They Get Away with Murder! UK Lecturers' Frustration with Students' Use of 'Essay Mills'

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the phenomenological experiences of four UK lecturers with contract cheating involving students. It aimed to investigate the reasons why some students use contract cheating services and what can be done to expunge the practice. This paper further documents how to recognise some of the cheating patterns and clues observed in essay and report submissions. Participants were recruited using purposive and convenient sampling methods. NVivo software was used to analyse the transcribed data. Findings revealed that contract cheating, especially students' use of 'essay mills' is still entrenched into the UK higher education fabric. Despite being able to identify cheaters using various tools at their disposal, lecturers were left frustrated as too often culprits went unpunished due to universities' lenient policies. Cheating 'red flags' include refusal to meet the lecturer for verbal feedback on assignments; essays having uncommon features from what lecturers normally expect; unusual citations and references which are often outside the module's specification, and the use of strange figures, and diagrams. Evidence from this study suggest that universities' leniency in dealing with suspects is largely due to the commodification of education that puts profit before quality. Recommendations to properly address this practice have been suggested in this paper. The limitations of this study and future directions for similar research are submitted herein.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Australian government commissioned a nation-wide study into contract cheating in higher education following the advice of the Australian Higher Education Standard Panel [1]. The HESP advised the government to deter commercial cheating activities in higher education came after the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) had identified prevailing misconducts. Consequently, in 2020, Australia passed a law making it illegal to arrange or advertise for sale certain cheating services, namely paid essay writing, also known as contract cheating. The law went into effect in early September 2020 and carries some stiff sanctions - up to two years in jail and a fine of up to $74,000 (A$100,000) [2]. The Australian government's prohibition followed in the footsteps of New Zealand which had outlawed such services as far back as 1989 in Section 292E of New Zealand Education Act (1989) [3]. However, contract cheating is not limited to Australia and New Zealand. 15.7% of students globally admit to contract cheating which translates into 31 million students globally. To put that into perspective, 1 in 7 graduates may have paid someone to do their assignment for them during their degree studies [4].

The phenomenon of contract cheating also known as "essay mills" has been on the rise in recent years in the United Kingdom. Research conducted in the UK [5] revealed that contract cheating had increased exponentially amongst university students during the Covid-19 pandemic as most courses were transferred online. According to a report by the Guardian newspaper, essay mills have been a growing source of concern in the UK higher education sector in recent years, but the threat has been magnified by the pandemic with many desperate students reaching out for their services [6]. These warnings came as the former universities minister Chris Skidmore introduced a bill in the Commons seeking to outlaw essay-writing services in the UK, arguing that they risk damaging academic integrity beyond repair [6]. The bill which has now moved successfully through all the stages in parliament, is now being considered by the house of Lords. If rectified, essay mills could be banned in the UK soon. The ban on essay mills will diminish the proliferation of essay writing services but may not completely eradicate the practice.

The literature on cheating has overwhelming focused on statistics [7,5,4] which is good to understand the extent of prevalence of the phenomenon and the gravity of the situation. But this quantitative approach has failed to consider the experiences of stakeholders such as the students concerned, the service providers and the lecturers who read and assess students' essays. Failure to conduct qualitative in-depth studies involving the major actors limit our understanding of the wider nuances of the phenomenon. This paper analyses the phenomenological experiences of four lecturers from four different universities from the Northwest of the United Kingdom. Data was collected in 2018 as part of a pilot study for a doctoral study in education which sought to understand the experiences of lecturers and students on the effects of language and culture on students' academic achievement. Two peer-reviewed papers have been previously published from that study [8,9]. This is the third and final paper to be written from that dataset. Huge data relating to contract cheating was extracted and it was deemed necessary to write a separate paper on it, taking into consideration the topical importance and relevance of the phenomenon. Two research questions were formulated to guide the analysis of the data.

1. How and why do students cheat using essay-writing services in UK universities?
2. What can be done to eradicate the use of essay-writing services in UK universities?

The first question analyses the process of cheating and the reasons why students cheat using essay mills. It equally examines the cultural undertone behind cheating and identifies those involved in this practice from the perspective of the lecturers. The second question investigates various strategies employed by lecturers to help curb the practice and the challenges they faced, and what universities do or can do to clamp down on cheaters.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of "contract cheating" has long existed but the term describing the phenomenon is believed to have been coined by Clarke and Lancaster [10]. They defined *contract cheating* as "the process of offering the process of completing an assignment for a student out to tender" [10]. In other words. Contract cheating happens when a third party completes work for a student who then submits it to an education provider as their own, where such input is not permitted [11]. Since the term was first

conceived, many researchers have embarked on a journey to investigate the various strands of the process. Most research on contract cheating, especially those that investigate sites offering contract cheating services have been covert for obvious reasons. Medway et al. [12] for instance, covertly investigated five essay mills and successfully purchased assignments from two of them. Their research also demonstrated that course work bought from essay mills can easily pass originality test on Turnitin. Research has also proved that contract cheating sites do not always provide the clamorous services and promises offered on their websites. Sunderland-Smith and Dullaghan [13] found that many contract cheating sites do not deliver assignments on time, and some do not deliver at all. Others provide variable quality assignments (including fail grade work) and are slow to respond to users' queries. In addition, they found that most contract cheating sites do not respect users' privacy and can share personal details with third parties under bogus privacy clauses [13] that leave users vulnerable.

Not only are students at risk of being scammed by shammed contract cheating companies, but they are also at risk of being subjected to university's disciplinary procedures if suspected of cheating. Pitt et al. [14] found that suspected students were traumatised after undergoing disciplinary procedures following academic misconduct allegations, irrespective of whether they had contract-cheated or not. Although Pitt et al. [14] examined students' perspectives, their focus was on suspected students and not on students who admitted having contracted a cheating service. Therefore, there is still a gap here that needs to be filled. Other researchers like Awdry and Newton [15], have surveyed staff views on commercial contract cheating in higher education in Australia and the UK. They reported that a large proportion of staff in these two countries admitted having experienced contract cheating with students at their universities. However, the outcome for the culprits were always very lenient [16]. Again, this quantitative survey was important in terms of statistics but failed to explore a deeper understanding of staff experiences – a gap which this paper attempts to fill.

Some authors have attempted to decipher the reasons why students cheat [17]. In '246 reasons to cheat', Amigud and Lancaster [7] provide some of these reasons following a study in which they analysed a dataset composed of 5,000 messages from ten contract cheating services posted on the social media. Among other things, they found that students do put effort into their assignments until certain threshold before seeking to outsource to a cheating company. According to this research, it seems some students only cheat when they become unwilling to put in extra efforts into their assignments. Outsourcing is therefore an afterthought rather than a thought harboured from the onset. Yet, other authors like Anderman [18] have distinguished between intrinsic and extrinsic goals for studying, and how these are related to students' cheating attitude. She argues that students who have extrinsic goals for studying, such as the desire to have a good salary and luxury life in adulthood, are more likely to cheat [19,20]. On the other hand, students who study with the intrinsic goal of acquiring knowledge are less likely to cheat. Whatever the reason for cheating, it seems the practices of contract cheating is deeply entrenched into higher education fabrics to the extent that even legislation cannot effectively police them [21]. This is because they provide a service which an alarming number of students will happily use [21]. It seems therefore that cheating students will simply seek other ways to outsource their essays if contract cheating services are finally outlawed in the UK. That may explain why authors like Awdry [22] have proposed a move beyond 'contract cheating' to 'assignment outsourcing' as a way forward to the study of cheating behaviors in higher education. Assignments can be outsourced to friends, relatives, and other people apart from cheating companies. Assignment outsourcing will continue even after essay mills are banned and universities must remain vigilant.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

A qualitative phenomenological approach was applied to study the direct experiences of the participating lecturers taken at face value [23]. This implies that an attempt was made to get a clear picture of the phenomenon of contract cheating as experienced by the lecturers who directly assessed students' essays. Thus, this paper presents their experiences as closely as possible to the way the lecturers concerned understood and appreciated them. The focus was placed on "trying to depict the relevant experiences in a way that is as faithful to the

original as possible" [24], by using direct quotations.

Non-probability sampling was employed in a purposive manner to recruit two of the participants, while a convenient sampling was used to recruit the other two. The purposive sampling recruited these participants based on their relevance to addressing the research questions [25]. On the other hand, the convenient sampling was deployed opportunistically as the samples were available and easily accessible at the time [23]. The samples were however relevant to the research questions. Although five lecturers participated in the pilot study, data on contract cheating was extracted from just four of them as one did not provide any data relating to contract cheating due to teaching an exclusively practice-based course. As there were no essay writing in his course, the phenomenon of contract cheating was absent.

3.2 Procedure

Three of the four interviews took place in the participant's office while one took place at the participant's home. Each of the interviews lasted for an hour, but on average, only one interview was conducted per month due to the busy schedule of the participants. The data collection process therefore lasted for four months. All interviews were semi-structured which allowed for a more interactive discussion between the researcher and the participants. The questions were predetermined but only served as guides and follow-up questions provided some opportunities for prompts and probes (Berg, 2007, p. 95) beyond the answers to prepared questions.

Audio-recorders were used, and manual transcription done at the earliest opportunity after data collection. The aim of manual transcription was to familiarize oneself with the data and to give the researcher forethought on possible themes during the transcription process. Data was then safely stored in the researcher's university OneDrive account which was only accessible to him using a password. In line with confidentiality, participants' identities have been anonymised and the initials used herein do not represent their real initials. The initials are different from the pseudonyms used in earlier publications just to add another layer of anonymity and guarantee privacy.

In terms of participants' profile, it suffices to say there were three males and one female. Three of the lecturers taught in 'new' universities while one taught in a Russell group university. The Russell Group is a group of 24 UK universities that are the gold standard of academia [26], while 'new' universities are post-1992 universities, usually former polyethnic or central institutions that were given universities status through the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). This distinction is important for readers who are not familiar with the UK university system as well as for the purpose of comparative analysis of the data.

3.3 Data Analysis

Nvivo software was used to code and thematise the data. After uploading the transcript on Nvivo, the data was coded by reading through the script and highlighting chunks of data, then coding them to emerging themes. Each participant was coded as a case and every coded information was attributed to the case that provided the data. This was done with the intention of doing a cross-case comparison. This process continued until the whole transcript was coded. Thereafter, the explore button was selected which then provided different analytical options like, advanced find, query wizard, text search, matric coding query, word frequency, queries, chart, hierarchy chart, maps, and diagrams. After careful considerations, and giving the small size of the data, the following options were selected for analysis, word frequency, queries, chart, and diagrams. Word frequency showed the frequency of occurrence of the first 1000 words and a tree map was produced as shown in Fig. 1. The essence of this was to show the focus of the conversation in the data. The bigger the square, the higher the focus of the interview. The tree map indicates that all four participants spoke a lot about students/student, followed by work, cheating, and essay/essays. This focus is also reflected on the title of the paper: 'UK lecturers' frustration with students' use of 'essay mills.' It also shows that the interview was highly focused on the topic and there were little diversions or distractions as could be the case with unstructured interviews. In fact, word frequency query summary that was produced showed that the word student was altered 33 times, which was 3.94% of the total data, student, 20 times (2.39%), work, 12 times (1.43%), cheating, 10 times (1.19%), cheat, 5 times, (0.60%), essays, 8 times (0.96%), and essay 6 times (0.72%).

Word Frequency Query

Fig. 1. Tree map showing word frequency query for first 1000 words

Cases and themes coding produced a summary that shows the percentage coverage of data per participant. It also indicates the various coded themes and the percentage of data coverage per theme. The summary was exported from Nvivo to Excel and then copied and pasted herein. The table reveals that SN produced the highest amount of coded data with 26.43% coverage, followed by RA, with 22.40% coverage, AS with 11.55%, and lastly YN with just 9.02%. The percentage coverage by themes were also produced with 'reasons for cheating' being the predominant theme as shown in the table. Among the various reasons for cheating, 'lack of academic writing skills' seems to stand out, at 6.24%.

Table 1. Percentage coverage of coded cases and themes

Coding	Percentage coverage
Cases\\AS	18.55%
Cases\\RA	22.40%
Cases\\SN	26.43%
Cases\\YN	9.02%
Codes\\Exams or assignments	4.64%
Codes\\How to catch cheats\Flawless essay	3.94%
Codes\\How to catch suspects\Verbal presentation	4.05%
Codes\\Hypocrisy of essay mills	4.93%
Codes\\No prove no case	3.93%
Codes\\Profit driven industry\Universities are profit-driven	3.26%
Codes\\Reasons for cheating	3.27%
Codes\\Reasons for cheating\academic background	3.27%
Codes\\Reasons for cheating\Lack academic writing skills	6.24%
Codes\\Reasons for cheating\lack research skills	3.27%
Codes\\Reasons for cheating\lack work experience	3.27%
Codes\\Reasons for cheating\Language barrier\examples of language barrier	4.21%
Codes\\Reasons for cheating\Language barrier\examples of language barrier\Poor translation	4.21%
Codes\\Who the cheaters are	3.35%
Codes\\Who the cheaters are\Chinese students accused more	3.35%
Codes\\Who the cheaters are\non-British students more scrutinised	5.04%

A comparative analysis was conducted between the cases and the following four comparison diagrams were produced.

Figs. 2, 3, 4 and 5 shows one-to-one comparison between cases, while Fig. 6 shows a group comparison across all four cases. The items lined-up in the middle of the figure indicate common grounds between the two cases, and the items lined-up along both sides of the figure show dissimilar grounds. This does not necessarily mean the two views were divergent. It could be because of the subjective coding process as the researcher might have used different words to mean the same thing. Taking the figures from face value then, major similarities abound. In Fig. 2 for instance, SN and YN share similar views that the lack of subject knowledge is a key reason why students cheat and that non-British students are more likely to be scrutinised for cheating. In Fig. 3, RA and YN share the same view that non-British students are likely to be scrutinised for cheating than their British counterparts. In Fig. 4, AS and SN share the perspective that if the lecturer cannot adequately prove that the student has cheated, no action will be taken against the student. In Fig. 5, we can see that AS and RA are associated on many more grounds. For instance, that cheating students often refuse to come for verbal feedback when invited; that some students even cheat on their final dissertation; and that no action will be taken if the lecturer cannot adequately prove that the student has cheated. Finally, Fig. 6 displays the thematic similarities and differences among all four cases. For example, if you look carefully at the figure, you will find the theme "no prove no case" somewhere in the centre. If you follow the lines, you will see that the said theme is shared by SN, RA, and AS. Another theme shared by three of the four cases is the first one "who the cheaters are", shared by YN, SN, and RA. The rest of the themes are shared by just two cases or attributed to just a single case.
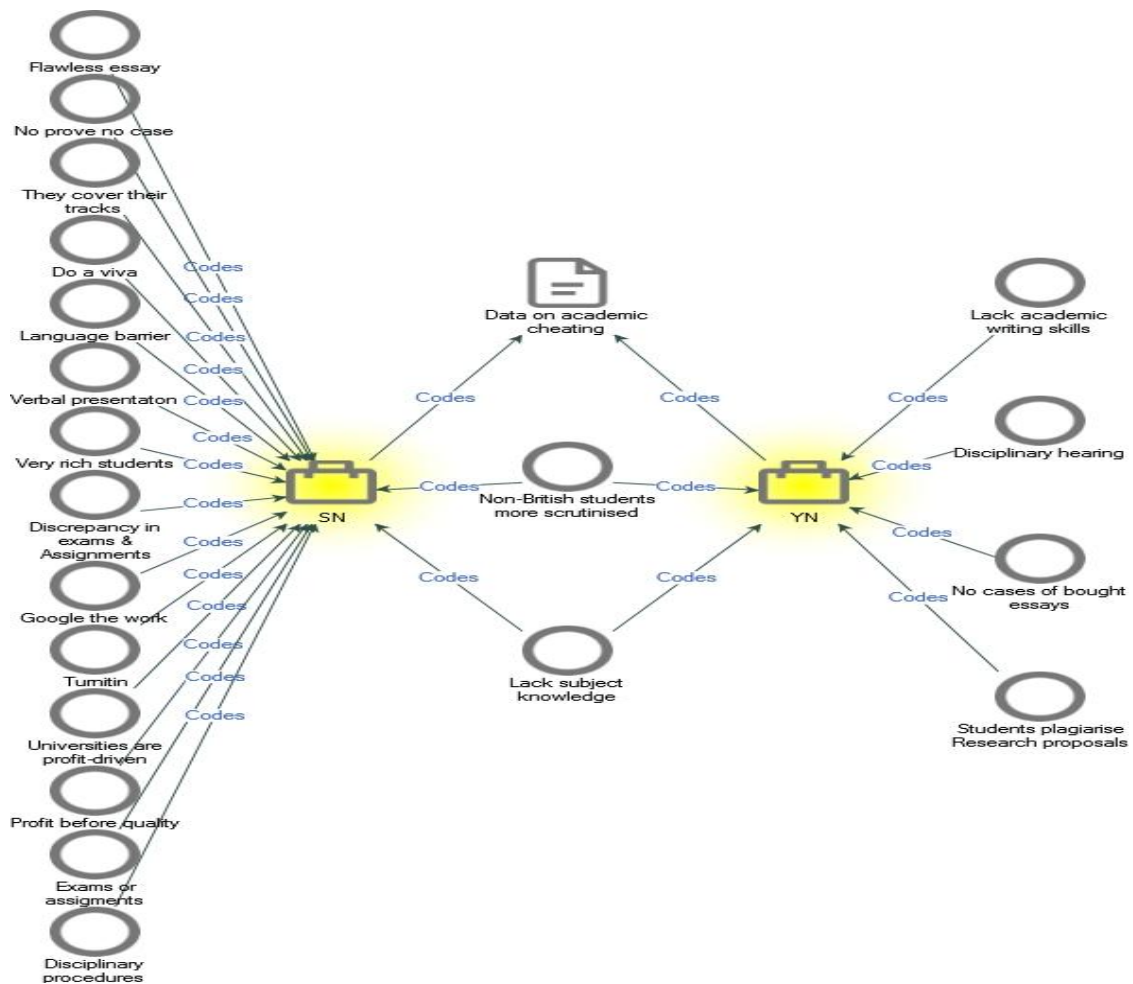
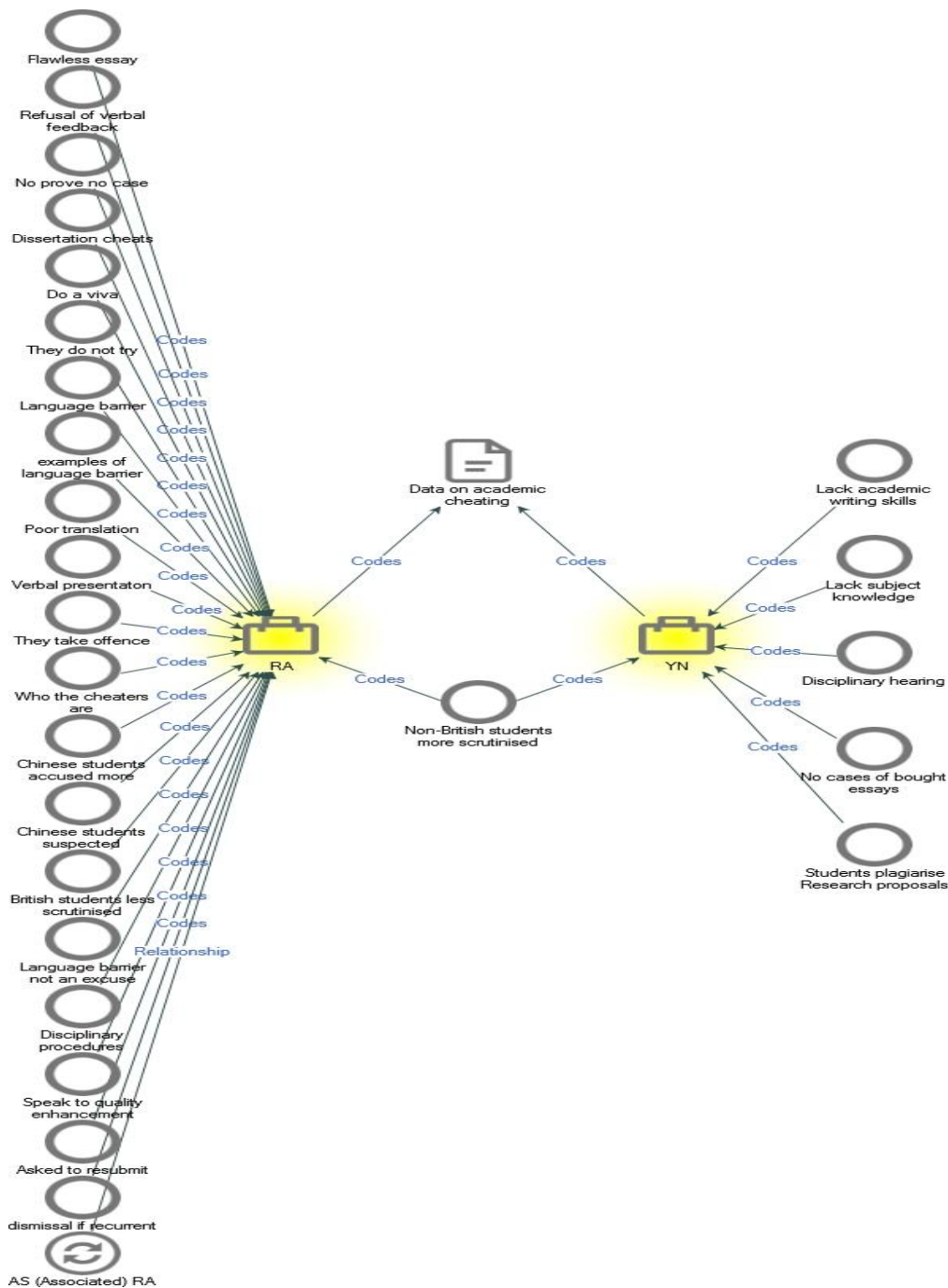

Fig. 2. Comparison between SN and YN

Fig. 3. Comparison between RA and YN

4. RESULTS

4.1 Detecting an Outsourced Essay

All participants in this study revealed that they can detect an essay that has been outsourced to a cheating company. One way of knowing this is the huge mismatch in performance [27] between the student's examination and take-home assignment. The student will normally score much higher in the assignment than in the examination. Previous performance in academic study is reportedly a good indicator of ongoing and future performance [28,29,30].

'When there is an exam and an assignment, they exponentially score higher in the assignment than in the exam. It just tells you that somebody did it for them'. – SN.
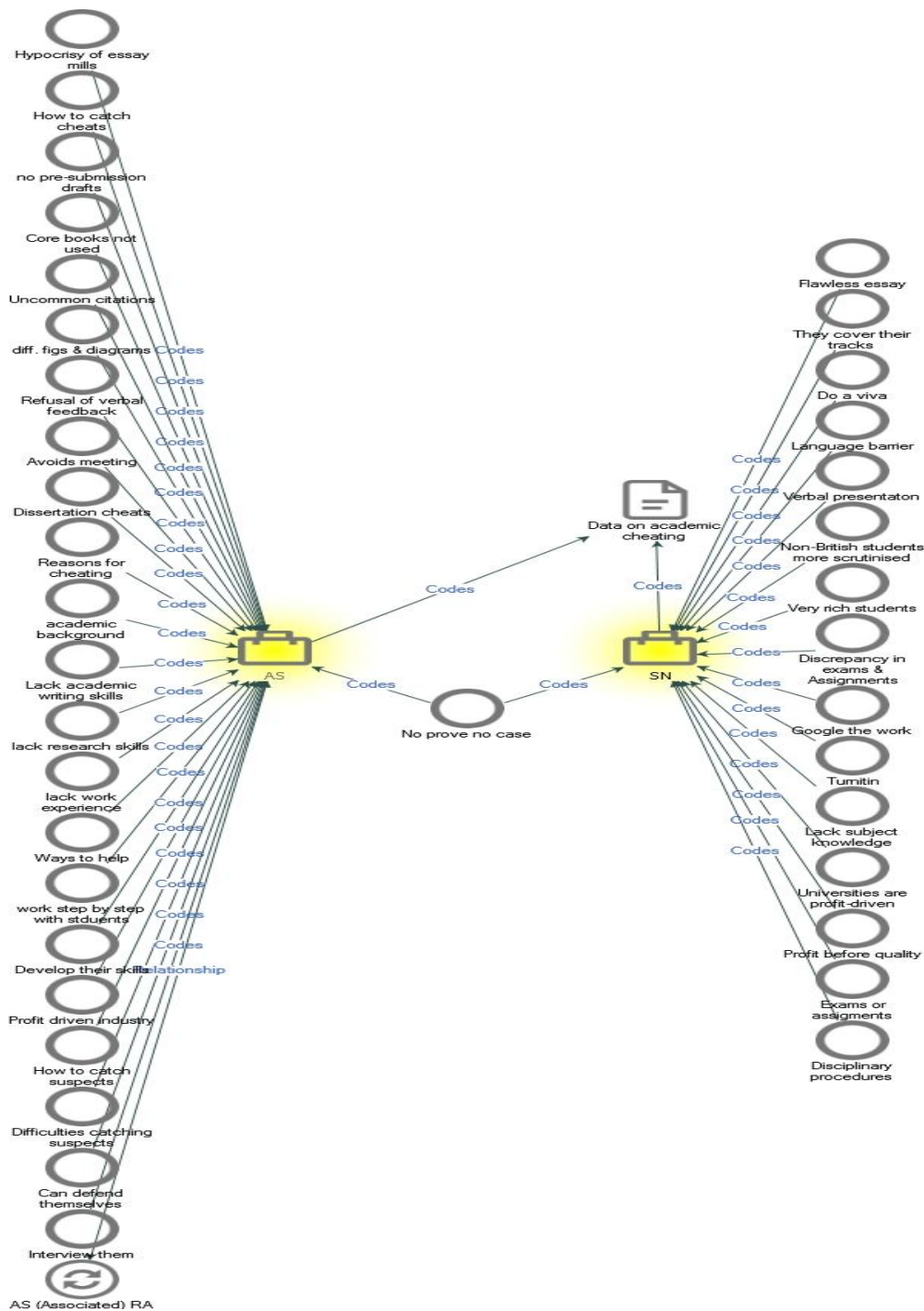
Fig. 4. Comparison between AS and SN

'Yes, we had a student who was not a very bright student. In the second year, his dissertation was just too good and couldn't have been written by him'. – RA.

Apart from not having a consistent performance in both exams and assignments, it seems that students who are not normally bright in class but go on to submit a brilliant essay can be subjected to scrutiny. RA also reported that some students can try to change the wordings of an outsourced essay by using synonyms. However, in such instances, the essay will not usually make sense as inappropriate translations can distort the whole meaning of a sentence [9].

According to AS, students who have cheated in their essays will not normally submit drafts for correction prior to their final submission. They do not use the core books for the course nor the books in the library, and the authors cited will be uncommon [16]. The figures and diagrams used in their essays will be completely different from what they have been taught in class. Above all, if you ask the student to come over for verbal feedback, they will request for written feedback to take back to the person who wrote it. These are all red flags to look out for. When these red flags are raised, lecturers like SN admits he spends time trying to catch the suspect by using all the available technological tools like Turnitin and Google [31,30].
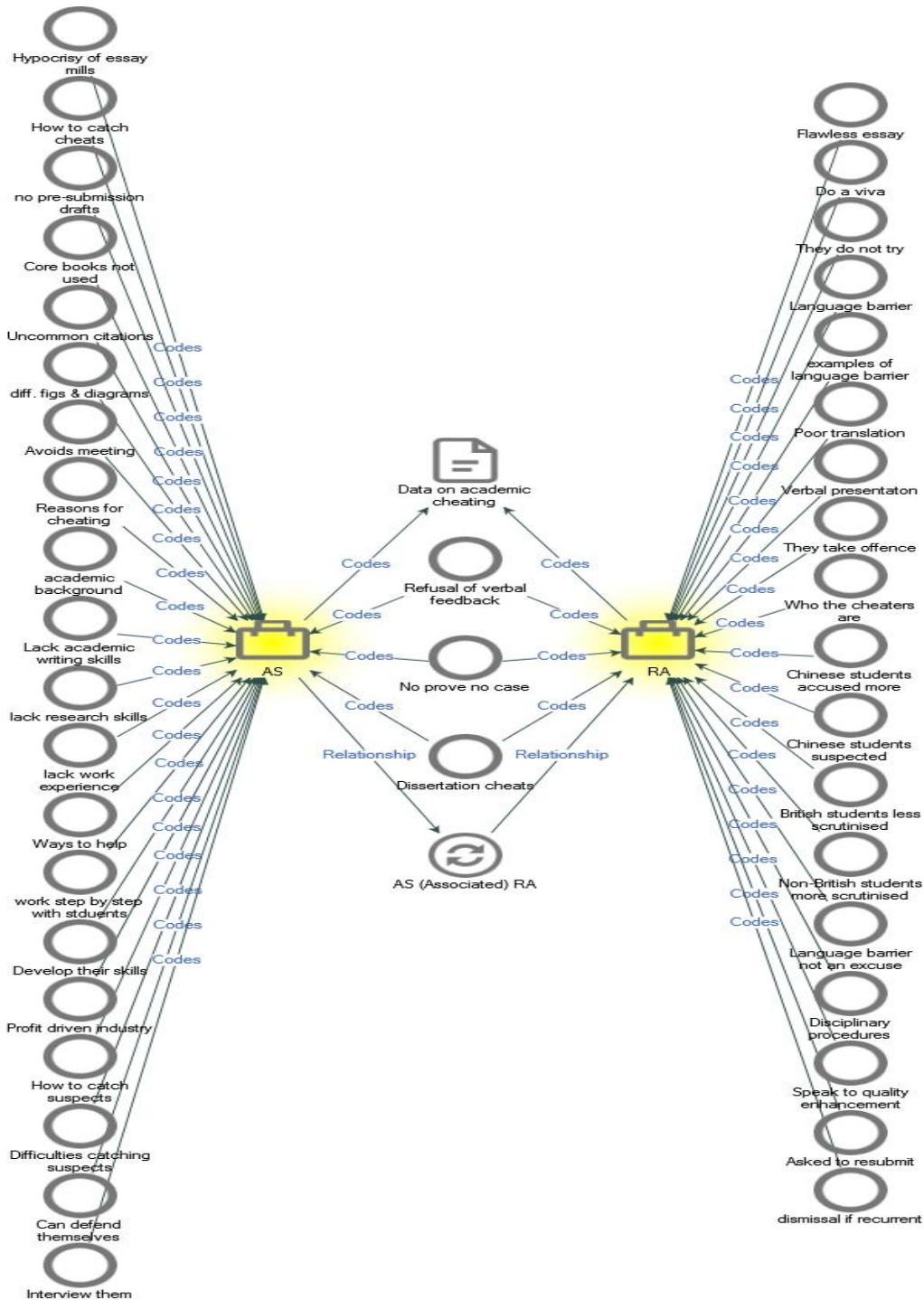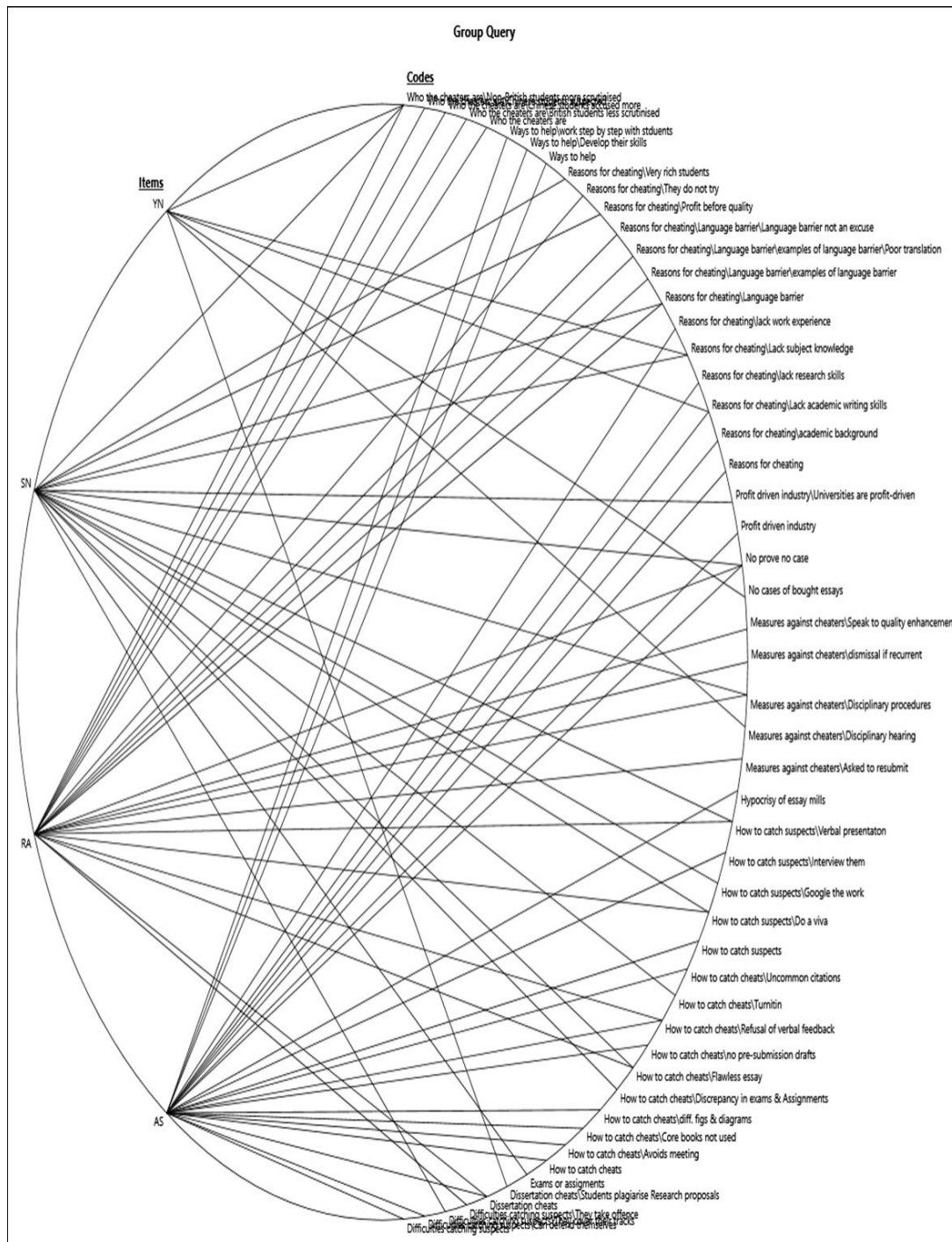
Fig. 5. Comparison between AS and RA

Fig. 6. Group query showing thematic interconnectedness

4.2 "Getting Away with Murder"

Data revealed that although lecturers invest time in catching suspected cheaters, they are often frustrated in the end as they cannot prove without reasonable doubts that the student has cheated. A case was that of a second-year student who cheated in their dissertation and

was caught, but RA could not do anything about it.

'We spoke to quality enhancement that deals with quality. What they said was, we could do a viva. That if we are not sure it is their work, let them do a viva or a verbal presentation. But usually, they will take offence. They will say you

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are accusing them of cheating. But you can see clearly that it is a bought essay when you pass it through'. - RA.

'But again, they are clever, if they pay somebody who knows the research process, he will cover all their traces. And you are not allowed to say somebody has cheated without any evidence- so they get away with murder'. - SN.

'Unfortunately, you cannot do anything about it unless you have a solid prove'. – AS.

The requirement of providing concrete evidence against the accused is a legitimate one. However, it also means that cheating students can easily get away with murder as highlighted above by SN. The perception that students will not get caught [32], or they are unlikely to be punished if caught [16], encouraged some students to cheat. All interviewees suggested that making suspects do some sort of oral examination or viva in front of a panel could be helpful. However, they also admitted that even verbal exams can be limited as some of the suspects can do a bit of homework and defend themselves – and still get away with murder.

It seems that the university also matters. Some universities seem to have more stringent policy for dealing with cheating than others. It could just be a coincidence but all three lecturers in this study whose cheating students apparently got away with murder are from post-1992 universities. YN who lectures in a Russell Group university reported that his university has a very rigorous way to check essays which helps them to easily identify the few students who try to cheat.

'When we identify them, there are disciplinary procedures that the student goes through. For example, a student who has copied, let's say you have submitted your essay, and we see that 30 percent is not your work, then we will invite you for a disciplinary hearing. When we interview and hear your viewpoints, the different procedures will be put in place. For example, they will give you a zero, then you will have to do it again and resubmit. But if it is a second time, and it is so grave, then I think it can lead to your dismissal'.

This rigorous approach employed by YN's university has greatly reduced the incidents of cheating to a bear one or two per academic year for every 50 students. However, it seems the rigorous approach explained above will only

penalise essays with over 30 percent of similarities on Turnitin. Essay mills will normally sell essays to students with low similarity scores as acknowledged by AS and such essays will easily pass. Hence, get away with murder anyway.

'They also tell the student that the piece is 100% original and will pass through Turnitin without any problems. Students will then submit it through Turnitin and come up with low scores of 14 or 15% resemblance'.

4.3 Universities' Nonchalance

Three of four interviewees expressed frustration with the leniency of their universities when confronted with cases of academic misconduct. The requirement to prove beyond doubts that a student has cheated is almost impossible to meet. Lecturers' hands are tight, and universities are aware of this. Most lecturers in this study who have taken students to the disciplinary for suspected case of cheating have lost their cases following appeal. The university often rule in favour of the student on grounds of 'lack of evidence' though it is clear to everyone that the essay has been bought. This finding is supported by Awdry and Newton [15], who found similar lenient outcome in their study. But why are some universities reluctant to adopt a more rigorous approach like YN's university has done? SN seem to have an answer.

'In certain areas of the world (such as developing countries) people are getting richer. These days foreign students come in with a lot of money. And for some of these students, unfortunately for universities, they have got the money to even pay people to do the work for them. If you look at how the student behaves in class, how they respond to certain questions that you've given them, you can straightaway know that what they are giving can never be from them'.

The commodification of education appears to be the answer. Not only are students too rich to pay for cheating services, but they are also rich enough to pay for their education. Universities seem to welcome these students, not entirely based on their academic achievements, but on their financial capability. Universities are attracted to the money that these students bring more than the brains they bring. Gillings [19] claims that the commodification of education is responsible for the entrenched problems of increasing academic dishonesty. Universities

seem to regard students as costumers, thereby transforming education into a consumer good, he argued. The reason for the commodification of education could lie in the continuous cut to funding which has put enormous financial pressures on universities. It is therefore an existential treat for some universities that rely on students' fee to survive.

4.4 Motives for Cheating

4.4.1 Language barrier

The data revealed that one of the main reasons why some students cheat is language difficulties [33,34]. This implies that majority of students accused of cheating are students from countries where English is not their first language, or those that have not had previous studies in the English language. However, RA believes that language difficulties is just a lazy excuse. "A student who is going to cheat will cheat, so those who cheat does so and blame it on the language. They do not try. They cheat and blame it on the language". SN agrees that language barrier could force some students to buy essays – but this should not be an excuse as most universities offer free proof-reading services for students. He expects students with poor English to write their assignments and give them to a proof-reader to correct the English before submission.

4.4.2 Lack of subject knowledge

Another reason why students cheat is the lack of subject knowledge. Lecturers interviewed believe that many students enter the university without adequate background knowledge of the subject they intend to study. Many of them might not have done the subject in high school or college and it is completely new to them. "Students getting into the program without the requisite knowledge which in my opinion, some of them were not supposed to be there", argues SN. Without basic prior knowledge of the subject, these students find it difficult to compete with others and would resort to cheating as a solution. This finding is supported by Delvin and Gray [35] who found inadequate admission criteria, poor academic skills, and teaching/learning issues, among other things, responsible for students' cheating habits.

4.4.3 Lack of Academic writing and research skills

Data suggest that the lack of academic writing skills accounted for some students' cheating

habits [33]. Unsurprisingly, these largely coincide with reasons indicated by instructors in previous studies [36,34]. AS believes that students come in from all sought of backgrounds who have no clue as to how to start writing, which topic to pick, or how to interview people. These students are prepared to pay five or six hundred to anyone who can write an essay with guaranteed pass. This position was reiterated by YN who said:

'I think sometimes you could find that with students who are coming from abroad because maybe they don't understand the contexts of writing essays or thesis. They think that when you want to do citations (although we repeat that to them), they can just lift portions of work from someone else and present it as their own'.

In the above quote, YN points to not only the act of outsourcing essay to a cheating company, but also the act of plagiarising. The fingers are being pointed to students from abroad, especially Chinese students. However, RA thinks that such students are being suspected and scrutinised much more than home students.

'If you have an essay bought by a British student, most times, they won't scrutinize it as much as if it was bought by a non-British student, and especially Chinese student. Maybe Chinese students buy essays more than any others. They scrutinize them a lot more'.

The lack of academic writing skills again, should not be an excuse to cheat as many, if not all universities offer academic writing lessons for non-English speaking students. Students can always access these services at their university free of charge. In addition, like AS, many lecturers are happy to help struggling students on a one-to-one basis to develop their academic and research skills.

5. DISCUSSION

This study has attempted to shed light and contribute to the growing literature on contract cheating in higher education. Through the lenses of four UK academics drawn from different universities in the Northwest of England, the paper has highlighted the process, reasons, and possible ways to combat the phenomenon. According to AS, the process of contract cheating starts when a student submits his essay question to an essay mill and pay for services. The essay mill then provides the student with a

properly written essay, apparently as a guidance and instructs the student not to submit that piece. They will ask the student to use it as a model answer to write their own. The students will however submit the model answer especially as they have been assured that the piece was 100% original and will pass through Turnitin without any problems [12]. Such perfect essays will often raise eyebrows from the lecturers as they already know the potentials of their students. For example, when a student who was not very bright in class and during continuous assessments suddenly presents a perfect essay, this raises eyebrows.

When suspected of cheating, some lecturers would normally invite the student for verbal feedback on their work – but the student will often give excuses to avoid the meeting. Suspected essays also appeared to have uncommon features from what lecturers normally expected. For instance, those essays will cite and reference books outside the module's specification [17] and use unusual figures, and diagrams.

Some of the reasons for contract-cheating advanced by academics include language barrier, lack of subject knowledge, and lack of academic writing skills [7,21]. Accusatory fingers are often pointed at certain groups of international students. While this may be true in some instances, this study has shown that it might as well be that this group of students are scrutinised more. The paper also revealed that when suspects are taken through disciplinary, they often win their cases as lecturers oftentimes fail to provide hard evidence. The leniency with culprits means that most of them are let off the hook and "get away with murder". Lecturers get frustrated at universities' nonchalance and some become reluctant to report suspects. Universities are allegedly viewing students as their sources of income to help survive and this commodification of education seems to be incompatible with rigorous measures. Walker and Townley [20] argue that "commodification and a focus on credentialism thus suggest that a rise in contract cheating could reflect changes in the way that students view their relationship to their work" [20]. The desire to achieve good grades and excellent academic credentials could motivate some cheating behaviours [19]. However, not all universities sacrifice quality for money. At least one university in this study reportedly adopted stringent measures that have drastically curb academic dishonesty.

To combat academic dishonestly, all interviewees opined that giving suspects a viva, or an interview will help expose and consequently penalise them. They suggested that viva should be introduced in some core modules to second, and third-year students as their scores count towards their final degree classification. In addition, students should have a 15-minute presentation on their dissertation and answer some questions from a standing panel to verify if it is their work. "In that way, there is no way that a student who has paid somebody to do the work for them is going to stand a panel of 2 or 3 lecturers asking them questions" argued SN. When asked if a move to 100% examination could solve the problem, SN disagreed. According to him, exams and assignments are two relevant and complementary methods of assessment, and one cannot be abolished. This is because both are testing different things. For instance, assignment gives the student independence to go out there and research, then present the material in their own way. This helps develop students' independent critical thinking. In an exam, you would not test things like referencing and citations which in an assignment, you would do. Gillings [19] argues that students who use essay services value grades more than knowledge. Such students may consequently graduate from the university without having acquired the core skills that essays are designed to develop.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The outlawing of essay mills in the UK might diminish their activities, but not eradicate the phenomenon of contract-cheating. This is because UK students who intent to cheat will simply contract essay mills from another country where they have not been outlawed. Although it will still be illegal on the part of the student to do so, essay mills outside the UK will still be able to legally provide these services. Besides, the essay mill company might be based in one country while the essay writers who work for them might be based in another country, making enforcement of legislation difficult [30]. It is impossible to outlaw this practice worldwide especially in a digital world with internet access. In addition, assignments can be outsourced to other people than essay mills. For instance, students can outsource their assignments to other students of higher levels. Student can also outsource their assignments to friends, and relatives who are skilful in the subject.

Therefore, universities must be vigilant and get tougher with suspects. Universities have the ultimate responsibility to ensure academic integrity and that responsibility must not he shifted to the government. Calls have been made to universities to create a "cohesive frameworks for dealing with student plagiarism that are based on prevention supported by robust detection and penalty systems that are transparent and applied consistently" (Park. 2003, p. 483-484). Furthermore, universities must work in close collaboration with academics to bring suspects to book and guarantee the quality of higher education. Lecturers should be allowed to give short verbal interviews to students who have submitted a suspected essay. All undergraduate and postgraduate final dissertations must be defended at a viva. The viva should constitute a percentage of the overall dissertation grade. The viva should not only aim at catching cheaters, but on developing students' confidence in presentation. In the viva, students will demonstrate the mastery of the material. Anderman [18] asserts that when students are confident that they can demonstrate mastery of the content, they are unlikely to cheat. In fact, this is good practice as it will enable students moving to higher levels like the PhD to be acquainted with this process. The government must adequately fund higher education as this will discourage the commodification of education and focus on quality instead.

7. LIMITATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has contributed a tiny bit to the literature on contract-cheating through an in-depth qualitative study of lecturers' perspectives about the phenomenon. Previous studies in the area were mostly quantitative and statistical which have limited our understanding of the wider nuances of actors' experiences. Actors directly involved with this are not only the cheating students, but also the lecturers who mark their scripts and the essay mill providers. This study has examined the perspectives of the lecturers only. A more balanced and robust study should integrate both the perspectives of the students involved in cheating and essay mill providers. Unfortunate, till date, there are no known qualitative studies that have overtly interviewed students who have admitted to contract-cheating nor essay mill providers. The difficulties in doing this could lie in the desire of those actors to remain incognito. Hardly any student will admit having cheated and goes on to

participate in research that seeks his/her views. Researchers must look for ways to guarantee such informants total confidentiality and convince them to participate. It could be an uphill task.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The main study itself was approved by the university's ethics committee and all ethical rules that governed research in the UK were followed. These include the British Education Research Association' [37] ethical guidelines for conducting educational research, the Data Protection Act [38], and the EU General Data Protection Regulation [39].

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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