

RESEARCH

Academic Ghost-Writing in India: Situating the Transformations in the University System

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Abstract

Ghost-writing in academia has always existed, but it is no longer limited to individual or scattered cases that do not warrant the status of an endemic problem worthy of serious research in education and knowledge production. With the progress of technology and communication, academic ghost-writing has crossed local boundaries, and it is now a global industry worth billions of dollars known as the contract cheating industry. While the academic community must understand and prevent how this global industry operates, it is equally important to understand the larger structural forms of a neoliberal society that enable the rise and endless expansion of the phenomenon of 'academic ghost-writing.' Consequently, it is also crucial to begin a conversation on the possible implications of the growth of this industry on science and the processes of knowledge production. This paper, therefore, discusses the phenomenon of academic ghost-writing or contract cheating and how it operates in a global market by drawing observations from one transnational ghost-writing company. The paper's primary objective is to situate the phenomenon of academic ghost-writing within the larger framework of the transformation of higher education, student mobilities, and the internationalization of University education.

Keywords: Ghost-writing; contract cheating; neoliberal university; common sense; knowledge; education

Introduction

The practice of ghost-writing has existed for almost as long as the practice of writing itself. Hiring wordsmiths or logographers to craft rhetorical accounts or write messages for members of the royalty is an ancient practice ([Riley and Brown 1996](#)), and it has continued into modern times, taking on various forms of ghost-writing. Public figures, especially politicians and celebrities, commonly use ghost-writers to write their speeches, autobiographies, etc. ([May 1953](#); [Stavisky 1973](#)). Historically revered as the site for producing scientific knowledge, the university has also been infiltrated by ghost-writing. Stories of people buying theses and dissertations or having someone else write assignments for them often circulate on university campuses and make for interesting conversations over tea or coffee. However, very few recognise the extent to which informal and individual instances of ghost-writing have now transformed into a full-fledged global industry of commercial contract cheating. According to research published by [Prof. Philip Newton \(2018\)](#) of Swansea University, about 31 million students worldwide hire contract cheating services. This number is estimated to have multiplied following the conditions of remote teaching brought in by the COVID-19 pandemic, making contract cheating a billion-dollar industry spread across the globe ([Eaton 2022](#)).

Despite being one of the oldest forms of cheating in human history, contract cheating has undoubtedly acquired a new meaning and shape in contemporary times. Current forms of academic ghost-writing or contract cheating can be understood as commercial cheating in academic work involving a transaction between the client and the ghost-writer. [Clarke and Lancaster \(2006\)](#) explain that contract cheating can be defined as plagiarism or cheating in which customers or clients, primarily students, outsource their assignments or exams to get it done by ghost-writers and then present it as their original work. The problem with this type of plagiarism is that it is not detectable by any modern standard plagiarism software such as Turnitin because ghost-writers' value strictly depends on their ability to produce non-plagiarised work. In that sense, the students who submit ghost-written assignments, papers, thesis, or even exams are, in theory, presenting an original work, just not their own. This non-detectability of contract cheating through standard measures makes it the most daunting and pernicious challenge to the integrity of academic work. The phenomenon is under-researched compared to the actual gravity of the problem, but there has been an increasing awareness about it in the academic community in recent years, and a growing number of scholars ([Amigud and Lancaster 2019](#); [Awdry 2021](#); [Eaton 2022](#)) are beginning to examine the various aspects of the contract cheating industry.

Towards the second half of the twentieth century, scholars began to identify and write on the increase in commercial ghost-writing services such as 'term paper mills,' which gave students the option of buying pre-written assignments from company's files or paying a higher price for custom services. These scholars had also predicted continued growth of a market of academic ghost-writing given the high profits of the business ([Hawley 1984](#); [Stavisky 1973](#)). The unethical and illegal nature of the business guarantees the heavy success of the contract-cheating industry. A piece in the [Duke Law Journal \(1974\)](#) referred to the increasing spread of the term paper companies as a 'national plague,' which does a fair job of communicating the intensity of the problem that threatens the very meaning and essence of formal education. However, term paper companies are no longer localised, catering to university students of a certain area. Rather, they have gone global to create an entire industry of academic ghost-writing giving rise to what can now be considered a global plague, affecting countries like Australia, England, and Canada, among many others ([Eaton 2022](#)) and drawing ghost-writers from countries such as India, Kenya and Pakistan ([Lancaster 2016](#)).

The advances in technology and communication combined with the forces of a neoliberal globalised world have resulted in the emergence of the contract cheating industry. With the emergence of the internet, ghost-writing received an explosive growth spurt as the accessibility of service providers

increased exponentially (Newton 2018; Campbell et al., 2000). The internet has allowed customers to seek ghost-writing services with minimal threat of getting exposed. Many websites exist today, such as india.writerbay.com, prospectsolution.com, writingcreek.com, etc. These websites allow students (clients) to acquire custom-made original work and offer both full-time and freelancing jobs for ghost-writers with lucrative salaries. A simple online search would provide several websites to help students complete their assignments and offer others a chance to earn good money with their writing skills.

However, what is more interesting and less known is that there are now transnational 'education service' companies that have established an organised business of commercial academic ghost-writing with proper ranks and profiles of a legitimate company. They have physical office spaces, an effective internal bureaucracy and management system, and offer full-time employment. Most of the existing research on the contract cheating industry is focused on online ghost-writing websites, but there is hardly any discussion or even awareness about the existence, let alone the nature, of such transnational companies that provide ghost-writing services. The businesses of these companies are spread over multiple countries, and they primarily cater to the needs of student clients who are studying in foreign universities. The transnational location and clientele of these companies may also make it more challenging and more complicated to legally regulate them through the laws of any one country, although that is outside the scope of the current discussion. Regardless of the legal dimensions of the concern, the case of such transnational ghost-writing companies raises several questions that are far greater than issues of academic misconduct or illegal business of an unethical commodity.

The Neoliberal University

The phenomenon of academic ghost-writing that we witness today with the rise of the contract cheating industry needs to be situated within the larger context of a neoliberal globalised world in which higher education and the university have gradually become market entities. Therefore, the focus of this paper is not solely on the current intensity of the problem of contract cheating, but rather, it intends to ask the question of what conditions of the education system and the larger society enable the rise and success of such industries. Thus, while the phenomenon of ghost-writing is much older, this paper is concerned with its expansion in the wake of the neoliberal transformation of the university system that can be traced back to the late 1970s. In the market model of the university, the value and essence of higher education have been reduced to the acquisition of credentials, and the means through which these credentials are obtained is hardly a matter of concern. Such a credential-oriented education is a characteristic of what Bill Readings (1997) called the university of 'excellence' in which corporate discourses of 'excellence' that sustain and reinforce the market structure have replaced the university of culture. Readings pointed out that 'excellence' serves the 'needs of technological capitalism' in the sense that "once it is generally accepted as an organising principle, there is no need to argue about differing definitions" (pp. 32-33). Thus, the corporate discourse of excellence, established by a range of quantitative quality indicators within the university system, becomes the dominating idea on which the university is established. At the same time, it limits the possibilities of critical thought and the possibility of having any alternatives.

Neoliberalism's values have penetrated so deeply into society that it has become common sense for people today, making it much more challenging to realise and identify the subtle ways it operates. Much of the contract cheating industry and its success is due to this neoliberal common sense and university system that pushes society's collective consciousness in favour of the market and limits citizens' critical thinking. The neoliberal university has displaced the culture and essence of open intellectual inquiry, and it is now defined through measured outputs of efficiency, performance,

and productivity (Olssen and Peters 2005). To achieve the goal of increased performance output, university governance is increasingly being structured and styled by techniques of 'managerialism.' This essential shift to New Public Management (NPM) aims to reengineer public education through implementing systems and methods of the private sector (Anderson 2008). Such a restructuring of the university through neoliberal ideology and its associated tools of NPM breaks all that the idea of university stood for and produces a generation of citizens who understand education and knowledge solely in terms of market values. Therefore, it is important to analyse academic ghost-writing and the entire contract cheating industry within the larger frame of neoliberalism and the market-oriented higher education system. This would allow us to contextualise the problem and understand how it is a consequence of the ongoing attack that higher education and scientific knowledge are facing from the state-market regime.

The unethical commodification of academic work and skill is thus a consequence of taking universities away from their values of learning and knowledge production and turning them into a training ground for market jobs and a mill for revenue generation. The commoditisation of knowledge has been such that every exchange in the educational setting and the production of original research work are seen as nothing more than commodities to be transacted for a price. This nature of commodification of knowledge and knowledge production was expressed in Shumar's (2008) discussion on the transformation of American university campuses into consumer spaces. Shumar remarked that the sites of production that university spaces used to represent are being replaced as 'sites of consumption,' which shapes the consciousness of students and even teachers so that their perception of knowledge and its place in society reflects the dictates of the market. He wrote, "Like the commodities in the stores, students come to think of course work and research as another commodity form" (p.73). This, therefore, explains the underlying role of commoditisation of knowledge within the neoliberal university, which informs the consciousness of society vis-a-vis the commercial transactions of academic work, skill, and learning. With this same logic and neoliberal common sense, the global contract-cheating industry operates with its consumers, managers, and service providers. This paper thus attempts to reflect upon a few aspects of the worldwide contract cheating industry, especially the emergence of transnational ghost-writing companies, and connect it to larger issues of the neoliberal university and transformation of higher education towards trends of increasing managerialism.

The Neoliberal Common Sense

In order to understand if the contract cheating industry poses any significant threat to science and the making of knowledge, it is necessary first to clarify what exactly we mean by science and, by extension, the production of scientific knowledge. While there is a larger understanding today that science is intricately embedded in society, it is not enough to understand science and society as distinct and interrelated categories. What is important to acknowledge is that science, by its very definition, is a social institution. John Ziman (2000) discusses the metascientific pluralism of what science is and what it does by explaining that the new and modern picture of science is one that is aware of all its complexities and nuances. Metascientific accounts enlarge the traditional philosophical dimension of science by adding a sociological dimension, whereby the scientific method is understood in terms of a range of social practices rather than merely a sequence of activities pursued within a laboratory (Ibid., p.4). Science is, therefore, not an isolated, glorified, and ambitious entity but an organised social institution much like every other social institution, such as religion, law, economy, etc. In the past decades, scientific knowledge has become a major site of investment for governments and corporate firms; therefore, the focus is geared towards producing knowledge that can be readily commercialised. As a result, universities are being moved closer to the marketplace through an accelerated push for

commodification and commercialisation (Gibbons et al., 1994), and its implications for the collective consciousness of society have therefore changed in favour of the market. Thus, understanding science and scientific knowledge in terms of its socio-political dimension allows for a much deeper and more sophisticated analysis of the intricate processes by which neoliberalism has transformed science and the production of knowledge and how it has constructed the logic and reasons with which the contract cheating industry operates.

The commodification of science and knowledge connotes more than its multiple transactions and circulation in a market society. It is part of what can now be called a neoliberal language and ideology produced by and within this milieu. Henry Giroux identified neoliberalism as “a form of common sense, and it functions as a mode of public pedagogy that produces a template for structuring not just markets but all of social life” (Sardoc 2021: 224). This constructed common sense has invaded language and everyday communications, favouring the neoliberal regime. We are no longer in a society where only material aspects of life or social institutions are structured regarding market values, but our collective consciousness has been commanded by it. Neoliberalism, therefore, is increasingly becoming common sensical as it is rapidly being internalised in every individual and simultaneously acquiring a life and power of its own. According to neoliberal common sense, everything from what we mean by science, knowledge, and education is reduced to narrow common sense, enabling the functionality of a market society.

The neoliberal common sense makes the intense competition among researchers for government funds and grants seem fair and taken for granted in the order of things. The cutthroat instrumentalism behind the ‘publish or perish’ idea or the years of anxiety academics must face in temporary faculty positions are all considered necessary to achieve ‘excellence.’ In fact, the emergence of various predatory journals worldwide owes their successes to this very idea of ‘publish or perish.’ Omobowale et al., (2014) talk about how ‘foreign’ predatory journals thrive in Nigeria due to the academic dependence of local universities on the knowledge production and dissemination system of the Global North. Securing a publication in a foreign journal is often the only way for Nigerian scholars to get appointments or promotions, but this extreme dependency lands many of the ‘desperate customers’ into the traps of predatory journals instead. In India, a lawsuit was filed a few years back against the OMICS group based in Hyderabad, which publishes about 700 journals, for a series of deceptive practices, including making false and misleading claims about their peer-review process (Prasad 2019). Such malpractices and the general scale at which predatory enterprises flourish reveal the problems and consequences of an unchecked march towards neoliberal instrumentalism in academia.

The extreme pressure for having publications with little regard for quality or the mental well-being of scholars is simply understood in terms of the commonsensical notions of ‘hard work,’ ‘excellence’ or ‘merit,’ which are some of the core neoliberal buzzwords. Explaining the discourse strategy of neoliberalism, Shin and Csiki (2021) wrote that certain keywords, often employed as rhetorical devices, maintain the illusiveness of the regime. In education, keywords such as competition, efficiency, learning outcomes, performance measure, performance-based funding, and many others feature extensively in education policies and the common-sense understanding of teachers, educators, and parents. Similarly, the keyword defining the purpose of education is no longer the acquisition of ‘knowledge’ but of ‘skills,’ implying tangible commodities transferred and exchanged within the market.

According to this neoliberal common sense, everything, including scientific knowledge, has a market value attached to it. This belief system lends weight to the idea that the pursuit of knowledge is valuable only to the extent that it helps acquire a skill set or a job. However, at the same time, there is also a clear identification of the values and practices that this neoliberal language of common-sense views as problems. For example, the exorbitantly high fee structures of IITs and IIMs are not a problem, but the values of public education followed in universities like JNU or Jamia Milia Islamia

with subsidised fees is a matter of concern for all of the nation's taxpayers. Ideas of the welfare state and public goods are vanishing from the collective consciousness of modern society and are relegated to specialised knowledge as opposed to the power of the common-sense knowledge of neoliberalism. Deshpande (2022) commented that Indian higher education is being systematically removed from its liberal values emphasises despite the massive rise in enrolment and is rendered merely as a 'superfluous degree.' This has been especially true with doctoral programmes, as the increasing rules and regulations formulated to maintain quality and standards have done nothing but take away the autonomy of universities (Qamar 2023).

The constant neoliberal restructuring and restricting of higher education has led to a point where its critical thinking and social upliftment goals are compromised to generate a market-friendly neoliberal consciousness focused on accumulating degrees and certificates. Consequently, conversations on systematic injustices and structural inequalities are considered excuses for the inability to work hard. The saying 'apni kismet apne haath' (one's luck is in one's own hands) is an interesting phrase showing how neoliberalism uses subtle means to shield or enhance social inequalities. Forms of social oppression primarily use concepts like 'luck' and 'destiny' as justification. Neoliberalism abets this oppression by endorsing that luck and destiny are indeed individual factors that can only be reversed by individual hard work and will. This reflects the system of meritocracy, an essential myth that fails to acknowledge structural inequalities and views achievements as resulting solely from individual talents and abilities (Young 1958). Values of individualism, therefore, take precedence over anything collective, communitarian, or social to the extent that social injustices are perceived only as individual failing.

The common sense of neoliberalism has infiltrated into the very definition of science as the distinction between 'scientific research' and 'research and development (R&D)' has been gradually declining, with the two categories being understood as one and the same (Ziman 2000). What many within a neoliberal society, including politicians, journalists, and civil servants, understand as science is its technological and instrumental aspects. Science as research is now defined by the policy language of exclusion, which terms it as 'basic research,' translating to research that is 'not' application-oriented (*ibid.*). However, this instrumental understanding of basic research is not a recent trend. Jacques Barzun (1966) also pointed out the same, quoting a legal brief that described basic research as "purely exploratory" that cannot be practically applied to any material purpose without the further help of applied research. This distinction clearly reflects the condescending undertone towards basic research that many people feel. Both research and knowledge are now valued based on technological applicability and commercial viability. Thus, science has been reduced to neoliberal keywords like 'innovation and invention,' which often commonsensically implies that science aims to aid economic development and infrastructure upgrade. Engineering and medical science, with their associated notion of applicability, are, therefore, the first things that many students and parents understand as science when they opt for subjects in high school.

The objective of this paper, however, is not to point out only the neoliberal common sense of the larger public but also to question and reflect upon how the academic system is feeding off the same common sense and enabling the further proliferation of neoliberal values. As a collective representation, neoliberalism operates through various symbols and images, many occupying central positions within the academic and university structure. One example is the academic profile of a scholar, department, or university. The academic profile is constituted through the "displayable productivity" made visible through various schemes of performance measure, including publications in 'top' ranking journals, thereby enabling the representation of academia in terms of performativity (Gendron 2008). In this rendering of academicians as performers, the profiles showcasing their achievements and publications are the primary tools in their professional journey of finding jobs, applying for grants, getting published, securing tenure, and practically every other aspect necessary

to build a career. The academic profile determines how we view ourselves and others as scholars and understand the academic profession and everything within it. The academic profile as a symbol of collective representation can also explain the 'Mathew Effect' of Robert Merton (1968), which describes the tendency within academic sciences whereby the contributions of eminent and famous scientists always get more credit and visibility than lesser-known scientists for either collaborations or similar work. This means that having a better academic profile not only ensures better access to scientific resources and benefits but also heightens the visibility of their work, which can then translate into the quantification language of becoming 'most cited.' Therefore, The academic profile is a neoliberal symbol of academia through which everyone within and outside the academic structure makes sense of it.

Other symbols and images include university accreditation and rankings systems, the number of awards received, and degrees from 'elite' institutions. These are part of the neoliberal common sense with which the university system and academic community function, and it may seem naïve even to expect alternatives. However, what is important to realise is that we are increasingly taking such symbols for granted, and rarely do we take a step back to question how the instrumentality of such symbols is reproducing neoliberal values of 'excellence,' competition, and individualism within the academia. And since these values come to us as common sense, we also fail to identify how instrumentality enables the growth of something like the contract cheating industry.

Observations from One Multi-National Company

Within the contract cheating industry, transnational academic ghost-writing companies have emerged with proper ranks and legitimate company profiles. One such player in the industry is in Noida, where I have experience working full-time for six months as an academic content writer in humanities, a position they ambitiously call 'Research Associate.' It is a Chinese company that defines itself as an 'educational MNC' headquartered in Shanghai and branches in Australia and India. Their LinkedIn page mentions their specialties as "Academic Research, Academic Writing, Educational Research, Educational Service Providers, Assignment Help, Academic Papers, Theses, Dissertations, and Professional Academic Guidance." Their clientele includes college students enrolled in universities in countries such as the UK, the United States of America, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. They provide fixed salaries to their academic writers, which are not dependent on the flow of orders, along with many additional benefits and bonuses. Even as a fresher one could earn about 4.4 lakhs per annum as a basic salary, and the figure can go much higher with the various kinds of bonuses.

The company has an efficient Human Resources department in charge of all the hiring, promotions, and day-to-day management. Their hiring alerts are frequently advertised on platforms such as LinkedIn and Naukri.com. What is interesting and shocking is that the company not only hires employees in its individual capacity but also through campus placements at many private universities in India. The company is invited for placements at a certain well-known private university located in Noida with the job title 'academic content writer,' and the job description mentions, "The subject matter experts would be required to complete academic projects, assignments, and dissertations based on specific criteria for foreign universities (Non-plagiarized Content, Standard Referencing, and meeting the deadline)." The company is, however, not the only company in the contract cheating industry that offers campus placements in private universities. Its sister company, associated with the same parent company in Shanghai, offers placements at many private universities, including in states like Uttarakhand and Jharkhand. In one of the placement pamphlets of the sister company, they were hiring for three profiles: "academic writer in advanced econometrics and advanced statistics and mathematics; academic writer in finance; and academic writer in project management." It is not only humanities and social sciences where such transnational companies of the contract cheating industry

have infiltrated but have expanded their claws into what many may consider as sacred disciplines like mathematics.

Nevertheless, as my recruitment was in the humanities and social science profile, my observations of the company and the industry were also, therefore, limited to that particular section. Upon recruitment, the trainees are made to undergo a 9-day program of training and evaluation. It consists of three rounds and is conducted by officials of the China branch, which means that the existing Indian employees have no say in the final selection of the candidates. This period is crucial for the company as the new recruits are taught the basic and essential standards of writing academic content. Ironically, the primary goal of this training is to teach critical thinking and writing, although what they mean by critical writing is merely the tricks of writing an argument and a counter-argument by citing proper references. They teach a six-step model of 'critical writing' which includes a topic sentence, followed by evidence that requires citation, then an analysis sentence that should be original, a counter-argument to that with citation, a rebuttal of that, and a concluding statement. In instances where the scope of following the six-step model is not feasible, they advise using the four-step model instead, which excludes the steps of counter-argument and rebuttal. Such instrumentality of critical writing may sound appalling to us at this point, but sadly enough, that is the primary measure with which many teachers and educators evaluate what a good piece of academic writing is.

At the final round of the nine days, the recruits are given a few dummy orders, which they have to write using the same six-step model. The final round is rather rigorous as instructors do not entertain even minor mistakes when following their model of 'critical writing,' and many new recruits naturally find the mechanistic approach hard to follow. Academic writing does not feature as one of the things taught in Indian higher education, not even at reputed central universities, as students often graduate without learning the fundamental difference between citation, reference, and a bibliography. Even after obtaining bachelor's and master's degrees from two of the country's most prestigious and reputed universities, I had to learn those things in an industry that makes a blatant joke of the entire point and essence of a referencing system, that is, to give credit where it is due. It would not be wrong to say that the centrality given to the instrumentality of following writing rules within academia is the same thing that the contract cheating industry targets and capitalises. They know well that as long as the regulations and formats are correct, the content remains secondary, which is at least the case in academic writing at the graduate level.

Nevertheless, the training to find references online and how to cite them properly turned out to be some of the instrumental skills that I picked up while working there, although the endless lists of rules are enough to make even the best of the scholars go fuzzy. The instructors during the training, and even the managers after the final selection, do not care as much about the content of what is written but only about the rules of citation and reference. Even the most minor mistakes in the references section could make an order come around for multiple rounds of revisions. Apart from the basic skills of producing dead academic pieces with perfect formats, one of the most important things for the company is to teach the new recruits to write in a way that does not leave any traces of fraudulence. They do not say it explicitly but slip it in through the training enough for the writers to pick it up. The paraphrasing skills are checked minutely, and they run every order through Turnitin, but most importantly, the write-up content should not raise any doubts about how and from where the piece came in. Towards the end of my 9-day period, the training instructor warned me about using too many examples from India in my dummy orders and advised me not to do so in the future and instead use examples from US, UK, and Australia.

It was only after the 9-day training-cum-evaluation period, when actual orders started to come my way, that I realised how widespread the business was. In my six months there, I have ghost-written for students of prominent and highly reputed universities in Australia, US, and Canada. As a writer at the lowest level, I was assigned to a manager who reports to the operations team, and further

above in the hierarchy, there was the sales team. The sales and operations teams were located at the headquarters branch in China. While the former receives the order from the client, the latter notes down the details into an order sheet, which contains information such as the credit points of the particular order, the length of it, the university of the client, the required reference style to follow, the deadline and the basic instructions for the order. The order sheet is then pushed down the hierarchy to the managers in charge of getting it written by the writers, then do a quality check of each order, ensuring that all instructions and rules are followed. The writers, therefore, have no direct contact with the clients who outsource their work. Even so, most orders needed logging in to the client's student portal of their colleges, which was mostly the learning management system called 'Moodle.' The login was necessary to access reading materials and sometimes even to write brief weekly or monthly assignments directly into the moodle. In those instances, writers get a sense of who the clients are, the university they attend, and how the curriculum of the particular course is structured. In almost all the orders that came my way, the clients were of Asian origin, particularly of East Asia, given away by their names and profile pictures.

As I joined during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was work-from-home mode, which has somewhat limited my experience. Although I did not have the opportunity to observe the physical workspace and interact with my co-workers, the online experience allowed me to understand how the internet was a very effective tool for the functioning and growth of the company. In a physical work environment, the official shift hours would have been 9 am to 6 pm, which was still the case on paper, but with work-from-home, there was practically no end of the day. The deadlines for most orders were kept till late at night, and the managers, operators, and sales members were all available via text message way past the official work hour. Moreover, the company asked for all employee communications through the Chinese app 'DingTalk,' developed specifically for professional communications. It is one of the many Chinese apps that the government of India banned after the Galwan border clash, and Indian employees have to use Virtual Private Network (VPN) to access the app. It is, therefore, not surprising that the app recorded massive success during and after the pandemic, with about 500 million users ([Zhang 2021](#)). The app's biggest plus is its automatic AI-enabled translation system, providing a seamless interaction between the writers and managers on one end and the operations and the Chinese sales team on the other.

The fact that all communications were done online through one work app also made it easier for me to preserve a record and analyse how the company functioned every day. The app was most helpful when the orders were exams, or what they called 'photo exams.' These are timed at-home exams comprising mostly multiple-choice, true or false, or direct questions requiring one-word answers. They are called photo exams simply because it means that the clients would appear for the exam at the given time from their computer and send photos or screenshots of the questions to the operators who keep sharing those with the writers over DingTalk. The writers provide answers on the app simultaneously, which are then forwarded to the clients, thus making outsourcing exams easy and spontaneous. Apart from photo exams, they also do orders with 'log-in exams' in which the writers would have to take the exam directly from the client's Moodle, which is a case of impersonation. These exams are usually tagged as priority orders having more credits as the response time is limited, and there is no scope for revisions. Writers get paid more for such exam orders, especially because no prior time is given to prepare for the exam. The exams require specialised knowledge of a subject, and more importantly, they are often scheduled at odd times, either early morning or very late at night, due to the time difference between India and the countries in which these universities are located.

The daily target for each writer is fixed at 2500 words per day, at least on paper, which they calculate in terms of a unit they created called 'moon.' Since orders like written articles and exams cannot be quantified together with word counts, it is more convenient to have a separate unit to accommodate different types of orders and bonuses. Technically, 1 moon equals 100 words; thus, the daily target

is 25 moons, which could be one full-length article, two separate articles, or a combination of an article and an MCQ exam. The moons for an exam are decided based on their complexity level, and if the exam is scheduled at an odd time, bonus moons are also provided. If some orders seem more difficult than usual, the writers could also request extra moons, and many writers work more than the required daily target as the amounts of moons are equivalent to the extra money that writers get apart from their fixed salary. Writers are also given additional incentives to write good content, such as getting bonus moons when a particular assignment receives a 'high score' from the client's teacher after submission. The company has accorded a cut-off score to each country; therefore, every country has a different level for a high score. For example, if the client is from an Australian university, the high score starts at 65; if they are from a Canadian university, the high score is 70 or above. The company thus has an elaborate and effective internal structure to ensure that there is no room for ambiguity in managing and running a successful shadow business of academic work.

Ghost-Writing Companies as a Product of Neoliberalism in Education

One of the major observations from the company is that the clientele is comprised almost exclusively of East Asian students studying in universities in countries such as the US, UK, Australia, and Canada. This overwhelming number led me to assume that it is perhaps because of the language and cultural challenges these international students face in their respective universities that make them consider the option of ghost-writing services. A paper by [Zheng and Cheng \(2015\)](#) confirmed this assumption by interviewing international students who have used ghost-writers for assignments and reported that they do it because they find it very difficult to read the course materials and understand certain assignment requirements. Another article published in *Outlook* by [Jeevan Prakash Sharma \(2022\)](#) writes that about 20-30 international students from East Asia studying in the US or European universities commit plagiarism, and the reasons are cultural. However, it would be rather simplistic to assume that the cultural challenges that international students face are only natural and that the approaches of universities towards these students have nothing to do with their decisions to seek out ghost-writing services.

In the market-oriented university system, all attention is focused on generating revenue. As [Henry Giroux \(2014\)](#) writes, universities are no longer a public good in the neoliberal society but have become private business enterprises in which students are the consumers and the university is a mall. As a result of this model, universities worldwide are increasing their tuition fees and doing everything in their capacity and beyond to increase enrolment and bring in more money. One of the essential ways this intense greed for money is met is by increasing the intake of international students who bring in handsome revenues for the university. The market for international students is growing each year, and they are charged premium fees compared to the low or subsidised fees for domestic students ([Cantwell 2015](#)). It is for this reason that there is a heavy inflow of East Asian students in many Western countries, but unfortunately, little effort or investment is made by the universities to help these students with cultural adjustment, which often hampers their academic progress. As such, it is not surprising that most of these students resort to ghost-writing services to pass the course and attain the degree they paid heavily for.

On the one hand, we have questions about who avails the ghost-writing services; on the other hand, we have questions about those who provide these services either as freelancers or as full-time employees of transnational companies. [Lancaster \(2019\)](#) writes that the international contract cheating industry is experiencing rapid growth in the number of academic ghost-writers from India. The fact that Indians with a higher education degree are recruited to work in these companies raises several

questions about the situation of higher education in India. To give examples from the company I observed, many employees graduated from reputed Indian universities. The manager I was assigned to was an alumnus of two of the country's premier institutions in Delhi. What then is wrong with the system that it is leading graduates of reputed colleges and universities to seek jobs in a blatantly unethical sector?

In today's neoliberal society, academic jobs are increasingly disappearing, and even with university degrees, the youth are forced to face a dismal situation of job prospects after graduation (Giroux 2014). While the size of the classroom of every college and university is increasing each year, the number of meaningful jobs is decreasing at perhaps a much higher rate. Satish Deshpande (2022) explained that the causal link presumed to have existed between higher education and employment has broken in recent years. Higher education no longer necessarily translates into decent jobs; however, within the public consciousness, the onus of generating employment has shifted away from the state. Educated unemployment is now naively explained through the corporate concept of 'employability,' which seeks to establish a narrative that educated unemployment (or underemployment) is due to the 'substandard' or 'irrelevant' training provided by higher education rather than being a consequence of the neoliberal commitment to private profit by extensively promoting downsizing and outsourcing. The notion of 'employability' could then be considered a part of the neoliberal common sense, which leads people to assume that unemployment arises due to the inability of higher education to 'train' individuals with market-relevant skills. This common sense fails to acknowledge that it is the state's responsibility to generate employment and not depend on market entities. Young people in India have academic skills but no academic jobs to use them under their names (Thaker 2018), a lack that explains the attractiveness of ghost-writing jobs that offer decent remuneration and added incentives in exchange for their academic skills.

The question then arises, what values do the writers use to rationalise and legitimise the unethical nature of the business? It is the neoliberal common sense that dictates the rational logic behind those who participate in academic ghost-writing, especially the writers. The ethics of ghost-writing rarely feature as a concern for the writers, or they come as secondary so long as their individual needs are met. Their common sense drives them to see the transaction of their academic skills as essentially a product exchange, making it legitimate and a matter of personal choice. Neoliberalism stands on the proliferation of the belief that every skill is subjected to marketability, and it is upon the individual to choose to get the most out of it. The education system of countries across the globe allows the indoctrination and internalisation of this neoliberal common sense. Giroux (2014) argued that neoliberalism has produced a 'dystopian education' that wages a war against the democratic values of critical thinking in higher education. As a result of this disintegrating criticality, ghost-writers with higher education degrees barely think critically and fail to question the nature of their job. They lose the criticality even to understand the fundamental difference between a job and a meaningful job and that it is a basic welfare demand that every individual should have an education and a job that is meaningful and not instrumental.

However, it would be presumptuous of us to merely state the lack of criticality and the neoliberal common sense as the only factors behind the decision of people to work as academic ghost-writers. Financial needs and pressures of working-class and middle-class families to get a job are some of the primary factors that lead many to choose employment over ethics. Many college and university students start in the contract cheating industry as freelancers while pursuing their degrees. The reason is often that an increasing neoliberal system of governance does not consider it necessary to provide students with financial assistance. Over the years, in many countries worldwide, there has been a huge reduction in the education budget as the money is being fed into the pockets of the rich and the military (Giroux 2014). India is one such country that has witnessed budget cuts in education, resulting in cutting down financial aid to students. The recent scrapping of the Maulana

Azad National Fellowship for students of minority communities is yet another example of the dictates of a neoliberal state.

There is also a major difference in the fellowship amount that students of pure sciences (including those in social sciences) and students of professional courses are allocated. The neoliberal common sense, which recognises only those branches of sciences with applicability or a commercial purpose as valuable, justifies providing students of only 'applied sciences' with financial assistance. Thus, while M.Tech students in IITs and NITs receive scholarships of about 12-14 thousand per month, students pursuing master's degree in natural sciences and social sciences receive no financial assistance. Only a few scholarships exist that help a small section of financially backward students, and the aid is not even enough to cover the monthly mess bill in hostels. It is, therefore, not surprising that students have to find alternative means to take care of their basic expenses and are forced to look for something that is easier to balance with their studies. Such students comprise a significant section of the academic ghost-writer pool, most of whom freelance for websites that offer them much more than any scholarship. Academic ghost-writing sites and companies become attractive and perhaps one of the very few options where they can put those skills gained through years of training in a discipline to some monetary use. Thus, the neoliberal trend of increasingly removing state funds from public education is directly related to the rapid and cancerous growth of the contract-cheating industry. Coupled with that, the trend of private universities inviting or allowing academic ghost-writing companies for campus placements speaks volumes about the consequences of the steadfast blinding push towards privatisation of education.

Questions on the Production of Knowledge in a Neoliberal Society

While the existence of a contract-cheating industry can raise several questions on its implications for science and the process of knowledge production, the unprecedented success of this billion-dollar global industry brings forth the unpleasant reality of neoliberal infiltration into the structural frames of knowledge production. Is the increasing instrumentalism of academia a reason behind the rapid expansion and growth of the contract-cheating industry? Before we begin to answer that, it is important that we first understand certain fundamentals of academic science, as academia provides the intellectual and institutional framework for scientific knowledge production. John Ziman (2000) argued that academic science is a culture and that every discipline in every university across countries is characterised by the same stereotypical and homogenised nature of this culture. Some basic expectations include doing original research, securing funds for research, and publishing them in journals and books. He makes a sociological argument for academic science as a socio-cultural institution by stating that "scientific behaviour is regulated by well-established, easily recognized and relatively stable norms, values and laws" which essentially creates a social order "that relies enormously on established relationships of personal and institutional trust" (p.29). Taking this element of trust for granted, Ziman discusses the critical role of the Mertonian norms in enabling a well-structured institution of science and also mentions that critics of science often fixate on certain behaviours that deviate from the norms, such as fraud and plagiarism. He writes, "these are serious matters for concern, but they are not so widespread and prevalent that they completely corrupt the whole enterprise" (p.32), and this is precisely where I want to situate the current discussion on the global contract cheating industry.

While Ziman had written more than two decades ago, this notion of fraud and malpractices being 'not so widespread' is still the dominant belief in the academic science community. Does it originate from a general discomfort to acknowledge anything that can threaten the established structures of

scientific knowledge production? Or is it a genuine lack of awareness? The answer, in part, could be both. Like Ziman, the larger academic community also considers the factor of 'personal and institutional trust' so fundamental for the social practice of science that it is often taken for granted. This is why whenever discussions of fraudulent activities and malpractices in science come up, it never reaches a point where larger questions on institutional structures are raised. They remain as isolated conversations in mostly discussions of ethics and law because such activities are believed to be isolated incidents. There is almost no awareness of the emergence of a global contract cheating industry based on academic fraud, having transnational companies operating within it and enabled by the ethos of a neoliberal market society. It is, therefore, crucial to acknowledge and begin a serious conversation over how the global contract cheating industry is poking major holes into the personal and institutional trust on which science and the production of knowledge are based.

The questions on scientific knowledge production are especially prudent because it is not just students but also professional researchers and academicians who use ghost-writing services. Often academic investigators hire ghost-writing services to further their professional standing as multiple publications, especially in high-impact and reputed journals, are essential criteria for academic tenure and acquiring grant support (Bosch and Ross 2012). This betrayal of the personal and institutional trust of science has its root in the internalisation of the neoliberal ideology. A system of perks and rewards, such as that exemplified by giving tenure and grant support based on the number of publications, is typical of the neoliberal common sense. It reflects the role played by ideas of individualism, intense competition, and instrumentality. It is not just individual researchers and professors, but universities too are subjected to various ranking systems that depend on the number of publications their faculty or researchers have. As the market-oriented system of the university is marked by an increasing casualization of the faculty (Giroux 2014), permanent positions are being cut down, and more and more faculty members are in temporary ad-hoc jobs. As such, faculties are forced to compete, and having multiple publications may often seem the only way to obtain a permanent position, thereby playing as a reason to consider ghost-writing services. The fact that academics and researchers hire ghost-writers for publications to further their careers or survive through a pool of casual academic labourers provides a basis for many to rationalise the practice of ghost-writing. Therefore, it is not surprising that academia today has become almost exclusively about having multiple publications to one's name, and the industry of academic ghost-writing is cashing heavily on this narrow road through which academia is headed.

Another question that comes with the breach of the personal and institutional trust of science is regarding where exactly the bulk of scientific knowledge production takes place. The case of transnational ghost-writing companies reflects a distinct industrial hierarchy in that students studying in universities of the so-called rich and developed countries get their assignments, research papers, and even theses written by young people from developing countries with high academic skills. This also makes for a notable addition to the historical division between the Global North and the Global South in the production of scientific knowledge, with the Global North dominating academic knowledge production and the Global South remaining largely at the periphery (Demeter 2020; Collyer 2018). However, if we consider the global contract cheating industry trends and phenomenon, a new and peculiar dynamic is added to the existing divide between the Global North and the Global South in scientific knowledge production. The fact that even some of the theses, dissertations, and research articles currently produced in the countries of the global north are, in reality, the knowledge products of the intellectual labour of the Global South throws a shade over the scientific hegemony of the global north. While it does indicate the exploitation of third-world intellectual labour, the legitimacy of the systems of knowledge production itself comes under question.

The Way Forward

While the purpose of this paper had been to begin a conversation within the academia and the larger scientific community on the problem of contract cheating, it also naturally directs our attention to the need for probable solutions. A paper by [Hill et al., \(2021\)](#) discusses the rapid rise of the global contract cheating industry in the context of the transition to online teaching since the COVID-19 pandemic, and the authors argue for a multi-level solution to curb contract cheating. At the individual level of academics, they suggest that alerting teachers and professional staff and making them aware of contract cheating is highly important. They also discuss the established link between contract cheating and assessment design, arguing that making appropriate assessments and course designs by considering the possibility of contract cheating is one possible solution to the problem.

However, the possibility of contract cheating is most present in online assessments. As a former ghost-writer at the company, I received many orders from the same client as they commission out every evaluation given by the teacher for the entire course duration. They even included small orders like reflective accounts of about 100-150 words to be done after each lesson and comments of about 50 words on their classmates' reflective posts. Therefore, the most effective way for teachers to ensure that their students do not use third-party assistance for their assessments is to develop course designs requiring in-person presence and interactions. Perhaps an increased focus on verbal modes of evaluation is more suited to assess and evaluate the actual knowledge and critical thinking abilities that each student has learned during a course. Moreover, studies have also found that students are more prone to cheating when there is a perceived sense that teachers or staff members do not care enough; therefore, building relationships of care and trust with students could be a meaningful step ([Harper et al., 2019](#)).

At the level of universities and the global community of academics, the need of the hour is to systematically raise awareness about contract cheating and its different types, along with making stringent policies against academic misconduct and cheating. However, organising conferences, seminars, and workshops can only go so far. While it is crucial to deal with the demand end of the contract cheating problem so that students do not avail of such services, it is even more important to understand and curb the supply end of the industry consisting of ghost-writers. The specific context and problem of a country like India is that we provide ghost-writers in large numbers to the global industry of contract cheating ([Lancaster, 2019](#)). The workforce of the company I worked for in Noida consisted mainly of graduates from reputed central universities in Delhi. The fact that they are hired through a multi-level selection process and paid well by the company means they have the required academic skills. Therefore, it boils down to the structural problems of a neoliberal society with a severe lack of meaningful jobs. Governments and authorities in India need to take cognisance of the part that Indian college graduates play in the growth of the global contract cheating industry. Apart from taking legal action against such ghost-writing companies in India, they must create more meaningful and legitimate avenues for students and graduates to use their academic skills and potential. Thus, we must ask difficult and uncomfortable questions about what is going wrong in our education and knowledge system such that the transition from universities to the workplace is no longer a given. The case of academically skilled graduates joining ghost-writing companies in India reveals that the assumption that better skills would naturally lead to better meaningful jobs is becoming untrue.

Conclusion

The objective with which this paper started was to situate the phenomenon of academic ghost-writing, and its rapid expansion in the form of a billion-dollar global industry within the larger structural frames of neoliberalism. The emergence of transnational companies that provide ghost-writing

services is not simply a matter of academic law and ethics but a more extensive reflection of the picture of despair and desperation painted by the neoliberal university. The incessant push towards managerialism in universities and the standardisation of mechanical norms such as ‘publish or perish’ fuels the desperation of young scholars and justifies the need for enterprises like the contract cheating industry. The neoliberal university displaces the ideas and culture of critical thinking. Instead of questioning common sense, it contributes to constructing a common sense that rationalises the buying and selling of academic products just as it rationalises the commodification of every other aspect of life in terms of neoliberal dictates. Neoliberal values of individualism and intense competition are now the dominant norms in the ‘race’ to get ahead. In academia, these norms underlie everything, ranging from finding a job to competing to secure that job and, once secured, struggling to survive it, resulting in a generation of professionals stuck in constant desperation. Therefore, for those who avail of academic ghost-writing services, the reasons include either the game of having more and more publications or a severely decreasing quality of education, indicating problems far beyond the breach of the code of ethics. As for those who provide such services, the reasons include a systemic mismatch between skill and labour market brought about by the limited number of academic jobs and multiple faults within the higher education system that makes the ghost-writing business a highly profitable enterprise. Thus, the rise of the global industry of academic ghost-writing, especially transnational companies that cater to a worldwide clientele, is a mirror that reflects all that is wrong within the neoliberal structure of the university and higher education. While this paper has intended to initiate the much-needed socio-scientific conversation on the phenomenon of academic ghost-writing which is destroying everything that the academic community holds dear, it also provides a ground for researchers to conduct more extensive investigations into the nature of the industry, its legal context, market strategies and its implications for higher education and knowledge production.

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