

QAA Viewpoint

Tackling academic misconduct in higher education August 2018

Background

For two decades, QAA and our partners at home and overseas have worked to challenge bogus institutions and fake certificates. In recent years, with the support of ministers in the Department for Education, our attention has turned to another threat to academic integrity: third party essay writing services.

The [International Center for Academic Integrity](#) defines academic integrity as a commitment to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage.

Academic misconduct denotes any attempt to subvert or evade these values. It takes a wide variety of forms, including plagiarism, collusion between students, using forged or altered certificates or transcripts, and contract cheating - when a third party (sometimes known as an 'essay mill') completes work for a student who then submits it as his/her own.

Recent developments

Of the various forms of academic misconduct, contract cheating has grabbed most attention from the public, media and politicians. The problem of contract cheating probably goes back many decades, but advances in information technology and social media, and the ubiquity of access to the internet, have certainly made it easier for essay mills to market their services to students, and for students to procure them.

In May 2018, following a [BBC investigation](#), pressure from QAA, the BBC and government led to YouTube removing videos that promote the use of essay mill services. In a [debate in the House of Lords](#) in July 2018, Lord Storey noted that 'essay mills and contract cheating are part of a billion-pound worldwide organisation, with dozens of companies registered at Companies House'.

A [2017 paper](#) in the Journal of Academic Ethics estimated that, based on worldwide studies, 3.5% of students engage in contract cheating. The 3.5% aggregate figure varies between samples around the world (from 0.3% to 7.9%) and 62.5% of students who engage in contract cheating go on to do so again.

A November 2017 [BBC Panorama programme](#) entitled 'Student Loan Scandal' went beyond contract cheating to level a number of allegations, including fraud, at two private colleges in London. Based on information received, our own investigation into several London colleges found significant weaknesses in recruitment, admissions, attendance monitoring and assessment processes. We have since broadened the scope of what, when and how we can investigate suspected academic misconduct.

In summer 2018, [the Irish government published a new bill that includes provision for the prosecution of essay mills and making it illegal to advertise contract cheating services](#). Ireland follows New Zealand and some US states in taking legislative measures. In the UK, a new [petition](#) calls for the Government to make it illegal to provide or advertise contract cheating services.

QAA's view

Academic misconduct is unacceptable. It undermines academic standards, harms the reputation of the higher education sector and poses dangers to the public including, in some sectors (for example, health and social care), the risk of harm. Students committing fraud are liable to significant penalties if caught, including being disqualified from practising in particular professions. Employers risk taking on graduates who lack the skills, knowledge and competencies which they rightly believe higher education qualifications ought to provide. Students also need to understand that by using essay mills they may make themselves vulnerable to blackmail.

Primary responsibility for quality and standards rests with providers, including the prevention and detection of academic misconduct. In October 2017, QAA published [guidance on combatting essay mills](#), a holistic and practical approach including:

- educating staff and students about contract cheating
- promoting the values of academic integrity
- detecting cheating when it happens
- setting effective academic regulations to tackle the issue
- handling cases.

Next steps

QAA's submission last year to the Advertising Standards Authority resulted in the [ASA upholding our complaints against UK Essays](#). However, the ASA oversees self-regulation and a voluntary code of conduct, rather than forming part of the legislative framework.

Is it time to revisit legislation? [In 2016, we called for legislation](#) as part of a multi-faceted approach to tackling essay mills. However, we understand the challenges this presents and why education ministers wanted to first explore non-legislative routes. Any legislation would need to apply across the UK and we would encourage dialogue between the four nations in developing proposals.

QAA is currently considering a proposal on how existing legislation could be used to prosecute essay mill advertising. Whether or not this or other legislative approaches are taken forward, we are clear that it is the companies, not the students, we should target, and that legislation does not work in isolation.

Fighting the essay mills is only part of a much bigger picture. There is a clear need for an overarching approach to tackle all types of academic misconduct, not just contract cheating. This summer, we brought together a UK expert advisory group on academic integrity, with members that included providers, sector agencies, politicians, government representatives and specialist organisations. The group will identify areas for priority action, as well as monitoring and responding to emerging themes and trends.

QAA is currently scoping a proposal for the creation of a UK Centre for Academic Integrity, with a formal remit to research, analyse and combat academic misconduct, and to coordinate work already being undertaken. This would align with, not replace, work already being undertaken by other organisations. Consensus is critical if we are to tackle academic misconduct effectively.

Academic misconduct is a global issue, and international consensus on how to tackle it is the ultimate goal. [The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education](#) has commissioned QAA to develop guidance for academics and quality assurance agencies, and we are also working in partnership with the [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency](#).

17 October is the third international day of action against contract cheating: an opportunity to revisit our collective responsibility for safeguarding academic standards, to which academic misconduct presents a real and present threat.