

Plagiarism in Higher Education

Custom essay writing services: an exploration and
next steps for the UK higher education sector

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Executive summary

This report explores the growing threat to UK higher education from custom essay writing services, or 'essay mills'.

It looks at how these services operate, gives examples from their websites, and highlights the claims they make, in particular their guarantees of being 'plagiarism free'. It also reviews existing regulatory and legal means for combating this form of cheating.

In reviewing some of the options for tackling this threat, we acknowledge that there is no single solution. Instead, we need a multi-faceted approach that builds on published research and the steps that universities and colleges are already taking to promote good academic practice by students, to 'design out' opportunities for plagiarism in their assessments, and to detect and penalise academic misconduct.

This report also identifies the potential for working globally, recognising that plagiarism and the use of custom essays is by no means unique to the UK or indeed to higher education. It highlights examples of work done in other countries worldwide, and recognises considerable scope for working with the partner agencies and European and international bodies of which QAA is a member.

Recommendations

The report's findings lead us to make the following broad recommendations for action:

- Universities, colleges and sector organisations should work in partnership to tackle custom essay writing services.
- The possibility of legislative approaches should be investigated.
- Companies selling advertising space should reject approaches by sites selling custom essays, and search engines should limit access to these sites.

Actions

- We will submit a formal complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority, using a test case of a sample of UK-based essay writing services websites.
- We will approach advertising companies and each of the main search engine companies asking them not to accept advertisements and to block such sites from search engines.
- We will work with the Government and other agencies to discuss the feasibility and potential efficacy of a range of regulatory and/or legislative solutions, looking at the approach taken in New Zealand, for example.
- We will work with our partner agencies across the globe through bilateral communications and ideas sharing and through the established networks of which QAA is a member: the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). We will ask universities and colleges to be alert to essay writing companies that operate on campus to promote their services (for example, by handing out leaflets to students).
- We will explore with the sector ways in which assessment design can reduce the opportunity for unacceptable academic practice, and share existing good practice.
- We will work with universities and colleges to identify and share existing good practice in the detection of custom essay cheating and in promoting more explicit and consistent approaches to punishing its use.
- We will work with the National Union of Students and universities and colleges to develop guidance that can be readily used by higher education providers, with links to their own support services, academic regulations, and guidance and initiatives on assessment and good academic practice.
- We will work with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) to develop a shared understanding of the implications of custom essay cheating and the consequences for students in relation to membership of or practise in particular professions.

Introduction

[Plagiarism is]... passing off someone else's work, either intentionally or unintentionally, as your own, for your own benefit. (Carroll 2007, p. 9)¹

Plagiarism is a form of cheating and an academic offence. Using custom essays (or 'contract cheating') is a specific type of plagiarism, where a student commissions a third party to complete an assignment for them for a fee, then submits the work as their own. Providers of these services claim that the essays they produce are '100 per cent plagiarism free', but that is a misleading claim. While the essay may not contain any plagiarised text itself, it becomes an act of plagiarism and academic dishonesty once the student submits it for assessment and represents it as his or her own work.

If students submit work that is not their own, this compromises the fairness of the assessment process, brings the validity of their qualification into question – in particular by presenting an inaccurate account of their knowledge, skills and attributes – and poses a threat to the reputation of UK higher education. There are potentially serious ramifications for the public if people who falsely claim to be competent as a result of an academic award enter a profession and practise.

For these reasons, we strongly condemn all forms of plagiarism including the use of custom essay writing services.

QAA safeguards the standards of UK higher education qualifications and supports the improvement of students' learning experience, whether they study at a university or college in the UK or overseas, provided their programme leads to a UK higher education qualification. Our position on plagiarism is set out in a [QAA Viewpoint](#).²

Terminology

There are a number of terms that have been used to describe this particular form of plagiarism, including contract cheating,^{3, 4} paid plagiarism, turn-in fraud, literary fraud, academic fraud, essay fraud, assessment fraud, paid third-party plagiarism, cuckoo essays and imposter essays. Providers of such essays have been referred to as 'essay mills'.

Fraud is a specific term usually used to define a criminal offence of deception, often involving financial gain, so care is needed in using this term.⁵ The gain here may not be immediately financial but the offender is seeking personal advancement through deliberate deception, in this case progressing toward or achieving an academic qualification. They may also be seeking to avoid financial loss (another characteristic of a fraud offence) by cheating to avoid failing a programme of study they have already paid for.

For the purposes of this report we refer to the activity as the commissioning of 'custom essays' and the providers of these products as 'custom essay writing services'. We use the term 'essay' broadly to cover any assignment that is not completed under closed-book/ invigilated examination conditions and results in a piece of work being submitted for assessment. We are conscious that other pieces of work, such as coding assignments in computer science programmes, can be completed by third parties as well, and they are taken to be included in this analysis.

1 Carroll, J (2007) *A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education*, second edition, Oxford Centre for Staff Learning and Development

2 QAA Viewpoint: Plagiarism in UK Higher Education: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=3054

3 For example, Wallace, M J and Newton, P M (2014) Turnaround time and market capacity in contract cheating, *Educational Studies*, Vol. 40:2, 233-236: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2014.889597>

4 Clarke, R, Lancaster, T (2006) *Eliminating the successor to plagiarism? Identifying the usage of contract cheating sites*: www.researchgate.net/profile/Thomas_Lancaster/publication/228367576_Eliminating_the_successor_to_plagiarism_Identifying_the_usage_of_contract_cheating_sites/links/02bfe50f6892ace478000000.pdf

5 One definition is: 'Dishonestly making a false (untrue or misleading) representation with a view to gain or with intent to cause loss.' www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199551248.001.0001/acref-9780199551248-e-1622?rskey=sCQgSk&result=1718

Why are we looking at custom essays?

Any form of cheating, including plagiarism, poses a threat to the academic standards of UK higher education qualifications, and therefore to the reputation of UK higher education as a whole and to the integrity of qualifications awarded to the vast majority of students who achieve their qualification entirely by legitimate means.

Media reports⁶ have pushed the issue of plagiarism in higher education onto the national agenda. The reports have centred on ‘custom essay writing services’. This is a term commonly given to businesses and individuals, usually established online, that enable customers to commission academic papers. These papers are often submitted as the customers’ own. The custom essay writing services go to varying lengths to dissuade customers from submitting the papers as their own, at least at the outset. After initial contact is made, however, they are often less circumspect about the intended use of their products.

The cost is dependent upon a number of factors including level (for example, undergraduate, postgraduate), assignment length (number of words) and the date by which the student would like to receive the work. An alternative format is where students post the work required and potential suppliers bid for the commission.

In its August 2009 report on students and universities,⁷ the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee considered the issue of plagiarism and the growth in ‘writing services’. The Committee concluded that the sector needed to be especially vigilant, establish consistent approaches and share intelligence. In addition to recommending that clear and comprehensive guidance be provided on what is and is not plagiarism it also recommended that the Government provide advice on whether writing services were liable for criminal prosecution.

We looked at a small number of custom essay writing services in depth, to discover the type of services they offer, who owns these businesses, and where they are based. We looked at the research that has been undertaken to find out what motivates students to cheat. Interspersed throughout this report we provide case studies of particular essay writing services highlighting what they claim to provide, the guarantees they make and information where available about the companies themselves.

6 www.independent.co.uk/student/news/uk-universities-in-plagiarism-epidemic-as-almost-50000-students-caught-cheating-over-last-3-years-a6796021.html
www.independent.co.uk/student/student-life/Studies/plagiarism-investigations-at-welsh-universities-rise-in-the-last-5-years-a7144621.html
www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/19/thousands-of-student-nurses-cheating-their-way-through-training/

7 www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/170/170i.pdf

Scale of the issue

The scale of the practice of commissioning custom essays is difficult to quantify. Research so far has been limited to academics and journalists looking at a relatively small number of cases. The response to recent Freedom of Information requests, which looked across UK providers, found that instances of academic offences were as high as 50,000 over three years (17,000 per year, or 0.7 per cent of students).⁸ However, these figures cannot be broken down to see how many were the result of students submitting essays bought from custom essay writing services.

The numbers can also indicate only how many students were caught; the numbers of students who plagiarise and are not discovered will be higher. In a 2014 study from Saudi Arabia,⁹ 22 per cent of students reported having paid someone to complete an assignment for them.

Some of the more recent media reports have been generated as a result of custom essay writing services stepping up their advertising. Access to essay writing companies is generally through the internet and social networks. However, earlier this year (2016), one company (OKessays) used more aggressive marketing tactics by advertising on the London Underground.¹⁰ Advertisements also make their way onto noticeboards in universities, and leaflets advertising essay writing services are being handed out across university campuses. Cards and leaflets also find their way onto shop noticeboards that are located near to campuses.

8 www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/education/article4654719.ece

9 Hosny, M, and Fatima, S (2014) Attitude of students towards cheating and plagiarism: university case study, Journal of Applied Sciences: <http://docsdrive.com/pdfs/ansinet/jas/2014/748-757.pdf>

10 Reported by Radio 4: www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-36276324
<https://twitter.com/MarcusJBall/status/732265294262046720>

How custom essay writing services operate

The custom essay writing market has been boosted by technological advances, as the internet allows easy access to these services, along with rapid ordering, payment and delivery.¹¹

Custom essay writing services lay great store by the bespoke, 'plagiarism-free', confidential nature of the service, while simultaneously issuing disclaimers warning against their products being used for plagiarism. Some companies assert that the work produced amounts to a model essay for use as a learning aid (providing guidance and assistance with assignments), and not to be submitted by students as their own work. However, such recommendations are not readily evident, hidden away in what is effectively small print.

Oxbridge Essays, for example, states: '[We] know that plagiarism is a very serious concern for our customers. For this reason, we go to great lengths to ensure your work is 100% plagiarism-free', while also stating that the 'client must never submit as if their own work, either in part or total, to their university, school or any other institute of education written materials sold to them by The Oxbridge Research Group Ltd.'¹²

A simple web search returns a proliferation of essay writing services sites of varying quality.¹³ While a few are competently written, the standard of English used on most sites is poor. Most offer myriad services including essays, assignments, dissertations and theses, all apparently written by highly qualified academic and professional writers. Many have instant online chat facilities.

The arguments put forward by the custom essay writing services to support their use by students include that a student's predicament is the fault of their university or college, for not offering the necessary support that would allow them to successfully complete their own work.

The student will typically contact an essay writing service online, either by email or through instant chat software. Basic details are taken and a price is quoted by the site. If the student agrees to the price, fuller details are submitted – title of essay, deadline, name of institution, referencing guidance, and so on. Prices tend to be calculated on number of words needed, the level of the qualification, and the urgency.

At this point, different approaches may be taken depending on the site being used. The more established sites will have a bank of people who have previously written for them, and essay commissions will go to those contacts, with the essay writing service acting merely as an intermediary. Another approach is the use of online freelance writer sites, such as Freelancer or Upwork, where assignments can be 'reverse-auctioned'. Details of the project are submitted and any writer registered on those sites will be able to bid for it.

Professor Phil Newton and Christopher Lang's recent publication looks at the operational aspect in some depth.¹⁴ The findings are summarised below.

- Turnaround times for commissioned essays are short – between a day (25 per cent of those analysed) and 24 days. The average was five days, and most (80 per cent) were fulfilled in the stated time.
- For every fulfilled request on a freelancer-type website there were another 10 people bidding for the work, suggesting significant spare capacity in the market.
- Prices ranged from £15 (Law, master's, 3,000 word dissertation proposal, no deadline) to £6,750 (English Literature, PhD, 100,000 word dissertation, seven day deadline).

11 Rigby, D, Burton, M, Balcombe, K, Bateman, I, and Mulatu, A (2015) 'Contract cheating and the market in essays': www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167268114003321

12 www.torg.co.uk

13 We have been told that the full list currently runs to some 850 sites (personal communication).

14 Newton, P M and Lang, C (2015) *Handbook of Academic Integrity: Custom Essay Writers, Freelancer and Other Paid Third Parties*' DOI 10.1007/978-981-287-079-7_38-1

Case Study 1: Essay Mills

Web address: <http://essaymills.com>

Content checked: 1 August 2016

Extract from the website:

Do not stress yourself with academic writing pressures when we can deliver the best for you.

An academic assignment can turn into a horrible nightmare within no time. With so many chapters, format requirements and topic explanations, you need to read through various books and websites. In the meantime, you also have to focus on various other tasks including studying and working. A lot of your friends would be enjoying their free time while you would be spending all your free time on research commitments. This actually does not pay off when the quality level is measured. For a student who has not written hard academic assignments before, it is almost impossible to end up with an A or A+ grade. Even if you sacrifice your sleep or use all your free time, you would not be able to deliver at the expected level. Writing an academic paper is a complete process. You have to complete multiple steps to finish the paper.

Plagiarism is unintentional in a lot of cases. You may not know that the content has been copied or not cited properly. Providing a citation for each used source is necessary. Whether you are using a website or a physical source, its citation has to be present in the bibliography of the assignment. Professional writers are already aware of all these requirements and they do not need to be told about anything. Eliminate your tensions forever and hire one of these expert companies to get better results in your paper.

The guarantees provided by the site:

100% Guaranteed plagiarism free

101% Plagiarism Free

Excellent 24-7 customer support

100% privacy and confidentiality

Efficient delivery prior to the deadline

Master's and PhD writers

Extremely high quality services

Any citation style & up-to-date sources

Prices:

Not available.

Who is behind the custom essay writing services?

We looked at an initial sample of 18 websites that offer essay writing services – a small sample of the number of such sites disclosed by a simple Google search.

Establishing ownership of the sites and where they are based is not straightforward. Five are traceable to companies in the UK, registered with Companies House. Six appear, from the address of the individual who registered the domain name, to be overseas-based. One overseas individual is behind at least two of the sites. Seven use web hosting companies that do not pass on their customers' details to <https://who.is> (a URL registration database), effectively making them anonymous.

Companies House data is limited. These organisations have sufficiently small declared assets to be exempt from full accounts returns so it is impossible to say how much money they are making.

We have not, at this stage, explored beyond the essay writing service websites themselves to the people who actually write the essays, including, for example, information about their qualifications and expertise.¹⁵

¹⁵ The work by Dave Tomar, *The Shadow Scholar - How I made a living helping college kids to cheat* (2013), is regarded as a pivotal work in purporting to represent the perspective of someone actually providing custom essays (in the USA).

Why students plagiarise

Many students who plagiarise do not do so intentionally. They may be unclear about what constitutes plagiarism and therefore may not realise they are inadvertently submitting plagiarised work.¹⁶

However, under certain circumstances, students are prepared to deliberately cheat by commissioning and submitting work as their own; that is, in order to gain advantage commensurate with the level of risk (Clarke and Lancaster, 2006, Rigby et al, 2015). The lower the likelihood of being caught, the more likely students are to make use of custom essay writing services, even at a cost.

We might expect a proliferation of custom essay writing services to drive up competition and drive down prices; greater competition might lead to an increase in the 'quality' of the commissioned work, while lower prices might have the opposite effect. It is evident from only a brief search that very many companies exist, most of them being of questionable quality. Although some students may continue to make use of these companies, many may, after submitting the commissioned work and not receiving the anticipated grade, lose faith in the services of such companies. Certainly there are articles,¹⁷ websites and blogs highlighting the grievances of disgruntled students who themselves feel cheated.

Cultural differences also play a part, particularly where cultural values and conventions influence academic practice. Of the reported 50,000 students at British universities who have been caught cheating in the past three years, there are concerns that a disproportionate number are foreign students.¹⁸ Cultures vary in their interpretations about what is and what is not acceptable in academic writing. Learning styles will also play a part, with those who have previously relied on memorisation and rote learning processes finding it difficult to make the transition to becoming analytical, critical thinkers with the ability to express their own opinions in their own words. Language competence or proficiency, particularly where English is not the first language, also affects a student's ability to write in their own words.

Universities have faced criticism that they are enrolling international students with a poor command of the English language simply because they pay higher fees.¹⁹ Some international students who struggle with university-level study but are determined to achieve their paid-for qualification at any length, may resort to cheating. The Times in 2016 suggests that, according to data obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, foreign students are four times more likely to cheat.²⁰

External pressures - be they financial, or relating to family or work - also have an impact. Parental pressure and fear of failing, or the need to get a particular grade or mark to progress into employment or onto higher level qualifications, may lead to students submitting plagiarised work. It is also reasonable to surmise that poor time-management skills, either because students have left the work to the last minute, or because they are facing multiple deadlines along with other commitments, may also compel students to resort to taking shortcuts such as copying text from other sources without appropriate referencing.

Finally, studies agree that some students resort to plagiarism simply because they are lazy and want to find the easiest route through the assessment process.²¹

16 See note 11.

17 www.theguardian.com/money/2016/jul/09/essay-bought-online-errors-refund?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

18 See note 8.

19 www.timeshighereducation.com/news/best-university-workplace-survey-unease-at-inadequate-language-skills/2018345.article

20 See note 8.

21 <https://offices.depaul.edu/oa/faculty-resources/teaching/academic-integrity/Documents/Top%20Ten%20Reasons%20Students%20Plagiarize%202012.pdf>
<http://www.trafford.ac.uk/static/plato/plagiarism1/why.html>
<http://tlt.psu.edu/plagiarism/instructor-guide/why-students-plagiarize>

Are students being misled?

Disclaimers that customers should not pass off the products as their own tend to be well concealed on the websites of such services. Once the potential client begins to engage with the service the message changes. Clients can then be told, conversely, that it is acceptable to submit the products as their own work.²²

Essay writing services go to great lengths to promote their products as consisting of original content that is guaranteed to be plagiarism-free. They are more circumspect when it comes to stating what the products can be used for. Generally, only an in-depth search of the website will reveal any exhortation that their products should not be submitted as if they were the student's own. However, if a student is prepared to cheat and pay a third party to do their work it is unlikely they will be interested in searching for disclaimers or reading terms and conditions, or be deterred by them even if they found them. There are ample reasons to deduce that these sites are knowingly encouraging or enabling academic offences; similarly it can be argued that students are not being misled and that they willingly enter into such arrangements.

²² Ofqual-commissioned independent research into essay writing services:
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141031163546/http://ofqual.gov.uk/news/cheating-risk-online-essays>
Similar companies examined, but study looked at high-school level qualifications.

Case Study 2: Essay Tigers

Web address: www.essaytigers.co.uk

Content checked: 1 August 2016

Extract from the website:

Plagiarism Free Papers: Our writers only deliver original content to you. All essay papers and articles are run through plagiarism detection software to ensure their originality. That is what guarantees that you never get copied content!

Every piece of writing that is written by our writers is put through a sophisticated set of software that can detect even the smallest trace of copy and pasted material!

- Zero percent plagiarism guaranteed
- Plagiarism report provided, if needed

FAQ: Does the agency guarantee that the content will not be plagiarized?

Yes, we guarantee that all the papers that we deliver are free from any copied material. To ensure this, we pass our papers through a software that generates a report indicating the plagiarism percentage. We deliver this report to the client too, when asked.

Have you ever been in a situation where either one or all the points have been true?

- Are you too busy with another assignment?
- Are you not in the mood of doing any assignment?
- Does this particular assignment bore you?
- You would rather be doing something else?

If that's the case, then you need an online essay help. And EssayTigers.co.uk is here to help you because we are easily the best essay writing service [sic] UK and all over the globe too.

The guarantees provided by the site:

Incredible Features

100% Premium Quality

Non-Plagiarized Content

275 Words/Page

Timely Delivery

Professional Writing Team

Money-Back Assurance

24/7 Customer Support

Prices:

£8.67 per page

QAA's role in preventing custom essay plagiarism

At time of writing, QAA has no legal or regulatory powers to take action against essay writing services websites or ghost-writers or against students guilty of plagiarism.

In the UK, higher education institutions with degree awarding powers are responsible for the academic standards of their awards. These responsibilities are set out in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code),²³ published by QAA following extensive consultation with the higher education sector and other stakeholders. Where higher education programmes are delivered in partnership, for example, through a further education college or a private college, the degree-awarding body's ultimate responsibility for standards cannot be delegated.

Under its Concerns Scheme,²⁴ QAA can investigate some higher education providers where there are concerns about academic standards and quality, and about information that higher education providers make available about their provision, and where we think that such concerns indicate serious systemic or procedural problems. We can, for example, investigate the failure of a provider to follow their own plagiarism procedures if we become aware that their responsibilities as set out in the Quality Code are not being met.

Relevant UK expectations

Specifically, the Quality Code makes explicit that higher education qualifications can only be awarded where both the threshold standards – the minimum acceptable level for an award – and the degree-awarding body's own academic standards have been met, and where achievement of the intended learning outcomes has been demonstrated through assessment processes that are equitable, valid and reliable.

The following are extracts from the Quality Code, parts A²⁵ and B²⁶.

Expectation A3.2

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:

- the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment
- both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the relevant degree-awarding body have been satisfied.

Expectation B6

Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

Indicators of sound practice relating to assessment

The Quality Code also sets out in its chapter on assessment (Chapter B6) the importance of developing in students the understanding of, and skills for, 'good academic practice' and the need to tackle 'unacceptable academic practice' (embracing all forms of academic cheating, misconduct and plagiarism). These indicators reflect the ethos of UK higher education, that students have a responsibility to engage in their learning and to develop and be developed as autonomous learners.

23 UK Quality Code for Higher Education: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code

24 QAA Concerns Scheme: www.qaa.ac.uk/concerns/concerns-about-providers

25 Quality Code, Part A: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a

26 Quality Code, Part B: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b

Chapter B6 contains the following indicators of sound practice²⁷ relating to acceptable and unacceptable academic practice.

Students are provided with opportunities to develop an understanding of, and the necessary skills to demonstrate, good academic practice. (Indicator 7)

Higher education providers operate processes for preventing, identifying, investigating and responding to unacceptable academic practice. (Indicator 14)

Reviews of higher education providers

QAA has conducted reviews of UK higher education providers, those with degree awarding powers and those who deliver programmes on behalf of degree-awarding bodies, and published the reports of these reviews.²⁸

Each review addresses whether the provider is meeting the Expectations set out above, based on evidence of the provider's regulations, policies and procedures, and on peer reviewers talking to staff and students.

Where shortcomings are identified, our reviewers make appropriate recommendations, which the provider responds to in its published action plan. Review reports also identify affirmations²⁹ and features of good practice.³⁰ Here are some anonymised examples:

Good practice

Provider #1

The integration of plagiarism detection into the assessment process, and the transparent and rigorous enforcement of the College policies when plagiarism is detected.

Students are introduced to academic plagiarism detection software at induction and all student work is submitted through this on the virtual learning environment. The process is applied rigorously, and prompt and effective action taken in cases where plagiarism is identified. Feedback on student work is specific and detailed, and is obtained through a number of written, oral and online mechanisms. Students consider it to be an important aspect of their learning. Plagiarism detection software is used to provide formative feedback to assist students in avoiding plagiarism, and is effectively integrated into the virtual learning environment for online submissions.

Recommendations

Provider #2

Ensure that students have access to resources that prevent unacceptable academic practice.

The College has installed plagiarism-detection software, which students can access via the College's virtual learning environment. However, the plagiarism-detection software is not embedded in student practice as an aid to managing and developing good academic writing skills. There is a lack of awareness among higher education students of the availability of the plagiarism-detection software, its function or how to use it. Teaching staff across all higher education programmes do not routinely encourage its use.

27 Indicators of sound practice are not mandatory but help higher education providers address their responsibilities as defined in the Expectations.

28 QAA review reports: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports

29 Affirmations are actions that higher education providers are taking in response to recommendations for improvement by QAA reviewers.

30 To view examples, visit the QAA Knowledgebase, www.qaa.ac.uk/research/knowledgebase-search, and search 'recommendations' using keywords 'misconduct' or 'plagiarism'.

Affirmations

Provider #3

The actions being taken to implement the Plagiarism and Academic Malpractice Policy to ensure the extension of plagiarism-detection software across all higher education courses.

Plagiarism-detection software has not previously been used for higher education courses. Instead, staff have been expected to use their experience and knowledge of individual students to detect instances of plagiarism and then liaise with university link tutors to award penalties. The College is currently piloting plagiarism-detection software on two programmes. Students are made aware of plagiarism and its consequences during induction, at workshops and course lectures, and in handbooks, and sign a declaration as part of the course assessment sheet.

Provider #4

The action being taken to identify and address the causes of high academic misconduct cases among international students.

Written and verbal information on expected academic conduct is provided to students at induction and at appropriate points throughout their course of studies. The penalties for academic malpractice are clearly published in course guides and in the Academic Regulations. While a range of support is available to all students in understanding and avoiding academic malpractice, there is a disproportionately high number of academic misconduct cases among international students, particularly at postgraduate level. The Students' Union has also identified this as an area requiring attention. The University, through its analysis of academic misconduct data, has acknowledged this as an area for improvement, and has established a working group to further develop the information, support and training made available to staff and students.

Case Study 3: Paperduenow

Web address: www.paperduenow.com

Content checked: 1 August 2016

Extract from the website:

100% Custom Essays

At PaperDueNow.com, we have expert writers available to write excellent papers for you on any given topic. You won't get pre-written or plagiarized essays with us - we only offer custom written papers of the highest quality.

The guarantees provided by the site:

Plagiarism 100% free

Completely anonymous 100% privacy

100% money back guarantee

We understand the deplorable consequences of plagiarism for students, and that is why we guarantee that every page of every order at PaperDueNow.com is original. We can be certain of this thanks to the innovative and trustworthy plagiarism detection service WebCheck. It scans papers to make sure they are plagiarism-free. The service won't share the contents of your documents with third parties or save them in a database.

This way, we can be absolutely certain that when your professor scans your paper, it will show as original.

'These guys saved my life! They not only wrote a perfect essay for me in two days, but did it at such a high level that my professor was impressed with it and I got an "A"! It was great! Now all my friends know about you and they are all thankful to me for the helpful resource I shared with them.'

Prices:

Prices starting from \$9.97/page

Next steps: a partnership approach to tackling the problem

At the end of June 2016, we brought together a group of academics, politicians, representative and sector organisations, and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) to share the findings of this research and other evidence, and to explore ways to tackle the issue. We have set out a series of proposed actions that can be summarised in three words: Education. Deterrence. Detection.

Our own research and the stakeholder forum have affirmed our view that there is no single solution and that a range of organisations, including us, need to take action on a number of fronts. Working together in partnership or collaboration with other bodies, we will explore:

- regulation of custom essay writing services including controlling their ability to advertise
- working with universities and colleges to: increase staff understanding of the threat posed by this form of cheating; amend assessment design; reduce the scope for cheating; improve detection and develop penalties (following due process)
- raising student awareness of why such conduct is unacceptable and the likely consequences.

UK regulation of custom essay writing services

We have looked at the legal position and at other regulatory powers that may enable intervention in custom essay writing services.

Current law

Both legislation and case law suggest that there is limited scope currently to address the behaviour of custom essay writing services or to challenge the conduct of students who use such sites.

The nearest applicable legislation is the Fraud Act 2006, section 2 of which addresses fraud by false representation which could be applied to a student submitting an essay written by a third party. This raises the question whether the supplier of the essay is then liable for inciting, encouraging or attempting to procure fraud (for example, under ss44-46 of the Serious Crime Act 2007).³¹

Case law appears to indicate a reluctance on the part of the courts to be involved in cases involving plagiarism, deeming this to be a matter for academic judgement that falls outside the competence of the court (*Hines v Birkbeck College* [1985] 3 All ER 15).

The Committee of Advertising Practice and UK Advertising Codes

The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) writes and maintains the UK Advertising Codes³² that would be applicable to UK-based custom essay writing services. The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) administers complaints against those Codes.

The UK Advertising Codes state that, if UK customers are targeted by advertisements from non-UK websites, those sites will be subject to the jurisdiction of their home country, not that in the UK. Given the international ownership of many such sites, this approach may have limited impact.

The rules in the Codes state that marketing communications must be legal, decent, honest and truthful. They should not bring marketing into disrepute. We consider that an organisation offering a product that (despite disclaimers) appears to have been designed for purposes of cheating in a programme of study is not acting decently and honestly.

³¹ See for example Saunders, N (2006) 'Combatting plagiarism - towards a new definition of academic misconduct', *Education Law Journal* paras 285-6, and the Crown Prosecution Service note on these provisions: www.cps.gov.uk/legal/d_to_g/fraud_act/#a07

³² www.cap.org.uk/Advertising-Codes.aspx

A complaint to the ASA could suppress the activities of some suppliers, but only those not careful enough to have clearly stated that their products are for research only. Overseas sites are beyond the ASA's jurisdiction. The ASA's powers include listing non-compliant websites, asking search engines to remove paid-for advertisements, and running AdWords campaigns to warn consumers. However, the ASA is itself a voluntary code.

Ofcom does not have the power to take action against websites offering products that may be used in academic offences.

We will submit a formal complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority, using a test case of a sample of UK-based essay writing services websites.

Approaching the advertisers

Following a complaint by the BBC (and others) to Transport for London (TfL), advertisements that had appeared on the London Underground for a website called OKEssays³³ in April 2016 were removed and TfL agreed to revise its policy regarding such advertisements. We will approach other potential sources of advertising for such sites to make them aware of the nature of these websites and the 'service' they purport to provide, as well as the implications for UK higher education and our students.

Search engines

We recognise how easily such sites can be found through search engines. Indeed some operators are clearly paying search engine providers to prioritise their sites in search results. Taking a similar approach to advertisers, we want to make it harder to find these sites in the first place. Any actions taken here will be subject to careful analysis of potential legal ramifications.

We will approach advertising companies and each of the main search engine companies asking them not to accept advertisements and to block such sites from search engines.

Later we indicate a number of steps we will take, working with universities and colleges, to seek to stem the flow of advertising within institutions.

33 <https://twitter.com/proftimbale/status/699197060613021696>

Case Study 4: Custom Essay Writer

Web address: <http://customessaywriter.co.uk>

Content checked: 1 August 2016

Extract from the website:

Students often ask themselves: “How can I write my essay on time?”, “Is there someone who can write my essay for me?”, “How can I get a good grade?” or “Which company can I entrust to write an essay for me?”

These questions are typical for most students. Students have different responsibilities, including jobs, family duties, hobbies and other activities that interrupt their studying and makes it impossible to write all the required tasks in a short period of time.

You can rest assured that you will get a quality paper that is free from plagiarism. You know the consequences of turning in plagiarized material, and we will never put you at risk of delivering that type of content.

The guarantees provided by the site:

100% confidentiality

Plagiarism-free custom essay

Affordable prices + discounts

Quality guarantee

Prices:

Based on an essay of 3000 (12 pages)

Urgency	Degree	Masters
3 hours	£948.27	£1463.79
6 hours	£682.46	£1054.23
12 hours	£491.17	£757.56
24 hours	£353.11	£545.72
2 days	£270.01	£414.00
3 days	£240.01	£366.03
4 days	£210.01	£317.98
5 days	£180.01	£270.01
10 days	£162.04	£233.99

The potential for new legal powers

Given the limitations of existing legal and regulatory powers, it is worth considering the potential for the introduction of new legal and/or regulatory powers designed to prohibit or more effectively regulate the activities of these websites. This could, for example, take the form of an offence of aiding or enabling for financial gain individuals to commit acts of academic dishonesty. There may also be lower-level regulations or statutory instruments which could empower an organisation to take action against custom essay writing services. A robust case will be needed, as will careful discussions with the Government on the appropriate legal mechanism. We recognise that the scope of such regulations/legislation would necessarily be limited to the UK, and that the devolved governments may also need to be involved.

QAA's Articles of Association³⁴ place the responsibility for the promotion and maintenance of quality and standards in higher education in the UK and elsewhere within our scope of responsibilities. As we have stated, we consider that contract cheating poses a clear threat to academic standards and the quality of higher education.

Nevertheless, careful consideration will be needed regarding where the authority to investigate and enforce infringements would rest. It could rest with the proposed Office for Students as regulator, with the work delegated to the Designated Quality Body for which provision is made in the Higher Education and Research Bill currently before Parliament.

We will work with the Government and other agencies to discuss the feasibility and potential efficacy of a range of regulatory and/or legislative solutions, looking at the approach taken in New Zealand for example.³⁵

Legislation/regulation in other countries

We have looked at the legal position in other countries and at approaches taken by regulators to identify the scope, and potential limitations, of legal controls over custom essay providers.

New Zealand

Newton and Lang³⁶ (citing Heather and Fensome, 2013) give the example of New Zealand's approach where changes were made to the law in August 2011 to make it illegal to advertise or provide third-party assistance to cheat. Powers were given to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) to prosecute anyone providing or advertising such services. Their website indicates that they have a similar role to QAA in terms of safeguarding qualifications and supporting students in their learning.³⁷

Newton and Lang offer a comparison between this approach and US State legislation (covered more fully below) showing similarities in the powers to control advertising, but indicating that:

The New Zealand law is broader in terms of what is considered improper, as it speaks to services, and not just assignments. For example, it covers sitting an examination for someone (Section 292E(4) (d)). Yet, at the same time, the law appears to be somewhat narrower than in the USA in that there is no section regarding 'should reasonably have known'.

The legislation enables fines of up to NZ\$10,000 (£5,300). We will talk to the NZQA to explore the background, rationale and evidence base that led to and supported the introduction of section 292E. We will also talk to them about the cases in which the legislation has been used, and the impact legislation has had on the problem of contract cheating.

34 QAA Articles of Association: www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/articles-of-association-QAABoard-2012.pdf

35 We are particularly grateful to Professor Phil Newton and Dr Thomas Lancaster.

36 See note 14.

37 www.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/our-role

New Zealand legislation - Education Act 1989³⁸

292E Offence to provide or advertise cheating services.

- 1 A person commits an offence if the person provides any service specified in subsection (4) with the intention of giving a student an unfair advantage over other students.
- 2 A person commits an offence if the person advertises any service described in subsection (4) knowing that the service has or would have the effect of giving a student an unfair advantage over other students.
- 3 A person commits an offence who, without reasonable excuse, publishes an advertisement for any service described in subsection (4).
- 4 The services referred to in subsections (1) to (3) are as follows:
 - (a) completing an assignment or any other work that a student is required to complete as part of a programme or training scheme;
 - (b) providing or arranging the provision of an assignment that a student is required to complete as part of a programme or training scheme;
 - (c) providing or arranging the provision of answers for an examination that a student is required to sit as part of a programme or training scheme;
 - (d) sitting an examination that a student is required to sit as part of a programme or training scheme or providing another person to sit the exam in place of the student.
- 5 A person who commits an offence against this section is liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding \$10,000.

USA

Newton and Lang (2015) have reported that in the USA 17 states had some form of law addressing custom essay writing services (at October 2014), and these examples illustrate the differences of scope and approach taken across these different states. They report (citing Dickerson, 2007) that:

... most prohibit the preparation or distribution of papers, while others prohibit assisting with the sale of papers or advertising these services, while yet another prohibits conducting research for students.³⁹

Their work also provides an invaluable account of some of the case law and the ways the state courts have addressed various defences to legal action, rejecting defences relating to disclaimers, copyright and intent, '[which] are thus useful in terms of identifying arguments and facts that could address these defences in future cases'.

Australia

In Australia there is no legislation governing custom essay writing services. However, this kind of academic cheating is the focus of considerable attention, not least through the work of the higher education regulator - the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) - working with universities. In response to media reports of allegations of cheating, TEQSA wrote to all Australian higher education providers requesting they report on the action they were taking to address such cheating, in accordance with their statutory powers, and to share best practice in relation to minimising misconduct and promoting academic integrity.⁴⁰

38 www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0080/latest/DLM3988805.html

39 Further information is provided on the website created by Mary McCormick - <http://law-fsu.beta.libguides.com/termpapermills> (cited by Newton and Lang 2015)

40 www.teqsa.gov.au/news-publications/report-student-academic-integrity-and-allegations-contract-cheating-university

This has resulted in a report setting out TEQSA's approach and the approaches of the higher education providers:

- All providers report that they regularly review their policies and practices to: promote academic integrity; minimise opportunity for fraudulent assessment conduct by students; detect academic misconduct; and impose appropriate penalties...
- A number of providers (eg Griffith University, University of Western Australia) have revised their policies recently to make specific reference to contract cheating.

We have agreed with TEQSA to share practice and work together to promote tackling the issue through international quality assurance networks. The Higher Education and Research Bill proposes awarding the Office for Students the power to request information on the performance of a provider's functions. This could include requesting they report on the action they are taking to tackle this issue.

China

In China there have been reports that the government is introducing national regulations⁴¹ to describe the acts that constitute academic misconduct, as well as punishments. These appear to cover academic institutions, which will be responsible for investigating and judging cases. The regulations do not seem to make these acts illegal in law, unlike cheating in college entrance examinations which is now punishable with a custodial sentence.

International approaches to regulation

The review of practice and legislation in other jurisdictions demonstrates that custom essay cheating is not just a UK phenomenon, and its solution is unlikely to be possible through UK channels alone, especially given the ability of website providers to register overseas.

We will work with our partner agencies across the globe through bilateral communications and ideas sharing and through the established networks of which QAA is a member: the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The TEQSA report also makes reference to the Asia Pacific Forum on Educational Integrity, with which we will also seek to engage.

⁴¹ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-04/13/c_135275962.htm?platform=hootsuite

Case Study 5: British Essay Writers

Web address: www.britishessaywriters.co.uk

Content checked: 1 August 2016

Extract from the website:

Looking For the Nursing Essay Help? British Essay Writers Are Here For You.

Our team of nursing essay writers is highly qualified and have proven experience in essay writing for nursing domain. Our essay writers are fully committed towards the order you have placed with us. Our writers put all their efforts in bringing out the best and excellent material for you. We assure you that the work done by our writers will be 100% unique and also 100% free of plagiarism. By getting our help for your nursing essays, you are getting the chance of standing out in the crowd.

Nursing Essay written in Technical Language: This is simple as we know the reflective writing, care study, patient journey, interventions, case analysis, disease management and other versatile topics of nursing and we have experts to tackle these topics proficiently.

100% plagiarism-free custom written nursing essay help: We ensure you to provide 100% custom written nursing essay help and we also ensure you that our writers compose your essay from scratch therefore there will be no chance for the presence of plagiarism in the essay.

Do not have much time? You may not have much time to complete your nursing essay, do not worry as we are here to help you out. We ensure you to provide your essay before you hit the deadline.

Sample Nursing Essay UK (www.britishessaywriters.co.uk/sample/nursing-essay.php)

Nurse shortage is characterized in connection to existing levels of demands that are not conformed to either in the present or in the past moreover in the comparison of existing nurses those still in the establishments of acquisition. This shortage of nurse services has been seen among numerous facilities of healthcare in the United Kingdom where there are examples of maturing nurse who don't get supplanted being supplanted. Quite, most retirements of the matured nurses are not being supplanted by an equivalent weight of unexampled nurses. Buchan and Aiken (2008) regret that the deficiency is not quantifiable, yet it is quite portrayed by few nurses who who are to make full a tremendous opening of vacant position in the centre of healthcare. Significant consideration of this deficiency is not in the terms of the unemployed nurses working in private clinic center yet majorly on the Registered Nurses (RNs) who are less in number in government human services offices (Bureau of Health Professions, 2004).

The guarantees provided by the site:

Free of Plagiarism: Our work is 100% original and free of plagiarism We write every work from scratch

On-Time Delivery: On time delivery is our guarantee, we never miss deadlines Rush delivery for urgent orders

Prices:

Deadline	2:2 Standard	2:1 Standard	First Class
6 days and above	£8.99	£13.99	£18.99
3-5 days	£11.99	£16.99	£21.99
Within 48 hours	£14.99	£19.99	£24.99
Within 24 hours	£17.99	£22.99	£27.99

Charges are on a per page basis

Working with the higher education sector

We recognise that customised essays written by third parties pose significant challenges for academic and professional staff in universities and colleges in terms of detection, proof and appropriate punishment (following due process). We have already identified good practice in the UK higher education sector, and will share more widely the steps that universities and colleges are taking to address plagiarism, through both assessment design and detection.

We will focus on:

- students' access to information about these websites
- raising staff awareness and supporting their efforts to address the issue through assessment design and effective detection
- supporting more effective regulation, including more consistent and explicit approaches to defining and penalising this form of cheating.

Access to information

As indicated earlier, essay writing services websites are extremely easy to find online. We need a concerted effort to limit their ability to advertise. We also believe that universities and colleges have the capability to significantly limit their students' access to such sites where they are using the institution's own Wi-Fi and internet facilities. However, blocking access to such sites will be a challenge, given their volume and the likelihood of new or re-registered sites appearing.

We will ask universities and colleges to be alert to essay writing companies that operate on campus to promote their services (for example, by handing out leaflets to students).

Assessment design

The scope for using assessment design as a way of reducing the opportunity for unacceptable academic practice is now well established in the literature on 'designing out plagiarism' (Carroll, 2007).⁴² This does not have to mean replacing essays with invigilated examinations, but it does mean finding an effective, valid and reliable approach to formative and summative assessment that cultivates students' engagement in their learning and helps them recognise the imperative of good academic practice.

TEQSA's work in Australia provides examples of approaches and good practice in relation to assessment design (at the University of Wollongong, Macquarie University, and University of Technology Sydney).⁴³ Newton and Lang (2015)⁴⁴ provide a critique of approaches that include: 'just-in-time' release of assessment details; the physical or virtual presence of the student at some point in the assessment (such as a viva voce); and increased emphasis on the close academic relationship between tutors and students (making tutors more familiar with each student's work and thus more able to spot sudden changes). Newton and Lang's critique indicates, however, that there is no easy way to design out cheating in this form, and that there is a risk of compromising other valuable elements of the assessment process in relation to promoting learning and ensuring validity and reliability.

They conclude:

Given that it is possible to purchase almost any type of assignment online, it seems unlikely that any single assessment design principle is going to completely prevent the use of paid third parties, and each has limitations and consequences of its own. However, it seems reasonable to assume that the use of a diverse range of assessment methods, including some which focus on having the student physically present to present their work, will make it harder for students to contract out all of their work and will also make it easier to triangulate between assessment types. (Newton and Lang, 2015, p7)

42 Carroll, J (2007) *A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education*, second edition, Oxford Centre for Staff Learning and Development

43 www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/ReportOnAllegationsOfStudentMisconduct.pdf

44 See note 14.

Similarly the TEQSA report asserts:

It is widely regarded that the best way to detect and deter contract cheating is to 'know your students'.

We will explore with the sector, and share existing good practice, ways in which assessment design can reduce the opportunity for unacceptable academic practice

Detection

Detecting customised essays can be a challenge. The now well established text-matching software (such as Turnitin) has its limitations, in that it can only compare text with content already held in its database. Customised essay services are designed to get around this, with many companies claiming to use plagiarism-checking software to ensure their essays are 'plagiarism free'. TEQSA asserts that this is not the experience of all higher education providers – a line of enquiry that we intend to explore further.⁴⁵

Discussions, including with Turnitin,⁴⁶ have indicated that it will be some time before text-matching software is able to offer the kind of linguistic analysis needed to clearly demonstrate that submitted work is not a student's own while, at the same time, remaining as easy to use as it is at present. It would be necessary to have sufficient examples of each student's writing style before any such analysis could be performed reliably.

Other issues have been raised about the challenges posed for academic staff in reliably detecting any form of cheating, not least in the additional burden it places on them during a period of marking, the workload for which may be high and with a short deadline. Rule-of-thumb approaches to marking out cheating have been reported to us; for example, awarding a lower mark rather than reporting the suspected case and pursuing the matter through the university's approved process.

We will work with universities and colleges to address these concerns, recognising that there are two aspects to proper detection through approved processes. Firstly, that the student must have access to due process and therefore an assurance of fairness. Secondly, that students are made fully aware of the penalties for proven plagiarism and that these are duly and consistently applied where appropriate.

We believe that it is very important for students to be made aware that there are consequences of cheating by reference to actual cases (a theme we expand on below). Current intelligence suggests that students perceive the risk of a) being caught and b) receiving significant punishment to be sufficiently low that there is no significant deterrent effect.

We will also work to address other unintended consequences, for example, that the termination of a student's programme of study as a result of proven cheating is regarded as 'non-completion' and can have a negative impact on the institution's key performance indicators and place in the league tables.

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) offers a Good Practice Framework⁴⁷ to provide more focused guidance for universities and colleges on due process in the detection and punishment of cheating, and we will work with the OIA on developing this in light of this reports' findings and recommendations.

Academic regulations

We want to explore with universities whether a consistent and explicit regulation addressing custom essay cheating will assist them in awareness raising, detection and punishment. Academic regulations, investigatory processes and penalties are all subject to the institutional autonomy of degree-awarding bodies, but we believe there is merit in having consistent approaches and sharing sound practice in deterring and penalising cheating.

⁴⁵ See note 39

⁴⁶ Personal communication

⁴⁷ <http://oiahe.org.uk/providers-and-good-practice/good-practice-framework.aspx>

We examined a small sample of universities' regulations and policies governing academic misconduct to see if there was any commonality in definitions, severity and sanctions and noted that:

- the policies or regulations were publicly available
- plagiarism was clearly defined, usually within the broader category of academic offences
- plagiarism at the master's and doctoral levels was seen as especially severe
- offences were dealt with by the relevant Head of Department, Executive Dean or deputy, or by a committee
- penalties included written warnings, zero marks, failure of component/module, suspension, expulsion, decision not to award a degree, reduction of degree class
- regulations requiring referral to a professional body were not apparent in all providers we looked at.

The sample also revealed one example of a specific regulation on custom essay cheating. We will extend this sample as the basis for sharing practice across the sector.

We will work with universities and colleges to identify and share existing good practice in the detection of custom essay cheating and in promoting more explicit and consistent approaches to punishing its use.

Supporting students

We believe that we can work with the higher education sector to build on and share examples of good practice in relation to raising students' awareness that:

- irrespective of what these websites claim ('100 per cent plagiarism free'), submitting such essays as their own work is cheating and a form of plagiarism
- the consequences for cheating and plagiarism will be severe
- support is available, and should be sought, in the event of assessment-related stress that might drive them to seek an apparently quick and easy solution.

Newton and Lang (2015) suggest that there is a mismatch between students and higher education providers in terms of the perception of the seriousness of custom essay cheating. In a survey, a majority of students appeared to think that this offence carried a minor penalty - failure of the assignment. In reality, the institution would be likely to expel the student. This is an important message to get across.

We will work with the National Union of Students and universities and colleges to develop guidance that can be readily used by higher education providers, with links to their own support services, academic regulations and guidance and initiatives on assessment and good academic practice.

Working with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

To varying extents, PSRBs have an interest in the implications of cheating and in the integrity of the qualifications awarded by UK degree-awarding bodies. All are concerned that a degree certificate/transcript should accurately report the student's achievement gained through honest means. Some professional bodies consider academic misconduct a sufficient reason to bar an individual from membership and from professional practice, constituting evidence that he or she is not fit to practise.⁴⁸ For example, academic misconduct is a bar to entry to the solicitors' profession (under the regulations of the Solicitors Regulation Authority).

⁴⁸ Section 4.1 of the SRA Suitability Test 2011: www.sra.org.uk/solicitors/handbook/suitabilitytest/content.page

To quote the Chief Executive of the Solicitors' Regulation Authority, Paul Philip:

The use of these type of websites not only raises serious questions about whether an individual is meeting the standards required, but also whether somebody has the right character to enter a profession where honesty and integrity is crucial.⁴⁹

We will draw on existing working relationships with a range of PSRBs, for example through our PSRB Forum, to discuss the implications of custom essay cheating and the consequences of it in relation to specific areas of professional conduct. We consider that this will also help to make students more aware of the unacceptability of cheating and the potentially severe consequences beyond any punishment that may be imposed by their university or college.

We will work with PSRBs to develop a shared understanding of the implications of custom essay cheating and the consequences for students in relation to membership of or practise in particular professions.

49 Quoted by the Guardian: www.theguardian.com/money/2016/jul/09/essay-bought-online-errors-refund

Conclusion

The commissioning by students of custom-written essays, usually through commercial online services, to be passed off as their own work, poses a serious risk to the academic standards and the integrity of UK higher education. Such actions constitute deeds of academic malpractice and a form of plagiarism, since personal advancement is being sought through the unattributed use of another person's work. Such practices result in gross unfairness to other students, as well as a distortion in assessment outcomes for the cohort as a whole, and other potential risks including awards being made to individuals who do not merit them and who may be unfit to practise in a related profession, for example, in failing to meet the criteria of the Solicitors Regulation Authority.

The production of custom essays is a commercial activity run from websites that are often not registered in the UK. Successful routes to tackling the practice are by no means straightforward, and the illegality of such services is still largely untested in the courts. The practice is particularly hard to identify because the products are often commissioned and produced specifically in response to 'customer' requirements, and the operators of such services may guarantee 'plagiarism-free' documents, tested by the same software available to institutions. The scale of the problem is considerable, with a simple internet search returning hundreds of examples of these websites.

We believe a multifaceted approach is required in combating this risk, with higher education providers and higher education and other regulatory agencies cooperating with other interested parties to address the issue on a number of different fronts. This belief is reinforced by the discussions we have had with a range of people and representatives interested in, and knowledgeable about, this topic.

There is much to be learned from regulations and legislation in other countries, and we believe there are benefits in discussing with government whether new legislative and/or regulatory powers are needed given the apparent limitations of existing legislation (such as the Fraud Act 2006, the application of which is untested in this context). Another potentially productive avenue is to bring a complaint against a sample of these services to the Advertising Standards Authority on the basis of such sites not being honest and truthful. Action could be taken to persuade search engines not to carry advertising from services encouraging academic malpractice.

We believe there is much that can be achieved by QAA working with universities and colleges and their representative bodies to build on existing good practice and promote and share new practice to the designing out of opportunities to cheat and to increasing the effectiveness of the detection and punishment of cheating. This sits alongside the importance of continuing to focus students on the need for good academic practice as part of their engagement in effective learning (including effective assessment) and to recognise the consequences of unacceptable academic practice.

Practical actions to suppress these practices at source include measures to eliminate on-campus advertising of such sites. In terms of detecting custom essays at the point of submission, further work is needed to develop software with the sophistication to detect documents that are inconsistent with the student's abilities. In the meantime, human knowledge, such as a tutor's familiarity with a student's work and academic development, is likely to be valuable in improving detection rates. Our overall conclusion is that stamping out this malpractice needs collaboration and commitment from all those with a stake in higher education in the UK, and globally.

Appendix

Attendees of Custom Essay Writing Services Invitation-Only Forum

28 June 2016, British Academy

Nominated member	Organisation
Jack Aitken	Quality Strategy Network
Alex Bols	GuildHE
Linda-Jane Buckle	Education consultant
John Bunyan	Turnitin
Paul Carter	Solicitors Regulation Authority
William Hammonds	Universities UK
Siobhan Hohls	OIA
Dr Thomas Lancaster	Coventry University
Prof Philip Newton	Swansea University
Alex Proudfoot	Study UK
Gill Rowell	Turnitin
Helen Steers	BIS
The Lord Storey, CBE	Liberal Democrat education spokesperson, House of Lords
Dr Adam Wright	National Union of Students

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557050

Web: www.qaa.ac.uk