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Why do University Students in the UK Buy Assignments from Essay Mills?

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Abstract

This article considers the growing crisis on a specific form of plagiarism in the UK where students purchase assignments from so called essay mills, which they then submit as their own work. It departs from the dominant discourses, however, to highlight the sociological context within which such student plagiarism, termed contract cheating, is occurring. This context revolves around an increasing shortage of graduate jobs and the stress and anxiety caused by the competition for the jobs that are available. It argues that the dominant discourses that simply describe and denounce contract cheating are not only devoid of such a contextual understanding, they work against such an analysis. It concludes that the way to prevent or eradicate such student plagiarism lies not in the criminalisation and punishment of offending businesses or individual miscreants but, rather, in a sociological understanding of why it occurs in the first place, which signals the need for radical reform of the existing social order as it relates to employment and education.



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Introduction

Student plagiarism is a form of deviance that can be defined as the practice of taking the work or ideas of another, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and passing it off as your own, for your own benefit, without the appropriate acknowledgement (Carroll, 2007). It comes in many guises, ranging from inadvertent and/or unintentional failures to provide correct or full references in essays and dissertations to any form of published or unpublished text or information at one end of the continuum (Park, 2003), to students paying third-parties working for so called “essay mills” (Bartlett, 2009) to write their assignments for them at the other, a phenomenon commonly known as ‘contract cheating’ (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006; Walker & Townley, 2012).¹

Student plagiarism has always been a perennial feature of the UK Higher Education (HE) landscape (Bowers, 1965; Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead, 1995; Ashworth et al, 1997; Walker, 1998), but there is currently a growing crisis (Mostrous and Kenber, 2016) amongst university educators and leaders, whether within universities or in government, in response to the specific problem of contract cheating.² This was fuelled by a widely reported Freedom of Information (FoI) request by *The Times* in 2016. It claimed that plagiarism in UK universities is currently at ‘epidemic’ proportions, with over 50,000 cases in the three years between 2013-16 alone, and that using the commercial writing services of so-called essay mills was increasing (Ali, 2016; Barratt, 2011).

In terms of the likely scale of such contract cheating as a specific social phenomenon, it is estimated that there are around 100 essay mill websites (Khomami, 2017) offering their services to UK students and that between 1 in 7 (Newton, 2018) or 15% (Evans, 2018) and 50% (Rigby et al, 2015, p. 24) of students³ have bought an essay from an essay mill at some time⁴ in an industry said to be worth over £100 million per annum (Audland, 2018; Lancaster, 2016a).

In response to the threat posed by contract cheating, the then Universities Minister, Jo Johnson, was unequivocal in asserting what he thought about it and what he thought needs to be done about it:

This form of cheating is unacceptable and every university should have strong policies and sanctions in place to detect and deal with it. Essay mill websites threaten to undermine the high-quality reputation of a UK degree so it is vital that

¹ Contract cheating can also include essays written for students by family and friends (Harper et al, 2018), although this article is specifically concerned with commercial forms of contract cheating where students purchase assignments from so called essay mills.

² Although this article is specifically about contract cheating in UK universities, it is very much a global phenomenon, with research that has analysed the legality and/or effects existing on various education systems around the World. This includes research on contract cheating in the United States (Dickerson, 2007), Australia (Steel, 2017), New Zealand (Savage, 2014; Draper and Newton, 2017), Canada (Eaton, 2019) and Lithuania (Tauginienė and Jurkevičius, 2017). My aim here is to contribute to the global conversation.

³ In reality, there is no way of knowing the true scale of student plagiarism, generally, or contract cheating, specifically, as the data relates only to students who either get caught cheating or admit to cheating on self-report surveys, which is notorious for under-reporting as respondents may not want to declare deviant acts or criminal behaviour (Newton, 2018).

⁴ According to a review of 65 previous studies in 2018, it was claimed that as many as 31 million university students worldwide are paying third parties to complete their assessments for them (Smith, 2018).

the sector works together to address this in a consistent and robust way. (Department for Education and Johnson, 2017)

A clarion call, indeed, and it is this way of understanding the nature of commercial contract cheating in British universities and what should be done about it that is reflected in the dominant discourses, which variously focus either on the supply or the purchase side. In terms of the supply side discourse, it is the companies that provide students with assignments-for-purchase that is seen as the main source of the problem (Medway et al, 2018). More specifically, essay mills are denounced for preying on “vulnerable” (Ross, 2017) or “gullible” (Lancaster, 2016) students and “exploiting their anxieties for profit”⁵ (Greatrix, 2018; also Rowland, et al, 2018; Nelson, 2018; O’Malley, 2017). In terms of how the problem might be resolved, there are calls for companies that provide paid writing services to students to be banned from advertising⁶ their services on university campuses⁷ (Busby, 2018), for global online companies, such as Facebook, Google, YouTube and Paypal, to block essay mills and stop them advertising on their platforms (Quality Assurance Agency, 2018), and even for such companies to be criminally prosecuted for colluding with students in acts of academic dishonesty, which are tantamount to criminal fraud (Draper and Newton, 2017; Draper and Newton, 2018).

Alternatively, the purchase side discourse places the emphasis on students who are variously depicted as poor organisers or time managers (Bessonova, 2018), “lazy” (Academics Anonymous, 2017) or LOTE (Language Other Than English) (Bretag et al, 2018). Mirroring calls for harsher sanctions against essay mills, purchase side discourse proposes that contract cheating can be tackled by threatening students with disqualification from their degrees (Opulencia, 2018), with fines (Yorke, 2017) or with criminalisation (Steel, 2017; Draper & Newton, 2017). This approach was recently given further support by the current Universities Minister, Sam Gyimah, in the following terms:

I expect universities to be educating students about these services and highlight the stiff, and possibly life changing, penalties they face” (cited in Smith, 2018).

A major problem with contract cheating confronting such discourses on a practical level, however, is the ease with which it currently evades detection by existing plagiarism software to identify it (Walker & Townley, 2012)⁸ and how widely this is likely to be known amongst those who might be tempted into using an essay mill. As such, the assurances that essay mills give to prospective customers, that their academic writing services are effectively plagiarism proof, currently ring true (Sokol, 2018), with the likely result that such services will continue to flourish and their usage will be undeterred.

⁵ Although the precise nature of those ‘anxieties’ and where they stem from is left unexplored.

⁶ A parliamentary petition to ban the provision and advertising of essay mill cheating services was also started in August 2018, which currently has almost 6,000 signatures (UK Government and Parliament, 2018).

⁷ In January 2009, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) banned an advertisement for Oxbridge Essays because it ‘misleadingly’ gave the implications that students could ‘submit purchased essays as their own without repercussions’ and that most of its essay writers were former students or lecturers at the universities of Oxford or Cambridge. This was the second time that the ASA has ruled against such an advert by Oxbridge Essays (Morgan, 2019).

⁸ Turnitin recently announced, however, that it was devising a new tool, Authorship Investigation, to help spot potential cases of contract cheating (Bailey, 2018).

Moreover, although it is not wrong, *per se*, to condemn essay mills or contract cheating students for the obvious damage that can be, and is, being caused to the reputation of UK HE and its academic currency both at home and abroad (Lancaster, 2016b), such discourses are also problematic on a theoretical level. To be sure, such utterances constitute what Kaposi and Dell (2011) would term “moralistic” discourses, which use emotive metaphors such as “epidemic”, “cheat” or “lazy” to confine the debate on contract cheating to the direct intentions of the agents involved, either buyers or sellers. This, then, serves to restrict understandings and, crucially, what can or should be done in response to contract cheating, foreclosing alternative analyses and any possible forms of action that might flow from them.

Against this background, this article departs from the dominant discourses on contract cheating, which focus either on suppliers or purchasers, to highlight the sociological context within which contract cheating is occurring in terms of the increasing shortage of, and competition for, graduate jobs and the stress and anxiety that this causes. It argues that the dominant discourses that simply describe and denounce contract cheating are not only devoid of such a contextual understanding, they work against such an analysis.

To this end, the remainder of this article is three broad parts. First, a brief historical analysis of the changing nature of the British labour market is provided to contextualise the increasing competition of jobs that underpins the decision-making processes of students who are left with no real alternative but to opt to go to university in the hope of obtaining qualifications as a means of securing employment. Then, the exponential growth of university enrolment over the last fifty years is analysed to emphasise the increasing forms of competition that contemporary students face compared with their historical counterparts. Finally, the root causes of the stress and anxiety that contemporary students experience is evaluated in the context of forms of counter discourse on, or resistance to, contract cheating that can be derived from student voices. This aids a sociological understanding of why students cheat by further contextualising the pressures that contemporary students are under to obtain the goal of first-rate academic qualifications.

It is concluded that the way to prevent such student plagiarism lies not in criminalisation but, rather, in a sociological understanding on why it occurs in the first place, which signals the need for a more radical approach altogether in terms of fundamental changes to the existing social order as it relates to employment and education.

The Increasing Competition for Contemporary Jobs

The history of modernity can be characterised as the increasing production of what Zygmunt Bauman (2003) referred to as “human waste”: people who are considered surplus to requirements and whom the State wants no responsibility for. Indeed, the inner logic of modern capitalist societies is to design ever more efficient production processes with increasingly less labour to maximise profits. In times past, such “redundant” or “disposable” (Bauman, 2014) people produced in Britain were somewhat disguised by loss of lives through wars and their displacement under such things as colonialism and other periods of mass migration, which saw hundreds of thousands of people for whom there was no longer a viable future make their homes in other parts of the world, most notably, perhaps, America and Australia.

As the whole world became modern, however, such economically unneeded or unwanted people could no longer be so easily absorbed by the labour markets of other countries, which themselves were producing superfluous people from a labour market perspective, and the

phenomenon of domestic human waste was born, creating an increasing number of working age redundant or disposable people in the UK who have no formal employment.

A defining moment of the British human waste phenomenon can be located in the changes that occurred in the mid to late 1970s, which resulted in profound changes to the type and number of jobs available in the UK nowadays where there is increasing competition in securing a job of any description. Indeed, where manufacturing accounted for 40% of the labour force in Britain between the 1840s and the 1960s (The Economist, 2016), it now (data to September 2018) employs less than three million (or around 8%) of the 32,494,000 in work (Office for National Statistics, 2018a). Moreover, whereas 22% of the workforce worked in agriculture and fishing in England and Wales in 1841, less than 1% were employed in such industries by 2011 (Office for National Statistics, 2013).

In place of such occupations, the service sector now employs over 80% of workers (Office for National Statistics, 2016) in a labour market that is unrecognisable in terms of the stability and general certainty of obtaining some form of employment that was characteristic of the past, with fierce competition for even relatively menial jobs. A pertinent example is the more than 1,700 applicants who applied for the eight jobs on offer at a new branch of Costa Coffee in Nottingham in 2013. The wages for the posts ranged between £6.10 (the minimum wage at the time) and £10 an hour, with the applicants ranging from new graduates to former managers, who were clearly overqualified for the positions (Williams, 2013).

Yet, such competition is the norm rather than the exception these days, which gives lie to another common adage, which states that ‘those who want work will find work’. Such an idea harks back to a bygone era in British society that no longer exists. However, it can be conceptualised as serving the important political function of placing the onus onto an individual who may be struggling to get a job, any job, and who may be vastly overqualified for the jobs that they are applying for. Indeed, it diverts attention away from an analysis of a society that is failing to provide employment opportunities to an increasing number of its citizens.

As of December 2018, the official figures proclaim that unemployment stands at around 4%, or 1.4 million out of a possible workforce of around 32.5 million. This was hailed as a fall in unemployment from the previous year when 350,000 fewer were in paid employment (Office for National Statistics, 2018b).

However, the way that ‘unemployed’ is defined is in terms of those who qualify for unemployment benefit. This gives the impression that a greater number of those who could work are working (i.e. 96%) when the reality is that approximately 75% of the population of working age (16-64) is currently working, of the true available workforce of just over 41 million.⁹

In official parlance, the 1 in 4 people who are of working age but are not working in the UK, are defined as the ‘economically inactive’ and currently amount to 8.74 million (September 2018) (Office for National Statistics, 2018b). This category is mainly comprised of students (27.3%), people looking after the family or home (23.4%), the long-term sick (22.8%) and those who are not looking for work because they have retired (12.8%). The notion that such groups are economically inactive is not only a rather imprecise way to describe those who may well be major

⁹ The true working age population of just over 41 million has been calculated by adding the data on those in employment between July to September 2018, 32,494,000 (Office for National Statistics, 2018a) with the Labour Force Survey data on the ‘economically inactive’, which numbered 8,736,000 in September 2018 (Office for National Statistics, 2018c) to give a total potential workforce of 41, 230,000.

economic consumers or contributors to the communities in which they live or the UK economy, generally, it presents them in pejorative terms too.

Such a negative conception demeans and devalues the work that each of these groups undertakes as it is unpaid, failing to acknowledge the numerous forms of economy that spring up to cater for students, the disabled and/or retirees, for instance. In general terms, it also fails to consider that a significant proportion of the so-called economically inactive might well be in work if there were jobs for them to work in. And, in the specific case of students, which is the focus here, it neglects that the “choice” to go to university may involve taking on tens of thousands of pounds of debt (Department for Education, 2018; also Jones, 2018) to try to obtain qualifications so that they are better placed to try to secure employment that they might not otherwise be able to get.

Indeed, there are around 2 million in the economically inactive data who are defined as having only a ‘marginal attachment to the labour market’; individuals who want to work but are not counted as unemployed because they had not actively searched for work in the four weeks preceding the unemployment survey, and so are not eligible for unemployment benefits (Office for National Statistics, 2018d). The marginally attached data also includes another nebulous category of unemployed who are termed “discouraged workers”, amounting to several hundreds of thousands who are not counted as part of the official labour force as, although it is accepted that they want to work, they are regarded as having simply given up looking for work as they do not believe that any kind of work is available for them (Office for National Statistics, 2018d).

The significance of this part of the analysis is that it underlines the context within which the “choice” to go to university needs to be critically understood. Indeed, not including the almost nine million in the economically inactive data who might work if jobs were available, the official unemployment rate for those aged 19-24 in the UK is almost 13%, with those under 25 three times more likely to be unemployed than the rest of the general population (Pells, 2017).

Only adding to the forces that shape a young person’s decision to go to university is the ever present spectre of not wanting to join the growing army of NEETs, that is, the 783,000 young people (aged 16 to 24 years) in the UK who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Office for National Statistics, 2018e). To be sure, confronted with the ‘choice’ between being a NEET or going to university with the hope of gaining qualifications and bettering your chances of a decent job and a decent life, opting for university can be conceived as the only rational decision to make in the circumstances.

The Increasing Need for Value Added First-Rate Academic Qualifications

In this context, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that over the last half century the UK has witnessed exponential growth in tertiary education attendance. Indeed, faced with an increasing dearth of traditional employment opportunities, and, also, in the context of a general discursive valorisation of the virtues of going to university coming from the political sphere over the last couple of decades (Blair, 2001), student numbers have almost sextupled over the period. This has seen a rise from around 400,000 full time HE students at UK institutions in the 1960s (Wyness, 2010) to 2.32 million students studying at UK higher education providers in 2016/17, of which 1.87 million are students from the UK (Universities UK, 2018).

The discourse for choosing UK higher education proclaims, proudly, that its product is “world-class”, “with four of the top six universities in the world in the UK”, and emphasises the intellectual and personal development aspects of HE as “life changing”. According to Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (2016a) (UCAS), whose main role is to operate the application process for British universities, going to university is:

[A]ll about giving you the inspiration and opportunities to develop your skills and knowledge, the freedom to be creative, and the support you need to achieve your best.

On the other hand, and somewhat at odds this, UCAS also highlight that opting for UK higher education means that students “will gain a qualification that’s internationally recognised - UK higher education qualifications are recognised and respected by employers and academics worldwide”; and, they:

“[W]ill increase [their] earning potential – having a degree makes you more attractive to employers, you’ll have a greater choice of jobs and you’ll earn more. The average salary for graduates is 30% higher than for non-graduates aged 25-30. In 2013–14, 90% of all graduates were in work or further study within six months of leaving university” (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2016b).

It is insightful that UCAS place such emphasis on the professional development, employability and enhanced earning potential for UK HE students as for many students that is, precisely, the reason for opting to go to university in the first place. To be sure, a survey on why students choose to go to university by the National Union of Students (NUS) found that the most common responses were: “to gain qualifications” (68%), “to improve my chances of getting a job” (53%), and “to improve my earning potential” (44%) (National Union of Students, 2008, p. 6). More recently, albeit from a different country, is the research by Adams et al (2017) on plagiarism in a university in New Zealand, which “found that all of the students, except for one [in the study], found university as a stepping stone to employment and as an opportunity to get a job ticket” (Adams cited in Elmes, 2016).

The reality, then, despite the narrative of personal development and intellectual growth and enrichment, is that a significant percentage of young people who choose to embark on a university degree can be conceived as doing so as a “means to an end”. That is, many can be said to “choose” to go to university, not for an avid curiosity for any particular subject, but, rather, for career related pragmatics and may not have “chosen” to go to university if alternatives avenues to a getting a good job with good pay were available in the way that they were in the past.

This has had several effects that have served to combine to further intensify the forces that surround and bear upon students who opted for university as a steppingstone towards a job. First, there has been a significant increase in the grades awarded at universities over the last couple of decades, which has increased the pressure on students to get first-rate academic qualifications, 2:1 (upper second) or above.¹⁰ Indeed, the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) data shows that in 1998/99 approximately 8% of graduates in the UK obtained a first-class honours degree, 42% a 2:1 and the remaining 50% achieved a 2:2 (lower second) (Higher Education Statistical

¹⁰ For further information on the UK honours degree system for undergraduates see UCL (2020).

Agency, 2018a). This compares with a tripling of first-class honours degrees since the 1990s (Paton, 2013), with more than three quarters gaining an upper second (2:1) or above and only 1 in 5 students being awarded a 2:2 in 2016 (Press Association, 2017). Overall, 26% of all graduates in the 2016-17 academic year were awarded a first-class degree (Higher Education Statistical Agency (2018b). Such data has fuelled growing concerns that universities are grossly inflating grades to lure students to their universities and/or to obtain better satisfaction rates in The National Student Survey (NSS)¹¹ and/or better rankings in the various league tables,¹² which will serve to undermine the value of UK degrees and the overall reputation of UK HE both domestically and globally (Forrest, 2018; Baker, 2018).

Second, the increasing pool of highly qualified graduates has created unprecedented levels of competition for graduate employment. Indeed, a report from The Association of Graduate Recruiters in 2012 suggested that because the labour market had become so fiercely competitive, with the UK's leading employers receiving an average of 85 applications for every available position (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, 2013), that the top graduate employers are simply screening out graduates who fail to gain first-class degrees as it was one of the simplest, and cheapest, ways to create a shortlist (Peacock, 2012; also Paton, 2013).

Third, a further consequence of a surfeit of highly qualified graduates is that recruiters for the UK's leading organisations increasingly require applicants to have a wealth of voluntary and/or work experience on top of their first-rate academic qualifications so that they can differentiate between applicants for graduate jobs who almost all have either a First or 2:1 degree (Press Association, 2017). On this point, research conducted by High Fliers (2018) found that work experience is as essential as excellent academic performance for a significant number of the country's leading graduate employers, with over a third of the organisations featured in the research warning that:

[I]n today's competitive job market, it was either 'not very likely' or 'not at all likely' that a graduate who'd had no previous work experience at all with any employers would be successful during their selection process and be made a job offer, irrespective of their academic achievements or the university they had attended.

Unlike previous generations of university students, then, today's students must greatly outperform their predecessors if they want to land a graduate career. Not only do they have to perform first-rate in their academic studies, they must also have a wealth of extra-curricular experiences, too (Ardehali, 2015).

As with all competitions, however, in the intense contest for contemporary graduate jobs, not all can, or will succeed, no matter what academic qualifications or extra-curricular achievements they might have. Indeed, a study conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in 2015 found that around 6 out of every 10 (58.8%) UK graduates ended up in non-graduate jobs, with approximately 10% of those employed in coffee shops, bars, call centres and at hospitality events (Tait, 2016).

¹¹ The claimed purpose of the NSS is to inform student choice (The National Student Survey, 2018).

¹² Which also works to influence student choice.

Student Pressure and Anxiety

It has long been known that stress and the pressure for good grades are the main reasons for student cheating (Davis et al, 1992). Today's students, however, are experiencing unprecedented levels of pressure compared with their historical counterparts to the extent that it can be conceived as a constant and ever-present force that bears upon students. They are perpetually aware that not all of them will or can succeed in their aspiration of a graduate career, no matter how well they do in their academic studies and no matter how brimming their CV is with extra-curricular experiences too. As Marina Della Giusta (2015) observed, students are 'definitely feeling more stressed' these days:

The factors that really drive it are financial stress, university education has become more expensive. And job prospects are more uncertain, so they're not sure whether it's going to pay off. (cited in Coughlan, 2015)

In terms of the likely numbers affected, the UPP Annual Student Experience Survey for 2017 found that 48% of males and 67% of females 'find the stress of studying difficult to cope with at university' (UPP, 2017).

This has created something of a perfect storm for student stress and anxiety that the dominant discourses fail to consider or chose to ignore (discussed further below), although it is at the fore of a discernible counter discourse on contract cheating, which can be derived from student voices, which emphasise the pivotal link between stress and anxiety and contract cheating.

For Fanni Zombor (2018), from the Open University Students Association (OUSA), for instance, contract cheating is caused by a range of factors, such as student debts and the inflexibility and/or difficulty in accessing academic support that combine to "pressure" "desperate" students "who may be struggling and tempted to use these services as an easy way out". Perhaps most crucially for Zombor (2018), punishing students is not the answer but, rather, recognising and dealing with the underpinning causes which see essay mills thrive.

In a similar vein, Sophie Whitehead (2017), another student voice seeking to counter the dominant discourse on contract cheating, argued in *The Student Newspaper* that "where there is a group of vulnerable, desperate people, it's guaranteed that there will soon be a tailor-made industry with the soul (sic) purpose of exploiting them." Echoing Zombor (2018), White (2017) also argued that "we must look at understanding the larger problem' that causes students to turn to essay mills:

...namely the insurmountable pressure from so many different angles that being a student involves...In a way that no previous university-attending generation can understand, there is a suffocating, often overwhelming pressure – unprecedented amounts of debt, lack of career prospects, and uncertainty about the future of the job climate, to name but a few. With so much to think about, it's unsurprising students are looking to ways to alleviate the burden of responsibility; it is just unfortunate that essay mills are seen as a way out.

This way of thinking is broadly analogous with Robert Merton's (1938) "strain theory" on why certain individuals feel pressured to commit economic crimes, which seems useful, too, in explaining the occurrence of contract cheating in universities. Indeed, in developing Durkheim's (1893/84; 1897/1951) concept of "anomie" ("normlessness"), Merton (1938) sought to explain

forms of deviant or nonconformist behaviour that can be attributed to the pressure on individuals to attain culturally prescribed goals, in his case material success, in the case of this article first-rate academic qualifications. The thrust of his thesis was that those who are unable to achieve such culturally proscribed goals through the legitimate avenues to obtain them might turn to illegitimate and deviant, meaning, for him, criminally unlawful, means to obtain them.

At his most radical, perhaps, Merton (1938, p. 672) suggested that “certain phases of social structure generate the circumstances in which infringement of social codes constitutes a “normal response.” In the same way, the conduct of students who use the services of essay mills cannot be divorced from the wider context within which the behaviour occurs. To be sure, a central insight from Merton (1938) was the effect on conduct when cultural success-goals, such as the desire for a 2:1 degree or above in this analysis, become detached from the legitimate institutional means to attain them.

This highlights the importance of a sociological understanding of the pressures exerted upon individuals that shape their desires and aspirations and the choices that they make as they strive to attain those aspirations. As Merton noted:

In the extreme case, the [student in this analysis] may be so vitiated by the goal-emphasis that the range of behavior is limited only by considerations of technical expediency. The sole significant question then becomes, which available means is most efficient in netting the socially approved value? The technically most feasible procedure, whether legitimate or not, is preferred to the institutionally prescribed conduct. As this process continues, the integration of the society becomes tenuous and anomie ensues. (1938, p. 674)

Considered from this perspective, anomie can be said to be widespread and growing in British universities in the current moment. Indeed, not insignificant numbers of students clearly feel that the objective of obtaining the cultural goal of a 2:1 degree or above, for instance, is of greater importance than complying with the rules and run the risk of not getting the academic qualifications that they so desire. They see this as a vital requirement of another culturally prescribed goal – a highly prized graduate job.¹³

Conclusion

Even if contract cheating were technologically possible fifty years ago, it is unlikely that it would have occurred, and certainly not on the scale that it is occurring today, as it simply was not necessary. Indeed, students of the 1960s and 70s opted to go to university under different circumstances and graduated into an entirely different employment universe to their contemporary counterparts. Then, was an era when students felt relatively little pressure or anxiety compared with students today. University then was not so intimately linked with the labour market and a 2:2 degree was the gold standard for a rewarding graduate career whilst extra-curricular experiences were not needed either. By contrast, university now is a miserable and painful experience for many students who ‘choose’ to go to university as a steppingstone towards a job. Despite getting first-

¹³ It is important to note, however, that such forms of deviancy are not restricted to undergraduate students at universities in the UK or elsewhere. Indeed, examples abound of cheating in ‘high stakes’ tests by teachers and students, alike, in the UK (see, for instance, McInerney, 2018; Tait, 2018) and US (see, for instance, Nichols and Berliner, 2007; Terbush, 2011) for instance, which could also be conceptualised in the same way.

rate degrees and having a wealth of extra-curricular experiences on their CVs, they are still not guaranteed a graduate career.

Yet, the changes to the social order as it relates to employment and education that have been charted here are not to be understood as natural, nor accidental forces that could not be prevented. On the contrary, they are a consequence of political decisions and exercises of power that altered, fundamentally, the nature of work and the amount of jobs available to the British labour force, which impacted, too, on the function of university as intrinsically related to employment in crucial ways that it was not in the past.

Indeed, the changes to the social order that now sees a quarter of the population of working age without employment and over half of graduating students unable to obtain a graduate career are the predictable outcomes of a neoliberal capitalist society that put (and puts) economic profit ahead of the basic social and cultural needs of its population in terms of secure employment and financial security for themselves and their loved ones.

Despite this, the dominant discourses on contract cheating restrict the gaze to the direct intentions of buyers or sellers of academic assignments diverting attention away from such a wider critical sociological analysis of the context of such deviant behaviour. In so doing, the dominant discourses serve, also, to obscure the beneficiaries of the existing arrangements, which includes the government in terms of decreasing the unemployment statistics, marketized universities who see students as mere ‘funding units’ and who clamour with one another for student fees to increase the coffers and employers who have exponentially larger pools of highly qualified graduates to choose from. And, accompanying this stance is a total moral indifference (Bauman, 1989) by such beneficiaries, as well as the advocates of the dominant discourses, to the plight or suffering of any students unable to get a job no matter what their qualifications or extra-curricular experiences. Instead, they are conceived and treated as a product of their own individual failings, rather than collateral victims of the existing social order. To apply and paraphrase Bauman (2014), they are regarded as redundant or disposable people for whom there is no longer a need and who are, therefore, left to their own devices to try to survive by whatever means that can. Was this not made explicitly clear with the introduction of student fees, an overt signal that there was a saturation of graduates and that society did not need the number of graduates that were being produced?

This reveals the theoretical limitations at the heart of the discourses that simply denounce contract cheating and call for the criminalisation and punishment of buyers or sellers as the way to resolve the problem. Indeed, as Michel Foucault (1977) observed, exercises of power in modern societies are not to be understood as merely prohibitive but, rather, as productive and constitutive of forms of social reality and human conduct. As such, it is the changes to the social order that were ushered in by the forces of global capitalism and the wholesale outsourcing of formerly staple British industries that can be attributed with producing the specific set of social circumstances under which the phenomenon of contract cheating emerged; with producing a symbiotic union between students who feel compelled to cheat and an industry of essay mills that exists to provide for their cheating.

The implications of this kind of sociological analysis is that it opens critical spaces for alternative ways of making sense of contract cheating as a social phenomenon. To be sure, “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault, 1979, p. 94-95) and rather than seeing contract cheating merely in the narrow terms of the deviancy of the direct intentions of buyers or sellers, counter discursive student voices indicate that nonconformist or anomic students (c.f. Merton,

1938) can be conceptualised as performing defiant acts of resistance in the face of a pernicious form of political violence by the State, as well as the proponents of the dominant discourses, that pitches them in a battle against one another for a graduate career that for many will not be realised.¹⁴ As Brad Evans and Natasha Lennard argued:

Violence is always an attack upon a person's dignity, sense of selfhood, and future. It is nothing less than the desecration of one's position in the world. (2018, p. 3)

Looked at from this kind of standpoint, contract cheating by today's students can, alternatively, be interpreted as a desperate act of survival by victims of the violence stemming from the changes to the social order that attacks their future hopes, desecrating their very position in the world. Moreover, from this kind of perspective is it even appropriate to consider a cheating student as the problem? Would it not be more fruitful to embrace a sociological analysis that would see the cause of such behaviour as the problem of a society which made political and economic decisions producing an employment environment in which there is an insufficient number of graduate jobs to meet the demands those decisions also created? Indeed, can it not be said, therefore, that students are now contract cheating to compete as a technique of survival to keep alive their hopes for a graduate job and a viable future life?

One thing is certain, the way that social problems are understood determines what will be done in response to them. In this sense, the way that the dominant discourses on contract cheating understand the problem and how it might be fixed are unlikely to make much of an impact on its deterrence or prevention. Indeed, for contract cheating to no longer exist would require radical changes to the social order as it relates to employment and education; action to roll back the conditions of its creation in a social order that does not march to the drum or dictates of a neoliberal capitalist ethos.

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¹⁴ It would be remiss in this critical analysis to fail to also acknowledge the colonial forces at play in contract cheating that sees UK and US students of the Global North, for instance, profit from the intellectual labour of the writers of their essays and assignments from the Global South, as many of those writing the essays for students in those countries are based in Kenya (see McCabe, 2019; BBC, 2019).

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