

The student's decision to cheat

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Background

Forms of plagiarism are changing as detection systems and patterns of plagiarism co-evolve. The most significant development in recent years has been the widespread adoption of the TurnItIn scanning system. While this system may deter some potential plagiarisers, they also have the option of adaptation. One such form of adaptation is to shift away from a 'copy and paste' approach to plagiarism toward the 'Contract Cheating' (Lancaster and Clarke, 2006) market. This market provides bespoke, original material which will not be identified as plagiarised by TurnItIn. The student's decision to buy within this market is the focus of this paper.

Research Questions

The evidence regarding the scale of the Contract Cheating problem mainly comes from the supply side. There is very little information on the demand side, partly because of illicit nature of the good purchased. The research reported here is concerned with the demand for coursework provided by Contract Cheating organisations.

It represents a first foray into this area to analyse the decision to buy such material and how this decision is affected by the price and quality of the work and the risk and penalties associated with its submission, as well as the characteristics of the buyers themselves. The research statistically identifies the implicit value students place on essays of varying quality and how these financial valuations are affected by the risk and penalties associated with their submission.

Methods

The research reported here uses Choice Experiments (CE) to address students' willingness to buy essays. CE are widely used in economic analyses of, inter alia, health (Ryan et al., 2008), agricultural (Burton et al, 2001) environmental (Bateman et al., 2008) and transport (Hensher et al., 2005) issues. It represents an innovation in the methodology of plagiarism research compared to previous empirical investigations (see Ashworth et al 1997; Brandão and Teixeira 2005; Caudill and Mixon, 2005; Kerkvliet, 1994; Kerkvliet and Sigmund, 1999)

Respondents in choice experiment survey are presented with repeated choice situations each of which comprises several options (in this case, essays) . Each essay comprises attributes (price, grade, risk and penalty). By (systematically) varying the levels of these attributes the essays and presented are varied. Respondents are presented with repeated sets of essays and indicate which of the options they prefer. Students recruited to the study were always presented with a "buy none" option: they were never forced to 'buy' an essay.

To make the choice situations as realistic as possible survey participants had to be presented with essay choices related to a specific piece of assessed work that was due to be submitted shortly thereafter. Students were recruited at 3 universities using this criterion. It was made clear that the research was unequivocally based on confidentiality, and had been approved by the University's Research Ethics Committee

Frame

This research comprises a statistical examination of the decision to purchase an essay from a 3rd party. The theoretical underpinnings of the statistical choice models estimated date back to Lancaster's consumer theory (1966) where the value of a product (essay) can be decomposed into the sum of the values of the product's attributes (price, grade, etc). Clearly the valuation of these attributes differs across students depending on their values, abilities, income etc. Lancaster's theoretical framework is operationalised via random utility theory and associated empirical models of choice (McFadden, 1974).

This approach allows identification of the implicit weight given to attributes and their levels in the choices that have been made. Further, one can analyse how the attributes are traded off against each other. The inclusion of a cost attribute allows estimation of the monetary value of changes in levels of the other attributes.

Research findings

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

We find that the students' choices are significantly affected by the levels of risk and the penalty associated with the essays - we quantify how the value of the essays decline as the probability of detection increases and the penalties become tougher.

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

A degree of caution is required when considering results from such a stated preference study as one needs to consider how reliable and realistic the choices, and implicit valuations they reflect, are. It might be the case that students did not treat the choices sufficiently seriously and over-report their willingness to buy. However, in this study there may be an opposite effect: the fear of self incrimination may have caused respondents to under-report their willingness to buy. We test for significant misreporting using a Bayesian misreporting framework (Balcombe et al., 2009) but find no evidence of a tendency to misreport and over-select the non-incriminating "buy none" option.

The proportion of students indicating a willingness to buy, and their apparent lack of concern at revealing this in a survey run by academics at their university, are startling. We discuss possible causes of the apparent lack of stigma in revealing a willingness to purchase coursework, including the consumerisation of the student experience (Molesworth et al., 2010, Newson, 2004 Fisher, 1993). As the University student is treated as, and increasingly identifies and mobilises as, a consumer demanding 'value for money' it appears many are prepared to take this consumer identity one step further. As a consumer in a Higher Education market, the decision to buy may no longer appear so unethical or alien to the educational experience. This may be more so where students feel that their university has subcontracted much of the teaching they receive to Graduate Teaching Assistants and hence their subcontracting some of the work required of them is just another informed, rational, consumer choice.