to return this work to a passable standard. They need to understand that purely using plagiarism detection software may not show if work is original, particularly when providers now claim to have access to this software. Academics also need to be aware that students are aware of contract cheating services, many of which advertise this provision blatantly. The indications are that students are regularly using these services.

Academics also need to be aware that the contract cheating space is continually changing. For example, one provider on Fiverr.com advertised an upsell from essay writing services to completing entire online classes for students. Such an approach may also circumvent developments in academic integrity technology designed to ensure that the same person takes an entire course.

There is still much more to discover about the different academic ghost writers involved in the contract cheating business. This paper has focused primarily on the low-end market, as those are the people primarily advertising on Fiverr.com. Articles in the popular media that feature interviews with ghost writers also indicate that a high-end market exists, with customers willing to pay higher prices for perceived premium services. More research is needed to formally discover the motivations of academic ghost writers and the extent to which different types of ghost writers operate. Only with access to that level of information can a thorough and considered preventative plan be put into place.

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