Fighting contract cheating and ghostwriting in Higher Education: Moving towards a multidimensional approach

Holi Ibrahim Holi Ali1* and Awad Alhassan2

Abstract: Contract cheating, or “ghostwriting” as it is more commonly known, has become a growing threat to academic integrity in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the world. This survey-based empirical research duly reviews a substantial body of the relevant literature of contract cheating or “ghostwriting” and it looks into this serious and often undetectable phenomenon with the view of exposing some of the implications of this practice and proposing a holistic approach.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The authors are TESOL and applied linguistics researchers and practitioners with teaching and research interest include English medium instruction in higher education, academic literacy and global issues in HE. The present study is part of our ongoing research project on contract cheating in higher education institutions in the Middle East and North Africa: policy, pedagogy and practice. The authors are frequent presenters at national and international conferences and symposia and they published extensively in peer-reviewed journals.

Holi Ibrahim Holi Ali is Assistant Professor of Applied & TESOL at the Department of English Language & Literature, University of Technology & Applied Sciences, Rustaq, Sultanate of Oman. He has a PhD in applied linguistics from the University of Huddersfield, UK. His teaching and research interests include writing for publication, English medium of instruction (EMI), language education and literacy, academic integrity and ghostwriting and contract cheating practices in higher education. He has presented widely at national and international conferences and published extensively in peer-reviewed journals.

Awad Alhassan is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics & TESOL at the Department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts & Applied Sciences, Dhofar University, Oman. He is also affiliated to Khartoum University, Sudan. He has an MA and PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Essex, UK. His teaching and research interests include EAP, academic writing, plagiarism and academic integrity as well as English-medium instruction in higher education. He has attended and presented at several national and international conferences and has published widely in peer reviewed journals.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Contract cheating or ghost-writing has become a growing and serious phenomenon threatening academic integrity in higher education institutions. This is due to the often undetectable nature of the ghost-written work and the inadequacy of the existing plagiarism software programmes in curbing this serious type of plagiarism. Our paper reports on findings from a qualitative study intended to explore the phenomenon from tertiary teachers' perspective. The study draws on a large body of the relevant literature to both situate its focus and to provide the reader with a relatively extensive literature in the area. The paper presented and discussed the main findings and proposed a detailed and pedagogically-oriented multidimensional approach combining a range of measures to help both educators and policymakers in HEIs combat and curb this serious misconduct.
that could assist educators to curb the practice. Focusing on the Omani higher education context, this paper empirically explores this issue from the perspectives of teachers in HEIs with the view of highlighting the seriousness of contract cheating to academic integrity and then making recommendations for HEIs and educators to combat the practice. Three main research questions were addressed: (1) How do teachers in higher education institutions perceive contract cheating? (2) In what way do they believe contract cheating affects academic integrity in HE? (3) What can be done to curb the practice of contract cheating? A qualitative methodology with an open-ended survey and follow-up interviews for the data collection was used. 30 participants voluntarily took part in this research. The findings showed that teachers viewed ghostwriting as a form of plagiarism. They also reported that there were negative consequences on the academic integrity of the assessed written work required of the students enrolled in different degree programmes in the Oman HEIs. At the same time, they made suggestions on ways to combat and curb the practice, such as manual verification and awareness-raising. The data informed both the pedagogical implications highlighted in this study and our recommendations.

Subjects: Language & Linguistics; Language Teaching & Learning; General Language Reference; Languages of the Middle East

Keywords: academic integrity; contract cheating; ghostwriting; higher education; multidimensional approach; plagiarism

1. Introduction

Contract cheating or ‘ghostwriting’ as it is more commonly known, has become a prevalent phenomenon in the higher education landscape. Therefore, the overarching aim of this study is to identify teachers’ views on this serious form of plagiarism and to propose a holistic approach that could curb and combat such malpractice. To the best of our knowledge, this research is the only research of its kind of ghostwriting practices in Oman, as this is completely novel research in this particular context. The terms ‘contract cheating’ and ‘ghostwriting’ are used interchangeably in this paper, since they are seen as synonymous in the literature. This study is responding to the HEIs’ and educators’ concerns about contract cheating or ghostwriting practices that have become prevalent in academia. Additionally, there is a paucity of previous research in this particular area, which inspired our choice to conduct this study in the context in question.

It is acknowledged that some students outsource their coursework to other people to get it done, usually paid but sometimes unpaid, and then the students submit it as their own work. Such work often passes plagiarism detection software programs because it is, in fact, a new piece of writing that abides by the required citation and referencing conventions. Hence, it is recognised as a form of plagiarism, but currently not effectively detected. Khan et al. (2020, p. 17) consider contract cheating to be a growing menace that most academic institutions are universally grappling with. The driving motivation behind this paper stems from our own experiences as academics working in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), where there are reportedly high numbers of contract cheating among our students, as well as hearing similar concerns from our colleagues elsewhere. Furthermore, there is little, if any, scholarship available on this phenomenon in the Middle East context, specifically Oman. Consequently, addressing students’ academic dishonesty in assessment by maintaining high standards of academic integrity in HE has become a core element in educational discourse. However, HEIs often experience difficulties with both detecting and policing ‘ghostwritten’ assignments (Rowland et al., 2018). Indeed, contract cheating has become a prevalent ‘servic’ offered to students and a source of controversy and debate within HE in the last
decade (Draper et al., 2017). This paper argues both theoretically and empirically that manual verification should be valued and equated with the technological detection measures, and the former should remain the main resource for detecting ghostwriting practices among students, especially in light of the inability of plagiarism detection technology to determine whether the submitted work has been written by the ‘author’ or simply purchased from a contractor or ghostwriter. Moreover, HEIs need to design and formulate policies and adopt multidimensional approaches and models that should consider teachers’ manual verification as an indispensable approach to curb ghostwriting practices among students in HEIs. Indeed, this could potentially be an effective mechanism since there are apparent challenges with the existing plagiarism detection technology in fighting and curbing such malpractice.

2. Background
Contract cheating (more commonly known as ‘ghostwriting’) is defined as a form of academic misconduct that involves students paying a third party to produce an unsupervised assessment item that they subsequently submit as if it was their work (Baird & Clare, 2017; Clarke & Lancaster, 2006; Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016; Walker & Townley, 2012). Remenyi (2016) describes ghostwriting as the practice of hiring a writer (or writers) to produce a piece of work that follows a predefined style, and none of the original writing credit is attributed to the ghostwriter(s). The purchaser specifies if they want an essay to be written to a particular standard, such as being good enough to obtain a first-class or second-class mark. Ghostwriting is not easily detectable by technological plagiarism detection measures currently used and this is concerning considering that research has revealed that a growing number of students in higher education have self-reported having purchased an assignment (see e.g., Lines, 2016; Wallace & Newton, 2014; Holi, 2013b). Ghostwriting cannot be easily detected by software in the same way as plagiarism but it could best be detected by lecturers having personal knowledge of the capabilities of their students (Remenyi, 2016). Furthermore, contract cheating is a particular form of plagiarism. The process of contract cheating is well described by Bretag et al. (2019, p. 2) as:

“… where a student gets someone – a third party – to complete an assignment or an exam for them. This third party might be a friend, family member, fellow student or staff member who assists the student as a favour. It might be a pre-written assignment which has been obtained from an assignment ‘mill’. The third-party may also be paid service, advertised locally or online”.

Contract cheating is conceptualised as the creation of work, original work that is tailored to the student’s requirements, but not written by the student. Ghostwritten texts have the potential to be of high quality, and therefore as the writing is not plagiarised in the traditional sense, e.g., copying full texts from another source without citing the source, technological plagiarism detection measures fail to detect ‘ghostwritten’ texts, and universities do not currently seem to have adequate policies in place to combat this practice.

As stated previously, ghostwriting is a different form of plagiarism because there is no direct intellectual theft involved; it is rather a question of misrepresentation or lying about the authorship of the work. Moreover, this type of offence can be considered an extreme form of plagiarism. Some academics feel that ghostwriting is considerably more serious than plagiarism concerning the degree of violation of academic trust (Remenyi, 2016).

There are several reasons that students turn to contract cheating and plagiarism, in general, these reasons are broadly classified into contextual and institutional, pedagogical, ideological and socio-cultural categories. For example, students resort to such malpractices due to the lack of understanding of plagiarism and referencing mechanics. The inappropriate use of sources can be one of the reasons behind plagiarism if students do not learn how to use them appropriately (Pecorari, 2003). Students’ lack of familiarity with academic discourse and its conventions leads to confusion, and then plagiarism (Lillis & Turner, 2001). Devlin and Gary’s (2007, p. 182) study
highlighted some important causes, such as inadequate admission criteria, poor understanding of plagiarism, poor academic skills, teaching and learning-related issues, laziness and convenience, pride in plagiarising, pressures and education costs. Additionally, Gullifer and Tyson (2010 p. 465) listed several similar reasons, such as students’ poor time management skills, the perception that cheating is easy, demanding study schedules, lack of motivation and some personal factors such as gender, personality type, age and grade average point. Moreover, Malgwi and Rakovski (2009) provided further reasons in their study such as students’ fear of failing the course, loss of financial aid, fear of parents withdrawing financial support, avoidance of embarrassment, desire to impress friends and peers, desire to get a well-paid job, to be competitive with others, competition in the job market, and risk of losing a job (2009 p. 210). Furthermore, Lines (2016) notes that one of the major reasons students use ghostwriting services is the increased accessibility to these services. Contract cheating agencies advertise their services publicly, targeting their clients using some commercial persuasive discourse to persuade their clients on social platforms and essay mills. Furthermore, alongside the contract cheating market being boosted by technological advancements and change, cultural and educational backgrounds could also be a cause of such practices. For example, in some countries and cultures, students are encouraged, if not forced, to write texts verbatim from their teachers. This verbatim learning is seen as a form of respect in certain cultures, and therefore it is difficult for such students to adapt to the new educational practices and ways of learning, or free thought (Hayes & Introna, 2005). For some students, the different ideological perceptions of plagiarism and the feeling of alienation from task assessment may make plagiarism a justified practice (ibid).

These studies seem to suggest that the reasons that contribute to the contract cheating phenomenon are too complex as they comprise an amalgam of factors ranging from social, economic cultural, educational to academic and personal factors.

Contract cheating has become commonplace globally, regardless of the educational system. The practice has come to light after the discovery of the growing number of essay mills on the Internet, where they freely advertise on popular sites, such as Facebook, of being able to complete assessed coursework on behalf of the students, of high academic quality in return for financial remunerations. Contract cheating sites can broadly be classified into three categories: (1) “essay mills”, (2) discussion forums, and (3) auction sites (Lancaster & Clarke, 2007b). Some voluntary confessions have also helped bring this academic misconduct into the spotlight, and several other cases were uncovered and reported in the literature (Remenyi, 2016, pp. 4–5).

Surprisingly, the ghostwriters themselves find their practice as a needed resource for students, despite acknowledging its illegality. For example, here is what a ghostwriter wrote to the Times Higher Education magazine:

I don’t justify the work I’m doing on ethical grounds. While what I do is not illegal, it does enable others to break rules and suffer the consequences if they are caught. The agencies maintain the image of legitimate businesses: many do not even refer to ‘cheating’. You are simply ‘helping’ with an assignment (making up, as one agency argues, for the university’s failure to provide adequate tuition). While I’m happy to acknowledge that I am dependent on clients’ continued cheating, this doesn’t mean I am not conscious that my job is a symptom of an illness, a fracture, in our universities.

Interestingly, Shahghasemi and Akhavan (2015) note that students sometimes hire ghostwriters simply because they can afford the payments for the service and do not want to do the work themselves. For example, in one of their interviews a student reported:

I know a former classmate of mine who was divorced and got money from her ex-husband. She said she wouldn’t bother herself doing these ‘stupid things’. She said in each semester she employs the best people to write her an original paper. She said sometimes, just a smile would be enough.
The literature provides several solutions to combat or curb the contract cheating issue among students. First, education was advocated as the main tool for sustaining the culture of academic integrity among students (Rogerson & McCarthy, 2017; Walker & Townley, 2012); second, reforming legislation and policies (Draper & Newton, 2017); third, continuous validation of students’ work (Amigud et al., 2018; Harper et al., 2019); fourth, shortening turnaround time as a means to address contract cheating (O’Malley & Roberts, 2012); fifth, the social approach which includes academic integrity-culture building process and awareness-raising campaigns across campuses using social media platforms through involving students (Khan et al., 2020). Finally, assessment design and structure (Bretag et al., 2019; Lancaster & Clarke, 2014; Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016) was recommended to be used to minimize opportunities to cheat, including increasing the use of invigilated examinations (Clarke & Lancaster 2007a; Lines, 2016; Moriarty et al., 2016). Also, it was recommended that teachers avoid re-use of exam papers and assignment topics (Davis & Carroll et al., 2009); and in-class viva voce tasks can be used as a means of verification (Carroll & Appleton, 2001).

HEIs all over the world have their policies for disciplinary problems in general and academic misconduct such as plagiarism in particular. They often publish these policies publicly to fight and deter plagiarism. These policies vary from one institution to another, but they have many things in common concerning plagiarism and breaching the academic codes. For HEIs to remain competitive in producing graduates who are marketable and globally accepted, universities all over the world, adopt a more focused position to address the issue of plagiarism by implementing academic integrity policies and procedures to prevent and discourage plagiarism among students and academic staff members. There are several existing approaches to fighting plagiarism practices.

There are broadly three HEI approaches on plagiarism that have been identified in the literature (Hu 2015a and 2015b as cited in Hu & Sun, 2017 p. 58–59). (1) The punitive approach, mostly incriminating in nature and it views plagiarism as an immoral and criminal act (within academia) that must be stopped, and those who commit this act must be caught and punished ruthlessly. (2) The self-regulative approach that relies on the goodwill and ethical side of students as it ‘centers on explicitly communicating to students the institutional espousal of academic integrity as a fundamental value’ and ‘depends on students’ integrity and willingness to abstain from academic dishonesty’ (ibid). (3) Last, the educative approach which acknowledges the complexity of plagiarism and favours educational and training measures (i.e. ‘providing ample opportunities for practice in a supportive learning environment in which students are not accused of plagiarism for making errors in the process of learning’ (Pecorari & Petric, 2014, p. 288) to combat such practices.

While there is relatively good technology in place for detecting classic plagiarism, such as Turnitin (commonly used in European institutions), SafeAssign, iThenticate etc., they could not detect contract cheating. Consequently, there have recently been some developments in this technology directed to specifically address this form of plagiarism. For example, Turnitin has recently launched a new piece of software called ‘Authorship Investigation’, which was created to specifically counter ghostwriting practice by comparing the writing styles of individual students against their previously submitted coursework (Yorke, 2018). Although this is significant progress, ghostwriting will still, more often than not, go on unnoticed. Especially in HEIs that have less funding or do not have access to these technological plagiarism detection mechanisms. HEIs are, therefore, obliged to find ways to deal with contract cheating and ghostwriting practices. Additionally, they need to create strong mechanisms, regulations and policies to deal with cases of contract cheating.

Having extensively reviewed the literature whilst highlighting the spread and the seriousness of the phenomena globally, this paper sets out to investigate ghostwriting in Omani HE from the perspectives of teachers as internal stakeholders and to provide some recommendations that would allow all stakeholders to detect, combat and curb the phenomenon which seems to be on the rise in the Middle East HE educational context and elsewhere. However, it is worth noting that
we, the authors of this study, favour and call for a more educational and pedagogically-oriented approach that promotes education, training and awareness-raising of the student writers rather than punitive and policing approaches that are based on intimidation and incrimination. Our current study addresses the following three research questions: (1) How do teachers in higher education institutions perceive contract cheating? (2) In what way do they believe contract cheating affects academic integrity in HE? (3) What can be done to curb the practice of contract cheating?

3. Methodology and research design
This study utilised a combination of both open-ended surveys and semi-structured interviews to gain the participants’ emic perspectives. The study adopted a qualitative methodology with a case study approach as it allows for multiple sources of data collection and thus providing the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of real-life situations, which in turn enhances the trustworthiness of the study (Denscombe, 2010). Additionally, the case study strategy enables the researchers to describe and explain issues related to the research that might not otherwise be accessible through other methods of inquiry. Purposive sampling was used as a means to enable the researchers to get the best information from the people most likely to have the experience or expertise to provide quality information and valuable insights on the research topic (Denscombe, 2010). This type of sampling aimed to ensure that the sample is as diverse as possible to be able to identify a full range of perceptions and perspectives that are associated with contract cheating and ghostwriting within the Omani HE context. Therefore, we sampled groups of participants with different linguistic, social, educational and cultural backgrounds. Purposive sampling is ‘hand-picked for the topic’ (Denscombe, 2010 p. 34), and, for the current study, purposive sampling was utilised because the researchers selected a small number of participants deliberately and consciously to obtain first-hand and in-depth accounts from the participants, whilst gaining as diverse information as possible. The sample was selected according to the following criteria: full-time EFL teachers, working in Oman, they were from different Omani HEIs, and they also all volunteered to participate in the study. 30 teachers from various Omani HEIs voluntarily took part in the study. Participants were recruited after the ethical approval was obtained for the study. Teachers are from multi-nationalities with substantial teaching experiences and they have been working in Omani HEIs for more than 5 years. An open-ended survey (see Appendix A) was used as the main method for the data collection followed by some semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) with five teachers out of the 30 participants to consolidate some of the salient themes that emerged from the open-ended survey data analysis. The open-ended survey was used as the main source of data collection to gain an understanding of how the teacher participants felt about and perceive of contract cheating or ‘ghostwriting’ and their experiences with it. We also intended to explore the participants’ views on the impact of this practice on academic integrity as well as their suggestions as to how the practice can be combated and curbed. Both the open format of the survey and the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researchers to gain the participants’ ‘views, understandings, interpretations [as well as] experience’ (Mason, 2002, p. 63) regarding ghostwriting as a serious and less detectable phenomenon threatening academic integrity in HE. The rationale behind using this tool was, first, to offer an opportunity for all participants to reflect on and report on their experiences and perceptions regarding the research topic since the interviews in the study focused on a sub-group of them; second, as the participants self-reported in the questionnaire, there was an opportunity for them to comment freely and anonymously on the issues under investigation without the researchers’ interference or presence. The findings obtained from the sample are not necessarily generalisable for the population but they provide an account relevant beyond the study. They could, for instance, be generalised to another similar context and other circumstances where, for example, grade, gender, physical location and education policy are similar, but within limits, due to the sample size and data.

As for the data analysis procedure, thematic analysis was selected because it is flexible, and a generic approach that can be used with different conceptual frameworks and with descriptive and exploratory studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) added that
thematic analysis has the potential to produce many interpretations of the data and potentially
give rise to more insightful interpretations than other approaches.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis employs six steps to elicit information
from the data namely, familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes,
reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. The first four phases were
carried out interchangeably by repeated reference to the study aims and research questions. This
helped us to select the salient themes and then identify the codes. The data was analysed through
the practice of coding and categorisation (see Appendix C), after which a more detailed sense of
the data can be gained and it can be represented in a meaningful way. The data from both the
survey and interviews were coded thematically and inductively to gain in-depth and rich insider’s
perspectives on the issues under investigation (see appendix C). We adopted an open strategy for
coding whereby everything was coded so that we could discover as many potential issues as
possible from the data (Alhassan, 2019). The themes that emerged from the coding process were
checked by both researchers to ensure agreement and thus maintaining some degree of inter-
rater reliability. The most salient themes were reported in the analysis and more connections and
linkages were established among the themes and further discussed and related to the wider
relevant literature.

Finally, the credibility of the current study was maintained by continuous engagement with the
participants to build trust during the data collection process and the data analysis. To enhance the
transferability and trustworthiness of the current study, researchers employed purposive sampling,
dense description and to link the reader to the context of the study through providing details about
the context of the study to help themselves to gain insight and draw conclusions (Hammersley,
2008). The researchers provided argumentative interpretations to the data backed by concert
evidence from the data to ensure that their explanations and interpretations are the most reason-
able for others.

4. Findings and discussion
This section focuses on the study findings and the discussion of the finding by weaving the
perspectives and perceptions of teachers in Omani tertiary education institutions through their
own words and perspectives. The data is organized thematically in such a way that addresses the
research questions and the representative quotes were selected from the themes generated from
both the open-ended survey and interviews to make the account and the narrated stories more
coherent and cohesive.

4.1. Teachers’ views about ghostwriting: ghostwriting vs. plagiarism
Teachers reported different views and perceptions about ghostwriting but they all seem to agree
on classifying the practice as a serious form of plagiarism.

A teacher said

I believe that ghost-writing is a serious form of plagiarism. It is an academic offence. It is
widely used in today’s academia, but unfortunately, there are no clear policies and measures
to combat such form of mal-practice. Ghost-writing can endanger the whole academic
integrity in HEIs. The problem with ghostwriting is the lack of evidence for incriminating the
concerned student as it is less detectable by text-matching programmes. I think that
ghostwriting is the most dangerous type of plagiarism.

These comments illustrate that ghostwriting is viewed as a serious form of plagiarism which can
threaten academic integrity and remains the less detectable form of misconduct. The above
comments indicate clearly that there were academic policies which are exclusively meant to
combat contract cheating. This teacher’s reaction reflects the difficulty of finding evidence for
penalizing the concerned student.
Another teacher reported:

It is similar to plagiarism. It takes place when someone asks another person to do his/her assignment like an essay and claims that it is his or her work. This is unacceptable, especially in education to hire someone to write for you (e.g., assignments, articles, or thesis). I believe it’s unethical from both sides. Ghostwriting is the practice whereby someone writes a text but someone else attributes it to themselves. Contract writing is the situation where the ghost-writer gets paid for his or her work. However, in some cases, students can get from someone to help with necessarily involving payment.

This comment confirms definitions in the literature for the contract cheating and ghostwriting such as seen in previous research (e.g., Baird & Clare 2017; Clarke and Lancaster (2006); Sivasubramaniam et al. (2016); Walker and Townley (2012). The data indicated that some participants are aware of ghostwriting and its danger to academic integrity. Interestingly, teachers also believed that it is only the hired/paid and contracted work that is ghostwriting.

The unethical aspect of ghost-writing is not only confined to the contract cheating service seekers but also equally includes the service providers:

Selling your writing skills to me is a heinous crime. Serious actions must be taken by higher education institutions and governments to stop such agencies from running such an unethical business. Ghostwriting has been normalised by many agencies and they believe that they are offering to students in these difficult times. It is worse than plagiarism. Students who plagiarise part of a text at least they do part of the work, but those who engage ghostwriters do none of the work.

The vast majority of teachers appeared to persistently view contract cheating and ghostwriting as a serious crime. They argue for holistic policies or approaches which should be adopted by higher education institutions to fight contract cheating. Governments should ban these services and crack them down on students. However, HEIs are facing difficulties in both detecting and policing ghostwritten assignments (Rowland et al., 2018) as contract cheating has become a prevalent cheating ‘servic’ offered to students and a source of controversy and debate within tertiary education in the last decade (Draper et al., 2017). However, some teachers differentiate between ghostwriting and plagiarism describing the former as being more serious than the latter in terms violation and its impact on academic integrity as a whole.

In a similar line a teacher reported:

Ghostwriting cannot be considered plagiarism since the real owner of the work is hired to do the job and knows that his work is going to be submitted as someone else's achievement. I think ghostwriting is more harmful than plagiarism to the education process. Plagiarism is a process which at least involves a person to whom an assignment is assigned in trying to do by him/herself but without acknowledging other people's work. Ghostwriting is, on the other hand, for example, a student is completely dependent on another student or so. In other words, he/she gets his/her assignment done by the other student and submits it as it is his/her work. Moreover, ghostwriting may not be detected by plagiarism software like SafeAssign, especially the written work is done for the first time.

It is becoming apparent from the above quote that ghostwriting is more harmful than other forms of plagiarism as it cannot be detected by plagiarism detection technology. This is in line with Remenyi’s (2016) view who believes that ghostwriting cannot be easily detected by software in the same way as plagiarism; however, ghostwriting is best detected by lecturers having personal knowledge of the capabilities of their students.

In contrast, another teacher claimed that ghostwriting is a bit less severe than plagiarism since, unlike plagiarism, there is a mutual agreement for copyright transfer in return to payment:
The two have one thing in common and that is the fact that the paper or writing project is the work of someone else and not that of the publicly named author. However, there is some difference. Plagiarism is theft of academic property without the consent of the original author whereas in ghostwriting, there is the transfer of exclusive use or ownership by mutual consent and most of the time by remuneration.

The above extract compares between ghost-writing and plagiarism. It illustrates that contract cheating and ghostwriting is less severe than plagiarism since there is a mutual agreement between the two parties. However, this does not corroborate with the literature which considers ghostwriting to be the more serious form of plagiarism. However, some academics feel that ghostwriting is considerably more serious than plagiarism concerning the degree of violation of academic trust, aligning themselves with views from the literature (Remenyi, 2016).

4.2. Impact of ghostwriting on academic integrity

Teachers claimed that ghostwriting practices have serious consequences on the educational process in many aspects.

One teacher said:

Ghostwriting will extremely affect academic integrity when we appreciate people who mainly depend on others and neglect the real writers. Policy-makers should legislate policies and measures which are exclusively addressing the issue of contract cheating. Also, text-matching software which can detect ghost-written assignment should be developed. Moreover, teachers also need to reconsider their assessment mechanisms and strategies which can minimize the ghost-writing practices among students. I think there is a strong relationship between contract cheating and the way students are assessed.

Teachers’ interviews revealed that ghostwriting has a greater negative impact, on the whole, on academic integrity. Therefore, they advocated that there should legislative measures to safeguard academic integrity and curb contract cheating practices. Assessment strategies are viewed as a motivator for students to go for contract cheating (Bretag et al., 2019; Busch & Bilgin, 2014).

4.2.1. Impact of ghostwriting on the assessment and evaluation process

The interview data showed that ghostwriting or contract cheating has a negative effect on the assessment and evaluation process of the students. For example, a teacher expressed:

Ghostwriting leads to a clear defect in the evaluation process, where the results of the continuous evaluation of students’ work during the semester will not be commensurate with the students’ results in the final tests they performed without external help, which will evaluate learning outcomes completely unclear and therefore the overall educational process.

A teacher reported that contracting cheating and ghostwriting could impact the whole evaluation and assessment process negatively. The prevention approach is important for curbing such serious practice. This was supported by Wallace and Newton (2014) who believed that prevention has gained in importance as an approach to tackling and fighting plagiarism beyond detection measures only. This type of offence can be considered an extreme form of plagiarism at least. Some academics feel that ghostwriting is considerably more serious than plagiarism concerning the degree of violation of academic trust (Remenyi, 2016).

4.2.2. Impact of ghostwriting on student learning

The findings of this study reveal the effect of ghostwriting on the student learning process. Teachers indicated that ghostwriting or contract cheating impact student learning negatively.

In a similar line, another teacher reported:
Ghost-writing can have serious effects on student learning, scholarship, and institutions of higher education. For example, the academic integrity of the master's thesis and doctoral dissertation has traditionally been the cornerstone of graduate education. For the student, ghostwriting compromises or devalues this experience of academic creativity and the experience of becoming an independent learner and knowledge creator. For the institution, it compromises their academic standards about research and teaching. More than integrity, it impacts the worth that one may attribute to the degrees and qualifications obtained thanks to ghostwriting. This could, in some cases, even pose a real danger to society.

This quote also points to the impact of ghostwriting on students learning process and the higher education institutions at large. Moreover, teachers also questioned the value and credibility of the qualifications obtained via ghostwriting practices.

4.3. Suggestions for curbing ghostwriting practices

Having highlighted the participants' views on contract cheating and its impact on academic integrity, this section illustrates their suggestions for combating and curbing the practice.

4.3.1. Techniques and strategies for combating contract cheating

Teachers proposed a range of techniques and strategies for curbing ghostwriting or contract cheating. For example, a teacher reported:

The student must prove to you that the work is theirs. For example, ask them to present their work and ask them several questions. Meet the students and ask them to explain some parts of their work. Ask them to write in front of you about one idea of their assignments. Raising students' awareness of contract cheating is of utmost importance. Creating a culture of integrity is one of the most important measures that could safeguard the process.

Teachers' voices demonstrated that they held different views about the ways to curb and combat ghostwriting or contract cheating practices. However, they suggest that the social approach to contract cheating such as using awareness-raising campaigns would help students to understand the issues of misconduct and reinforcing the integrity-culture-building process (Khan et al., 2020). Another suggestion was made by teachers who are using student-teacher conferencing. In this conference, teachers can verify the ghostwritten assignment by asking students a couple of questions and then the teachers can decide whether the written work is done by a student or a third party. Students themselves can be involved in organising the awareness-raising campaigns against contract cheating and breaching codes of conducts. Students can post messages across the campuses and public platforms against essay mills and ghostwriting agencies as an unethical business.

In a similar vein, another teacher reported:

Involving students' in-class presentations to have an idea about the level of the student and then compare this level with the level of the scholarship in the assignments. However, it is still difficult to prove it as the presentation skills are different from the writing skills.

The data indicated that one of the strategies that could be used to combat contract cheating is the assessment design. Getting students presenting their written assignments could reveal whether the assignment was written by a student or a third party. Several researchers demonstrated the importance of assessment in fighting contract cheating practices (Davis & Carroll 2009; Bretag et al., 2019; Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Clarke & Lancaster, 2007b; Lines, 2016; Moriarty et al., 2016).

The assessment and course design should be considered to handle contract cheating practices in HEIs.
Yet, another teacher suggested

Teachers need to take the students through their written assignments step by step. Allocate some of the class time for students to complete their assignments. Also, check students work right from the beginning and don't leave everything till the end. Of course, a short introduction about ghostwriting and plagiarism at the beginning of each semester would help.

This teacher considered walking students through the assignment process could help the student to shy away from contract cheating. Also educating students about academic integrity issues can help in curbing such form of misconduct. This goes in line with the educative approaches which acknowledges the complexity of plagiarism and favours educational and training measures (i.e. providing ample opportunities for practice in a supportive learning environment in which students are not accused of plagiarism for making errors in the process of learning' (Pecorari & Petric 2014 p. 288).

Moreover, another teacher suggested:

All students should submit their papers and presentations into a common drive, on which there would be a portfolio per student. Then, it would be good to have a program (software, App) which can analyse a student’s papers and presentations as a whole and calculate the degree of probability that a given paper or presentation be his or hers based on his or her style and depth of thinking throughout.

This teacher probably meant instead of having text-matching software only, alternative software, that could analyse a student’s assignments could be developed to help track contract cheating incidents. This idea is supported by York (2018) who pointed out that Turnitin has recently launched a new piece of software called ‘Authorship Investigatio’, which is hoped to specifically counter ghostwriting practices by identifying and catching out students who have outsourced their work to third-party, professional, paid ghostwriting services. This is done by comparing the writing styles of individual students against their previously submitted coursework.

4.3.2 Awareness-raising measures
Teachers felt that the educative approach for handling ghostwriting and contract cheating will assist in minimizing and curbing such practices. Teachers also emphasised the role of education and institutional approaches in awareness-raising and educating students about the importance of academic integrity.

One teacher proposed:

One of the best ways to deal with the problem of ghostwriting is raising awareness through education. Like plagiarism, students should be educated about academic integrity, why ghostwriting is considered bad academic practice and the penalties for academic misconduct. Students should also be provided with much support to develop their academic writing and critical thinking skills to help them to be independent learners and knowledge creators.

Arguably, this teacher’s view is in line with that of Khan et al.’s (2020) who advocate the idea of social approach for curbing contract cheating, namely through awareness-raising campaigns across campuses or using social media platforms. This can be done by students themselves as they can be involved in organising the awareness-raising campaigns against contract cheating and breaching codes of conducts. Students can post messages across the campuses and public platforms against essay mills and ghost-writing agencies as an unethical business.
5. Conclusions, implications and recommendations

This conclusion summarises and synthesises the key findings of the study, outlines the implications and proposes a holistic approach for curbing ghostwriting and contract cheating in relation to the existing literature. It also offers some recommendations for informing the successful implementation of the proposed prevention approach. Teachers’ views and perspectives about ghostwriting includes ghostwriting vs. plagiarism, the impact of ghostwriting on academic integrity, the assessment and evaluation process and the student learning. Additionally, some techniques and strategies for curbing ghostwriting or contract cheating such as educational and institutional approaches and awareness-raising measures were added.

This is a small-scale qualitative study set to investigate the phenomenon of contract cheating and ghostwriting in Omani HEIs with the view of proposing a multi-faceted approach that can help both educators and policymakers to effectively deal with this serious phenomenon. Although plagiarism is a complex issue, especially when viewed over against different contextual, educational and cultural backgrounds, the practice is still not acceptable because it completely devalues formal education. Besides, it is punishable in most HEIs. Incriminating approaches, however, are not always effective in curbing and fighting the practice because ghostwriting is rather hard to detect or, in some cases, altogether less detectable. Due to the small nature of the study, the reported findings are not intended for generalisation, but we believe that the implications and recommendations based on these finding are illuminating and insightful if taken and adopted in other educational contexts globally. The proposed approach is educational and it has drawn on various dimensions and favoured the improvement of the teaching and learning environment with the view of educating students to understand and firmly uphold academic integrity. The overall objective of the proposed approach is not to intimidate our students and teachers, but rather to raise their awareness of the seriousness of contract cheating and ghostwriting and to equip them with the necessary tips and strategies to avoid the practice. The proposed prevention approach is not intended to be exhaustive, but it is open to further expansion and development. In the light of our findings, we can recommend that what is primarily needed is multiple preventive measures, ranging from pedagogical to institutional, social and cultural.

As for the pedagogical aspects of the approach, which is the core measure, HEIs should ensure that the methods of assessment are sufficiently diverse so that students are not tempted to outsource their projects to a third party. For example, teachers could, whenever possible, request that students do their assignments in class rather than at home, and they could ask them to give in-class oral presentations as part of the requirements of a written assignment. Written assignments should also be designed to cover broad topics that cannot be easily plagiarised. Additionally, students should be made aware of the differences between editing, proofreading and ghostwriting. Teachers also need to be trained to detect ghostwriting, both manually and electronically. Manual plagiarism detection should be valued and equated with technology-oriented detection methods and techniques. Teachers should be made aware of plagiarism-removal and reduction technology, such as Spinbot, which is sometimes used to deceive the detection systems.

Several manual detection tactics could be applied to detect ghostwritten work, for example, if the submitted work does not align with the students’ personal development, English language proficiency, natural writing style, students’ may be requested to explain not only their work but also the said differences. If detected, teachers should speak to students and show them the evidence privately and ask them to explain and talk through their work. Above all, teachers should endeavour to closely get to know their students and their writing styles and language proficiency levels to help them manually detect any work that is beyond their students’ levels. Teachers should also openly discuss the essay mills and contract cheating services with their students to make them more sensitive about the unacceptability of the practice. They should also draw their attention and make them aware that teachers are fully aware of the existence of such unethical
services, which may make them less enthusiastic about resorting to such services when they know that their teachers are aware of them (Vernon et al., 2001).

As for the institutional component of the approach, HEIs should play a vital role in curbing the practice since it has, worryingly, become a growing concern, as it seriously undermines and defeats the whole value of education and the awarded university qualification degrees. It is unfair for a student to obtain credit for work that they did not actually do. Additionally, HEIs should engage students in the policy development process to make them feel like partners rather than passive recipients of the policies (Bretag & Mahmud, 2016). At the same time, institutions should cooperate on the global level to track and crackdown on ghostwriting service agencies. A socio-cultural dimension could also be part of this proposed holistic approach.

As for the social and cultural aspects of the proposed approach, HEIs and educators need to appreciate the complex and socio-culturally situated nature of plagiarism to be able to address it and enhance students’ awareness about the practice (Hayes & Introna, 2005). For example, HEIs can disseminate the culture and values of academic integrity among the university community including students as well as the academic and administrative staff. As Mervis (2012) suggested these values can be promoted and students can be acquainted with them throughout their study time and course tasks and activities should also include such values. A gradual educational punishment system could also be introduced (Cinali, 2016; Mervis 2012) but, as suggested above, students should be part of its development so that it can be acceptable to all. Changing and earing assessment strategies towards a more personalised and authentic assessment with a clear rubric would help students to stay away from contract cheating.

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Author details
Holi Ibrahim Holi Ali1 E-mail: hollii2@yahoo.com ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0608-6146 Awad Alhassan2 ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1147-0919

1 Department of English Language & Literature, University of Technology & Applied Sciences, Rustaq, Sultanate of Oman.
2 Department of English Language & Literature, Dhofar University, Salalah, Sultanate of Oman.

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Appendix A.

An open-ended survey

Dear Colleague,

This is a three-part open-ended question survey for a study intended to investigate teachers’ perspectives about ghostwriting practices among students in Omani higher education institutions. We would like to thank you very much for agreeing to take part in the investigation by completing this survey. We very much appreciate it if you could answer the questions and prompts by writing as much as you can and to the best of your knowledge. We might also contact you for some follow-up interviews and/or further questions. Please be reassured that the data collected via this questionnaire will be used for research purposes only and needless to say that your identity will not be disclosed when reporting our findings. Also, feel free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason.

(1) Background questions

(a) Could you just please tell us a little bit about yourself? Your name? Affiliation? The number of years of your teaching experience? Your speciality and scholarship? The subject(s) you teach? The contexts/places where you taught before your current position?

...............................................................

(2) Ghostwriting(contracting cheating practices

(a) What does ghostwriting or contract cheating mean to you?

...............................................................

(b) Why do you think students resort to ghostwriting or contract cheating?

...............................................................

(c) How would you see ghostwriting in relation to plagiarism?

...............................................................

d. In your opinion, in what ways do you think ghostwriting would impact academic integrity?

...............................................................

e. Have you ever received, as part of student coursework, or suspected a ghostwritten assignment or project? If so, how did you deal with it?
f. How does your institutional policy address ghostwriting or contract cheating practices?

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g. Can you describe the challenges and problems you would experience when trying to verify and detect ghostwritten assignments or projects?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------

3. Ghostwriting preventive strategies

(a) Can you tell us about any strategies you or your colleagues have been employing to verify students' ghostwritten assignments or projects?

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(a) If you were asked to suggest some strategies and techniques for dealing with ghostwritten assignments, what would you suggest and why?

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(a) In your view, what could be done to combat ghostwriting and contract cheating practices among students in Omani higher education institutions?

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(e) Do you have any comments or anything to add to what covered in this questionnaire?

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Thanks for your kind cooperation

Appendix (B). Follow-up Interview Schedule for EFL Teachers

The interviews were conducted with five teachers who responded to our request for follow-up interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to elaborate on some salient themes that emerged from the analysis of the open survey data. Below are the main interview questions but a lot of probes and follow up questions were also asked? The schedule is indeed informed by the study research questions.

(1) Perception of ghostwriting/contracting cheating practices

(a) What does ghostwriting or contract cheating mean to you?

(b) Why do you think students resort to ghostwriting or contract cheating?

(c) How would you see ghostwriting in relation to plagiarism?

(d) In your opinion, in what ways do you think ghostwriting would impact academic integrity?
(2) Challenges of and dealing with the suspected cases of ghostwriting/contracting cheating

(e) Have you ever received, as part of student coursework, or suspected a ghostwritten assignment or project? If so, how did you deal with it?

(f) Can you describe the challenges and problems you would experience when trying to verify and detect ghostwritten assignments or projects?

(g) Can you tell us more about any strategies you or your colleagues have been employing to verify students’ ghostwritten assignments or projects?

(h) How does your institutional policy address ghostwriting or contract cheating practices? Has it been effective?

(4) Impact of ghostwriting on academic integrity

(a) Can you tell us more about the impact of ghostwriting on academic integrity?

(5) Suggestions for curbing contract cheating and ghostwriting

(b) If you were asked to suggest some strategies and techniques for dealing with ghostwritten assignments, what would you suggest and why?

(c) In your view, what could be done to combat or deter ghostwriting and contract cheating practices among students in Omani higher education institutions?

(6) A closing open question

(a) Would you like to add any final comment to what we’ve already talked about throughout this interview?

| No. | Code | Definition |
|-----|------|------------|
| 1   | EFL T Vs CH or GHOSTW & contract cheating | This code refers to when teachers talk and/or write about their views on contract cheating or ghostwriting. |
| 2   | CH DT CH or GHOSTW Challenges in detecting contract cheating & ghostwriting | This code refers to when teachers talk and/or write about the challenges in detecting contract cheating or ghostwriting. |
| 3   | IMPC CH or GHOSTW AINTEG Impact of ghostwriting on academic integrity | This code refers to when teachers talk and/or write about the impact of ghostwriting on academic integrity. |
| 4   | IMPC CH or GHOSTW ASSMNT Impact of ghostwriting on the student learning | This code refers to when teachers talk and/or write about the impact of ghostwriting on the assessment and evaluation process. |
| 5   | IMPC CH or GHOSTW Ss L Impact of ghostwriting on the student learning | This code refers to when teachers talk and/or write about the impact of ghostwriting on student learning. |
| 6   | SUGG F CH or GHOSTW Suggestions for fighting contract cheating or ghostwriting | This code refers to when teachers talk and/or write about their suggestions concerning the potential measures for fighting contract cheating or ghostwriting. |
