

Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education

How to Address Contract Cheating, the Use of
Third-Party Services and Essay Mills

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1 Introduction

What do we mean by contract cheating?

'Contract cheating' happens when a third party completes work for a student who then submits it to an education provider as their own, where such input is not permitted. It is distinct from collusion, as the student contracts the third party to provide the assessment, usually a company or individual using a website to promote themselves and receive orders. Such companies have become known as 'essay mills', even though they supply more than just essays. The common approach is for the work to be outsourced once again by the mills to individual writers.

The aim of this guidance

Our aim is to support higher education (HE) providers in focusing on the problem of contract cheating and taking steps to address it. Providers are obliged to ensure that their assessments are equitable, valid and reliable.¹ Contract cheating services, and the students making use of them, pose a risk to achieving this.

This guidance sets out best practice around promoting academic integrity in higher education, through tackling students' use of third parties' services in order to cheat. It covers the use of essay mills and other forms of contract cheating. It describes the issues, and sets out the steps providers can take to:

- educate staff and students about contract cheating
- promote and encourage academic integrity, and deter students from committing academic misconduct
- detect cheating when it happens
- set effective academic regulations to handle the issue
- deal with cases.

The guidance is specifically designed to help you if you are:

- senior leadership in a higher education provider
- working in a quality setting
- involved in the design, delivery and review of assessments in higher education
- working with procedures and regulations governing academic conduct and integrity
- responsible for investigating cases of academic misconduct
- involved in student engagement and want to raise awareness of contract cheating.

It may also be useful for providers of education at other levels, such as further education, as well as professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) that have an interest in the integrity of individuals seeking professional qualification, and which operate accreditation procedures for providers.

¹ Expectation B6 of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education:
www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2968

This document is provided for information and guidance only, and is not part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). It draws upon best practice, current theory and new research in contract cheating to give practical solutions for providers. As the regulatory landscape in UK HE is changing, particularly in England with the establishment of the Office for Students, the guidance may also help providers meet emerging regulatory requirements in the future.

To find out more about the responsibilities of providers in assessing students, please refer to the Quality Code guidance on assessment.

Why has this guidance been developed?

In August 2016, in response to serious concerns among HE providers and from sector bodies and government, QAA published a report on third parties helping students to cheat.² We looked at online companies known as essay mills, who supply completed academic assignments to students for a fee. We also explored possible approaches to reducing the use of these services.

Following publication of the report, and further discussions across the sector, the UK Government asked QAA to work with Universities UK (UUK) and the National Union of Students (NUS) to develop guidance for HE providers, as well as standalone advice for students. Informed by practice in UK HE and international research, with input from GuildHE and leading experts from UK providers, this guidance is one of the results of that request.

Definitions

In this guidance we use a number of terms in particular ways, and it is important to distinguish between them. Individual providers may use these terms in different ways, or use alternative terminology. Providers are encouraged to consider the benefits of standardising the terminology that they use and, in this context, the definitions below may be used as a model.

Academic integrity

This guidance uses the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) definition³ - 'a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. From these values flow principles of behaviour that enable academic communities to translate ideals to action.'

Collusion

A form of cheating which occurs when people work together in a deceitful way to develop a submission for an assessment where such input is not permitted. It is distinct from contract cheating in this guidance as collusion does not depend on a fee being paid for the work.

² Plagiarism in Higher Education - Custom essay writing services: an exploration and next steps for the UK higher education sector: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=3107

³ www.academicintegrity.org/icai/resources-2.php

Contract cheating

A form of cheating where a student submits work to a higher education provider for assessment, where they have used one or more of a range of services provided by a third party, and such input is not permitted. The contract with the student can include payment or other favours, but this is not always the case.

- 'Services' may include essays or other types of assignments, conducting research, impersonation in exams and other forms of unfair assistance for completing assessed work.
- 'Third parties' include web-based companies or auction sites (essay mills), sharing websites (including essay banks), or an individual such as a lecturer, colleague, friend or relative.
- 'Input' means that the third party makes a contribution to the work of the student, such that there is reasonable doubt as to whose work the assessment represents.

Essay mill

An organisation or individual, usually with a web presence, that contracts with students to complete an assignment or assignments for a student for a fee.

Plagiarism

Where a student passes off someone else's work, intentionally or unintentionally, as their own, for their own benefit. In this guidance we use the term 'plagiarism' broadly, encompassing contract cheating and collusion as well as other forms of misconduct, in order to give contract cheating a discrete meaning.

Sanctions

An outcome imposed in response to, and in order to penalise, contract cheating. Providers will typically use a range of terms here (such as sanction, outcome or penalty) with different descriptors. We are using 'sanction' to reflect the potential impact for students and the potential deterrent value associated with the term. An outcome of withdrawal from a provider or loss of marks in relation to a level of study is a sanction.

2 Summary of recommendations

In this document we suggest a number of detailed actions on how to tackle contract cheating. They cover four main areas: education (for students and staff), prevention, detection, and regulations/policies. A summary of the key recommendations is provided below.

Education - Information and support for students

Use information and support for students to place a positive focus on academic integrity. Early, written information to students is crucial.

Provide support for students that enables them to develop skills in studying, academic writing, the use of academic sources, paraphrasing and research. Think about how essay mills find their customers, and how students find them.

Education - Training and information for staff

Ensure that staff are kept up to date with academic regulations on assessment, and their responsibility to uphold academic standards and integrity. Ensure that staff are familiar with the concept of contract cheating, and the procedures to be followed when it is suspected.

Prevention

Consider 'authentic assessment', with a mixture of assessment methods where possible. Think about how to limit cheating opportunities when designing and reviewing courses and setting assignments.

Consider blocking essay mill websites from your IT equipment. Be alert to advertising methods such as posters, flyers and social media, and take steps to minimise/counter them when detected.

Detection

Consider organisation-wide detection methods. Consider linguistic analysis tools to complement text-matching software. Get to know your students' styles and capabilities, and be alert to unexpected peaks in a student's assessment performance.

Consider formal processes for alerting PSRBs of misconduct by students where programmes are part of, or are likely to lead to, professional qualification.

Regulations and policies

A strong commitment to academic integrity can be signalled through institutional values or mission statement.

Make regulations and guidance as clear as possible, available in a range of formats and languages. Have an explicit procedure to follow to report a suspicion of academic misconduct, determining who to report to and how to report it.

Designated and specially trained academic conduct officers may adjudicate on routine matters. Use a panel to adjudicate on serious and/or complex allegations of academic misconduct, and appeals, with members supported and trained appropriately. Record statistics for cheating cases in sufficient detail to allow effective analysis.

3 Background

Types of contract cheating

Contract cheating services provide customised assignments with a short turnaround time - shorter if a premium is paid - to specified grades and qualification levels. Companies set up for the purpose of providing contract cheating services have come to be known as 'essay mills'. Despite the term, these companies' products can range from essays to lab reports, reflective journals, dissertations, computer programming, film editing and other services. They range across many disciplines and subjects, and across different assessment types. Students are increasingly being targeted by advertising assuring them that this is acceptable and common practice.

Cheating is not always a commercial issue. It can also involve the sharing of work, without money changing hands, that is subsequently submitted dishonestly as a student's own work; in this guidance we view this as 'collusion'. While collaborative learning is normal and can be a valuable part of the learning experience, this guidance is concerned with third-party assistance that crosses the line into cheating; in other words, collusion with a paid-for element.

Some third parties will also provide proofreading and copyediting services. While these two services may not in and of themselves constitute cheating, it can depend on scale: major changes can lead to work being submitted by the student that is substantially different from what they originally wrote. Such services can be a gateway to full-scale contract cheating.

Why is contract cheating a threat to standards?

HE providers have an obligation to ensure that awards that they make meet nationally agreed standards. The Quality Code requires providers to 'operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment'⁴ in order to achieve this. Reliability in this context means ensuring that assessments accurately reflect or test the extent to which students have achieved the learning outcomes of their programme.

Contract cheating therefore represents a clear threat to providers' ability to assure the standards of their qualifications, and as such to the reputation of UK HE as a whole. Although student plagiarism and ghost-writing have been longstanding aspects of academic misconduct, the recent growth of third parties offering to help students to cheat has raised serious concerns in the sector.

Why does contract cheating happen?

A number of factors allow contract cheating to take place. The two main factors are motivation and opportunity⁵ - while there is no evidence to suggest that students nowadays are more motivated to cheat, the prevalence of essay mill websites provides more opportunities.

⁴ UK Quality Code for Higher Education, *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning*: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code

⁵ Beckman T. and Lam H. (2016) Learning Assessment Must Change in a World of Digital "Cheats".

As the assignments are custom written, text-matching tools widely used to detect plagiarism are less effective. Amassing strong evidence to challenge such behaviour makes it difficult to prove, and can deter academics from reporting or pursuing suspected cases. The more students escape detection, the more normalised this practice becomes.⁶ At present, there is no specific prohibition in law on the operation or use of contract cheating services.

Studies have shown that students who cheat in assessments do so for a wide range of reasons.⁷ These can include: not having good research, attribution and essay writing skills; feeling unable to seek support from their providers; lack of confidence, interest or ability in the subject or topic of study; lack of engagement with studies; poor time management; and lack of understanding of an assessment's requirements. Cheating may be habitual behaviour. Some students may have health or personal issues which affect their studies. Students may not understand how inappropriate this type of conduct is or what the consequences can be.

There is a common perception that students studying in another language are more likely to cheat than domestic students, but there is currently no UK data to support this view. There are additional pressures on international students that providers should keep in mind, including difficulties with the English language (which may not be unique to international students), a lack of understanding of assignment requirements, and the perceived approachability of teaching staff.

Contract cheating and professional qualifications

There are clear, significant risks to the public if students are graduating with an award gained after having used contract cheating services, as graduates may be practising with inadequate professional skills. This is especially pertinent in relation to programmes that are professionally accredited or otherwise lead to professional status. Here there is a real risk that contract cheating can endanger property, liberty, and lives.

Many PSRBs have a statutory duty to consider the character and suitability of anyone who wishes to enter their profession. They must ensure that any individual admitted into their profession has, and maintains, the level of honesty, integrity and professionalism expected by the public, and does not pose a risk to the public or profession. The exact nature of the requirement will vary according to the particular rules of the PSRB, and the nature of the profession.

When it comes to demonstrating a level of honesty, students need to be made aware of the seriousness of contract cheating and the possible negative impact it may have on their future careers as a result.

⁶ Glendinning, I. (2017) Scorecard for Academic Integrity Development: Benchmarks and evaluation of institutional strategies. Conference proceedings for Plagiarism Across Europe and Beyond 2017 May 24-26, Brno, Czech Republic, pp 25-34.

⁷ Newton, P. (2015) Academic integrity: A quantitative study of confidence and understanding in students at the start of their higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. 41 (3), pp. 482-497; Brimble, M. Why Students Cheat. An Exploration of the Motivators of Student Academic Dishonesty in Higher Education. In *Handbook of Academic Integrity*. Ed. T. Bretag. Singapore: Springer Singapore, pp.365-382; Foltýnek, T., Dlabolová, D., Glendinning, I., Lancaster, T. and Linkeschová, D. (2017) South East European Project on Policies for Academic Integrity. A study commissioned by Council of Europe Pan-European Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED).

Students should be made aware that their application to be admitted into a regulated profession may be put at risk if they have committed and/or have been judged by a provider to have committed a deliberate assessment offence, which amounts to plagiarism or cheating, in order to gain an advantage for themselves or others.

The recommendations and action points in this guidance

In this guidance, we recommend an approach where providers adopt a culture of academic integrity, underpinned by a strategy for encouraging scholarship and discouraging all forms of academic misconduct. A crucial part of the institutional deterrence framework is the adoption of strong, clear, transparent and consistently applied policies, combined with fair and proportional sanctions.

Investigating and prosecuting instances of cheating can be highly time consuming and expensive. Reducing the most serious types of misconduct before they occur will free up resources and allow institutions to focus on education and support.

4 Education

Information for students

Quality student information and support are central to any strategy aimed at encouraging academic integrity and reducing contract cheating. Providers can foster academic integrity through promoting scholarly institutional values, engaging in dialogue with the student community and ensuring that academic and professional staff are aware and aligned with a set of common aims and objectives.

It is helpful to give students clear information, in writing and verbally, on the importance of academic integrity and the need for honesty, as well as the likelihood of detection and the potential consequences of cheating. This should happen early, but it may not be wise to rely on 'frontloading' all the information at induction. It will be beneficial to have discussions with students about cheating, the fact that it is unacceptable, and that the provider will not tolerate it, whenever opportunities arise. This may be at the start of each programme, year and/or term, as well as whenever tasks and assignments are set.

Providers should consider discussing ethics and the expectations of professions with students. It will be helpful to highlight the public interest in academic integrity to those on professional courses. On non-professional courses, there will still be opportunities to strengthen a culture of honesty and to prepare students for the expectations of the workplace.

At the earliest possible stage, and reinforced where necessary, providers should draw to the attention of students on programmes leading or closely related to professional status (law, medicine, or engineering, for example) the fact that they may be obliged to report any findings of misconduct to relevant PSRBs.

Students will benefit from understanding the measures that you use to identify contract cheating. In the same way that widespread use of text-matching software discourages cutting and pasting, students need to know that the provider takes these issues seriously and that there is a high likelihood of being caught if they were tempted to cheat.

Declarations

Requiring students to sign declarations stating that all work is original and plagiarism-free may not prevent dishonesty, but may remind students of the importance of honesty and the potential consequences of cheating. Providers can consider how to make this an effective intervention.

Familiarity with students' work

Teaching staff may want to make clear to students that they will become so familiar with their work that examples of cheating will be obvious in terms of style, ability, attitudes, and confidence. One-to-one or small group tutorials will help to reinforce this message.

Peer attitudes

Students will benefit from knowing their peers' attitudes to cheating. Students have a clear stake in ensuring that the hard work and dedication demonstrated by the majority is not undermined by the minority who seek to claim an unfair advantage.

It is important to actively involve students. Guidance will be most impactful if the local students' union champions it, and hosts information and advice on its web pages.

Student information should highlight whistleblowing processes, and detail what these are.

Key action points

- ✓ Place a positive focus on academic integrity, not just a negative focus on misconduct
- ✓ Give written information to students on the importance of academic integrity, and consequences of cheating
- ✓ Provide information that focuses specifically on the implications of using third-party assistance in cheating
- ✓ Information should be included in the student handbook, codes of conduct and programme documentation
- ✓ See the companion pieces to this guidance (information for students, and for students' unions) for examples of how to engage with students
- ✓ Provide early information, reinforced at appropriate times throughout programmes
- ✓ Consider the effectiveness of student honesty declarations
- ✓ Be clear about the measures you use to detect cheating
- ✓ Essay mills offer products at all qualification levels, so avoid focusing entirely on the undergraduate stage
- ✓ Be aware of the diverse needs of your student body and offer information in a range of formats and languages as appropriate
- ✓ Make students aware that, where they are studying on accredited programmes or programmes that lead to professional status, any findings of cheating will be reported to the relevant professional body

Support for students

As well as information, students need to receive support to gain the necessary skills for studying, academic writing, use and acknowledgement of academic sources, correct referencing, paraphrasing and research, to enable them to succeed without resorting to contract cheating. Information and tutorials on these topics should be relevant to the programme of study.

Given the diversity of experiences that students may have been exposed to prior to joining a UK HE institution, it cannot be assumed that students have such skills already. Students with little or no previous experience of academic writing and independent study, especially where English is not their first language, will need time and guidance to give them a fair chance to reach their potential.

Timing

Training and support for students should be scheduled for when it is most relevant, for example when they are preparing for their first assignment. Ideally, it will be delivered in small tutorial groups, but whether the group is large or small, it should be delivered in a supportive manner by academic staff who understand the complexities of this topic and the associated institutional policies.

A focus on student transitions is helpful. Preparing new students for HE assessment, which may be more demanding than they are used to, can minimise the temptation to cheat among inexperienced students. Such preparation could take the form of information provision, tutorials, and formal and informal feedback.

Study skills are best assimilated and understood by students when embedded within the curriculum through timetabled sessions. Students may be supported in their learning development through instructional tools. Providers may consider reiterating messages relating to honesty at meetings with groups of students.

Types of support

Students themselves can be asked to support campaigns to counter contract cheating. Providers may train students to serve as academic integrity champions or ambassadors, who can signpost and support students at risk of using contract cheating services.⁸

It is important to think about why students cheat, the ways in which essay mills find students, and how students may find them, as well as other third parties who might be involved in cheating. It is common for essay mills to mislead students into believing that using their services are acceptable and common practice. Some essay mills are now tailoring emails to suggest that the provider is either providing the services or supportive of them.

Providers should consider the needs of students with English as a second language when promoting and developing their support services.

Providers should, through induction, set out what type of support is made available to their students so that there is no uncertainty about whether any assistance offered is legitimate. State clearly who they should talk to for help. Students have a responsibility to check with

⁸ Fallon, J., Wellman, N. and Awdry, R. (2012) Now are we all on the same page? Strategies for engaging students. 5th International Plagiarism Conference Proceedings, Newcastle 2012.

their personal tutor/equivalent if they are uncertain about the legitimacy of any support offered to them.

Students may ask a friend or relative to complete the work for them if they feel unable to cope, or students from previous years on the same course may offer a service to students. Awareness of these behaviours, as well as essay mills' tactics, will help those supporting the students, whether academics, professional staff or student mentors, to be effective in offering advice.

It may be helpful to consider ways of engaging further with local schools and further education providers to encourage the development of good academic skills and academic integrity prior to entering HE. Useful areas to focus on might be writing and referencing skills, as well as how to paraphrase and interpret ideas. The ICAI publishes resources aimed at developing a culture of integrity for schools.

Key action points

- ✓ Provide support for students to enable the development of skills in studying, academic writing, use of academic sources, paraphrasing and research
- ✓ Be mindful of students' diverse needs, such as where English may not be their first language
- ✓ Time student support activities relevant to academic integrity carefully; think about when they will be most effective
- ✓ Embed the tuition of study skills throughout the curriculum
- ✓ Think about how to involve students in spreading the integrity message
- ✓ Take every chance to reiterate the integrity message
- ✓ Be clear about the support that is on offer for students who feel under pressure
- ✓ Think about how essay mills find their customers, and how students find them
- ✓ Consider working with schools and further education providers to encourage solid academic skills and academic integrity

Case study

Less formal ways of engaging with students can also be effective; the contract cheating awareness week run by Deakin University's Students Association in Australia, with a wheel-based Contract Cheating Game, is a novel example.¹ The University deliberately used the colours of its sports teams for the branding of its anti-contract cheating materials, to associate the pride the students have for their teams with integrity in their academic work. The awareness week activities have their own web resources, linking with the University's own pages on academic misconduct and penalties.

Training and information for staff

All training that providers offer to their staff relating to learning, teaching and assessment design should involve the consideration of academic integrity.⁹

All members of the academic community (students, academic staff, leadership, management and professional staff) need to be familiar and kept up to date with the academic regulations that apply to all forms of assessment, and their roles and responsibilities in upholding academic standards and maintaining academic integrity.

Positive emphasis on integrity

It is important to place a positive emphasis on academic integrity, rather than focusing on issues of plagiarism and other forms of cheating. This might include understanding the reasons why students might commit misconduct and finding ways to address them.

Providers should nonetheless ensure that all relevant staff are familiar with the concept of contract cheating, the signs to look for, and the procedures to be followed when contract cheating is suspected. Training in this area is, again, best integrated within general training about teaching in higher education¹⁰ rather than just a separate session on rules and regulations, and should be available to all staff who may be involved in any investigation.

Assessment methods

Staff should have opportunities to consider the design and use of resilient assessment methods, or methods that are more resistant to the challenges of contract cheating. Such methods are also likely to promote deeper learning while developing a wider range of skills, many of which will be valuable for future employability.

A basic principle is to ensure that programmes of study include assessments that allow students to demonstrate their learning practically, in a face-to-face format where possible. Examples include oral presentations (including presentations of written work); practical, authentic assessments; placements; contextually specific, personalised assessments; peer assessment; and narrated video presentations.¹¹

An increase in the use of formal written examinations may reduce some aspects of contract cheating but care should be taken if considering this approach. Formal written examinations may not be the most appropriate methods for assessment of many types of learning, and examinations are also subject to misconduct challenges.

Some, but not all, of the above examples of assessment will work for distance learners. Providers will need to pay particular attention to this mode of study when thinking about limiting contract cheating risks.

⁹ Ransome J. and Newton P.M. (2017) Are we educating educators about academic integrity? A study of UK higher education textbooks. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. March 2017, pp. 1-12.

¹⁰ Ransome J. and Newton P.M. (2017) Are we educating educators about academic integrity? A study of UK higher education textbooks. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. March 2017, pp. 1-12.

¹¹ Newton, P.M. and Lang C. (2016) Custom essay writers, freelancers, and other paid third parties. In *Handbook of Academic Integrity*. Ed. T. Bretag. Singapore: Springer Singapore, pp. 249-271.

Key action points

- ✓ Ensure that staff are kept up to date with academic regulations applying to assessment and their responsibility to uphold academic standards and integrity
- ✓ Integrate academic integrity into staff training on learning, teaching and assessment design
- ✓ Place a positive emphasis on academic integrity, ensuring that staff understand the reasons why students might commit contract cheating
- ✓ Provide training to academic staff on the design and use of resilient assessment methods
- ✓ Ensure that all relevant staff, especially those involved in any investigation, are familiar with the concept of contract cheating, and the procedures to be followed when it is suspected

5 Prevention

Providers should be aware that, while it may be possible to remove all opportunities to cheat from HE assessments, approaches that focus on eradication rather than minimisation can be impractical, prohibitively expensive and, most importantly, harmful to the learning experience.

That said, there is much that providers can do to reduce the opportunities for students to behave dishonestly when under assessment, and to prevent organisations and individuals from profiting from such behaviour.

Assessment design

Assessment forms a crucial part of the learning process, and is the way in which providers satisfy themselves that students have achieved a programme's learning outcomes. Both of these purposes are compromised by cheating but sound design can help to minimise instances of cheating.

'Authentic assessment' is a term used to describe assessment methods that are more reflective of the ways in which students will actually use the knowledge they learn (practical exams or face-to-face assessments, for example). Arguably such assessment methods are harder to contract out.

Providers should consider using a mixture of assessment methods, controlled and 'uncontrolled' (where no environment or time conditions are set), written and oral, clinical, presentations and portfolios, as well as group and peer assessment.

A fundamental rethinking of the format and processes, even the structure of programmes, is a more extreme response to the threat of contract cheating but can provide a valuable opportunity to consider how best to 'design out' cheating in this way. Changing assessment methods in the ways suggested in this report is also likely to have the benefit of improving assessment generally by focusing on what students can do, rather than what they write about.¹²

Deadlines

The view that shortening the time available to students to complete assignments will make cheating less likely is becoming less prevalent, and the evidence supports this shift. Essay mills and their ghost-writers are more than prepared to offer very short turnaround times for high level and 'high standard' assignments - the only difference is a higher charge.

Minimising risks in written assessments

Written assessments completed in the student's own time, while valuable, well established and relatively low cost to operate, have the potential to provide the greatest risks of cheating.

Providers can reduce this risk by setting specific assignments that enable easier cheating detection, with 'checkpoints' or early drafts where research and findings can be discussed,

¹² Newton, P.M. and Lang C. (2016) Custom essay writers, freelancers, and other paid third parties. In *Handbook of Academic Integrity*. Ed. T. Bretag. Singapore: Springer Singapore, pp. 249-271.

including presentation requirements, online testing, workplace attestation, group work, and the use of 'in class' IT equipment.

Key action points

- ✓ Consider 'authentic assessment'
- ✓ Use a mixture of assessment methods
- ✓ Don't rely on short deadlines to limit contract cheating
- ✓ Think about how to limit cheating opportunities when designing or reviewing courses and setting assignments
- ✓ Set specific assignments, with 'checkpoints' for research and findings discussions

Blocking essay mills, disrupting advertising, HR policies

Blocking access to essay mill websites on campus

A strategy that providers may wish to consider is blocking access to essay mills from computers and Wi-Fi systems on their property. Attempts to access essay mill sites would be met with a message that access is prohibited, and that if the student is having difficulty completing an assignment they should contact their tutor. Providers may also consider warning students that using such sites goes against academic integrity and outlining the consequences of going further.

This will not prevent a student from accessing sites from their own devices. However, if they do try to use providers' systems, the block message will signal that the provider is aware of the sites and reinforce the importance of academic integrity. Where providers do not block sites, and students are able to access essay mills from their systems, the opposite impression may be given.

Disrupting opportunities to advertise

The advertising activity of essay mills has increased in recent years. Advertising space has been purchased on search engines and in Tube stations, flyers and business cards are handed out on campuses, social media accounts target students who say they are struggling with assignments, and in some cases mailing lists from providers have been obtained by mills and used for direct emails. Providers should be alert to these methods, including any advertising that takes place in languages other than English, and consider ways of removing this kind of advertising when it occurs.

While posters can be removed, and pamphlet distributors can be asked to leave a providers' property, social media or email contact can be harder to counter. If activity is detected, providers could use their own social media and email accounts to contact their students, directly or indirectly, warning them about contact from particular sites and companies and re-stressing the need for academic integrity.

Preventing academic staff from becoming involved

There is currently little solid evidence to suggest that academic staff and PhD students are engaged in the provision of cheating services to students. However, there is some anecdotal evidence, and a theoretical risk of this happening.

Providers may wish to consider making explicit within each staff contract that assisting a student to commit an academic offence, or ignoring evidence of misconduct, would be cause for a staff disciplinary investigation.

A more straightforward approach is for providers to make the act of 'supply' an explicit offence within their disciplinary procedures, which are separate to the contract and can be adjusted more easily.

Key action points

- ✓ Consider blocking essay mill websites from your IT systems
- ✓ Use blocking messages to reiterate information around academic integrity and where the student should seek support if they are struggling
- ✓ Be alert to advertising methods like posters, flyers and social media, and take steps to minimise/counter them when detected
- ✓ Make explicit to staff the implications of assisting students to commit academic offences

6 Detection

Interviews, online searches, detection software

Although the detection of individual instances of cheating is a responsibility of academic staff, it can be helpful to document the procedures and techniques that staff use provider-wide so that this information can be shared. Leaving departments, and especially individuals, to develop their own detection methods will be less effective and will not achieve consistency. Written procedures, flowcharts, checklists and suggested phrases for staff to use when confronting students whom they suspect of cheating are all helpful.

Where there is a reticence on the part of staff members to challenge where cheating is suspected, a significant cultural change may be needed.

Interviews

An effective way of detecting third-party written assignments is to interview the student after the work has been assessed. The use of viva assessment is commonly used in HE but it is not practical to put these in place for every assignment on every course. Random sampling may detect some instances of cheating, and would also serve as a deterrent. A pragmatic approach would be to require an interview as part of an investigation process to establish evidence for decisions.

Active searching online

Knowing how essay mills operate is helpful when thinking about detection methods. Typically, a student will commission an assignment through an online essay mill, but the production of that assignment will be outsourced by the mill, usually using legitimate copywriting websites where writers bid for pieces of work. The student/essay mill elements of the transaction will not be searchable, but the essay mill/writer bidding elements may be.

Something as simple as searching for your assignment titles online after you set them may show instances of students trying to commission answers and alert you to the likelihood of cheating. It may also benefit providers to become familiar with the main copywriting sites.

RSS feeds are used by assignment writers to aggregate results from copywriting sites where commissions that may interest them become available. Some providers in Australia have been using RSS feeds in the same way, but to alert them when their assignments are being commissioned.

Detection software

The typical view on contract cheating is that it cannot be picked up by existing 'plagiarism detection' software solutions as the work is normally bespoke and unlikely to use copied text. This may be true, but the outsourced writers may resort to plagiarism themselves and '100 per cent plagiarism free' guarantees are made by individuals and organisations that operate in an ethically dubious space. Traditional plagiarism may still occur within third-party supplied assignments, and normal text-matching checks should still be made.

New software solutions are being developed in the area of stylometry, using linguistic analysis for text analysis and authorship attribution. Their usage and effectiveness is not currently clear, but this is an area that providers may want to pay attention to as it develops.

Key action points

- ✓ Consider organisation-wide detection methods and document them
- ✓ Cultural change at an organisation may be needed if the problem is not being taken seriously
- ✓ Consider the use of vivas for checking authorship of submitted work
- ✓ After setting assessments, use active searching to see whether students are trying to commission someone else to do the work
- ✓ Consider linguistic analysis tools to complement text-matching software

Case study

Schools in Victoria, Australia are reported to be increasingly using plagiarism detection software to help to mark students' work and ensure that assignments are not copied from the internet.¹³ One company is reported as stating that schools and colleges in England were a fast-growing market. It sells its software to 130 schools and more than 200 colleges. Although the program is designed to detect cheating, the company says that some teachers use it as a training tool to prepare sixth-form students for university.¹⁴

¹³ Preiss, B. (2014) Schools turning to anti-plagiarism software to catch cheating students. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 2 September.

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Knowing your students, grade shifts, marking, PSRBs and whistleblowing

Knowing your students

One of the most effective ways of detecting cheating is familiarity with a student's normal output (their writing style and standard of work, for example). Evidence from formative assessments, as well as previous summative assessments, is useful in building familiarity and can also be used in investigations.

While it is the responsibility of academic staff to know their students, it may not always be possible to become completely familiar with individuals' styles and capabilities, bearing in mind variations in class size and different modes of study. Moreover, familiarity with students and their work should not be the only detection method relied upon. However, students may be more likely to cheat if they feel that their providers do not know them and their work well.

Grade shifts

One indicator of cheating may be unexpected and unexplained discrepancies between a student's performance in different assessments. Another would be where a student with poor attendance or low participation in discussions submits suspiciously high quality work. Providers may wish to consider programme-long systems for looking at students' grade patterns.

Marking

Essay mill products are of variable quality, and one aspect that may help to identify them is a failure to align with the assignments set. There may be a failure to recognise, or a tendency to ignore, themes and topics discussed during lectures. Different sections may be written in an obviously different style or voice. Generic terms may be used, as might spellings or phrases not typically used in the UK. It is rarely this easy, but there have been reports of different fonts and styles being used in word processed documents, indicating cutting and pasting.

One of the disadvantages of using anonymous marking systems is that the opportunities to detect contract cheating are vastly reduced. However, work may still be identified by candidate numbers and these can allow comparison of assignments. Providers need to balance the disadvantages of anonymous marking with the long-established positives of reducing discrimination in assessment.

PSRBs

Where providers are aware of students who have been involved in contract cheating, they may be required to report this to the relevant PSRB and provide it with the student's details, including their name, date of birth and address. Providers will need to consider how to do this and comply with data protection law. A copy of the final decision should also be included, after consideration of any appeals. It is not for the provider to judge the seriousness of the offence. It is for PSRBs to make that judgement and to take appropriate action in the context of their professional rules and codes of conduct.

It is also good practice for PSRBs to train staff to recognise the outcomes of academic misconduct as they appear on transcripts, to prompt further investigation when checking qualifications.

Whistleblowing

The vast majority of students are not only honest but are also invested in the learning experience. They will be party to conversations that you as a provider are not. Some may not care that others in their cohort are cheating but others will want to tell you if they suspect it is taking place. They are also the people targeted by essay mills' advertising activity.

You may want to consider whether your institution's policies and procedures are sufficiently robust to enable students to report suspected contract cheating by another student, including appropriate safeguards for false accusations and protection of individuals raising concerns.

Key action points

- ✓ Get to know your students' styles and capabilities, as far as is possible
- ✓ Be vigilant of unexpected peaks in a student's assessment performance
- ✓ Failure to recognise themes and topics discussed during lectures, and the use of different styles, unfamiliar terms, unusual spelling and formatting, are all indicators that someone else may have written the assignment
- ✓ Consider formal PSRB reporting processes for misconduct on programmes with a high likelihood of professional qualification
- ✓ Consider whether you have adequate systems in place to allow for whistleblowing - to protect the accuser, as well as the accused, appropriately

7 Regulations and policies

Consistency, transparency, and strategy

The most effective ways to manage contract cheating involve addressing cheating strategically, looking at a provider's planning and values, and operating robust academic regulations, policies, procedures, and decision making. The regulations, policies and procedures should flow from the provider's values, mission statement, and strategy (where a commitment to integrity can be explicitly stated). Providers could begin by reviewing their regulations and policies to see whether they are fit for dealing with contract cheating.

Consistency

There needs to be a common and consistent approach, underpinned by academic regulations, across all parts of the provider, with appropriate resourcing and strong support from the provider's leadership. This should cover the definition of contract cheating, identification and reporting of cases, the process to be followed and the possible outcomes. Communication with students must also be clear and consistent.

Transparency and clarity in communications

All members of the academic community (for example, students, academics, professional services, management) need to know about policies, procedures, expectations and sanctions, and be supported to understand what is deemed as acceptable and unacceptable academic practice.

The consequences of breaching academic regulations should be transparent and clearly articulated; relying on a passive approach to communicating this information (such as a link to a website) is not likely to be effective.

Guidance for students and staff should be in plain English, clearly setting out the processes and penalties for contract cheating. However, it should be made clear that students have a responsibility to take advantage of the support and information provided. They should be encouraged to engage and be able to take an informed approach to their academic conduct; this minimises the risk of students' ignorance leading to misconduct.

Holistic strategy for deterring contract cheating

An overarching strategy that supports and promotes academic integrity should be in place, reducing the likelihood that students will resort to academic misconduct. A positive institutional ethos, including pedagogical practices requiring challenging activities, critical thinking and scholarly outputs, can positively affect both the opportunities and tendency for students to commit different forms of academic misconduct.

A holistic strategy for deterring contract cheating will take account of assessment design, education and an understanding of why contract cheating happens.

Adopting regulations that are specific to individual actions in contract cheating can serve as a deterrent, as well as a statement of intent. For example, a regulation that prohibits the simple commissioning of an essay from a third party (in addition to the submission of an unattributed commissioned essay) reinforces that this is considered an academic offence in its own right.

Regulations should ensure that all suspicions and allegations of academic misconduct are reported to a designated agency or officer who is responsible for recording and processing the allegation. An examiner should not deal with the case independently.

Key action points

- ✓ Review your regulations, policies and procedures to see how fit they are for dealing with contract cheating
- ✓ Signal a strong commitment to academic integrity through your institutional values, mission statement, and strategy
- ✓ A common approach across the provider is needed
- ✓ All members of the academic community, including the provider's leadership, should work to the same values and definitions, policies and procedures
- ✓ Provide clearly worded statements to articulate what is deemed as acceptable and unacceptable practice, as well as the consequences and sanctions for breaching academic regulations
- ✓ Academic regulations, policies, procedures and sanctions should be supplemented by accessible guidance for students and staff
- ✓ Be aware of the diverse needs of the student body and offer guidance in other formats and languages
- ✓ A holistic strategy, supplemented by regulations that are detailed and specific to individual actions, will provide a robust institutional commitment to uphold academic integrity
- ✓ Regulations should ensure that all suspicions and allegations of academic misconduct are reported to a designated agency or officer

Quality assurance links, reporting and gathering evidence, and vivas

Linking academic integrity to quality assurance

Maintaining and enhancing academic integrity can be viewed as part of the quality assurance cycle within an institution, to ensure that it comes under regular scrutiny, monitoring and review.

Reporting suspicions of academic misconduct and gathering evidence

There should be an explicit procedure for any member of the academic community to follow to report a suspicion of academic misconduct.

In contract cheating cases, supporting evidence could include:

- meta-data captured from within the submitted document (for example, the properties of a Word document may identify the author as being different from the student)
- samples of the student's normal writing style
- evidence of the submission to an essay mill
- notes from a viva voce examination conducted as part of the evidence collection process.

Conducting a viva voce examination relating to an allegation of academic misconduct

A viva is generally accepted as a good way to determine whether a student has a grasp of the work they submitted. If an institution wishes to apply a different assessment process to a particular student, such as an additional viva on suspicion of academic misconduct, the circumstances should be explicitly set out in the academic regulations, otherwise students would have grounds for appeal on the basis of unfair treatment. Regulations should also make clear how such a viva should be conducted, terms of reference and remit.

The viva should not determine whether the allegation is substantiated, but gather evidence that could be submitted to a formal adjudication process, by allowing the student to defend their work. It should be distinct from a separate oral investigation which could cross-examine the individual on authorship.

To ensure objectivity and fairness to the student, the viva should be chaired by someone independent of the allegation, but appropriately experienced and trained. The chair should ensure that the viva is conducted in a collegiate manner and that the student is treated fairly. Typically, the viva participants would be the student, a supporter or adviser (but not a legal representative), the chair and an academic subject expert (normally the person making the allegation). To help to allay concerns about workload, support services could be made available to help to collect the evidence required.

The student should be allowed to present evidence, such as date-stamped draft copies of their work, to support their claim that they did complete the work themselves. The subject expert will normally ask questions about the work to ascertain whether the student understands what they submitted and have met the relevant learning outcomes. A record of the viva is added to the set of evidence that constitutes the case against the student.

Key action points

- ✓ Link academic integrity to an institution's quality assurance cycle to ensure regular scrutiny, monitoring and review
- ✓ Examiners should not deal with the case independently as this would be likely to give the accused person grounds for appeal
- ✓ Have an explicit procedure to follow to report a suspicion of academic misconduct, determining who to report to and how to report it
- ✓ Provide a check list of typical and admissible evidence to support an allegation to help guide people wishing to raise concerns
- ✓ Consider using vivas as a normal part of the assessment process
- ✓ Academic regulations should clearly state additional assessment measures for suspected cases of academic misconduct
- ✓ Vivas should be chaired by someone independent of the allegation, but appropriately experienced and trained, to ensure objectivity and fairness
- ✓ To help to allay concerns about workload, support services could be available to help to collect the evidence required
- ✓ Have systems and processes in place for recording evidence from a viva voce

Managing allegations, adjudication, and sanctions

Managing allegations and adjudication

The consequences for the student if a cheating accusation is substantiated are significant. They may affect their ability to progress and to graduate. In fitness to practise cases, PSRBs considering professional status are unlikely to reopen the matter or reconsider the decision, but they will look at the circumstances around the academic misconduct; professional careers are, therefore, at stake.

It is crucial to ensure fairness, starting with the independence and impartiality of those involved in the academic misconduct process. Designated and specially trained academic conduct officers often adjudicate on routine matters in many providers.

However, considering the seriousness of contract cheating, and the potential complexity of matters, adjudication should be conducted by a panel (this could include academic staff, senior management, students, students' union representatives, professional staff), with an independent chair, to ensure consistency and fairness. Panels can also consider appeals from first instance decisions from individual officers. All persons involved in considering academic misconduct should be trained and qualified to undertake their roles. They should not have been involved with investigation of the matter or given advice on how to proceed.

The procedures for handling allegations can be complex and involve many people institution-wide. To ensure consistency of process and a supportive but timely student experience, it may be helpful to create flowcharts, with associated standard documentation, setting out timescales and including notification methods and intervals for scheduling meetings.

Decisions and sanctions

Contract cheating might normally be considered an extremely serious matter because the deliberate, intentional decision of a student to engage a third party to complete work for them elevates the seriousness of contract cheating above what would normally apply to a case of plagiarism. The recommended sanction for extremely serious academic misconduct should be suspension or expulsion.

Regulations and policies should be clear about the standard of proof to be applied. We recommend 'the balance of probabilities'; this is the standard applied by the courts in civil matters and by some regulators in professional admission cases where the character of the applicant is in question. The higher alternative, 'beyond reasonable doubt', may seem proportionate given the seriousness of the potential sanctions but may be too strict to enable effective decision making.

There may be extenuating or mitigating circumstances where some leniency in the sanction applied could be justified, for example newly arrived students in their first assessment period in UK HE who have had no access to information about the institutional expectations, norms and consequences, or students under extreme pressure following close bereavement or serious family crisis. It is important to ensure that any mitigation applies to the sanction imposed, rather than the decision on whether contract cheating has occurred.

Providers should have a clear policy on what amounts to exceptional and mitigating circumstances, but should be careful not to fetter the decision makers' discretion by producing inflexible or exhaustive lists, as this would be unfair and decisions could be challenged. Where sanctions are mitigated, and indeed for any sanction lower than exclusion, we recommend incorporating an educational element around academic integrity.

Clear, written reasons for any sanctions should be given. The process and the basis for challenge and appeal should be reiterated in writing alongside the notification of the panel decision.

Key action points

- ✓ Specifically appointed and trained academic misconduct officers may be used on straightforward or routine matters.
- ✓ The use of a panel to adjudicate on allegations of academic misconduct and appeals from first instance decisions will help to ensure independence, fairness and impartiality
- ✓ Mandatory staff development and training for adjudicators and other panel members will help to ensure a consistent approach to the conduct of proceedings involving alleged academic misconduct
- ✓ Flowcharts, timescales and quick guides to meeting schedules will help to provide a supportive but timely student experience
- ✓ A standard approach to the classification of different types of academic misconduct, the associated level of seriousness and the relevant sanction to be applied will help to ensure consistency of decisions across an institution
- ✓ Consider using 'on the balance of probabilities' as the standard of proof
- ✓ The institution's stance towards extenuating and mitigating circumstances should be articulated in the regulations, policies and procedures, but do not fetter your organisation's discretion in decision making
- ✓ Ensure any mitigation applies to the sanction and not to the decision
- ✓ For sanctions less serious than exclusion, consider adding an educational element around academic integrity
- ✓ Clear, written reasons for panel decisions and sanctions applied will assist the student in understanding the outcome as well as the options for challenge and appeal

Case studies

In compiling this guidance, we asked the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) whether they had any experience of complaints arising from misconduct hearings. OIA had considered one complaint, where panel members and the chair deciding on a case of plagiarism at a provider had been involved in the earlier investigation of that case. They had given advice on how to proceed with the case and had already seen available evidence before the official hearing. The OIA subsequently concluded that the provider had failed to act fairly in not ensuring that panel members came to the matter afresh.

Research in the AMBeR Project showed that there are significant differences in the sanctions applied by providers for different forms of academic misconduct across the sector. The research team proposed a metrics-based method for deciding what sanctions to use to try to promote consistency across the UK HE sector. Some providers have since adopted the AMBeR Tariff¹⁵ or modified it for their own use. Others have chosen a different way of ensuring consistency of sanctions within the provider, but in many providers the decisions are still the remit of individual academics and there are no common policies or procedures for handling accusations or deciding sanctions.

¹⁵ Tennant, P. and Rowell, G. (2010) Benchmark Plagiarism Tariff for the Application of Penalties for Student Plagiarism and the Penalties Applied.

Statistics, appeals, supply of cheating materials

Maintaining and monitoring statistics on academic misconduct cases

National-level data on the outcomes of misconduct cases involving use of third parties is currently very limited. As a result, building up a national picture of the frequency of this type of cheating is almost impossible. There may well be value in recording misconduct investigation outcomes in sufficient detail to identify and distinguish traditional plagiarism from contract cheating and other types of academic misconduct. This will allow providers to establish a baseline within their organisation and, crucially, analyse longer term whether any new approaches they take are effective in dealing with the problem. It is important to note that absence of identified cases does not always mean that there is no cheating; it could mean that cases are not being detected or not being appropriately investigated.

What is important is that each provider understands what is happening within their organisation and is able to respond appropriately when there is a change in trend or concentration of activity. Understanding the type of offences committed will help you to develop your approaches to the management of academic conduct issues (for example, lower level offences may simply require a more detailed induction on academic writing, whereas serious offences may require a targeted approach to acts of a deliberate nature).

Appeals process

Regulations should be clear about the grounds on which appeals can be made, and make this information available to any student that would benefit from it.

Contract cheating supply

Student consumers of contract cheating services are not the only people involved in these transactions. Typically, the essay mill will act as an intermediary to connect the consumer and the creator of the work, or fulfil the service procured (such as impersonation to sit an examination).

The academic regulations should make clear that students fulfilling any of these roles are also committing very serious academic misconduct, and would normally be subject to disciplinary sanctions.

Any member of academic staff found to be providing ghost-writing or other contract cheating services, irrespective of where the client students were enrolled, would be subject to the staff disciplinary code.

Key action points

- ✓ Record statistics in sufficient detail to allow effective analysis
- ✓ Statistics and related information can feed into the quality monitoring process and systematic reviews, in order to continue to improve operational policies and procedures
- ✓ The grounds for appeals can be communicated through student and staff guidance, institutional policies, procedures and academic regulations
- ✓ There could be instances where students are involved in the supply of contract cheating services; sanctions to be applied in such situations can be included within the student and staff guidance, and institutional policies, procedures and academic regulations

Student leadership, review, R&D, distance learning programmes and working with others

Student leadership

All students will benefit from a positive culture of academic integrity. They have the most to gain from robust and secure institutional policies and systems, and have an important role to play in helping to maintain academic integrity.

Students can be asked to support campaigns to counter contract cheating in many different ways. Several institutions train students to serve as academic integrity champions or ambassadors, who can signpost and support students at risk of using contract cheating services.¹⁶

Many providers involve student representatives in developing policies, and some institutions have students serving on academic conduct panels. Academic integrity representatives could be incorporated within existing course representative systems.

Regular review

Regular monitoring of operational evidence, including statistics collected, case outcomes and appeal findings, will assist an institution in evaluating whether current policies are effective for deterring and detecting cases of academic misconduct and whether outcomes are fair, proportional and consistent.

Research and development

Academic integrity is a rich research area, with many innovative materials, tools and techniques under development to address constantly evolving threats to security of academic standards. Providers should remain open to new ideas, understand the changing landscape, and take advantage of useful developments.

Some students will resort to cheating for a number of reasons (see section 3); to help to inform policy, providers could conduct their own research to determine whether these reasons are applicable to their own student population.

Distance learning programmes and working with others

Regulations should apply equally to all categories of students, including students who do not have a presence on campus. However, authentication of the student identity for assessment of online candidates creates different challenges for institutions.

Establishing authorship and authenticity of work is difficult enough for campus-based students, but there is an additional burden on an institution that offers distance learning/online programmes with no attendance requirements. Providers' regulations should set out the additional processes for non-campus students to ensure that suspected contract cheating cases are identified and suitably managed.

Where providers are working with others to deliver programmes, such as validation or transnational education arrangements, care should be taken when establishing relationships

¹⁶ Fallon, J., Wellman, N. and Awdry, R. (2012) Now are we all on the same page? Strategies for engaging students. 5th International Plagiarism Conference Proceedings, Newcastle 2012.

to ensure that partner organisations are taking the risks of academic misconduct seriously. The provider may wish to consider steps to scrutinise potential partners' processes and regulations when developing arrangements.

Key action points

- ✓ Consider including student representatives on decision-making panels for academic misconduct, and involving students in misconduct guidance and policy setting
- ✓ Regular monitoring and review will show whether existing procedures and sanctions are effective at deterring and detecting academic misconduct
- ✓ Institutions can establish what works in other organisations and apply or adapt that practice to their own situation
- ✓ Online, distance learning and transnational education will provide further challenges for an institution in identifying and proving academic misconduct. Where such provisions exist, regulations will need to be extended to cover additional processes that may be required.

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