

Students as consumers: the market for essays

Dan Rigby¹, Kelvin Balcombe², Michael Burton³, Ian Bateman⁴, Abay Mulatu⁵

¹University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom, ²University of Reading, Reading, United Kingdom, ³University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia, ⁴University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom, ⁵London Metropolitan Business School, London, United Kingdom

Forms of plagiarism are changing as detection systems and patterns of plagiarism co-evolve. The most significant development in recent years has been the widespread adoption of the *TurnItIn* scanning system. While this system may deter some potential plagiarisers, they also have the option of adaptation. One such form of adaptation is to shift away from a ‘copy and paste’ approach to plagiarism toward the ‘contract cheating’ market. This market provides bespoke, original material which will not be identified as plagiarised by *TurnItIn*.

The Contract Cheating market (Lancaster and Clarke, 2006) was estimated to be worth £200m in 2006. It is a market with many particular and interesting features. It is an illicit market in which there is strong information asymmetry. In most cases it is very difficult for the novice purchaser to discern the quality of the product that will be delivered (if any is delivered at all). The crucial point about the Contract Cheating form of plagiarism is that if the work is provided from a “reputable” company and is therefore original then it will not be detectable via *TurnItIn*.

The evidence regarding the scale of the Contract Cheating problem mainly comes from the supply side - the number of companies, their turnover, etc. There is very little information on the demand side. This is partly because of illicit nature of the good purchased but also, we suspect, because of the extremely low levels of detection for work sourced in this way.

The research reported here is concerned with the demand for coursework provided by Contract Cheating organisations. It represents a first foray into this area to analyse the decision to buy such material and how this decision is affected by the price and quality of the work and how the valuations of such coursework are affected by the risk and penalties associated with its submission, as well as the characteristics of the buyers themselves. The research reported here uses choice experiments to address students’ willingness to buy essays.

Respondents in a choice experiment are presented with repeated choice situations. Each option which makes up the choice situation comprises a series of attributes. By (systematically) varying the levels of these attributes the choices presented are varied. Respondents are asked to report which of the options they prefer. In this study students were asked to consider essays which differed in terms of 4 attributes: price, grade, risk and penalty.

An example of a choice set presented is shown here:

	Buy Essay 1	Buy Essay 2	Buy Essay 3	Buy None of Them
Price of Essay	£50	£100	£75	
Risk of Being Caught	1 / 1000 chance of being caught	1 / 1000 chance of being caught	1/100 chance of being caught	
Penalty if Caught	0% Mark for the Module	Repeat the Year	0% Mark for the Module	
Essay Grade	2(ii) Mark	2(i) Mark	1 st Class Mark	
What option would you choose?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

With sufficient responses across a sufficiently wide range of choice situations, one can analyse the implicit weight given to attributes and their levels in the choices that have been made. Further, one can analyse how the attributes are traded off against each other. The inclusion of a cost attribute allows estimation of the monetary value of changes in levels of the other attributes to survey participants.

Students recruited to the study were always presented with a “buy none” option: they were never forced to ‘buy’ an essay. To make the choice situations as realistic as possible survey participants had to be presented with essay choices related to a specific piece of assessed work that was due to be submitted shortly thereafter. Students were recruited at 3 universities using this criterion. It was made clear that the research was unequivocally based on confidentiality, and had been approved by the University’s Research Ethics Committee

We find that 50% of the students surveyed in each of the 3 universities indicate a willingness to buy essays on one or more occasion. Analysis of the survey choices allows the implicit value of the essays of differing grades to be identified. These range between £164 for a 2(ii), £212 for a 2(i) and £307 for a 1st class essay.

We find that the students’ choices are significantly affected by the levels of risk and the penalty associated with the essays – the value of the essays declines as the probability of detection increases and the penalties become tougher.

We explored variability in the sample by playing a series of standard gambles with the students and identifying *ex post* each individual’s level of risk aversion. We find the individuals’ risk preferences significantly affect their valuations of the illicit essays offered.

A degree of caution is required when considering results from such a stated preference study as one needs to consider how reliable and realistic the choices, and implicit valuations they reflect, are. When considering such hypothetical bias one is wary of systematic misreporting of preferences. It might be the case that students did not treat the choices sufficiently seriously and over-report their willingness to buy. However, in this study there may be an opposite effect: the fear of self incrimination may have caused respondents to under-report their willingness to buy. Given the illicit nature of the choices we test for significant misreporting using a Bayesian misreporting framework but find no evidence of a tendency to misreport and over-select the “buy none” option.

It is quite remarkable how many students indicated a willingness to buy. Their apparent lack of concern at revealing this in a survey run by academics at their own university is startling. The assurances of confidentiality were genuine but the level of purchasing indicated was still contrary to our expectations. Why is there such an apparent lack of stigma in revealing a willingness to purchase coursework? It may be that the ethical line that most lecturers perceive as being crossed when such purchases are made is not that significant to many students.

One could argue that in the modern University the student is treated as, and increasingly identifies and mobilises as, a consumer demanding ‘value for money’. The evidence here is that many of them are prepared to take this consumer identity one step further. Perhaps they feel that their university has subcontracted much of the teaching they receive to Graduate Teaching Assistants and hence their subcontracting of some of the work required of them is just another informed, rational, consumer choice.