

*The Perceptions of Higher Education Students  
on Contract Cheating and Educational  
Corruption in South East Europe*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses research on contract cheating undertaken with students across six countries in South East Europe. The research was conducted as part of the South East European Project on Policies for Academic Integrity (SEPPAI) and supported by a grant from the Council of Europe. Thirteen focus groups were held in which students discussed their experiences with contract cheating and wider issues of educational corruption. The trends identified showed that students knew how to gain contract cheating assistance in both coursework and examinations. Some students were themselves working as academic ghostwriters. Despite pockets of good practice being evident, there was the suggestion of a wider culture of corruption, with claims that some teaching staff were willing to take financial incentives to guarantee grades to students. The findings demonstrate that contract cheating represents a threat to academic integrity in countries where this had not previously been documented.

**Keywords:** contract cheating, academic integrity, academic misconduct, plagiarism, ghostwriting

**RÉSUMÉ:** Cet article examine la recherche sur le plagiat à contrat des étudiants de six pays d'Europe du Sud-Est. La recherche a été menée dans le cadre

du projet PESEPIU (Projet d'Europe du Sud-Est sur les politiques d'intégrité universitaire) et a bénéficié d'un financement du Conseil de l'Europe. Treize groupes de discussion ont été organisés au cours desquels les étudiants ont discuté de leurs expériences en matière de plagiat et de problèmes plus vastes de corruption dans le domaine de l'éducation. Les tendances identifiées ont montré que les étudiants savaient comment obtenir une assistance pour tricher à la fois dans leurs cours et pour leurs examens. Certains étudiants travaillaient eux-mêmes en tant qu'écrivains anonymes. Bien que des exemples de bonnes pratiques soient évidents, les résultats démontrent que certains enseignants étaient prêts à accepter des incitations financières pour garantir de bonnes notes aux étudiants. Les résultats démontrent que le plagiat représente une menace pour l'intégrité universitaire dans des pays où cela n'avait pas été documenté auparavant.

Mots-clés: plagiat, intégrité académique, mauvaise conduite académique, écrivain anonyme

### *Introduction*

Contract cheating, originally defined by Clarke and Lancaster (2006), is the concerning behaviour where a student hires, uses or attempts to use a third party to complete their assessments for them. When contract cheating occurs, a student is bypassing the learning that is expected of them. Contract cheating has been flagged as a threat to academic integrity and quality to which many assessments and degrees are susceptible.

This paper examines the perspectives on contract cheating of student focus group participants captured as part of the South East European Project on Policies for Academic Integrity (SEEPPAI) (SEEPPAI, 2017). The findings relate to six countries in South East Europe, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. Note that North Macedonia was adopted as a country name in early 2019 since the previous name had been disputed. There has been no previous research looking specifically at contract cheating in this region.

SEEPPAI used a mixed methods approach to research academic integrity. This formed part of work undertaken for the Council of Europe's Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED) platform (ETINED, 2017).

This research ties into the view that contract cheating is an international problem, but estimates of its extent vary. Separate longitudinal meta-analyses estimate that 3.5% and 15% of students have engaged in contract cheating (Curtis & Clare, 2017; Newton, 2018). The real extent of contract cheating appears likely to lie between those percentages.

Commentators have suggested that students should not choose to engage in contract cheating, as the quality of the work they are buying is poor (Levinson, 2005; Jenkins & Helmore, 2006; Sutherland-Smith & Dullaghan, 2019). Other studies have contradicted this by showing that high quality work is available (Lines, 2016). Services market heavily to students, including through social media (Amigud, 2019) and assignments can be purchased on the same day they are due (Wallace and Newton, 2014). Services offer to supply work with deliberate mistakes matching the known ability of the student (Reddit, 2015).

Many recommendations to address contract cheating exist, including that staff development is needed. Further work to understand why students contract cheat is necessary (Morris, 2018). Academics have been encouraged to think about promoting academic integrity through assessment design (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016; QAA, 2017).

### *South East European Project on Policies for Academic Integrity (SEEPPAI)*

This paper analyses data collected as part of the SEEPPAI project. Five of the six countries from which data was gathered formed parts of Yugoslavia, so had a similar cultural background. Of the six, Albania is the only country with a distinct history and governance. Croatia is the only county in the study that holds membership of the European Union.

One reason this region is of interest to academic integrity researchers is that concerns have been raised about students being required to pay bribes to receive educational advantages (ACSN SEE, 2015). Transparency International (2013; 2015) also indicated that widespread corruption from national Government level downwards is a known issue. Within education, areas where bribery is said to be expected include students paying to receive a place in a university dormitory and having to take extra private tuition without which it would be impossible to pass examinations.

A full analysis of the wider SEEPPAI project is beyond the scope of this paper, but some relevant survey findings are of interest (Glendinning et al, 2017a; 2017b). Respondents were asked if their institution had policies and procedures for dealing with contract cheating in the form of ghostwriting. 51% of teachers surveyed agreed with this statement, compared to 45% of students. Respondents were also asked if they knew of students who had contract cheated. 57% of teachers said that they were aware of at least one instance of contract cheating, compared with 27% of students.

### *Research background*

SEEPPAI was led by five academics from higher education institutions in the UK and the Czech Republic, supported by a placement student and a PhD student. At least one higher education institution in each of the six countries was visited by project team members during October and November 2016. During the visits, as well as collecting data the research teams offered talks and workshops on academic integrity.

This paper extends on the analysis published in the main project report (Glendinning et al, 2017a) by discussing data on contract cheating and financially fraudulent activities collected during focus groups with students. The paper is intended to provide academic integrity guidance for the region and the wider community.

### *Focus group operation*

The higher education institutions visited were asked to invite students to participate in focus groups. The guidance to the hosts was to provide a student group of between five and twelve students allowing for free discussion. None of the research team had any previous contact with or responsibilities for the education of the students involved, therefore there were no power-relationship issues. Ethical approval was obtained in advance from Coventry University.

The facilitators followed best practice for focus group operation, including assuring students about informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Data from focus groups was captured using detailed notes, quotations and audio recordings.

The focus groups used a flexible format, beginning with standard prompts designed to provoke initial discussions on contract cheating and other academic integrity issues. An

opportunity for open discussion followed, which led to several of the focus groups commenting on wider issues including financial corruption on both a local and national level.

All of the focus groups were conducted in English. Table 1 summarizes the focus groups that were held.

Table 1.  
Focus Groups Held During SEEPAI Data Collection

Country	Number of Focus groups held	Number of student participants	Focus groups conducted by
Albania	3	30*, 7, 25*	Irene Glendinning
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3	7, 2, 12	Dita Dlabolová (2 groups) Wider project team member (1 group)
North Macedonia	1	8	Thomas Lancaster
Croatia	3	10, 8, 5	Dita Dlabolová (1 group) Wider project team member (2 groups)
Montenegro	1	2	Thomas Lancaster
Serbia	2	6, 10	Dita Dlabolová
Total	13	<i>* Higher education institution staff were present</i>	

The academic discipline of students, the level of study, the size of the focus groups and the willingness of students to communicate varied. Several countries only had one institution teaching a particular subject, so it is not possible to list subject names whilst guaranteeing to preserve participant anonymity. Across the focus groups, a wide cross-section of subjects were represented. These included engineering, agriculture, psychology, computer science, tourism, law, mathematics and international relations.

#### *Research limitations*

Although the pre-prepared prompts for the focus group included questions about contract cheating and cheating in examinations, other factors, including bribery and extortion, emerged over the course of the focus group discussions. As these were not anticipated questions, they were not asked consistently to all focus groups.

On occasion, students appeared limited in what they could say. As Table 1 indicates, there were two occasions in Albania when staff arranged a group of students larger than requested and insisted on remaining in the room with the students. The large group meant that not all students could equally contribute. In these and other focus groups, there were occasions where some participants seemed reluctant to speak freely.

Despite only 13 focus groups being held and these being based on student opinions, a common pattern of findings developed. To improve confidence that these findings accurately reflected the region, a draft of the main SEEPPAI report was sent for peer review to academic contacts in the region. The overwhelming feedback from SEEPPAI reviewers was that the research findings had captured the reality of education in the region.

### *Research findings*

The SEEPPAI focus groups identified three mechanisms and eleven themes through which students could pay for an academic advantage. These are summarised in Table 2 and further explored throughout the paper.

Table 2.  
Cheating Themes Identified from SEEPPAI Student Focus Groups

<b>Cheating Mechanism</b>	<b>Identified Themes</b>	<b>Identified Using</b>
Contract cheating	A1 - The visibility of the advertising of contract cheating services A2 - The pricing of contract cheating services A3 - The frequency of contract cheating A4 - Students as contract cheating buyers and providers A5 - Why contract cheating happens in the region A6 - The wider interest in contract cheating amongst students	Scheduled questions
Hiring assistance for examinations	B1 - The use of hidden earpieces to gain an unfair advantage in examinations B2 - The risk of cheating using hidden earpieces to gain an unfair advantage in examinations	Scheduled questions
Other methods of obtaining an unfair advantage	C1 - Making direct payments for results and qualifications C2 - Making indirect payments for results and qualifications C3 - Using influence for results and qualifications	Open discussion

*Contract cheating**Theme A1 - The visibility of the advertising of contract cheating services*

Contract cheating was consistently identified by students in the region as posing a risk to academic integrity. Students regularly mentioned the role of Facebook in supporting contract cheating. Several students reported seeing advertisements for essay writing companies on Facebook groups and on Facebook pages. Students from the university in Montenegro said that advertisements appeared on their department's Facebook group. Others reported offers being made inside the closed Facebook groups they used.

Another example of the use of Facebook groups saw these used by students to make a direct request to have work completed. It was explained that a student would request a price for the work, with Facebook as the host for an informal auction of competing offers, with the student looking for the lowest price. This is comparable with the agency site model identified as used by many contract cheating services, albeit the Facebook versions being more informal (Clarke and Lancaster, 2013).

Contract cheating does not just take place on Facebook. Students in Croatia mentioned that contact telephone numbers were posted in toilet cubicles. In Albania, a student discussed a physical shop where people could order their assignments. Several students in Serbia admitted that their parents had written essays for them. Students in North Macedonia reported seeing an advertisement on the university noticeboard from someone seeking help with their Master's thesis.

Not all contract cheating is so blatantly advertised. A participant from Montenegro talked about local agencies advertising translation services for students. In reality, these agencies were known to be writing essays and academic papers for students.

*Theme A2 - The pricing of contract cheating services*

Where students indicated that they were aware of contract cheating services, the pricing of these services was explored. The discussions indicated variable pricing, but also showed that students were not sure, pricing suggestions sometimes varied even within the same group of students. Pricing is summarised in Table 3, with conversions from local currencies to euros based on July 2017 exchange rates.

Table 3.  
Student Identified Pricing of Contract Cheating Services

Theme Identifier	Price For Short Document (e.g. essay)	Price For Longer Document (e.g. thesis)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	10 euros	Not stated
Croatia	40 to 100 euros	Not stated
North Macedonia	5 euros	20 euros
Montenegro	20 euros	100 euros

Pricing also varied by subject, with students from North Macedonia expecting to pay more for engineering than economics or law. A student in Croatia, whose friend had paid to have papers written, said that they had paid 300 Kuna (40 euros). Another student in the same focus group said their brother had been offered 100 euros to write papers.

*Theme A3 - The prevalence of contract cheating*

Student views about how common contract cheating was differed greatly. Occasionally students within the focus groups said that they were unaware of the issue, or may have been unwilling to admit to the researchers that they knew about this. However, the indications were that students were aware of contract cheating and considered this to be something that occurred regularly.

Six out of ten students from a focus group at a Croatian university publicly said that they knew someone who had purchased work. Comments about the prevalence of contract cheating from universities in both Serbia and North Macedonia included the phrase “very common”. Students in Serbia also stated that 95% of students did this. However, one student in Serbia disagreed, stating “I don’t think many – only 50%”, but this is a number that should still be considered substantial.

Some students from Bosnia and Herzegovina stated they thought that 100% of students outsourced their work, including PhD students. They also talked about a professor that they heard had borrowed money to have their PhD

written for them. As one student exclaimed, “every homework has its price”.

*Theme A4 – Students as contract cheating buyers and providers*

A student from Croatia confessed that their best friend had paid for work on two occasions, receiving top grades. Students in Montenegro said that each class would have one or two students who would write assignments for other members.

Several students in the focus groups said that they had written work for other students or had been asked to do this. One student from Serbia said that they had started ghostwriting at high school and continued this at university. A student from Croatia stated that their brother had been approached to be a writer. A student in Montenegro said that they had been asked to write for someone on another course who they classified as an “excellent student”. They said that they turned this down due to a lack of time, but the requesting student found another writer. The conversation with the student suggested they would be willing to work as a ghostwriter under other circumstances.

*Theme A5 – Why contract cheating in the region happens*

Students gave many reasons why contract cheating happened. One student discussed a friend who was said to be capable but overloaded with due assignments and so passed some onto a ghostwriter. A student from North Macedonia further said that students who missed handing in written assignments would not be able to take their written exams, seemingly fueling the contract cheating market further. The issue that students thought they didn’t have the knowledge necessary, particularly at the undergraduate dissertation level, was also discussed.

The focus group data suggests that contract cheating does not just start at university level. A student from Bosnia and Herzegovina talked about the high school attitude to computing, where a third party was paid to write a computer program. Several students were said to have then submitted the same purchased program. This suggests that, because teachers do not address cheating at school level, students arrive at university believing it is acceptable.

*Theme A6 - The wider interest in contract cheating amongst students*

Students from the focus groups did not seem overly concerned if others were contract cheating. They said that although students may not get caught at the time, they would be found out eventually. For instance, students in Bosnia and Herzegovina discussed students who got their friends to complete their English language assignments and successfully received passing grades. However, when they moved on to the examination portion of the course, they did not have the ability needed and were unable to pass overall.

Students in Albania had a relaxed view towards contract cheating. A typical quote collected from a focus groups of students considering this as “just getting information”. However several students in Albania expressed dismay at students who contract cheated being awarded higher grades than honest students.

Some students from North Macedonia went further, suggesting that students who did not use contract cheating services were putting their academic career in jeopardy. One student commented on contract cheating:

“Not all students do this. Sometimes it’s too expensive. Some people think they won’t give money for that and end up with no homework at the end.”

Students from Montenegro did have knowledge that students in their class were contract cheating and noted that some got caught. They talked about a case in their class where one student wrote essays for several other students. The class professor was suspicious about the essay and, the students involved admitted what they had done. They were given a lower grade for the subject, but still passed. The students who took part in the focus group said that this was not the first time their peers cheated, only the first time that they had been caught. They also said that they thought that this punishment was appropriate. This needs to be considered as social commentary on attitudes towards cheating in the region.

The information from the focus groups suggested that it was difficult to detect students who were contract cheating. Several groups of students thought that students doing work for their peers could be detected by looking at handwriting, particularly when one person was writing work for several students. When work was typed, looking for common handwriting was no longer a viable option.

A small number of students were willing to go on record that they cared when others were contract cheating. A separate focus group participant in Montenegro to the previous example also said that they were approached to write for another student. In this case, the request came from a master's level student on a teaching course. Despite being offered what was stated to be a large amount of money, the request was turned down. The student identified that they would be in competition with the requester for jobs in the future and that this person "might get the job which I'm wanting". The concern "what can we expect from teachers like that one?" was also expressed.

Contract cheating does not always seem to be without risk. Students in Bosnia and Herzegovina talked about someone they knew who had been caught contract cheating. That person was temporarily excluded from their course and not able to take assessments for one year.

A student quote from Albania sums up the overall student attitude to buying work within that country:

"In Albania, we can buy some information and here we are best to buy something. We buy it in the market. It does not cost too much for me. It is easy to pay."

### *Hiring assistance for examinations*

#### *Theme B1 – The use of hidden earpieces to gain an unfair advantage in examinations*

For subjects where formal examinations are the predominant method of assessment, examination misconduct was viewed as being more common than the use of ghostwriting services. The financial methods that students stated were used to gain an unfair advantage extended beyond traditional assignment contract cheating.

The issue of students using hidden earpieces to gain an unfair advantage in examinations has been identified in contract cheating research (Lancaster and Clarke, 2017) and in studies of academic integrity in the European Union (Glendinning, 2014), particularly in Romania and Bulgaria. The topic was regularly discussed in the South Eastern Europe focus groups. These earpieces allow students to pay to receive answers from someone outside the examination room, another form of contract cheating.

Students in Croatian universities said that hidden earpieces were very common, with one student noting that these were widely advertised, including "in every bathroom".

Students in other countries in South East Europe knew where they could hire these earpieces. The focus group participants from North Macedonia said that the use of these had been “common” in their mathematics examinations.

The way in which these hired earpieces are used to aid student cheating is of interest. During the examination, it was said that someone outside the examination room would whisper answers to the students. More sophisticated technology described during the focus groups included the addition of microphones so that the students could communicate directly with those outside, as well as using hidden cameras to send pictures to their external helpers.

*Theme B2 – The risk of cheating using hidden earpieces to gain an unfair advantage in examinations*

Cheating in examinations using earpieces was noted to carry risks. Students in Bosnia and Herzegovina said that their professors were aware of this form of cheating and had developed techniques to make it more difficult for students to communicate with an outside party, including asking questions at an increased speed during spoken viva examinations. Students from North Macedonia knew of technology being used during examinations that emitted “a screeching sound”. Presumably this sound was designed to make it uncomfortable for students wearing hidden earpieces.

Penalties for being caught cheating using hidden earpieces were also noted by students as being severe, typically involving periods of suspension from studies. For instance, students from Bosnia and Herzegovina stated that the suspension period would be for six or twelve months. None of the student participants mentioned the possibility of permanent expulsion

*Other methods of obtaining an unfair advantage*

*Theme C1 - Making direct payments for results and qualifications*

Students in four focus groups volunteered additional information in part of the open-ended discussion. They believed that corruption beyond contract cheating was endemic in their university system. As this question was not a standard focus group question, this issue was not consistently explored across all focus groups. In these focus groups, students discussed how they could be asked to pay lecturers

to obtain a pass mark for a coursework or examination, or to increase their mark.

A student from North Macedonia said that, “many professors are corrupt”. The student cited Economics and Law as particular subjects they were aware that payments for results went on. They claimed that a 200 Euro payment would guarantee an ‘A’ grade in economics examinations.

Similar examples of students paying teachers were also given by students in Montenegro. As one student stated:

“I heard about that in the law faculty. There are a few professors who are known for taking money to let students pass exams. There has been some research about that and the police have been involved. It’s not okay, it’s hurting honest students.”

A student from Montenegro also suggested that some aspects of buying qualifications did away entirely with the pretense of taking assessments:

“Heard about that happening in Belgrade. There is a café near the faculty. Students just go in and order, ‘I want to pass’, like ordering a coffee. They pay, the professor comes out, takes the money and watches what students pay.”

Corruption also seemed to be a known issue in Albania. This topic was brought up by students in two separate focus groups. Although discussions in other countries were relatively tempered, students in Albania directly referred to payments made as “bribes” and said they knew which lecturers would accept them. However, the students also said that not all their lecturers would consider taking bribes or allow cheating.

This quote from a student from Albania captures the attitude there and how the challenge of fostering a culture of academic integrity in Albania could be addressed:

“They have to fix or change first of all the corruption in the professors. Students can pay the professor.”

The wider discussions with students about the political landscape in Albania suggested that they saw bribery and corruption going on across the country, not just within the higher education sector.

### *Theme C2 - Making indirect payments for results and qualifications*

Not all of the techniques used by teaching staff in the countries to generate extra income seem as blatant as bribes.

Students in Montenegro identified that staff could also sell the teaching materials needed for success, as the following quote attests:

“There was a situation in our department with a specific teacher. He asked us to buy a book from him if you wanted to pass the exam. You couldn’t get it from the library. You had to pay him about 20 euros for the book to pass the exam. If you didn’t have his book you couldn’t pass the exam. He was doing that for about 10 years. After a change of the Dean he is not working here anymore. But I’m sure he’s doing that with other students in other faculties where he’s teaching.”

Although this form of corruption could be considered a less direct mechanism than a payment to a teacher for results, the end result is the same. It could be considered of more concern than a direct payment. The indication is that all students need to make this payment in order to successfully complete their studies.

### *Theme C3 - Using influence for results and qualifications*

An alternative method to financial payments was also identified during open discussions and involved students looking to obtain an unfair advantage. This involved political influence, for example through people having society connections or a position of note. In one focus group students from North Macedonia said higher grades were possible “if you know someone who knows the professor” or if you were a “child of a politician”.

Students from North Macedonia summed up why corruption was a problem, saying that this was “really discriminating”. The context was that students would have a better chance at life if they were politically connected. The students expressed concern that one of their peers buying an advantage “will get a much better job and not have put in all the effort”.

## *Conclusions*

As this research reported in this paper has indicated, there are many challenges to academic integrity evident across South East Europe. Central to these challenges is contract cheating. Examples have been presented showing that students are aware of contract cheating services, that many know peers who use these services and that some students are writing directly for these services or for their peer group. The majority of focus groups saw students

willing to talk openly about contract cheating. Some students confessed to using these services themselves and were not dissuaded by the presence of their peer group or teachers.

The trend that students are themselves working as contract cheating services providers, by ghostwriting for other students, is worrying. Although research into the individuals and companies who are ghostwriting has begun to emerge (Sivasubramaniam et al, 2016; Stella-Maris and Awala-Ale, 2017; Lancaster, 2019) there is little evidence elsewhere in the literature to suggest that students commonly operate as providers.

The reasons why students appear so involved in the ghostwriting process are not clear. This may be through financial necessity or because of the economic situation in their country. It may be because work is written in a non-English language, thus creating a localised market different to that operating in the English-speaking world. It may also be because students know the risk of being caught is low. It is not clear what, if any, penalty would be applied to a student acting as a ghostwriter in this region.

One positive finding that emerged is that some students believed in academic integrity and were willing to speak freely. There were students who valued completing their own work and who were looking for opportunities to advance themselves in a legitimate manner. These students should be encouraged and supported to act as academic integrity champions, ideally alongside the teachers who also feel the same way.

This research has focused on South East Europe, but there are many other similar areas of the world where contract cheating research has not yet been conducted. This is a challenging area to address at a local level, particularly where cultural norms appear to be enablers for wider corruption. Such research does need to be carried out, even if this is done whilst being mindful that it may be impossible to collect a complete and representative data set.

Contract cheating needs to be addressed at a local level, but in countries such as these where cultural norms appear to be enablers for wider corruption, issues also need to be addressed at the highest channels within society within society. It is perhaps here where the international supporters of academic integrity can best offer their support to those students and academics who do wish to make a difference.

At the same time, future international recommendations on academic integrity need to be mindful that not all countries have reached the same stage of development and maturity. It is therefore essential that the specific needs of all countries are considered as part of any sector-wide approaches to addressing contract cheating that are made. Teaching staff may also want to consider opportunities to explore student perspectives, experience and motivation in a non-confrontational manner in their own institution.

Within the South East Europe region, more research is needed into the wider culture of corruption which appears to permeate from the highest levels of society through to the educational sector. This study demonstrates that students have directly encountered elements of corruption, ranging from low level requests to buy mandatory texts for which a teacher receives a commission, to more serious indications that money can directly be exchanged for results.

Even the smallest instances of corruption have a detrimental effect on the day-to-day life of students. During the research visits, students on several occasions expressed their driving force towards gaining a qualification as this was seen as a route for them to gain employment outside of their country of origin. When the need for a successful end-result is more important than the learning journey, it is not surprising that there are students who are willing to cheat. The process needed to address contract cheating in South East Europe needs to look above and beyond higher education for its answers.

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