

Quality Compass

Revisiting academic integrity from a student perspective

November 2022

Welcome to the fifth edition of Quality Compass – QAA’s publication exploring current topics to help you navigate future challenges and potential opportunities.

This issue focuses on academic integrity as a positive approach to encouraging good academic conduct. It highlights approaches to identifying and managing misconduct cases including applying restorative approaches.

We view a Quality Compass as a conversation-starter, linked to our wider membership offer. We are keen to engage with you and provide the opportunity to share your thoughts and practices. If you would like to contribute to future editions or respond to anything we have covered in this issue, please do get in touch at membership@qaa.ac.uk

This edition of Quality Compass has been contributed by Professor Michael Draper, Deputy Pro Vice Chancellor Education (Academies), Swansea University, and student interns from the Hillary Rodham Clinton School of Law: Zoë Birch, Megan Croombs and Elenor Marano.

In the [Hepi Policy Note 33 \(March 2022\)](#), ‘Defining Quality’, QAA’s Chief Executive stated that:

Academic quality is a comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, higher education providers manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed, while meeting the legitimate expectations of students, employers, government and society in general.

Students, along with employers, are key stakeholders who rightly expect that the value of an award and the achievement it represents are secured. Those legitimate expectations have been challenged by the rise in academic misconduct from the use of an increasing number of essay mills and commercial suppliers of bespoke assessment answers.

This Quality Compass considers academic integrity and misconduct with a particular focus on the student perspective.



The notion of originality within academic integrity

While academic misconduct at undergraduate level largely focuses on action against students who plagiarise, cheat, collude or purchase academic work online, contrastingly the notion of academic integrity is broadly based on the honesty and originality of academic submissions.

Student voices from the [University of Oregon](#) observe (2021):

*Academic integrity allows us to **build on the discoveries, thoughts, and ideas of those before us** while still acknowledging and respecting their contribution and work. Every discovery is built of past knowledge that someone else has shared and this allows us to honour their hard work.*

Or simply:

*It means having **pride** in your work and **caring about your work and yourself**.*

Are these voices truly representative of what students feel and think about academic integrity? A February 2022 podcast by [Jarret Dyer](#) notes that:

From our own research we found that students in essence think [cheating is] conditional, it really depends on if the institution has provided them with the ability to cheat - their words, not mine - or if there were preventative measures to keep them from cheating.

Integrity, or the absence of it, could therefore be viewed as the result of a risk-and-reward calculation on the part of students.

[Ouriginal](#) (by Turnitin), which is responsible for one such preventive measure by way of text-matching and writing style analysis software, describes originality as the ability to 'put a spin on a perspective or idea'. This is a skill which they believe is often overlooked and often gets 'buried beneath standardisation and time pressure'.

This can be seen particularly in the final years of secondary education, where students are often taught to stick to essay formulae for academic success, and creative risk-taking is not encouraged. Being taught to prioritise conformity over creativity at such a formative stage may be responsible for extinguishing the desire to produce work which is original and individualistic in later years. As originality and attribution are critical to ensuring academic integrity, we need to foster appropriate skills in students as a matter of priority. We may ask ourselves, 'how easy is it to spark creativity and originality in students in the initial stages of higher education based on their secondary education experience?'

[QAA's supporting successful student transitions](#) activity offers positive approaches and practical solutions to help support the transition into higher education. An evaluative approach embedded within the timetabled curriculum or personal tutor sessions in which students identify their key attributes and those areas which require additional assistance encourages reflection on the development of academic skills alongside other interventions. Student and staff partnerships in the development of student directed independent learning is also an effective approach that should be considered (Draper and Fisher, 2020).

The transformational view of quality described in the QAA's 'Defining Quality' piece, refers to empowerment, allowing students to 'engage in and influence their transformation'. Isolation, both physical and psychological, brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, has snatched away the usual classroom environment which would encourage students to converse and challenge each other's ideas in a mediated setting, and replaced this with the often silent, online break-out rooms. With in-person contact and teaching returning to university life, a focus on exposing students to methods of forming and challenging perspectives through academic discourse and divergent thinking practices may again help to develop a drive for originality and integrity.

Nurturing academic study skills is essential in the prevention of academic misconduct and supporting integrity, not least because it has been recognised that students may inadvertently plagiarise or not understand the difference between collusion and collaboration. The challenge here may be accentuated due to collaboration or team working being a skill valued by employers.

What is clear is that students will continue to use and adopt learning behaviours that have served them well prior to higher education unless there is training, skills development and information that prepares them for learning in a higher education setting ([Draper and Fisher, 2020](#)).

The changing context for those learning behaviours have been identified by Lee Elliott Major, a professor of social mobility at the University of Exeter writing in [The Times](#) on 15th August 2022 who suggested that:

Rising numbers of pupils are caught smuggling phones into exam halls. Increasing numbers are diagnosed with dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or other conditions. This means 25% extra time is allowed in exams. It also enables psychiatrists to prescribe smart drugs to improve concentration. The booming use of Modafinil, Ritalin and Adderall suggests this is more about gaming test scores than safeguarding children's wellbeing

This is both a challenging and a disturbing suggestion and not one endorsed by the authors or QAA, however it is reflective of wide concerns around the development of integrity within the school system. Research into cheating behaviours in UK schools is not well developed when compared with research in higher education settings. What is clear, however, as asserted by McCabe et al (2012) is that an influential contextual factor in relation to the development of a cheating culture is the extent to which students perceive that their peers cheat. This perception supports a normalisation of culture and behaviour which in turn must be addressed when students transition into higher education.



Possible solutions for academic misconduct

Currently, many students do not understand the seriousness of academic misconduct resulting from commissioning or using essay mill services and the consequential penalties and outcomes which often result in withdrawal from a programme.

In June 2018, UKTopWriter reported that there were 635 available essay mill websites in operation for students to choose from. This figure dramatically increased to 1,090 in 2022.

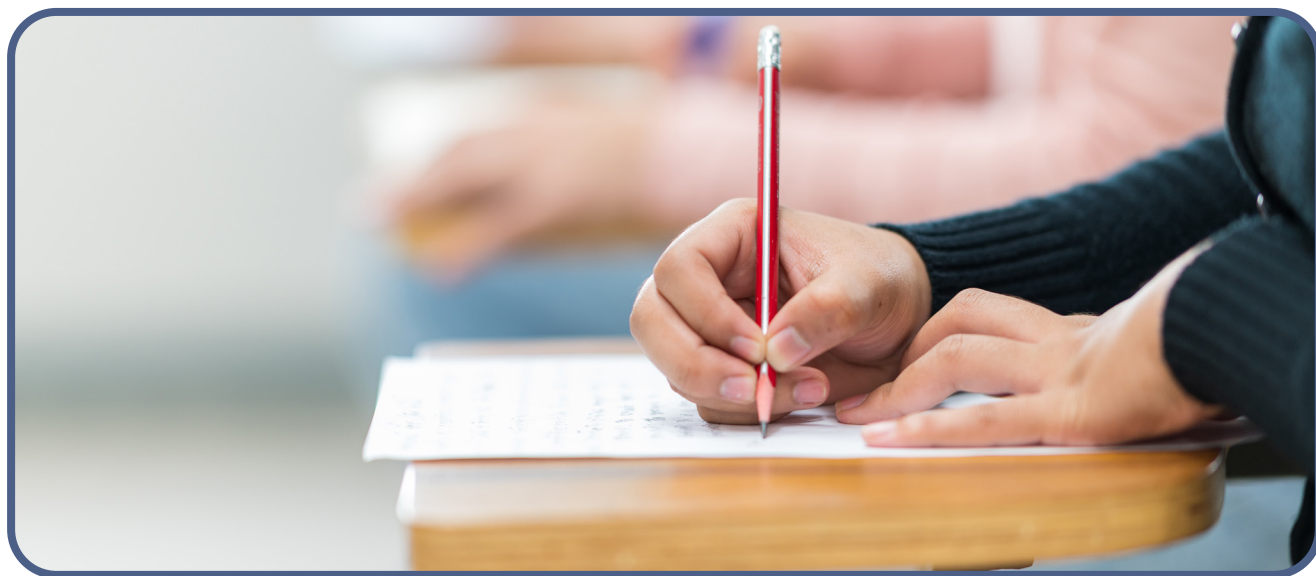
During the switch to online examinations, it is self-evident that this increase in site availability is the result of a demand led service. The recent criminalisation of commercial cheating services in England through the [Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022](#) may have an impact on the number of websites operating and promoting services but this will depend upon consistent and effective enforcement of the new strict liability criminal offences in relation to advertising.

The temptation for students to use such services may be minimised through a desire to avoid association with a criminal activity but a poor attitude to, or misunderstanding of, academic integrity will remain. A future approach to academic integrity should involve then developing students' academic pride and ownership of their submissions. Essay mills multiply due to demand from students; if students valued their own learning and efforts these websites would become redundant.

Admirably, many academic institutions already offer academic integrity training to ensure students respect and understand what constitutes misconduct. The [University of Newcastle in Australia](#) has an interesting approach in their academic integrity module. Students take a test to prove their academic understanding; passing enables them to access online resources: 'if you don't complete the module within the timeframe, you'll be unable to re-enrol in courses, view exam results, grades and transcripts, or graduate'. Other institutions tend to take an embedded approach to skills development, developing student confidence in context as a means of preventing academic misconduct either intentionally or otherwise.

The first edition of Contracting to Cheat: How to address contract cheating, the use of Third-party Services and essay mills published by QAA in October 2017 recommends that, in order to engage students:

information and tutorials on the necessary skills for studying, academic writing, use and acknowledgement of academic sources, correct referencing, paraphrasing and research should be relevant to the programme of study



The second edition (June 2020) and [third edition](#) (Sept 2022) reinforce the message that:

study skills are best assimilated and understood by students when embedded within the curriculum through timetabled sessions

and advise against:

frontloading all the information at induction. Repeat the messages at the start of the year and/or term, as well as whenever tasks and assignments are set

However, some students may not engage even when embedded and timetabled unless there is consequence or benefit, such as the award of academic credit for successful completion of an embedded study skills assessment. The move to multiple student entry points rather than one intake in September/October presents a further challenge for institutions in ensuring that all students have the same induction experience including late enrollers. January entry tends to focus on international students and research has demonstrated that those students whose first language is not English are more at risk of committing academic misconduct for a number of reasons including cultural differences, academic preparedness and understanding of higher education policies ([Parnter 2022](#)).

The second edition of Contracting to Cheat also identifies related areas of concern. Students rightly want to ensure the quality of their work and may turn to proofreading or services that claim to check for plagiarism. Essay mills might provide these services as a means of obtaining and reusing student work. Students need to be made aware of the risks, so make it clear what to look for in a legitimate service, as well as where the line is drawn between acceptable and unacceptable levels of help with assignments.

In the current academic year, QAA is supporting two [Collaborative Enhancement Projects](#) focused on academic integrity, one of which considers why particular student groups are particularly vulnerable to academic misconduct and, crucially, identifies ways of supporting students to recognise and apply positive academic practices.

The other project relates to accessibility and equity in proofreading which has implications for academic integrity. The [participating institutions noted](#) that:

although many higher education institutions have proofreading policies to manage expectations between staff and students, they vary substantively in their prescription... Students' Union advisors who support the student body prior to and during academic misconduct cases, report that tension exists between the messaging of encouraging students to keep their work secure and allowing them to share their work to be proofread (and consequently relinquishing control over it)

If services are not supported or endorsed by an institution then a student is at risk in relation to the security of their work, particularly as students do not usually read the terms and conditions of service which detail how their work may be used.

Another area relates to the use of text matching software by students to assess similarity and view reports with the aim of avoiding plagiarism allegations. This of course misses the point about what actually constitutes plagiarism (there a number of institutional definitions) but many students do not understand that simply not using the same words as an already published text will not avoid a plagiarism allegation if attribution for ideas etc is not made as part of the submission.

Students turn to online ‘plagiarism checking’ services with the same consequences for the security of their work and fail to understand that software cannot determine plagiarism. [EssayScam Forum](#) has some admittedly qualified findings but they have a helpful analogy: using free online tools ‘is like giving a real estate appraisal company the right to use your home in exchange for a ‘free’ appraisal of the property”.

In an effort to protect their students some institutions do allow students to use their licenced systems, not only as a formative experience, but in advance of formal submission of a summative assessment, leading students to chase originality scores below a threshold deemed acceptable. Is this really a valid educative experience? [Debora Weber-Wulff](#) argues that academics need to stop pretending that software always catches recycled text and start reading more carefully (although with large cohorts this would be challenging). The same point may apply to students.

However, with the increasing availability of software and technology has this particular battle been lost? Should we embrace the use of technology by students as future employment in certain areas will be dominated by tech? Canadian academics have asked the question ‘Will Machines Replace Us?’ in their work on Machine–Authored Texts and the Future of Scholarship (Alarie & Cockfield, 2021). GPT-3 or generative pre-trained transformer 3 software can produce coherent text upon demand. Yes, the resulting text needs polishing but students already have access to this technology. Should we be training students to use this technology effectively rather than insisting on the production of original work.

Alarie & Cockfield (2021) observe that:

we foresee challenges such as the need to safeguard and define academic integrity more accurately. If GPT-3 simply reproduced passages of text published on the Internet, it would likely constitute an academic integrity violation. For instance, a reproduced passage might constitute plagiarism which could be detected by software such as Turnitin. For the most part, however, GPT-3 does not extract passages but instead constructs wholly new arguments based on the seed text by identifying patterns and concepts in the seed text and elaborating upon them through its deep language model.



The [Law Society](#) has just produced a horizon scanning report ‘Neurotechnology, law and the legal profession’ in which it considers Neurotechnology being used to interact directly with the brain by monitoring and recording brain activity or acting to influence it. The report states that in time:

legal educators might start to face new questions relating to equity and academic integrity; for example: what kinds of neurotechnological assistance are permissible in relation to assessment tasks? What if some students have access to performance-enhancing neurotechnologies and others do not?

Furthermore:

Reflection on neurotechnology (and other technologies) provides the opportunity to respond by encouraging an anticipatory style of thinking in students, and to foster the development of critical thinking skills, whether students are learning the law for the first time or are engaging in continuing professional development. However, educational institutions might be challenged by novel questions relating to neurotechnological forms of academic misconduct

In the light of these developments, current thinking around academic integrity may look like an analogue response to a challenging digital environment, although some argue that [analogue strengths will still matter in a digital world](#) because our ‘brain has unique abilities to process analogue information, combine it creatively and transfer it to new situations’. In other words, originality, and in our context originality in academic integrity will continue to matter.



Managing misconduct cases

If we are not going to tear up the academic integrity rule book, where does that leave the future for penalties and outcomes in respect of proven academic misconduct by students? [QAA's 2021 research into members' approaches to academic misconduct cases and use of penalties](#) noted that there were many similarities in the outcomes and penalties applied but some providers emphasised the benefits of framing academic integrity as something to support students, rather than as a form of discipline. This trend is likely to continue with the growing movement towards [restorative justice and practice](#) in the context of academic misconduct.

In Building a Culture of Restorative Practice and Restorative Responses to Academic Misconduct, [Sopcak and Hood \(2022\)](#) note that 'Restorative practices demonstrate fairness; and foster empathy, compassion and accountability; through experiential learning opportunities'. And in so doing foster 'civic responsibility, engaged citizenship, and ethical decision making in students'. They quote a student from MacEwan University:

The restorative resolution was a great choice for me because I was so stressed at the time to be persecuted and ridiculed for my mistake, instead in the restorative resolution meeting I was given a chance to state my point clearly without blame and to just talk about mistakes and how to go forward with the resolution. I was glad that I could come clean and work towards a solution that would be a positive to everyone involved. A learning to take away is that I will use the checklist that was made by me (...) to reinforce the research that I have done on the topic of academic integrity.

QAA's sector-wide review of penalties and outcomes is welcome as a platform to build consensus and ensure a degree of consistency in approach between different institutions. It is acknowledged that the specific facts of misconduct proceedings will always differ, but the finding of a particular outcome should ideally lead to the same or similar outcome. Magistrates for example have sentencing guidelines for this reason.

There are already many similarities in outcomes according to the QAA research but there is a clear divergence in relation to practice between the availability and role of educational support and the impact of mitigation. An aspect to consider here is self-whistleblowing; should credit be given for an admission similar to the discretion available in courts to reduce sentences for a guilty plea with tariff reductions both for an admission in advance and on the day of the panel hearing? What role could a restorative approach play in deciding on an outcome? This approach could be adopted in the case of admission on a first-time basis with traditional punitive penalties being reserved for cases of non-admission, commissioning or repeated cheating behaviours.



Reinvigorating Self-Determination in Student Culture

As higher education transitions into a new era featuring increased online engagement, blended learning models and authentic assessments, students need more than just a passing acquaintance with academic integrity. Today, most students have the ability to outsmart mechanisms put in place to act as deterrents against misconduct with relative ease, and a lack of peer and staff supervision removes the social pressure that typically prevents cheating behaviours.

When students feel isolated or confused, the opportunity for deliberate or unintentional academic misconduct not only increases but also takes on the siren guise of a genuine route for success, particularly if students see others doing it themselves with apparent impunity. Dealing with this perception must be addressed.

Students are already vulnerable for various personal and social reasons, which the shift to online models can exacerbate. Students are targets of the persuasive and constant onslaught of essay mill marketing or offers of collusion with little accountability other than threats of punishment. It should come as no surprise that the ethical-moral compass can easily be set aside. Reinspiring student culture to take on a level of self-determination, confidence building and social accountability is vital to changing the student perspective and willingness to adopt cheating behaviours. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we influence and are influenced by our peers every day.

The increased use of active training and information is certainly a part of helping students shift their mindset, but changing attitudes must come from a conscious decision and choice. Reinforcing good behaviours and support through social and learning initiatives on campus can play an instrumental role in promoting self-determined paths towards accountability and authenticity for all. After all, this is about students, their future and the roles they will play in society, and we need to listen and employ strategies based on their experience and what they understand or perceive to be true if we are to support the development of an integrity mindset

QAA activity on Academic Integrity

You can find out more about [QAA's work on academic integrity](#) on our website. We have a wealth of resources and materials to support staff and students engage in positive academic practice including our Academic Integrity Charter and the [Collaborative Enhancement Projects](#) we are supporting.

We also convene the UK Academic Integrity Advisory Group which informs and shapes our work, and a wider Academic Integrity Network to engage with and inform our key stakeholders.

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