



***The Intersection of Contract Academic Work
and Contract Cheating:
Policy Brief***

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I am grateful to those who support my work on educational ethics.

Images

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Abstract

Purpose: The goal of this report is to provide substance for an evidence-informed discussion about the intersection of precarious academic employment and the contract cheating industry.

Methods: This is a qualitative report informed by the extant literature. It synthesizes available source material relating to academic staff who also supply services (e.g., essay writing, assignment completion, etc.) to the commercial contract cheating industry.

Results: A summary and synthesis are provided of issues relating to precariously employed academic staff and the contract cheating industry. A key outcome of this work is to highlight how the commercial cheating industry preys on underemployed academic staff. Predatory practices of the contract cheating industry are highlighted including false promises of high pay and meaningful work. Consequences such as disciplinary action and dismissal of academic staff who moonlight as suppliers to the industry are discussed, along with possible counter-measures to raise awareness and protect academic staff.

Implications: This guide is intended to provide guidance on methods used by the commercial contract cheating industry to exploit contract academic staff. Recommendations are provided on how to build awareness about the issue and also consider protections for the precariously employed.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Message from the Author.....	5
Executive Summary	6
Introduction.....	8
Purpose Statement.....	8
Intended Audience	8
Terminology.....	9
Methodology	11
A Dearth of Data	11
Overview of Contract Academic Staff.....	12
Overview of the Contract Cheating Industry	12
The Intersection of Contract Academic Staff and the Contract Cheating Industry	14
Consequences for Supplying Services to Academic Cheating Industry	16
Disciplinary or Criminal Consequences.....	16
Possible Consequences Imposed by the Contract Cheating Industry.....	17
The Need for Advocacy and Awareness	18
International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating.....	18
Canada: CAUT's Fair Employment Week	18
Recommendations.....	19
1. Need for increased empirical evidence	19
2. Improved institutional commitment to academic staff.....	19
3. Payment for legitimate academic labour of all kinds	19
4. Supportive approach to precariously-employed academics who supply services	20
5. Increased labour protection	20
Closing Remarks.....	21
References.....	22

Message from the Author

My research into educational ethics began during my doctoral work, when I investigated revenue generating programs in higher education (Eaton, 2009). I have sharpened my focus over the years and undertook a dedicated research program on academic integrity after securing a full-time tenure track position, after twenty-two (22) years as a precariously-employed academic. During my time as a sessional, I delivered credit courses at two different universities and non-credit courses, workshops, and programs for more organizations than I can remember.

As a qualitative researcher, I frame my work by declaring my subjectivity and bias. It is important for me to declare from the start that this work is neither agnostic nor objective. Policy research can be as much about *advocacy* as it is about *analysis* (Ozga, 1999). Those with precarious academic employment who find themselves drawn into working for the contract cheating industry may be too vulnerable or ashamed to speak out.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no published research that has systematically gathered primary data from precariously-employed academics who have also supplied services to the contract cheating industry. Nevertheless, enough secondary evidence exists to insist that deeper dialogue and rigorous inquiry is needed.

I began the research that informs this report 2018. It has taken two years to locate, analyze, and synthesize the available evidence. Some sources date back almost half a century, but evidence remains scant. There is more work to be done, and this report represents a starting point for further dialogue, research, and most importantly, action.

Finally, in no way do I intend to criticize any academic peer, graduate student, or anyone else who has worked for the contract cheating industry. The intention of this report is not to demonize the disenfranchised. Indeed, if there is blame to be laid, it is on the educational system that propagates precarious academic employment, and its industry counterpart, the commercial contract cheating companies that further exploits unemployed and underemployed academics.

Executive Summary

- The goal of this report is to provide substance for an evidence-informed discussion about the intersection of precarious academic employment and the contract cheating industry.
- Readers may be more familiar with phrases such as “term paper mill” or “essay mill”, as these have been popularized. The term “contract cheating” refers to illicit academic outsourcing in both text-based and non-text-based (e.g., computer code, design, etc.) disciplines.
- The term “ghostwriter” should be avoided when talking about those who work for contract cheating companies, as this normalizes the illicit act of supplying services to the commercial academic cheating industry. Those who work for the industry are name as *suppliers*.
- The commercial industry is comprised of large corporations operating mainly online, whose entire business model is focused on facilitating academic cheating. These are sophisticated enterprises, with aggressive and predatory marketing and advertising schemes and online workflow systems designed to easily manage orders. Most of the income is kept by the company owners, with very little being paid to individual suppliers. This business model propagates a life of underemployment for individuals working in the industry.
- Students can simply upload assignment instructions to an online portal and pay the required fee to have someone complete academic work on their behalf. That “someone” can include a precariously-employed academic.
- The contract cheating industry has been boasting since the 1970s that they employ moonlighting faculty members. There has been enough documented evidence over time, including reports from the BBC (UK) to suggest that some precariously employed academic staff supply services to the industry.
- The initial offer of employment can sound captivating to the unsuspecting academic. The company offers the individual a position as a ‘professional writer’ or ‘academic writer’, with the ability to work from home, putting in as many or as few hours as they choose, and even working in their academic field of expertise. Ads offer project-based work, such as writing sample or model essays. Contract cheating companies rarely say in their job advertisements that they are seeking suppliers of unethical services for a billion-dollar industry.
- Some individuals have agreed to supply services to the contract cheating industry without realizing they are doing so. They may instead have been deceived into thinking they are providing legitimate writing services.

- Contract academic staff not only lack job security and often earn less than a living wage, they are vulnerable to recruitment by the contract cheating industry willing to prey on their expertise, qualifications, and unstable financial situation.
- **Recommendations:**
 1. **Need for increased empirical evidence:** There is an urgent need to gather more data about the experiences of those who supply services to the contract cheating industry. Such data would provide advocacy groups with more leverage and researchers with more evidence to support existing secondary sources.
 2. **Improved institutional commitment to academic staff:** The contract cheating industry would lose some of its highly qualified suppliers if those individuals had permanent and secure employment. Institutions play a key role in ensuring those who hold academic appointments have secure and sustained employment.
 3. **Payment for legitimate academic labour of all kinds:** Those with full-time and secure employment can insist that precariously-employed colleagues be paid for their legitimate contributions (e.g., contributions to research, attendance at research team meetings, etc.) To accept unpaid contributions from precariously-employed colleagues propagates a culture of exploitation and underemployment. Those in a position of privilege can advocate for those in a position of precarity.
 4. **Supportive approach to precariously-employed academics who supply services:** Administrators who would discipline or dismiss academic staff who supply services to the contract cheating industry are *enabling the system that prompted the individual to work for the industry in the first place*. An academic system that does not provide full-time and secure employment to its labour force bears some responsibility when individuals seek employment beyond the academy. Disciplinary action or dismissal of an academic colleague who has supplied services to the contract cheating industry should remain an option, but also a last resort. First, efforts should be made to understand what prompted the individual to accept such work and subsequent supports put in place to offer the individual alternative legitimate employment.
 5. **Increased labour protection:** Precariously employed academics need the support of academic unions, particularly in cases where disciplinary action might be taken for working outside of the academy.
- Academics who supply services to the contract cheating industry generally do not aspire to do unethical work. They do it because they are underemployed and are struggling to make ends meet. The systems that have propagated a rise in precarious academic employment have also created conditions for the contract cheating industry to thrive by preying on precariously employed academics.

Introduction

This paper offers an overview of the relationship between the contract cheating industry (e.g., essay mills) and precariously-employed faculty. I offer a broad overview of how the cheating industry preys on individuals with legitimate-but-precarious academic employment, luring them in to work in the cheating industry by taking short-term gig assignments often advertised as “academic writing” or “tutoring” jobs.

Purpose Statement

The goal of this report is to provide substance for an evidence-informed discussion about the intersection of precarious academic employment and the contract cheating industry.

Intended Audience

The audience for this work is first and foremost for precariously-employed academics themselves. In addition, others who may find this report useful include, but are not limited to, policy makers, academic labour groups (e.g., unions), academic administrators, allies to contingent academic staff, and students, and anyone else with an interest in academic ethics, educational integrity, precarious academic employment, and contract cheating. This report has been framed within the context of Canada, though it may also be relevant and useful to those in other jurisdictions.

This report may also be helpful to academic administrators and others who mentor aspiring or early-career academics who may be naïve about the predatory nature of contract cheating companies that aggressively pursue would-be suppliers. Mentors of individuals who have yet to secure full-time academic employment are in a position to caution against making poor career decisions that ultimately may not help in achieving one’s career goals.

It is crucial for everyone who works, or aspires to work, in academia to know how to identify contract cheating companies – and avoid them. It is equally important that precariously employed academics be supported in their efforts to earn a living through legitimate work within the academy itself.



Terminology

One of the problems researchers and advocates encounter is a lack of consistent terminology. In this report particular terms have been intentionally chosen for consistency, though it is important to acknowledge that terminology varies and regional language differences can play a role.

Language itself is political. Some, if not all of these terms are politically charged in some communities. Not all of the terms have the same meaning in every region or in every professional community. Some of the terms listed in the column labelled 'Synonyms' might be more accurately described as alternate terms, as they may not have parity with the terms used in this report. The purpose of highlighting the terms selected for this report is not to further exclude or marginalize any persons or groups, but rather to ensure consistency throughout this document.

The list of synonyms provides examples and does not represent an exhaustive list.

Table 1: Terminology

Term used in this report	Definition	Synonyms
Contract Academic Staff	Those who work in higher education without permanent work, job security. This group often lack benefits, such as medical benefits or retirement plans.	Sessional; Adjunct; Precariously Employed Faculty; Contract Faculty; Part-Time Faculty; Contingent Academic Staff / Contingent Faculty; Limited Term Appointment
Contract Cheating (verb)	The process of hiring a third party to complete academic work on behalf of an individual (usually a student). In some cases, contract cheating can also apply to professors or others who hire third parties to write papers or other work on their behalf.	Academic outsourcing
Contract Cheating Industry	The commercial business of buying and selling academic work.	Essay mills; Term paper mills; Homework "help" services; Thesis-completion services; Thesis "consultation" services
Supplier	A business or individual who supplies services or products to the contract cheating industry.	Ghostwriter; Provider

A note about the term “ghostwriter” merits attention. Although this term has been used to describe those who supply services to the industry, scholars and other experts advocate against using this term because ghostwriting can be a legitimate professional activity. That is not the case for those who supply services to the predatory cheating industry. Using the term “ghostwriter” normalizes unethical professional activity (see Bertram Gallant, 2016). Therefore, the term “ghostwriter” should be avoided. Those who work for the industry are suppliers to it and should be named as such.

The term “ghostwriter” should be avoided when referring to those who work for contract cheating companies, as the term normalizes illicit behaviour.

*Individuals who work for cheating companies are **suppliers to the industry** and should be referred to as such.*

Methodology

The aim of this report is to offer a broad, but comprehensive overview of: (1) the commercial contract cheating industry and (2) the intersection of contract academic work and the cheating industry. This report includes a synthesis of available information drawn from credible scholarly articles and books, as well as professional reports from authoritative sources. Evidence-based recommendations are offered at the conclusion of the report.

A Dearth of Data

Little is known about how many contract academic staff work also work as suppliers to the contract cheating industry. There is a general lack of data about contract academic appointments (Pasma & Shaker, 2018). It is probable that those who find themselves drawn into supplying writing, editing, or tutoring services to predatory contract cheating industry might prefer not to disclose such employment because it could further jeopardize their chances of attaining full-time academic employment. Those who work for the industry may be unwilling to participate in research that would provide the primary data that is so desperately needed.

To further complicate the matter, there are ethical complexities with gathering primary data from those who supply services to the contract cheating industry. Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2) on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans requires researchers to demonstrate a concern for research participants' welfare, including the seriousness of the harm that could result from the research such as damage to a research participant's reputation or risk to employment, etc. Further, researchers are guided to assess the probability that such harm could occur as a result of the research (see: Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018).

In the case of research involving precariously-employed academics who provide services or products to illicit or unethical companies, the risks are real, as are the possibility that harm could result from individuals choosing to participate in such research. In other words, although it is not impossible to collect primary empirical data from precariously-employed academics who moonlight by supplying services to the contract cheating industry, the ethical considerations of undertaking such research would need to be carefully considered.

Overview of Contract Academic Staff

More than half of all academic appointments in Canada are contract-based (Pasma & Shaker, 2018). Numbers are similar in the United States (American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 2014). The majority of contract faculty appointments are part-time, with women being more likely to have precarious employment than men (AAUP, 2014; Pasma & Shaker, 2018). In Canada, between half and two-thirds of contract faculty hold a PhD and a majority have been employed off the tenure-track for more than five years (Pasma & Shaker, 2018).

In the U.S., the number of non-tenure track full-time positions has been growing faster than part-time appointments (AAUP, 2014) which means that full-time tenure-track appointments are on a path to extinction. This has led to the emergence of the “gig academy” in which the majority of academics now find themselves without job security or benefits, moving from one gig to another, not unlike others who participate in the gig economy (Kezar et al., 2019). Such “gigs” can include supplying services to the commercial contract cheating industry because it is becoming increasingly difficult to make ends meet with an academic career.



Overview of the Contract Cheating Industry

Readers may be more familiar with phrases such as “term paper mill” or “essay mill”, as these have been popularized by the media. Indeed, media reports about the industry began to proliferate in the early in 1970s. *Time* magazine (1971) did a major article on term paper mills in 1971 after a string of newspapers published exposés about the proliferation of the industry in the United States (Goodman, 1971; Maeroff, 1971; Shearer, 1971). As a result, the first legal cases against term-paper mills were brought against corporate term-paper mills in 1972 (see: *State v. Saksniit*, 1972). The notable point here is that commercial term paper mills have been operating at scale for about half a century.

Florida State University (n.d.) maintains a comprehensive database of legal cases and other information relating to term paper mills in the United States, where such businesses are now considered illegal in 17 states. In 2020, it became illegal to provide contract cheating services in Australia (Parliament of

Australia, 2020). No similar legislation exists in Canada, though it has been suggested that there may be ways to pursue the development of such laws (Newton & Lang, 2016).

Because terms such as “term paper mill” or “essay mill” imply text-based (e.g., prose) work, in 2006 the term “contract cheating” was introduced by computer scientists in the UK who found students outsourcing coding assignments to online third-party providers (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006). Since then, “contract cheating” has become widely adopted as an umbrella term to include all kinds of academic outsourcing across all disciplines. Contract cheating occurs when a “third party makes a contribution to the work of the student, such that there is reasonable doubt as to whose work the assessment represents” (Draper & Newton, p. 2017, p. 1).



The academic black market (Eaton, 2017) is a massive global commercial enterprise, estimated to be worth over \$1 Billion USD (BBC, 2019). The commercial industry is comprised of large corporations operating mainly online, whose entire business model is focused on facilitating academic cheating. These are sophisticated enterprises, with aggressive and predatory marketing and advertising schemes and online workflow systems designed to easily manage orders. Students can simply upload assignment instructions to an online portal and pay the required fee to have someone complete academic work on their behalf. That ‘someone’ can include a precariously-employed academic.

For too long the issue of contract cheating has been dismissed in Canada. There is mounting evidence to show that the contract cheating industry is well established in Canada (Bretag, 2019; Eaton, 2017, 2018; Lancaster, 2019b; Rossi et al., 2019). Even more distressing is that there is evidence to show that academic outsourcing not only occurs in both official languages, but that commercial suppliers are actively marketing to Canadian children as young as grade six (Eaton & Dressler, 2019).

The Intersection of Contract Academic Staff and the Contract Cheating Industry

On a 2018 survey in Canada of contract academic staff, over half of the respondents reported that they wanted a full-time academic position and most reported that they cannot rely on sessional work to make ends meet (Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), 2018).

In the CAUT survey, 48% of respondents reported that they were employed in at least one other job outside of their contract academic staff positions. Although the survey collected data on how many additional jobs respondents had and how many hours they spent at these additional jobs, little information was collected about *what kinds of jobs* respondents did. Contract cheating jobs could fall under the category of temp, casual or self-employed categories used in the survey. It is not only possible, but also probable that some respondents worked for contract cheating companies in addition to their academic appointments.

The contract cheating industry has been boasting since the 1970s that they employ moonlighting faculty members. Owners of an early term-paper mill told a reporter at the New York Times in 1971 that their offerings are “original work written by moonlighting faculty members, graduate students, technical writers and others...” (Maeroff, 1971, p. 25).

The contract cheating industry has been boasting for half a century that they employ ‘moonlighting faculty members’.

Another early term-paper mill supplier alleged that prior to entering into the term paper industry “he was a teaching associate at ‘one of America’s best universities’” (Martin, 1972, p. 69). Yet another article, from the same time period, published on the front page of the *Boston Globe*, noted that “The professional term-paper services make these claims: There is no school in the Boston area that doesn’t have some instructor writing free-lance papers for a service. No school that doesn’t have dozens of students buying from a service” (Goodman, 1971, p. 1).

In addition to these historical accounts, there is modern evidence to support that contract cheating companies continue to “prey on vulnerable academics” (Turner, 2017, n.p.), getting “genuine academics to write their material” (Turner, 2017, n.p.).



Some individuals have agreed to supply services to the contract cheating industry without realizing they are doing so. There are an increasing number of accounts of individual suppliers who have answered an online job ad, only to discover later that they have agreed to become part of the illicit academic black market (Boyd, 2016; Mills, 2017). Such individuals may be more naïve than nefarious.

The initial offer of employment can sound captivating to an unsuspecting individual. The company offers the person a position as a ‘professional writer’ or ‘academic writer’, with the ability to work from home, putting in as many or as few hours as they choose, and even working in their academic field of expertise. Ads offer project-based work, such as writing sample or model essays. Contract cheating companies rarely say in their job advertisements that they are seeking suppliers to provide unethical services to a billion-dollar industry. One need only conduct an online search for jobs as an ‘academic writer’ to find numerous postings ready to accept individuals searching for work.

Individuals who looking for legitimate work may be unaware that the predatory cheating industry is poised to lure them in with promises of high pay and professional work related to their area of academic expertise. These are often empty promises and individual suppliers soon learn that companies will find various excuses to lower their pay and ultimately, issue as little money as possible in exchange for services rendered. The company receives the bulk of that fee paid by the consumer and the individual supplier receives a small portion, further propagating a life of underemployment.

The contract cheating industry has been estimated to be worth \$1 Billion USD. Most of the income is kept by the company owners. Very little is paid to individual suppliers. This business model propagates a life of underemployment for individuals working in the industry.

Individuals who have answered such ads and subsequently worked for contract cheating companies have been called “accidental” suppliers (Lancaster, 2019a) as they were unaware they were signing up to work with a contract cheating company. Some accidental suppliers leave after one or two gigs, while others stay on, even after they realize that the company they are working for is illicit because they cannot find sufficient legitimate academic work to sustain themselves.

It is a myth that the individuals who work for these companies are exclusively from economically under privileged countries in Africa or South East Asia. More and more, contract cheating companies are reaching out to underemployed academic staff worldwide using social media networking sites. There is strong evidence to suggest that many individual contract cheating suppliers are highly qualified. One

study reported that 90% of individual suppliers to the contract cheating industry have master's degrees or higher (Sivasubramaniam, 2016).

Consequences for Supplying Services to Academic Cheating Industry

Those who supply services to the contract cheating industry may face a variety of consequences, including disciplinary action from their employer and possible criminal charges, depending on the jurisdiction. The industry itself may impose consequences on those who attempt to leave such as coercion or blackmail.

Disciplinary or Criminal Consequences

Although it is not technically illegal to supply services or goods to the cheating industry in Canada, the global landscape is shifting quickly. Recent legislation in Australia has made it illegal to advertise or supply academic cheating services (Parliament of Australia, 2020). Similarly, in the UK, it has been proposed that academics who supply services to the contract cheating industry might be subject to investigation and disciplinary action (Quality Assurance Agency, 2020).

In Canada, many institutions have codes of conduct for academic staff and supplying services to contract cheating companies may contravene institutional policies. Individuals who supply services to a contract cheating company could be declared to pose a risk to the reputation of the institution(s) that employ them as academic staff. This means that individuals who provide services to essay mills or other contract cheating companies risk losing their reputation and their job if they are discovered. This drives the industry further underground because individuals who supply services to contract cheating companies may not discuss such activities with others. In turn, this can lead to further isolation and frustration as precariously employed academics scramble to piece together enough work to survive.



Although precariously employed academic staff may be inadvertently lured into supplying services for cheating companies and bear responsibility for their actions, they are simultaneously victims of a predatory industry that lures students into buying and gig workers into supplying for. The system continues to flourish because of supply and demand. Although much work has been underway to

prevent contract cheating from happening from the student side of the equation, little has been done to support those drawn into working for the industry.

Academics who supply services to the contract cheating industry

do not generally aspire to do unethical work.

They do it because they are underemployed and are struggling to make ends meet.

Academics who supply services to the contract cheating industry do not generally aspire to do unethical work. They do it because they are underemployed and are struggling to make ends meet. *The systems that have propagated a rise in precarious academic employment have also created conditions for the contract cheating industry to thrive by preying on underemployed academics.* There are companies whose entire corporate identity centres around providing work for precariously employed academics.

Possible Consequences Imposed by the Contract Cheating Industry

Since about 2018 there has been increasing evidence to show that contract cheating companies blackmail customers (i.e., students) threatening to report them to their schools for academic misconduct if they do not continue to pay money in order to keep the purchasing of academic work a secret (O'Brien, 2019; Ross, 2018; Yorke et al., 2020). Students are often unaware of the possibility of being blackmailed or harassed by contract cheating companies (Yorke et al., 2020).

Because it has been documented that some cheating companies blackmail and harass their customers, the possibility exists that such treatment would also extend to individual suppliers. In other words, there is a possibility that if contract cheating companies are blackmailing students, they are also likely to blackmail individual suppliers by reporting or threatening to report them to their academic employers if the supplier attempts to leave the contract cheating company. This remains, as yet, an entirely understudied aspect of the contract cheating industry, but one that must be considered as a possibility.

The Need for Advocacy and Awareness

The academic labour side of the contract cheating industry, in relation to precarious employment, has been woefully ignored. There is an urgent need to recognize that a lack of legitimate academic employment could result in highly qualified individuals being drawn into illicit work. Although such work may not be illegal in Canada, the consequences can be real as academics remain underemployed, exhausted, and risk losing the legitimate appointments they have if they disclose their activities to colleagues or others.

International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating

The International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating, organized by the International center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) began in 2015 to raise awareness about contract cheating among students, faculty, and other educational staff. Each year, an increasing number of institutions worldwide pledge to take part in awareness events on their campuses to draw attention to this issue. Increasingly, the predatory nature of the industry has been a focus of the International Day of Action. There is a need to highlight how individual suppliers are also subject to exploitation within the industry.

Canada: CAUT's Fair Employment Week

In Canada, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) hosts Fair Employment Week occurs annually to raise awareness about the need to improve “the working conditions and job security of contract academic staff” (CAUT, n.d.) It cannot be over-emphasized that “working conditions” exist both within and beyond individual institutions.

Contract academic staff not only lack job security and often earn less than a living wage, they are also vulnerable to recruitment by the illicit contract cheating industry willing to prey on their expertise, qualifications, and their need to earn money to supplement their legitimate academic earnings.

Recommendations

A number of concrete recommendations emerge from this information synthesis.

1. Need for increased empirical evidence

The phenomenon of contract academic staff being prey to the contract cheating industry has existed for decades, but has remained a neglected aspect of academic labour advocacy. One reason for this, undoubtedly, is a lack of available data. Rigorous inquiry must be undertaken to understand first-hand experiences of contract academic staff and others who supply services to the contract cheating industry. Such research must protect participants to ensure that neither they, nor any legitimate employment they have, is put at risk.

Those who have chosen to share their experiences in the media have often done so under pseudonyms (Martin, 1971; Mills, 2017). This points to a reluctance among those who share their experiences to disclose their identities. Protecting the identities of research participants is a key priority.

Providing that ethical considerations have been carefully considered, there is an urgent need to gather more data about the experiences of those who supply services to the industry. Such data would provide advocacy groups with more leverage and researchers with more evidence for scholarly investigations.

2. Improved institutional commitment to academic staff

A common characteristic of contract academic staff is “that their institutions make little or no long-term commitment to them or to their academic work” (AAUP, 2014, p. 171). The contract cheating industry would lose some of its highly qualified suppliers if those individuals had permanent and secure employment. Institutions play a key role in ensuring those who hold academic appointments have secure and sustained employment.

Institutions have an ethical obligation to provide career development support to all academic staff. This includes regular meetings with administrators and academic human resources professionals who have a responsibility for mentoring and helping academic staff advance in their careers.

3. Payment for legitimate academic labour of all kinds

Those with precarious academic employment who are eager for a full-time tenure-track appointment may find themselves invited to contribute to research projects or publications in order to gain experience and increase their publications in order to increase their competitiveness on the job market. Academics with full-time permanent appointments are positioned to advocate for their precariously-employed colleagues. Those with full-time and secure employment can insist that precariously-

employed colleagues are paid for their legitimate contributions (e.g., contributions to research, attendance at meetings, etc.)

To accept unpaid contributions from precariously-employed colleagues propagates a culture of exploitation and underemployment. Those in a position of privilege must advocate for those in a position of precarity.

4. Supportive approach to precariously-employed academics who supply services

Efforts have been underway in other countries to punish or criminalize the supply of services to contract cheating companies (e.g., Australia). There is no doubt that those who supply services to the industry should be held responsible for their actions. On the other hand, administrators who would discipline or dismiss academic staff who supply services to the contract cheating industry are also supporting the system that prompted the individual to work for the industry in the first place. An academic system that does not provide full-time and secure employment to its labour force bears some responsibility when individuals seek employment beyond the academy.

Disciplinary action or dismissal of an academic colleague who has supplied services to the contract cheating industry should remain an option, but also a last resort. First, efforts should be made to understand what prompted the individual to accept such work and supports put in place to offer the individual alternative legitimate employment. Only if and when it has been determined that genuine efforts of support have been rejected should punitive action or dismissal be considered.

5. Increased labour protection

Academic unions have a key role to play in advocating for the working conditions of contract academic staff. It must be acknowledged that “working conditions” apply not only to an individual institution where an academic might hold an appointment, but also be considered in broader overall terms. The working conditions of higher education as a *system* must be considered. Precariously employed academics need the support of academic unions, particularly in cases where disciplinary action might be taken for working outside of the academy.

Closing Remarks

There is much work to be done to better understand how the predatory contract cheating industry takes advantage of precariously employed academic staff. It is imperative that the dialogue focus on how to improve working conditions for highly qualified academics eager for full-time, secure, and legitimate employment.

Judgement and finger pointing will not solve the systemic problems that have resulted in the phenomenon of unethical academic work propagated by the contract cheating industry. Those in positions of privilege must seek first to support colleagues who have yet to attain full-time and secure employment. Such support can come through mentorship, advocacy, and an insistence that contract academic staff must be adequately compensated for their contributions to the academy.

The contract cheating industry presents a direct and imminent threat to educational systems at every level. This threat includes predatory marketing and business transactions with students, as well as exploitative employment for individuals to supply services. The commercial contract cheating has existed as an organized and large-scale industry for half a century or more. It is time for academia as a whole to take action against contract cheating.

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About the author

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Eaton received the 2020 Research and Scholarship Award from the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE) for her research relating to educational ethics and academic integrity in Canadian Higher Education. Eaton has also received the Werklund School of Education Teaching Excellence Award (2015).

Eaton spent 22 years as a contract academic staff member before securing a tenure-track position. She has never worked as a contract cheater, but she knows of contract academic staff who have.

Prominent works

Eaton, S. E., & Burns, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Women negotiating life in the academy: A Canadian perspective*: Springer. doi: 10.1007/978-981-15-3114-9

Eaton, S. E. (2021). *Plagiarism in higher education: Tackling tough topics in academic integrity*. Libraries Unlimited.