Contract Cheating: the pandemic that has no antivirus and the Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan
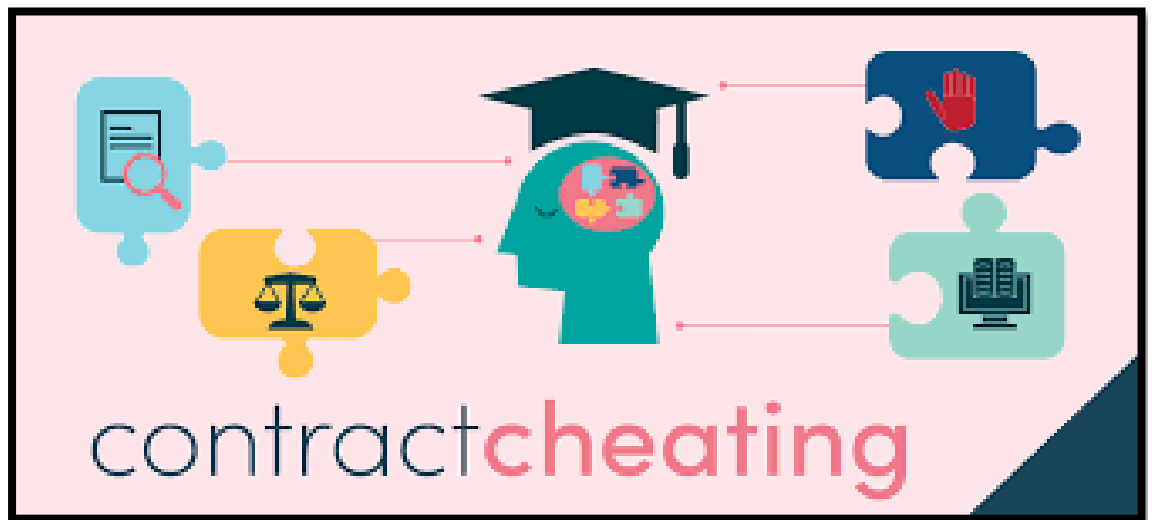
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Contract cheating is the commissioning of bespoke university assignments with the intention of submitting them for assessment (Lancaster and Clarke 2007).

The first thing that we, as Higher Education Institutions need to accept and absorb is that contract cheating is a flourishing business. One that Pakistan has yet to counter, now like all problems that creep up on you without you noticing them, contract cheating is Pakistan's Trojan horse. Having worked in academia for over 21 years and mostly with the HE sector in various different roles; lately I have been working with a top TNE HE provider I have seen how during the pandemic when the public, private and other sectors in higher education had to go online, the assessment mechanism took a mammoth hit. The faculty did not know how to assess online, and the providers and institutions were not prepared for the enormous task ahead of them. With the assessment rubrics not altered for online assessments and the rise in coursework being the summative form of assessments, students started enjoying loopholes in the system. A lack of evidencing the drafts before submission, little training and experience of academic staff to investigate assessment authenticity.

The learner could see clearly through the flawed system and its loopholes; sometimes wittingly and unwittingly he/she could and did exploit the system. There is serious need of tangible controls. The almost non-existing framework and best practice of giving continuous feedback to students on coursework, student-teacher ratio, and the rise in manhours for teachers has resulted in poor or incorrect assessment decisions. The student previously had timed assessments and would be face to face in an exam simulation with invigilation as opposed to this Covid year student had as much as 24 hours to submit the same exam with access to all resources, internet eBooks, answer scripts, etc. No amount of proctoring and digital controls helped. One indicator that things have gone south was an incessant rise in students having done exceptionally well in the Covid year assessments especially online submissions. An unfair advantage was for students in a developing country like Pakistan is that students in the urban cities had access to better internet and resources than students with less or no resources, even though they may have been better learners.

Alarmingly statistics in a study in Australia show as much as 16% of students even admit to contracting to cheat. But most alarming as per Philip Dawsons book on 'Defending Assessment Security in a digital world' is, is that only 1% were ever caught cheating. With the rise in essay mills, tutoring websites, bots that appear when you even mention academic writing or assignment to your friends and family that offer to help do your work – it's all wrong!

Like all wrong the controllers of exams and assessments all institutions need to know as much or more than the learner on what is happening around their learners; what is distracting them and what is affecting them? To catch offenders of all types we need to think like the offenders and know the latest on all wrongdoings. I am always drawn back to the movie 'catch me if you can' by Stephen Spielberg with Leonardo De Caprio playing the youngest con man and forger Frank Abegnayle who allegedly, before his 19th birthday, successfully coned worth millions of dollars by posing as a Pan American World Airways pilot. We can debate the validity of his claims later but for now the analogy seems fit that we need to go back to the con man to understand how the con works because in the movie he is later hired by the authorities to learn and take his help in fighting such crimes and catching felons committing the same crimes successfully. As another example maybe a bit extreme the Behavioral Analysis Unit also had to go rely heavily on the caught serial killers to understand why the heinous crimes are committed with such ease by these criminals.

On a more academic note, we will also need to understand what motivates a student to take this route knowing that this is risking their academic success; if caught the student may have to face serious consequences. How important is Academic Integrity? and any higher institution's role in creating an environment enabling and enriching the surroundings for the learner immersed in academic integrity. How well equipped is an academic institution to catch collusion, contract cheating and various offenses surrounding academic misconduct? It is the responsibility of the leadership and the HE institutions' core value system and culture to spend time and resources on the authenticity and quality of the programmes they are delivering. Having deeply built-in policies for Academic Integrity along with the right expertise to manage, handle and process cases against academic misconduct are key responsibilities of any HE institution. The rise in E assessments and a rise in course work and submissions for work online has given rise to businesses catering to helping learners do their work for them, even micro tutoring websites and places on the web claiming to help you are just bots popping up to take you to all kinds of fraud. From paraphrasing tools like Quillbot to conversations on any social media will start showing you ads for places where you are easily inclined to go to because who does not want to go the easier route?

Assessors/instructors need to go as far as going onto WikiHow and strangely enough know-how to cheat to be able to better themselves at assessment security and to be on top of their responsibility of taking on and developing better deterrents for their institutions' assessment policies.
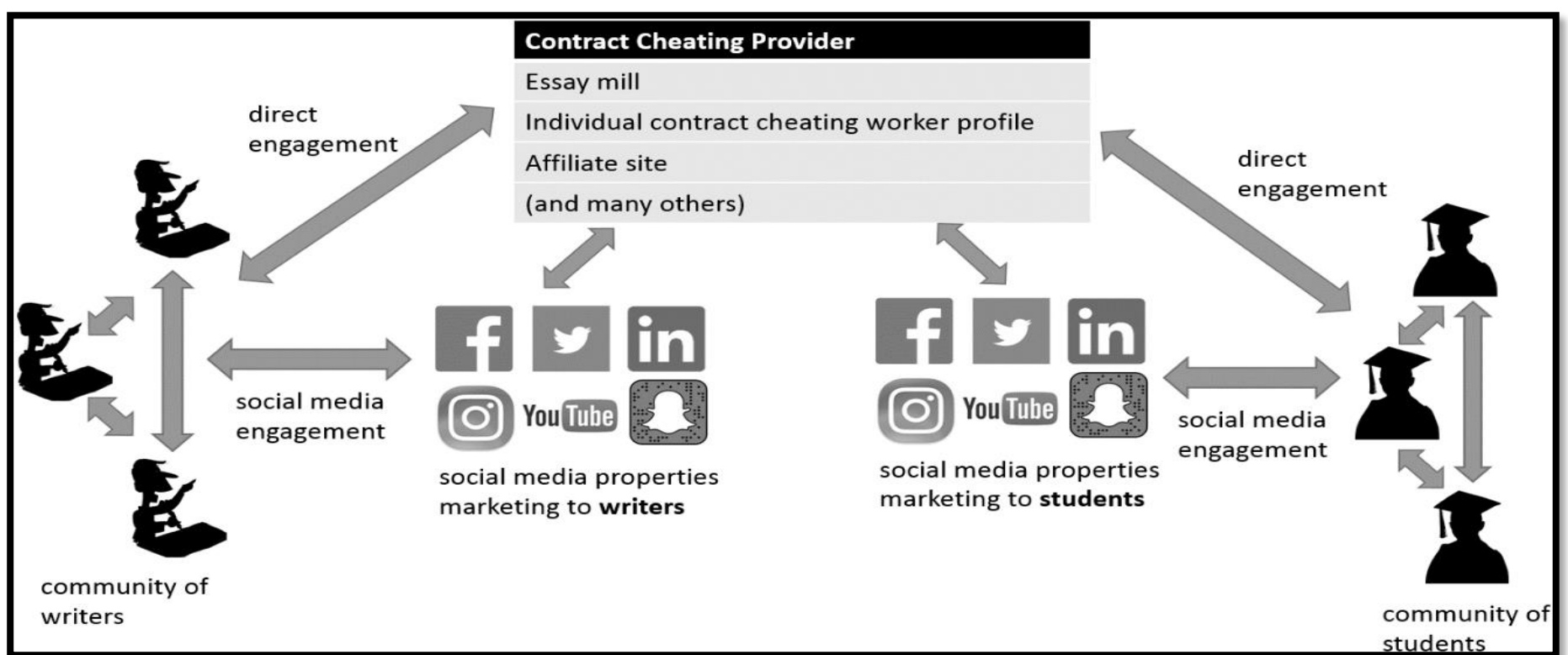
Pakistan's higher education sector is 188 educational institutions in Pakistan that are recognized by the HEC. Public, private, military, and vocational universities constitute the higher education system in Pakistan. With yardsticks being research and rankings, it is quite misleading for example for a mechanical engineering student to look at a department and their ranking as nothing about the hordes of articles being published by the research enthusiastic professors is going to directly impact the student until he/she is fairly taught and honestly assessed. The information can be quite misleading. The race for promotion always overshadows the research. In Pakistan academic honesty has been in free-fall forever. Every university and Higher Education Commission (regulator) in Pakistan must demand that any professor claiming credit for a scientific paper must present that work before an informed audience and be appropriately questioned. Credible foreign specialists should be included. Technology allows this to be done remotely (Zoom, Skype etc.) and to preserve videos for later viewing. Each presentation must explain what that paper has contributed to knowledge production. (Pervez HoodBouy) That can be one solution. This too has many pitfalls. Transparency is not a magic wand. Still, it will whittle down most challenges.

Transnational Education has given rise to various models of delivery in Pakistan, and the pandemic widened the gap of support and handholding and critical friendship that some TNE set-ups required and depended upon for the TNE delivery. In the various forms of transnational engagement, distance and supported distance learning models being offered do tend to have staff that did have experience in the delivery of some form of digital assessment.

However, with little or no oversight by the UK, Australian, etc. universities a lot of responsibility and accountability lands on newly developed and approved partnerships. Most of whom have regulatory body approvals. Even at the regulatory level, understanding the complexity and the challenges have not been completely understood. The regulator has itself been struggling with the way it had to overcome student riots and unrest on decisions to come back to face to face exams. The road is long, and my only fear is that the regulator may need to look at the team supervising the foreign collaboration wing with the same staff looking after the public sector universities. The separation of both is a must in order to understand the challenges of a TNE HE setup and the problems associated with it. Now the biggest reform needed is the staff teaching and assessing in these programmes. They need to be trained and be experienced enough to decide assessment controls and take decisions on student learning outcomes and final grades. For now, no such effort is being made at the regulator level. Also, the word contract cheating does not even make it on the website many sections and facets.

There is a serious play on fairness and equity that is threatened and is directly proportional to any institution's reputation because there is something very worrying if your students are aware of learners achieving more because they were able to pay their way into academic success and they were not graded fairly.

For institutions wanting to uphold their reputation and their learner's satisfaction on equity and assessment fairness, the burden of proof is solely on the institutions. When we pay the assessors, they should be able to have measures to stop unfair advantages like these. And higher education institutions need to invest now in human resources with academic integrity and answers with respect to assessment design and a shift from the traditional exams for the new learner. Defending Assessment Security in a Digital World is becoming more and more difficult and for Pakistan, it's not even a realization at this point. Using Turnitin is one small tool and is not the answer. Anyone that has been an instructor checking a student's work will tell you that the tool can tell you what was copied and from where and detect similarity but the challenge in knowing is this your student/learner's own work will still require for you to understand forensics of assessment. Experienced markers will tell you that detecting contract cheating is possible and training to detect improves their accuracy there is tons of recent literature on the same. The rise of TNE HE in Pakistan has put greater responsibility on the delivery of programmes of the provider and the final degree-awarding institutions and the regulator. Threat to academic integrity is serious and institutions that will understand, invest and build fairness and equity in delivery will succeed in upholding their reputation.

TMUC and Its Role in ensuring Academic Integrity in Pakistan as a Responsible TNE Providing Higher Education Institution

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In a future that requires creativity, problem solving, and communication skills – The Millennium Universal College (TMUC) has a systematic approach to solving complex problems. An approach that emphasizes innovation through iteration and learning through doing. TMUC fraternity accentuates a methodical approach to critical thinking, a way about solving problems that allows for creativity and collaboration for lessons as well as co-curricular projects. The faculty is trained to curate ways for learners to look at problems from different perspectives, to brainstorm solutions, and think about different key aspects that can be implemented to try to devise solutions, and then to assess whether or not they worked, and start over - meaningful and motivating practice to devise productive results. As much as the collaboration is encouraged as 21st Century skills requirement, there is always a critical lesson and admonition with respect to plagiarism, collusion, contract cheating, etc., that follows the lessons.

As educationists, we substantially underscore the essence of Reflection *in* Action and Reflection *on* Action. These enable self-correction and magnet-out the possibility of disoriented and unfocussed moral decision making. At TMUC, we counsel learners and empower them to be responsible and ethical learners. This very *empowerment* emanates from the dynamic pairing of *possibility and agency* alongside *ownership and impact* embedded as learning outcomes in tailor made workshops and seminars that clearly condemn circumventing tools in academic submissions. We encourage students to develop a sense of possibility and work with efficacy, never undermining the high-fidelity aspects of moral and ethical requisitions for any assignment or group work.

At TMUC, learners are encouraged to distillate the facts that *Honesty* and *Integrity* stem from a value system we foster, ones that will impact their decision making and must never be compromised. The criteria to reaching a conclusive stance for academic writing tools varies across the multiplicity of dimensions, clearly setting out the locus of responsibility at different levels. Learners at TMUC are emphatically made to realize the significance of honesty in their submissions by clearly set out repercussions and consequences in case dishonesty is witnessed. The institute and fraternity are invested in apprising students about the moral and ethical obligations at every step of the way and all assignments have multiple rounds of checks to filter the ones compromised according to according to academic integrity boundaries.

At TMUC, our quest lies in ensuring that our students' learning journey is vibrant, informative and engaging. There is a great emphasis on students to be developing as independent learners and to transform them as mentioned, we ensure they realize the need to be responsible and ethical. Here, students have the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their achievement in context to their contribution to their academic assignments. TMUC has developed the necessary quality assurance and qualifications recognition systems to ensure the student learning experience is enriching and rewarding during and by the end of their study programme.

#AcademicIntegrity
#ChampionAcademicHonesty&Integrity
#SayNoToContractCheating

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