

Don't assume online students are more likely to cheat. The evidence is murky

July 27 2018, by Chris Pilgrim And Christopher Scanlon



You'd think that studying online would make it easier to cheat. But don't jump to conclusions. Credit: Christin Hume/Unsplash

More university students are choosing to study online rather than face-to-face, prompting concerns about academic integrity.

If you're tempted to cheat in [face-to-face courses](#), even during exams, how much easier would it be to pass off work that isn't your own when you're online?

But research by us and others shows how university courses are delivered is less important in predicting which students are more likely to cheat.

A better predictor is students' demographic characteristics, particularly their age.

Students choosing online courses

In Australia, the number of external (or online) students grew from 213,588 [in 2015](#) to 224,662 [in 2016](#), the latest available figures.

There has been particular growth in online postgraduate education, as people juggle study with professional and personal commitments.

[Deakin University's](#) Cloud Campus, for example, now enrolls more students than its two Geelong campuses and its Warrnambool campus combined—13,054 versus 12,868 enrolments.

What's the evidence on cheating?

Evidence for whether online or face-to-face students are more likely to cheat is inconclusive.

[A 2006 paper](#), for example, found more cheating in online classes than courses using traditional lectures.

Other studies, some looking at [specific disciplines](#) and others at [general student populations](#), found [less cheating online](#).

In yet [another study](#), students who took only online classes were less likely to cheat than students who took only face-to-face classes.

This is consistent with Swinburne's experience. Based on internal (unpublished) figures from 2016 and 2017, online students were ten times less likely to be involved in academic misconduct, including exam violations, compared to their on-campus counterparts.

These figures may simply mean the design of [online courses](#) makes it more difficult for students to plagiarise. Alternatively, it may just mean we're better at detecting plagiarism when it happens face-to-face, rather than online.

If not online students, who then?

So other factors seem to be more important in academic integrity than how courses are delivered – in particular, a student's age.

We know students aged 25 or over [are less likely](#) to engage in academic misconduct, like sharing work. And, as [online students are generally older than their on-campus peers](#), this could explain how some researchers have found they're less likely to cheat.

At Swinburne, there are about five times as many students who are over the age of 25 as under. The average age of online students is 32.

Of course, it may be that older students are more accomplished at concealing cheating, but this seems unlikely.

Swinburne's experience backs [other research](#) that shows younger students are more likely to cheat and engage in more "collaborative cheating"—like copying another student's work and submitting it as their own—compared with their older peers.

But we need to be careful not to reinforce stereotypes. As anyone who has sat on disciplinary panels will know, academic cheats come in many shapes, sizes, disciplinary cohorts and ages.

How do we support a culture of academic integrity?

Universities certainly need to update and adapt their approach to academic integrity to suit online teaching, technological changes and globalisation.

For instance, this may mean [changing assessments](#) to reduce the likelihood of cheating. Students may need to demonstrate solutions to problems in-person or via video. And it means using text-matching software to minimise [contract cheating](#), where students outsource their assessment to third parties.

However, the overall approach needs to be the same, regardless of how courses are delivered. We need to support and communicate to students about [an overarching culture of academic integrity](#). This involves actively engaging with our students, explicitly teaching the norms of academic writing and research.

This might be achieved through compulsory modules covering academic integrity, providing academic support services, and regularly reinforcing messages about ethics as a key part of academic and professional life.

All this needs to be backed by appropriate policies and processes, including training and support for academic and professional staff.

We need to move beyond the idea that online courses are beset by [academic integrity](#) problems, or we need special measures to "fix" online learning. Online learning is, itself, not necessarily a contributing factor to an increase in [academic misconduct](#).

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