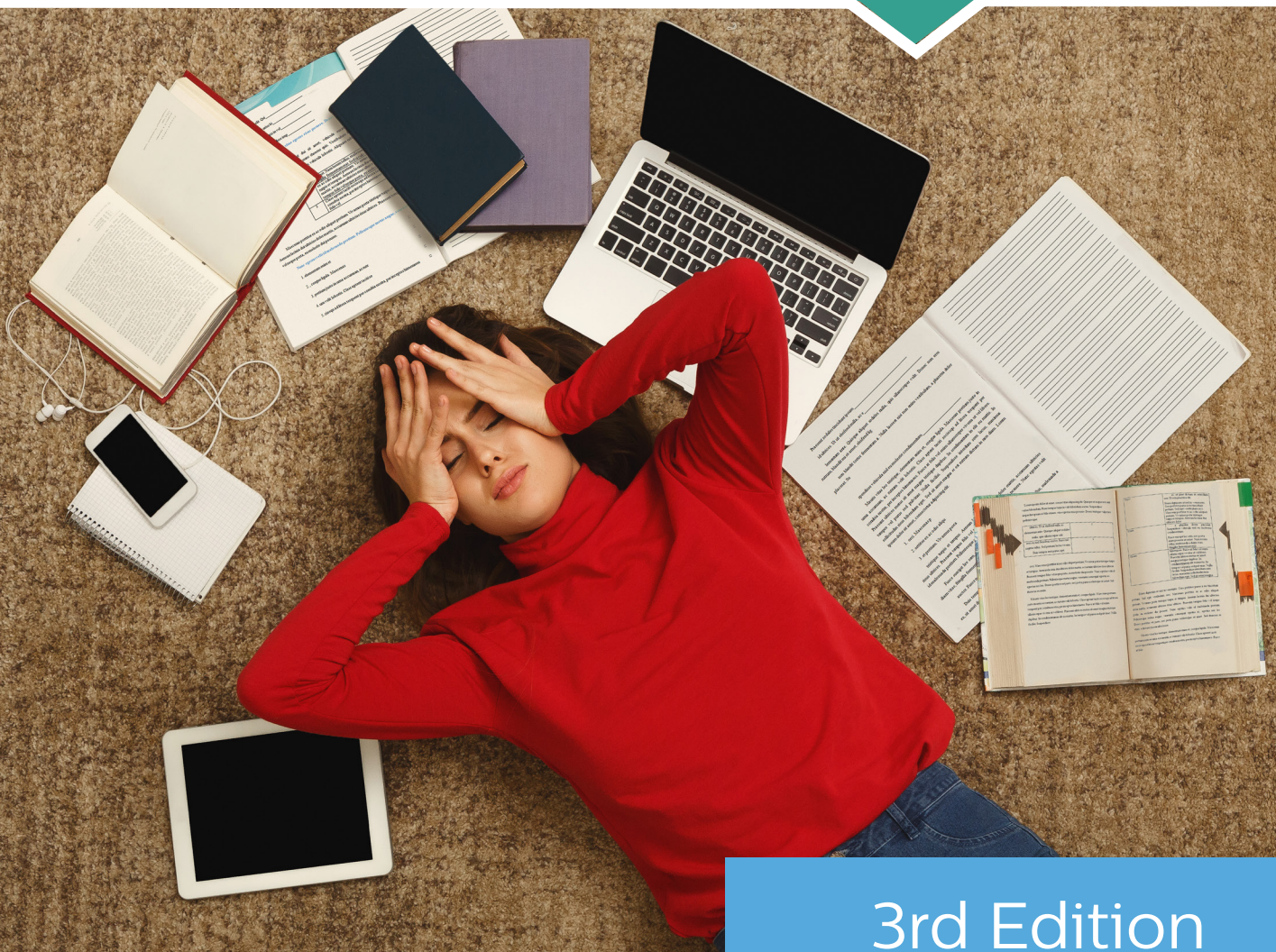


Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education

How to Address Essay Mills
and Contract Cheating



3rd Edition

Acknowledgements



The third edition of this guidance features minor updates to take account of changes to legislation in England in 2022 to prohibit essay mills. These are highlighted and marked with an icon to help those familiar with previous editions identify the new additions.

Previous versions have been written with the help of, and on behalf of, QAA's voluntary membership institutions in the UK. It is being published publicly as we believe it is in the interest of the UK higher education sector and wider society to do so.

QAA would like to thank the Academic Integrity Advisory Group hosted by QAA for their input into the content, in particular Professor Michael Draper (Swansea University), Dr Thomas Lancaster (Imperial College London), Dr Irene Glendinning (Coventry University), Dr Robin Crockett (University of Northampton) and Helen Smallbone (Edge Hill University). In addition, we are grateful for the input from QAA's Strategic Student Advisory Committee and from Lawrence Thomas and Callum Morton, student representatives at Swansea University.

We would particularly like to thank Professor Cath Ellis (University of New South Wales) for her extensive suggestions and contributions.

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Executive summary

The first edition of [Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education](#) was published in October 2017. Since then much has changed. Interest in and engagement with cheating in higher education has increased, both in the higher education sector and in wider society. While we cannot say how many students cheat, or how many essay mills are in operation, there is now evidence to demonstrate that it is a widespread phenomenon.

In August 2018, research published by Swansea University indicated that as many as one in seven recent graduates internationally may have paid someone to undertake their assignment for them, potentially representing 31 million students across the globe.¹ In May 2019, a Channel 4 Factcheck concluded that large numbers of students in the UK had used essay writing services and that higher education institutions were only identifying a small number of these.²

While these and other figures can only be estimates, they demonstrate the significant and potentially increasing scale of essay mill use. This is clearly the feeling within many higher education institutions, evidenced by 45 Vice-Chancellors and sector leaders, representing institutions across the UK, writing to the then Secretary of State of Education Damian Hinds MP in September 2018 to ask for action to be taken, including the introduction of legislation.

This awareness of scale of use, and scope of issue, has influenced the drafting of the second edition of this guidance. It reflects that students at all higher education institutions will be targeted by essay mill marketing, that their use has become increasingly commonplace, and that universities and colleges need to adapt their policies and practices to reflect this. A summary of the main changes is set out below.

The other significant change reflected in this guidance is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic resulted in an emergency pivot to remote teaching and assessment in March 2020, higher education providers have needed to change their teaching, learning and assessment practices to adapt to digital provision with geographically distanced student cohorts. They have also needed to adapt the ways in which their student communities are supported, to ensure that the health and mental wellbeing of their students is catered for in unique circumstances.

This document also reflects the changes to provision and support that have resulted as a consequence of necessary change arising from COVID-19. At the time of writing, higher education institutions across the UK, supported by our extensive guidance, are making plans for their autumn 2020 provision – with most providers adopting a blended approach of virtual provision with some onsite and in-person contact with students. While the new policies and practices they introduce may eventually revert back, it is likely that some will result in permanent change. This guidance does not seek to predict what those changes will be, but acknowledges that physically-distanced teaching and assessment will be more commonplace than in previous years.

1. www-2018.swansea.ac.uk/press-office/news-archive/2018/lateststudyrevealssharpincreaseinessaycheatinggloballywithmillionsofstudentsinvolved.php

2. www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-universities-catch-less-than-one-per-cent-of-bought-in-essays-own-records-suggest

The primary changes in this document from the first edition, following a survey in 2019 and feedback from our Academic Integrity Advisory Group, are summarised below:

- In the first edition, the prevention and detection of essay mills were given parity of prioritisation. As explained above, there is evidence of widespread use of essay mills across all higher education institutions. Because of this, while preventing their use remains important, we also acknowledge that if a student is determined to find a way to use an essay mill, they will do so. Therefore, the greater deterrent will lie in detection of their use – detection is now the priority.
- Following on from this, the first edition used the language of designing cheating out of assessment. The implication from this is that some forms of assessment are cheat-proof. This is misleading, and could lead to complacency. However, the guidance still considers assessment design, and it remains an important element of institutional strategy to combat contract cheating.
- The first edition emphasised the importance of supporting and resourcing staff to detect academic misconduct. The guidance now recommends that each institution formally resources this function as at least part of a staff role. This will help ensure institutional consistency, and makes it clear that addressing contract cheating is a priority.
- If contract cheating has become more common, it follows that the number of academic misconduct cases involving the use of essay mills will increase. The new edition of the guidance acknowledges this in practical and logistical terms, and in the treatment of cases, particularly when it is the first time a student has been suspected of cheating.
- The COVID-19 pandemic saw essay mills target students as they seek to take advantage of the uncertainty and anxiety that might arise as a consequence. An anxious student physically distanced from their academic community may be more vulnerable to essay mill marketing. This is reflected in additional content focused on student support. Although the pandemic's restrictions are now at an end, many providers have moved to hybrid delivery models and the advice remains pertinent.
- Finally, further changes in this 2022 edition have been made to take account of the biggest change to the academic integrity landscape for some time – the prohibition of essay mill services in England under the *Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022*. This Act makes it an offence for individuals and organisations to provide or arrange to provide commercial contract cheating services for students in England, and the advertising by them of those services.

1 Introduction

What do we mean by contract cheating?

Contract cheating happens when a third party completes work for a student who then submits it to an education provider as their own, where such input is not permitted. Over the last decade, an industry has developed where companies, based in the UK or overseas, are paid to undertake this work. These companies have become known as ‘essay mills’, although many supply a range of services in addition to essay writing. Typically, the essay mill will outsource the commissioned work to individual writers engaged on an ad hoc basis. The term ‘contract cheating’ does not apply exclusively to essay mills. It can, for example, also refer to situations such as friends or family members completing assignments for students in whole or in part, and does not always involve a financial relationship. More detailed definition of terminology is set out below.

The aim of this guidance

This guidance has been produced with, and for, QAA voluntary members across the UK. It is being made publicly available to support all higher education providers by focusing on the problem of contract cheating and taking steps to address it. The [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code) recommends that providers are obliged to ensure that their assessment processes are reliable, fair and transparent, and that the value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards. Contract cheating services, and the students making use of them, pose a risk to achieving this.

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

- educate staff and students about the problem of contract cheating
- promote and encourage academic integrity, and deter students from engaging in academic misconduct
- detect cheating behaviours when they happen
- set effective academic regulations to handle the issue
- deal with cases effectively, fairly and transparently.

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

- in a senior leadership role for a higher education provider
- working in a central quality team
- involved in the design, implementation and review of assessments in higher education
- working with procedures and regulations governing academic conduct and integrity
- responsible for investigating or reaching decisions on cases of academic misconduct
- involved in student engagement and want to raise awareness of the problem of contract cheating.

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

While the guidance is intended for use by institutions in the UK, it contains information relevant for providers in other jurisdictions.

This document is provided for information and guidance only. It is not mandatory, and is not part of the Quality Code. It draws upon effective practice, current theory and recent research in contract cheating to give practical solutions for providers. The guidance may also help providers enhance their practice and meet current and emerging regulatory requirements.

To find out more about the responsibilities of providers in assessing students, please refer to the Quality Code [Advice and Guidance on Assessment](#).

Why has this guidance been developed?

In August 2016, we published a report on third parties helping students to cheat and explored possible approaches to reducing the use of these services.³ In 2017, the UK Government asked QAA to work with Universities UK and the National Union of Students to develop guidance for higher education providers, as well as standalone advice for students. Informed by practice in UK higher education and international research, with input from GuildHE and leading experts from UK providers, we published [Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education](#).

3. Plagiarism in Higher Education – Custom essay writing services: an exploration and next steps for the UK higher education sector
www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/plagiarism-in-higher-education-2016.pdf

In 2019, we ran a survey for our member higher education institutions on the impact of this guidance – asking for ways we could improve it, and for any intelligence or suggestions that the sector wanted to share about their experiences with contract cheating. We also consulted with our Strategic Student Advisory Committee and with members of the Academic Integrity Advisory Group that we host. The second version of this document was updated in light of this feedback – summaries of the changes appear at the beginning of each section. Section 8 of the guidance also sets out additional examples of good practice that were provided in responses to the survey.



In 2022, laws were passed in England that prohibited the operation of commercial essay mills, leading to minor updates to this third edition.



Guiding principles

These guiding principles are intended as a framework for providers to consider when starting new academic integrity initiatives or reviewing existing practices.

- 1 Strategic and operational institution-wide approaches to academic integrity are crucial.
- 2 Such approaches should cover best practice and education for staff and students, reducing opportunities to cheat, deterrence, detection, and effective regulations and policies.
- 3 Institutional support and resourcing of staff to identify and investigate academic misconduct, is one of the most effective ways of detecting contract cheating.
- 4 The use of essay mills affects every higher education institution in the UK.
- 5 Assessment design has a significant role in deterrence and detection, but no assessment can design out contract cheating.
- 6 Working in partnership with students is integral to combatting contact cheating.



2 Summary of recommendations

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

Education: Information and support for students

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

Provide support for students that enables them to develop skills in studying, academic writing, the use of academic sources, appropriate paraphrasing and research. Thinking about how essay mills find their customers, and how students find them, can help you in developing the most appropriate information.



While the 2022 legislation in England has not criminalised the act of contract cheating itself, it is important to stress that the provision of these services for money is now illegal. This may help confirm the ethical problems of cheating in the minds of students.

Education: Training and information for staff

Providers should support staff, so they feel confident in pursuing suspected cases of cheating. Ensure that staff are kept up-to-date with academic regulations on assessment, and their responsibility to uphold academic standards and integrity. Ensure that staff are aware of the problem of contract cheating, and the procedures to be followed when it is suspected.

Reducing opportunities to cheat

Identifying assessment that makes it more difficult to rely on contract cheating such as 'authentic assessment', which is more reflective of the ways in which students will actually use the knowledge, along with a mixture of assessment methods where possible. Think about how to reduce cheating opportunities when designing and reviewing courses and setting assignments. Be aware that assessment design alone can only have a limited impact on cheating. Consider using regular low stakes assessments to develop student confidence as opposed to single summative high stakes assessments.

Consider blocking essay mill websites from your IT equipment or use ‘pop ups’ to guide students to your support mechanisms if they click on a particular link.



Be alert to advertising methods such as posters, flyers and social media, and take steps to minimise/counter them when detected. In England, such advertising is now unlawful, so in some circumstances it may be appropriate to refer issues to the police.

Detection

The single most important step that providers can take is ensuring appropriate resource and support is provided to staff with academic integrity responsibilities.

Develop organisation-wide detection methods, bringing together the best elements of local approaches. Consider tools to complement text-matching software, including new-generation tools designed to assist in the detection of contract cheating, for example: software that uses linguistic analysis to ‘learn’ a student’s typical written style. Get to know your students’ styles and capabilities, and be alert to unexpected changes in a student’s assessment performance.

Regulations and policies

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

Ensure staff are resourced and supported to address suspicion of academic misconduct.

Dedicate a designated strategic lead and/or staffing resource to the protection of academic integrity.

Use designated and specifically trained single decision makers when appropriate.

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

Keep records and collect data for cheating cases in sufficient detail to allow effective analysis, and feed analysis back to reporting academic staff.

Following positive detection, consider formal processes for alerting PSRBs of misconduct by students where courses are part of, or are likely to lead to, professional qualification.

3 Background

What's changed?

The survey in 2019 told us that, in many cases, while this guidance is well known and well used in quality circles, there is a general lack of awareness across the wider institution. There is also a need for a strategic approach to addressing academic misconduct – local, often disconnected approaches are more commonplace. We have tried to emphasise the importance of institution-wide strategies.

Types of contract cheating

While this guidance will apply to any form of contract cheating, the focus is primarily on identifying and combatting the use of essay mills – commercial entities that exist to gain financially by encouraging students to cheat.

The output from essay mills can range from essays to laboratory reports, reflective journals, dissertations (including whole-dissertation packages that comprise: proposals; intermediate/formative assessments; final reports – with implied fabrication of data in some circumstances; presentation slides; and notes for vivas), PowerPoint presentations, computer programming, film editing and other services. They range across many disciplines and subjects, and across different assessment types. Students are increasingly being targeted by advertising, often via social media⁴ or direct email, assuring them that this is acceptable and common practice.

Contract cheating is not always a commercial transaction. It can also involve the sharing of work between students, family or friends (usually without money changing hands) that is subsequently submitted, in whole or in part, dishonestly as a student's own work. While collaborative learning is normal and can be a valuable part of the learning experience, this guidance is concerned with third-party assistance that crosses the line into cheating.

4. Lancaster T, Canadian Perspectives on Academic Integrity (2019), Social media enabled contract cheating <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ai/article/view/68053>

How essay mills operate

Essay mills are almost exclusively online entities operating across the globe. Numbers are extremely difficult to estimate, and we are unable to give an accurate estimate although we believe the figure is well in excess of 1,000. They can range from UK-based organisations registered at Companies House with offices and permanent staff, to one-person operations with minimal infrastructure beyond a computer operating off-shore. For this latter group, there is research that suggests vulnerabilities in these processes could be used in detection – in particular, the use of web searches to identify assessment briefs which may be in the process of being outsourced.⁵ Prices vary but assignments may be obtained for as little as £20.

Extortion and blackmail are becoming greater threats to people who use essay mills. Personal data may be stored online with minimal if any security, exposing customers to identity theft and bank fraud.⁶ Respondents to the survey undertaken in preparing this edition of the guidance, referred to reports of essay mills contacting students after purchases are made, threatening them with identifying them to their institutions unless further money is given to them. We also know that essay mills are contacting higher education institutions directly if students fail to pay the agreed price.

Why is contract cheating a threat to standards?

Higher education providers have an obligation to ensure that the awards they make meet nationally-agreed standards. The Quality Code states that providers should use ‘assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent’ in order to achieve this. Reliability in this context means ensuring that assessments accurately test and reflect the extent to which students have achieved the learning outcomes of their course.

Like all forms of academic misconduct, contract cheating therefore represents a clear threat to providers’ ability to assure the standards of their qualifications and, as such, to the reputation of UK higher education as a whole. Although student plagiarism and ghostwriting have been long-standing aspects of academic misconduct, the recent growth of commercial third parties offering to help students to cheat, raises serious concerns about academic standards.

5. Ellis, C, Zucker, I M & Randall, D, The infernal business of contract cheating: understanding the business processes and models of academic custom writing sites. *Int J Educ Integr* 14, 1 (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-017-0024-3>

6. Sutherland-Smith, W and Dullaghan, K (2019), You don't always get what you pay for: User experiences of engaging with contract cheating sites, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44:8, 1148–1162, DOI: [10.1080/02602938.2019.1576028](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1576028)

Why does contract cheating happen?

The two main factors that allow contract cheating to take place are motivation and opportunity.⁷ While there is no evidence to suggest that students nowadays are more motivated to cheat, the prevalence of essay mill websites provides more opportunity.

As contract cheated assignments are custom written, text-matching tools widely used to detect copy-paste plagiarism are less effective at detecting this type of cheating behaviour. Amassing strong evidence to support allegations of contract cheating can be difficult, and this can deter academics from reporting or pursuing suspected cases.⁸ The more students escape detection, the more normalised this practice becomes.⁹



From April 2022, there is now a specific prohibition in law on the operation and advertising of contract cheating services in England. Governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland may bring in similar legislation, but this is not in place at the time of publication (Sept 2022). This aligns England with other jurisdictions which are legislating to criminalise provision of such services, including Ireland, Australia and New Zealand.

Studies have shown that students who cheat in assessments do so for a wide range of reasons.^{10,11} These can include: seeing opportunities to cheat; feeling generally dissatisfied with the teaching and learning environment; not having good research, attribution and essay writing skills; feeling unable to seek support from their providers; lack of confidence; having a first language other than English; interest or ability in the subject or topic of study; lack of engagement with studies; poor time management; and lack of understanding of an assessment's requirements. Cheating may be habitual behaviour, or simply a part of an individual's character. Some students may have health or personal issues which affect their studies. Students may not understand how inappropriate this type of conduct is or what the consequences can be.

7. Beckman T, Lam H, Khare A (2017), Learning Assessment Must Change in a World of Digital "Cheats". In: Khare A, Stewart B, Schatz R (eds) *Phantom Ex Machina*. Springer, Cham
https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-44468-0_14

8. Harper R, Bretag T, Ellis C, Newton P, Rozenberg P, Saddiqui S & van Haeringen K (2019), Contract cheating: a survey of Australian university staff, *Studies in Higher Education*, 44:11, 1857-1873, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2018.1462789](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1462789)

9. Glendinning, I (2017) Scorecard for Academic Integrity Development: Benchmarks and evaluation of institutional strategies. Conference proceedings for Plagiarism Across Europe and Beyond 2017 May 24-26, Brno, Czech Republic, pp 25-34
http://academicintegrity.eu/conference/proceedings/2017/Glendinning_Scorecard.pdf

10. Newton, P (2015), Academic integrity: A quantitative study of confidence and understanding in students at the start of their higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. 41 (3), pp 482-497 [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02602938.2015.1024199](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1024199);

Brimble, M, Why Students Cheat. An Exploration of the Motivators of Student Academic Dishonesty in Higher Education. In *Handbook of Academic Integrity*. Ed. T Bretag. Singapore: Springer Singapore, pp 365-382 https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-981-287-098-8_58 ;

Foltýnek, T, Dlabolová, D, Glendinning, I, Lancaster, T and Linkeschová, D (2017), South East European Project on Policies for Academic Integrity. A study commissioned by Council of Europe Pan-European Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED).
www.plagiarism.cz/seeppai/Final-report_SEEPPAI.pdf

11. Bretag T, Harper R, Burton M, Ellis C, Newton P, Rozenberg P, Saddiqui S & van Haeringen K (2019), Contract cheating: a survey of Australian university students, *Studies in Higher Education*, 44:11, 1837-1856, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2018.1462788](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1462788)

There is a common perception that students studying in another language are more likely to cheat. While there is Australian research to suggest this may be true,¹² there is currently no UK data or research to confirm this. There are additional issues for students with English as a second language for providers to consider, such as a lack of understanding of assignment requirements, and the perceived approachability of teaching staff.

Part of the issue is also a lack of strategic approaches to encouraging academic integrity, and detecting contract cheating within institutions. Failure to detect cases of contract cheating, in particular, may lead to complacency within the provider over the genuine scale of misconduct that is taking place. A lack of a clear strategy allows people who are cheating to do so successfully, and if they talk to their peers about their 'success' then they might be tempted to make use of contract cheating services too. This is known as contagion. Detection strategies must be visible in order to function as a deterrent.

Contract cheating and professional qualifications

There are significant risks to the public if students graduate with an award gained after having used contract cheating services, as graduates may be practising with inadequate professional skills. There are particular consequences in relation to courses that are professionally accredited or otherwise lead to professional status - such as medicine or law - where there is a real risk that contract cheating can endanger public health and safety.

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

Students should be made aware that their application to be admitted into a regulated profession may be put at risk if they have committed a deliberate assessment offence.

12. Bretag T, Harper R, Burton M, Ellis C, Newton P, Rozenberg P, Saddiqui S & van Haeringen K (2019), Contract cheating: a survey of Australian university students, *Studies in Higher Education*, 44:11, 1837-1856, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2018.1462788](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1462788)

4 Education and support

What's changed?

The survey responses, and QAA's Strategic Student Advisory Committee, told us that timely information for students is crucial in addressing the threat of contract cheating. We have stressed this here, given more guidance on essay mills' moves to look legitimate, and encouraged providers to think about student-led, peer-assisted approaches. Survey responses also indicated that awareness of contract cheating as an issue was not extending beyond those directly responsible for ensuring academic quality.

There is more content relevant to supporting students, particularly if physically distanced from their academic community.

Information for students

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

It is helpful to give students clear information, in writing and verbally, on the importance of academic integrity and the need for honesty, as well as the likelihood of detection and the potential consequences of cheating. Have discussions with students about contract cheating and the provider's views on it whenever opportunities arise.

This may be at the start of each course, but try not to rely on '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. Some providers are using online academic integrity modules, with completion being either voluntary or mandatory.

Students should also be advised not to post details about their assessments on social media, or have conversations with contract cheating services who contact them. Essay mills make extensive use of social media to find and engage with potential customers.

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

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

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

Essay mills can pose as proofreading or plagiarism-checking services. 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. Providers should have clear and accessible institutional policies in this area.

Students also need confidence that providers take academic integrity seriously and that they address any cases of misconduct appropriately and fairly. It will also be useful to stress that the providers of these services are now prohibited under the law in England. Although students do not face being criminalised, the fact that essay mills are now illegal should assist in students forming their own opinions on the ethics involved in such transactions.



Declarations

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

Familiarity with student work

Teaching staff may want to make clear to students that, as they become familiar with their work, cheating may become apparent through understanding a student's idiosyncrasies, including written style, ability, attitudes and confidence. It is also useful to remind students that their work submitted in any module can be compared to work submitted in other modules. One-to-one or small group tutorials, physically distanced if necessary, will help to reinforce this message.

While anonymous marking makes this difficult at the point of assessment, the author is often subsequently revealed so that meaningful feedback can be given.

Peer attitudes

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

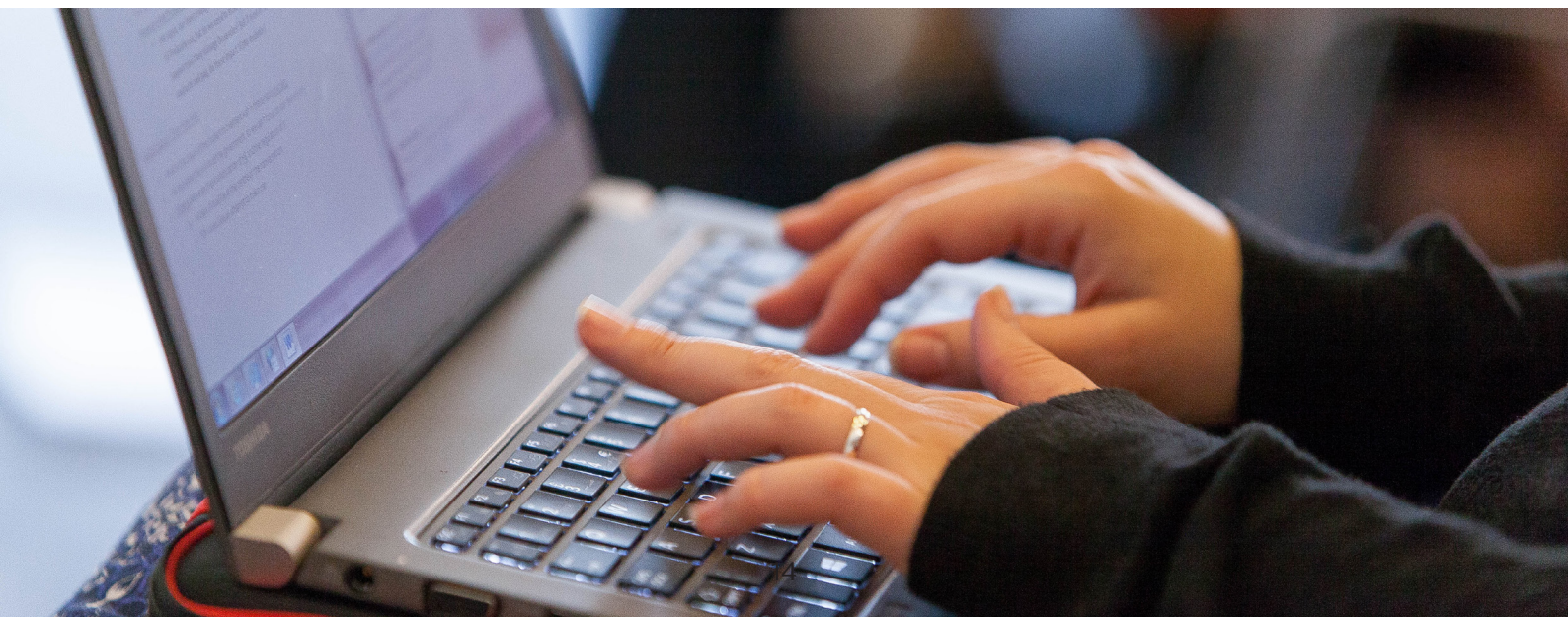
It is important to actively involve students – for example, in strategy-setting, drafting guidance, academic integrity campaigns. Guidance will have most impact if the students' union champions it and provides its own information and advice for students.

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



Key action points

- Place a positive focus on academic integrity, not just a negative focus on misconduct.
- Give written information to students on the importance of academic integrity and consequences of cheating.
- Provide information that focuses specifically on the implications of using third-party assistance in cheating.
- Information should be included in the student handbook, codes of conduct and course documentation.
- See the companion pieces to this guidance (information for students, and for students' unions) for examples of how to engage with students.
- Provide early information, reinforced at appropriate times throughout courses (for example, at a module level).
- Be clear about the measures you use to detect cheating.
- Essay mills offer products at all qualification levels, so avoid focusing entirely on the undergraduate stage and include admissions as well as postgraduate qualifications.
- Be aware of the diverse needs of your student body and offer information in a range of formats and languages as appropriate.
- Make students aware that, where they are studying on accredited courses or courses that lead to professional status, any findings of cheating may be reported to the relevant professional body.
- Ensure you have a robust whistleblowing policy that has been developed with student engagement.
- Confirm the legal position on contract cheating.



Support for students

As well as information, students need support to gain the necessary skills for studying, academic writing, use and acknowledgement of academic sources, correct referencing, paraphrasing and research, to enable them to succeed without resorting to contract cheating.

The importance of effective student support increased following the moves to distance and digital assessment in response to COVID-19. Students removed from their academic community can feel more vulnerable and will benefit from regular contact with academic staff. Peer-assisted learning or mentoring schemes can also help – consider giving recognition to PhD students for supporting new students. Consider how the support you give students from diverse cultural backgrounds, in terms of their study and language skills, can contribute to their academic integrity.

Personal tutoring and academic mentoring centred on academic performance and its enhancement is critical to the development of students as confident independent learners.

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

Timing

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

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

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

Types of support

Providers should, through induction, explain to students what support is available. State clearly who they can turn to for help. Students should be encouraged to check with their personal tutor/equivalent if they are uncertain about the legitimacy of any support offered to them.

Students themselves can be asked to support campaigns to counter contract cheating. Providers may train students to serve as academic integrity champions or ambassadors, who can signpost and support students at risk of using contract cheating services.¹³ Student-led campaigns in general tend to be effective in student engagement, so try and consider ways of supporting student groups to run their own academic integrity campaigns and events as well.

Some essay mills offer discounts to students who refer a friend, and some may recruit students to advertise their services on campus and via social media. Reporting or 'whistleblowing' channels need to be clear and available to those students who hear about it happening. As advertising contract cheating services is now prohibited in England, it is crucial to stress to students the risks they may be exposing themselves to if they participate in any promotional activity for essay mills.



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

Students from previous years on the same course, may also offer a service to students. Awareness of these behaviours, as well as the tactics of essay mills, will help those supporting the students – whether they are academics, professional staff or student mentors – to be effective in offering advice.

Seemingly inflexible or 'bunched' submission dates for assessments can add to the pressure students feel. So if there is any flexibility in submission deadlines, make sure to let your students know.

It may be helpful to consider engaging with local schools and further education providers to encourage the development of good academic skills and academic integrity prior to entering higher education. Useful areas to focus on might be writing and referencing skills, as well as how to paraphrase and interpret ideas. The International Centre for Academic Integrity (ICAI) publishes resources aimed at developing a culture of integrity for schools,¹⁴ and the European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI) has published resources for higher education providers.¹⁵

13. Fallon, J, Wellman, N and Awdry, R (2012), Now are we all on the same page? Strategies for engaging students. 5th International Plagiarism Conference Proceedings, Newcastle 2012. www.researchgate.net/publication/283072781_Now_are_we_all_on_the_same_page

14. ICAI Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity (2014) <https://academicintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Fundamental-Values-2014.pdf>

15. ENAI Educational materials for higher education institution teachers and students www.academicintegrity.eu/wp/all-materials



Key action points

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

Case study

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

Training and information for staff

The single most important step is for providers to dedicate staff and resources and provide proper support to combat cheating.

We strongly recommend that a role protecting academic integrity is incorporated into a staff job description. Assigning a strategic lead responsibility to a senior member of staff is also key. Many institutions will have staff who have an interest in academic integrity, but who find it difficult to dedicate the time due to other commitments. Clearly, either creating a new post or incorporating responsibility for academic integrity into an existing role will have resource implications. However, the benefits arising from having a single point of coordination and responsibility will be significant.

Case study

In 2019, the University of Northampton incorporated a new position as University Lead on Contract Cheating into an existing academic post. The main functions of the role are to investigate and coordinate investigations into allegations of contract cheating, and to mentor and train staff at the University of Northampton and a Midlands Academic Integrity Group. The post also has a research brief, looking into new techniques to help identify commissioned assignments.

All training that providers offer to their staff relating to learning, teaching and assessment design should involve the consideration of academic integrity.¹⁶ All members of the academic community (students, academic staff, leadership, management and professional staff) need to be familiar and kept up-to-date with the academic regulations that apply to all forms of assessment, and their roles and responsibilities in upholding academic standards and maintaining academic integrity.

Staff also need to be aware of the factors that contribute to students cheating: the availability and awareness of cheating services, the pressures that might tempt a student to avail themselves of these services, the attitudes to committing offences and the likelihood of being caught.



To improve detection and deterrence, it may be helpful to develop an awareness among staff of how essay mills operate, including their now prohibited status in England and other countries. Staff also need to understand how some essay mills engage in the extortion and blackmail of students, and what to do if they become aware of this.

Positive emphasis on integrity

It is important to place a positive emphasis on academic integrity, rather than focusing on issues of plagiarism and other forms of cheating. This might include telling students what they can do rather than phrasing advice in terms of what they should not do; and understanding the reasons why students might commit misconduct and finding ways to address them.

In developing positive approaches, it may be useful to consider reasons why the majority of students do not cheat. Research indicates that lack of opportunity, fear of detection and punishment, trust, motivation for learning, time management, morals and norms are among these reasons.¹⁷ Students who contract cheat should also be made aware that the essay mills do not always deliver what they promised, and that they are risking their personal details by giving them to unscrupulous individuals. Being clear about the chances of detection, the low quality of commissioned assignments, the consequences of proven misconduct and the exposure to extortion and blackmail, is a powerful disincentive.¹⁸ The misplaced trust that students place in these services must be challenged.

16. Ransome J and Newton P M (2017), Are we educating educators about academic integrity? A study of UK higher education textbooks. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. March 2017, pp 1-12 www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02602938.2017.1300636

17. Rundle, K, Curtis, G and Clare, J (2019), Why Students Do Not Engage in Contract Cheating. *Frontiers in Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02229>

18. Sutherland-Smith, W and Dullaghan, K (2019) You don't always get what you pay for: User experiences of engaging with contract cheating sites, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44:8, 1148-1162, DOI: [10.1080/02602938.2019.1576028](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1576028)

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

Staff in your organisation may be interested in joining local academic integrity networks, if they are not already. These groups are a good way of discussing emerging issues, coherent responses to the challenges of contract cheating, and sharing good practice.

Assessment methods

Assessment design is considered in greater detail below, but staff should have opportunities to consider the design and use of assessment methods that allow students to demonstrate their learning practically, in a face-to-face format where possible. Examples include oral presentations (including presentations of written work); practical, authentic assessments; placements; contextually-specific, personalised assessments; peer assessment; and narrated video presentations.^{19,20}

Such methods are also likely to promote deeper learning while developing a wider range of skills, many of which will be valuable for future employability.

An increase in the use of formal written examinations may reduce some aspects of contract cheating but care should be taken if considering this approach. Formal written examinations may not be the most appropriate methods for assessment of many types of learning, and examinations are also subject to misconduct challenges. It is also worth noting that while exams may reduce the possibility of contract cheating and the use of essay mills, research indicates that cheating in exams remains a common form of academic misconduct.²¹

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

19. Newton, P M and Lang, C (2016), Custom essay writers, freelancers, and other paid third parties. In Handbook of Academic Integrity. Ed. T Bretag. Singapore: Springer Singapore, pp 249–271
http://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-981-287-098-8_38

20. Bretag T, Harper R, Burton M, Ellis C, Newton P, van Haeringen K, Saddiqui S & Rozenberg P (2019), Contract cheating and assessment design: exploring the relationship, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 44:5, 676–691 DOI: [10.1080/02602938.2018.1527892](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1527892)

21. Harper R, Bretag T and Rundle K in Higher Education Research and Development (2020)



Key action points

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



5 Reducing opportunities to cheat

What's changed?

While it remains important that higher education institutions look for ways in which to make cheating more difficult, we have moved away from the language of 'prevention'. It is not safe to assume that contract cheating can be designed out from assessments, and to imply that certain assessment approaches are 'cheat-proof' could lead to complacency. Instead of 'prevention' we now look at reducing the opportunities to cheat and increase the emphasis on detection.

The survey in 2019 highlighted limitations with blocking essay mills from providers' systems as a preventative measure. It also suggested that assessment policies may not be reflecting the work that is being done on the ground to prevent cheating.

Providers should be aware that, while it may be theoretically possible to remove all opportunities to cheat from higher education assessments, approaches that focus on eradication rather than reduction would be impractical, prohibitively expensive and, most importantly, harmful to the learning experience. Also, relying solely on assessment design as a means of preventing contract cheating can lead to complacency.

That said, there are steps that providers can take to reduce the opportunities for students to behave dishonestly when under assessment, and to prevent organisations and individuals from profiting from such behaviour. They can also aid in the ultimate detection of cheating when it does happen.

Assessment design

Assessment forms a crucial part of the learning process, and is how students demonstrate that they have achieved a course's learning outcomes. Both of these purposes are compromised by cheating. Good assessment design is one of a range of approaches that can help reduce instances of cheating. However, while it is a useful approach, it is no more than a tool and design are not enough on its own to stop cheating happening. Effective detection and treatment of cases should go hand in hand.

'Authentic assessment' is a term used to describe assessment methods that are more reflective of the ways in which students will actually use the knowledge they learn. This could involve practical exams or face-to-face assessments (which can also be undertaken digitally and at distance).²² A study has found that authentic assessment approaches remain vulnerable to contract cheating, but they may improve the chances of detection.²³ If considering authentic assessment, it should be remembered that some students might not be familiar or comfortable with the concept, so may need additional support.

Providers should consider using a mixture of assessment methods, controlled and 'uncontrolled' (where no environment or time conditions are set), written and oral, clinical, presentations and portfolios, as well as group and peer assessment. It is still possible to cheat, but it would be more expensive and therefore may provide a disincentive.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many higher education institutions adapted assessment processes in a range of ways to help students and promote positive academic practices. For example, introducing daily and weekly planners to keep students on track, offering moderated discussion forums, or other forms of peer mentoring, providing regular updates keeping virtual office hours, and clear signposting of individuals and services to help students. Many of these practices will bring positive benefit to students regardless of environment. The pandemic did provide an opportunity for institutions to fundamentally rethink format and processes, including the structure of courses; to consider how to reduce or disincentivise opportunities to cheat, which could then be continued into permanent practice.

Changing the ways in which assessment is approached is also likely to have the benefit of improving assessment generally by focusing on what students can do, rather than what they write about.^{24,25}

Deadlines

Shortening the time available to students to complete assignments does not necessarily make cheating less likely. Essay mills are prepared to offer very short turnaround times for assignments. Feedback from students suggests that shortening deadlines may actually increase the likelihood of a student resorting to an essay mill, owing to the added anxiety of a perceived lack of time.

22. JISC report: The future of assessment: five principles, five targets for 2025 (2020)
www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/the-future-of-assessment

23. Ellis C, van Haeringen K, Harper R, Bretag T, Zucker I, McBride S, Rozenberg P, Newton P & Saddiqui S (2019), Does authentic assessment assure academic integrity? Evidence from contract cheating data, Higher Education Research & Development DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2019.1680956](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1680956)

24. Newton, P M and Lang, C (2016), Custom essay writers, freelancers, and other paid third parties. In Handbook of Academic Integrity. Ed. T Bretag. Singapore: Springer Singapore, pp 249–271
http://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-981-287-098-8_38

25. Ellis C, van Haeringen K, Harper R, Bretag T, Zucker I, McBride S, Rozenberg P, Newton P & Saddiqui S (2019), Does authentic assessment assure academic integrity? Evidence from contract cheating data, Higher Education Research & Development DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2019.1680956](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1680956)

Minimising risks in written assessments

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

Providers can seek to reduce this risk by setting specific assignments that enable easier cheating detection, with 'checkpoints' or early drafts where research and findings can be discussed, including presentation requirements, online testing, workplace attestation, group work, and the use of 'in class' IT equipment. These might have to be planned in ways that are compatible with, for example, physical distancing requirements. Coursework checkpoints do not have to be resource-intensive but could involve using seminars while coursework is underway as an opportunity to informally discuss progress on assignments. You should be aware that such steps do not make it impossible to cheat, so do not let this lead to complacency.



Key action points

- Do not rely on short deadlines to limit contract cheating.
- Think about how to limit cheating opportunities when designing or reviewing courses and setting assignments.
- Do not let efforts to reduce cheating lead you to believe that cheating cannot happen – almost any assessment mechanism can be outsourced to a third party.
- Try instead to use assessment mechanisms to give you a better chance of detecting cheating.

Blocking essay mills, disrupting advertising, HR policies

Blocking access to essay mill websites on campus

A strategy that providers may wish to consider is blocking access to essay mills from computers and wi-fi systems on their property. The services that these websites provide, and their advertising, are now illegal in England. Attempts to access essay mill sites would be met with a 'pop-up' message that access is prohibited, and that if the student is having difficulty completing an assignment, they should contact their tutor. Providers may also consider warning students that using such sites can amount to academic misconduct and outlining the consequences of going further. These warnings could alternatively be displayed on login, where messages reminding students that their internet usage is monitored could also remind students about transgressing academic regulations.

This will not prevent a student from accessing sites from their own devices and the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent move away from institutional-based teaching and learning, demonstrates the limitations of access blocking. However, if students do try to use providers' systems, the pop-up message will signal that the provider is aware of the sites and reinforce the importance of academic integrity. Where providers do not block sites, and students are able to access essay mills from their systems, the opposite impression may be given. As new essay mill websites are appearing all the time, it is not practical to attempt to block all companies. However, a blocking tool along with a pop-up will give clear indication to students that the use of essay mills is prohibited.

Disrupting opportunities to advertise

The advertising activity of essay mills has increased in recent years with many using sophisticated marketing and promotion practices. Advertising space has been purchased on search engines and on local advertising hoardings and public transport; flyers and business cards are handed out on campuses; social media accounts target students who say they are struggling with assignments; and in some cases, mailing lists from providers have been obtained by essay mills and used for direct emails.



While advertising these services is now illegal in England, the international nature of essay mill sites means that marketing will still take place.

While posters can be removed and pamphlet distributors can be asked to leave a provider's property, social media or email contact can be harder to counter. If activity is detected, providers could use their own social media and email accounts to contact their students, directly or indirectly, warning them about contact from particular sites and companies and restressing the need for academic integrity. IT services can sometimes detect and block intruders, including ghostwriters that have been given access to students' accounts.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how innovative and adaptable essay mills marketing could be. Some sought to capitalise on the anxiety, concerns and uncertainties faced by students. There were numerous examples – often using the social media channels favoured by students – advertising discounts, suggesting they could fill a gap resulting from a lack of supervision, or even offering essay writing to help students stay safe.

Providers should be alert to new marketing techniques, including any advertising that takes place in languages other than English, and keep staff and students aware of developments.

Preventing academic staff from becoming involved

There is currently little research evidence to suggest that academic staff and PhD students are engaged in the provision of cheating services to students. However, there is considerable anecdotal evidence, and higher education providers should be aware of the risk of this happening.

Providers may wish to consider making explicit staff contracts that assisting a student to commit an academic offence, or ignoring evidence of misconduct, would be cause for a staff disciplinary investigation. A more straightforward approach is for providers to make the act of 'supply' an explicit offence within their disciplinary procedures, which are separate to the contract and can be adjusted more easily. As this could now be considered illegal activity in England, procedures and guidance for staff may already cover lawbreaking as a disciplinary offence but adding a specific clause may be clearer.



Key action points

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



6 Detection

What's changed?

In talking to providers since the first version of the guidance was published, we have heard that some staff do not feel able to investigate suspected misconduct due to work pressures or the low likelihood of proving cheating – a view reiterated by some survey respondents.

Staff time, bespoke training and a senior member of staff with a clear strategic responsibility, including coordinating and/or undertaking the activities in this section, will help improve the prospect of detection.

Interviews, online searches, detection software

Although identifying individual instances of cheating is a responsibility of academic staff, it can be helpful to document the procedures and techniques that staff use provider-wide. Leaving departments, and especially individuals, to develop their own detection methods will be less effective and will not achieve consistency and fairness. Trained and authorised staff should open conversations with students suspected of cheating. Written procedures, flowcharts, checklists and suggested phrases to use when approaching students are all helpful in making staff aware of the importance of procedural fairness.

Where staff members are reluctant to pursue suspected instances of cheating, significant cultural change may be needed. There is a perception that contract cheating is difficult to detect and to prove. It is here that a dedicated staff resource with responsibility for promoting academic integrity and identifying contract cheating will be of particular benefit. They will be able to offer training and support to assist with the understanding and confidence of their peers. For example, they can provide staff with examples of where and how findings have been made, either internally or from other providers, suitably anonymised.

Staff also need to know that they will be supported and that the provider they work for takes the issue seriously. To resolve academic workload issues, the provider may consider providing additional support for tutors/academics for putting together the evidence to raise a referral of contract cheating.

Interviews

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

Active searching online

Knowing how essay mills operate is helpful when thinking about detection methods. Typically, a student will commission an assignment through an online essay mill, but the production of that assignment may then be outsourced, sometimes using legitimate copywriting websites where writers bid for pieces of work. The student/essay mill elements of the transaction will not be searchable, but the essay mill/writer bidding elements may be. Something as simple as searching for your assignment titles online after you set them may show instances of students trying to commission answers. It may also benefit providers to become familiar with the main copywriting sites.

RSS feeds are used by assignment writers to aggregate results from copywriting sites. Some providers in Australia have been using RSS feeds in the same way to alert them when their assignments are being commissioned.

Identifying use of tutoring services during exams

There is growing evidence of students taking advantage of online tutoring services when sitting exams taken under remote conditions. This involves asking the online tutor the exact question posed in an exam and receiving real time support. It should be stressed that typically the online tutoring company is providing a legitimate service, with warnings to students not to submit the provided materials as their own work, as they are intended to offer support with coursework. Some tutor services will place the questions and their answers on their websites, which can allow universities to identify if questions match those set during exams. Universities should raise requests for information and evidence to support academic misconduct cases directly with the tutoring service and take advantage of any policy published by the service to support such requests.

Use of technology

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

Where outsourced assignments actually meet their plagiarism-free promises, they may go through detection checks with 0% or very low proportions of matched text (yet with, for instance, no direct quotations and fabricated references). These should be considered suspicious and investigated further.

New software solutions are available that are designed to assist in the gathering of evidence to support allegations of contract cheating. There is early research regarding their effectiveness,²⁶ and it is a development of which providers should be aware.

When universities moved to remote examination in the wake of COVID-19, some introduced remote invigilation, such as through the use of webcams or facial recognition software. It should be noted that some students have raised privacy concerns and are opposed to this practice. Any move to introduce such options should be approached in collaboration with students.

Other authentication tools that can be used to protect academic integrity during remote examination include remotely supervised activities, password-protected or voice-recognition software, online or telephone questioning, or third-party verification

The interrogation of metadata around document creation is also useful. It should look realistic. The reference lists should correspond with reading lists or material readily available through the library. Citations in essay mill generated submissions will often be low quality or from obscure academic sources. Research shows that successful identification of contract cheating is largely dependant on the experience of the assessor, as well as knowledge of the student.²⁷ The importance of experienced assessors again demonstrates the usefulness of a dedicated staff role, where possible.

Specific training

Studies in Australia show that detection of contract cheating is improved where assessors are specifically trained on what to look for in outsourced assignments. It can also reduce instances of 'false positives'.²⁸ Assessors from different subjects coming together to share experience of their own subject areas may also be beneficial.

26. Dawson, P, Sutherland-Smith, W and Ricksen, M (2019), Can software improve marker accuracy at detecting contract cheating? A pilot study of the Turnitin authorship investigate alpha, Assessment and evaluation in higher education, pp. 1-10
www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02602938.2019.1662884?journalCode=caeh20

27. Rogerson, A (2017), Detecting contract cheating in essay and report submissions: process, patterns, clues and conversations
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2344&context=buspapers>

28. Dawson P & Sutherland-Smith W (2019), Can training improve marker accuracy at detecting contract cheating? A multi-disciplinary pre-post study, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education
www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02602938.2018.1531109



Key action points

- Consider organisation-wide detection methods and document them.
- Cultural change at an organisation may be needed if the problem is not being taken seriously.
- Consider the use of viva voce examinations for checking authorship of submitted work.
- After setting assessments, use active searching to see whether students are trying to commission someone else to do the work.
- Consider linguistic analysis tools to complement text-matching software.
- Training sessions that bring together assessors from different subject areas/disciplines can improve detection rates.

Case study

Schools in Victoria, Australia are reported to be increasingly using text-matching software to help to mark student work and ensure that assignments are not copied from the internet.²⁹ One company is reported as stating that schools and colleges in England were a fast-growing market. It sells its software to 130 schools and more than 200 colleges. Although the programme is designed to detect cheating, the company says that some teachers use it as a training tool to prepare sixth-form students for university.³⁰

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

Knowing your students

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

29. Preiss, B (2014), Schools turning to anti-plagiarism software to catch cheating students. The Sydney Morning Herald. 2 September. www.smh.com.au/technology/schools-turning-to-antiplagiarism-software-to-catch-cheating-students-20140901-10ayuv.html

30. Hurst, G (2014), Schools counting on anti-plagiarism software to catch out cheats. The Times. 1 August. www.thetimes.co.uk/article/schools-counting-on-anti-plagiarism-software-to-catch-out-cheats-btjh5h799r2

While it is the responsibility of academic staff to know their students, it may not always be possible to become completely familiar with individuals' styles and capabilities, bearing in mind variations in class size and different modes of study. Moreover, familiarity with students and their work should not be the only detection method relied upon. However, students may be more likely to cheat if they feel that their providers do not know them and their work well.³¹

Grade shifts

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

Marking

Essay mill products are of variable quality and may not reflect the assignments set. They may fail to recognise themes and topics discussed during lectures and seminars, or the nuances of a particular assignment.

Different sections may be written in an obviously different style or voice. Generic terms may be used, as might spellings or phrases not typically used in the UK. Different fonts and styles used in word processed documents may indicate cutting and pasting, or that the student has been editing a document provided for them by an essay mill. Be aware that this alone is not sufficient evidence to prove contract cheating.

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

PSRBs

Where providers are aware of students who have been involved in contract cheating, they may be required to report this to the relevant PSRB and provide it with the student's details, including their name, date of birth and address. Providers will need be aware of data protection requirements in passing over information. A copy of the final decision should also be included, after consideration of any appeals. PSRBs will make their own judgement based on the evidence you provide and take appropriate action in the context of their professional rules and codes of conduct.

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

31. Bretag T, Harper R, Burton M, Ellis C, Newton P, Rozenberg P, Saddiqui S & van Haeringen K (2019), Contract cheating: a survey of Australian university students, *Studies in Higher Education*, 44:11, 1837-1856, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2018.1462788](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1462788)

Whistleblowing

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

You may want to consider whether your institution's policies and procedures are sufficiently robust to enable students to report suspected contract cheating by another student, including appropriate safeguards for false accusations and, where possible, protecting the identity of individuals raising concerns. Students need to know how they will be treated if they approach the provider with such information.

As whistleblowing policies can involve consideration of potential tension between priorities, such as anonymity conflicting with protection from false accusation, they should be prepared in collaboration with students.



Key action points

- Get to know your students' styles and capabilities, as far as is possible.
- Be vigilant of unexpected peaks in a student's assessment performance.
- Be aware of technology developments that can provide tools to aid the detection of contract cheating.
- Failure to recognise themes and topics discussed during lectures; and the use of different styles, unfamiliar terms, unusual spelling and formatting, are all indicators that someone else may have written the assignment.
- Consider formal PSRB reporting processes and GDPR compliance for misconduct on courses with a high likelihood of professional qualification.
- Consider whether you have adequate systems in place to allow for whistleblowing – to appropriately protect the accuser, as well as the accused.
- Do your students have confidence in how they will be treated if they approach you with information about other students cheating?

7 Regulations and policies

What's changed?

The survey responses indicated that providers were seeing benefits from using simpler language within regulations and policies. Some providers are improving their data recording around academic misconduct, which allows for better management information to help inform strategy.

We have also expanded the section on support for students under investigation as these are stressful, high-stakes procedures.

There is an acceptance that evidence of increasing use of essay mills means that cases involving suspicion of their use are not exceptional.

Additional advice has been added to take account of the prohibition in England of commercial contract cheating services and advertising.

Consistency, transparency and strategy

Effective ways to manage contract cheating involve addressing cheating strategically, looking at a provider's planning and values, and operating robust academic regulations, policies, procedures and decision making. The regulations, policies and procedures should flow from the provider's values, mission statement and strategy (where a commitment to integrity can be explicitly stated). Providers could begin by reviewing their regulations and policies to see whether they are fit for dealing with contract cheating. There should be detailed guidance for staff, covering investigations, decisions, sanctions, extenuating circumstances, outcomes and appeals.



Care should be taken to explain that while provision and advertising of commercial contract cheating is now prohibited in England, the use of those services is not illegal – the new law has not criminalised students.

Transparency and clarity in communications

All members of the academic community (for example, students, academics, professional services, management) need to know about policies, procedures, expectations and sanctions; and be supported to understand what is deemed as acceptable and unacceptable academic practice. We recommend distributing this guidance, complying with the web accessibility regulations, across all areas within institutions, to help explain the extent of the risks around contract cheating and to inform thinking about possible solutions. You may wish to include subjects/disciplines and students' unions/associations on the best ways to articulate your policies to the wider student body.

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

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

Holistic strategy for deterring contract cheating

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

Consistency in regulation

There needs to be a common and consistent approach, underpinned by academic regulations, across all parts of the provider, with appropriate resourcing (ideally with a dedicated staff post) and strong support from the provider's leadership. Without dedicated staffing allowing a centralisation of approach, consistency can prove difficult, as academic integrity operations may then be handled locally, within schools and faculties.

The approach should cover the definition of contract cheating, identification and reporting of cases, the process to be followed, and the possible outcomes. Student bodies should be aware of the regulations in place.

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

Due to the 2022 legislation prohibiting essay mills, providers may wish to look again at their regulations and policies to ensure they adequately cover the main repercussions (for example, do they sufficiently cover unlawful activities such as providing assignments to students for a fee and advertising commercial contract cheating sites). If they do not, changes may need to be made.



Contract cheating supply

Student consumers of contract cheating services are not the only people involved in these transactions. Typically, the essay mill will act as an intermediary to connect the consumer and the creator of the work, or fulfil the service procured (such as impersonation to sit an examination). Students may also be distributing advertising materials on campus, or through social media platforms.

Academic regulations should make clear that students fulfilling any of these roles are also committing very serious academic misconduct, and would normally be subject to disciplinary sanctions. Depending on the activity they carry out, it may now also be illegal in England.



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



Key action points

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

Quality assurance links, reporting and gathering evidence, and viva voces

Linking academic integrity to quality assurance

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

Reporting suspicions of academic misconduct and gathering evidence

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

In contract cheating cases, supporting evidence could include:

- metadata captured from within the submitted document (for example, the properties of a Word document may identify the author as being different from the student, or the creation of the document may appear unrealistic)
- samples of the student's other assignments, to look for variation within and between documents that cannot be easily explained
- evidence of the submission to an essay mill
- notes from a viva voce examination conducted as part of the evidence collection process.

Research is available that provides further information on approaches to detection and evidence.³²

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

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

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

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

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

32. Rogerson, A (2017), Detecting contract cheating in essay and report submissions: process, patterns, clues and conversations
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2344&context=buspapers>



Key action points

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

Managing allegations, adjudication and sanctions

Managing allegations and adjudication

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

This means that students under investigation will be under tremendous pressure. We know that investigating officers, where academic integrity is the sole focus of their role or an additional function they must perform, can also experience significant stress. It is important to consider the needs of both and put appropriate support in place.

Fairness is crucial, starting with the independence and impartiality of those involved in the academic misconduct process. It is essential to be clear about all aspects of the process, including where decisions are being taken by individuals or panels.

Individual decision making may be appropriate where providers are dealing with a high volume of cases. Designated, specially trained academic conduct officers often adjudicate on routine matters in many providers.

In serious or complex cases, adjudication may be conducted by a panel (this could include academic staff, senior management, students, students' union representatives, professional staff) with an independent chair, to ensure consistency and fairness. Panels can also consider appeals from first-instance decisions from individual officers.

All persons involved in considering academic misconduct should be trained and qualified to undertake their roles. They should not have been involved with investigation of the matter or given advice on how to proceed.

The procedures for handling allegations can be complex and involve many people institution-wide. To ensure consistency of process and a supportive but timely student experience, it may be helpful to create flowcharts, with associated standard documentation, setting out timescales and including notification methods and intervals for scheduling meetings. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator's Good Practice Framework provides useful advice on disciplinary procedures.³³

Regulations should address whether legal representation is permissible and the relevant standard and burden of proof that will be used to make a decision. In the light of COVID-19 physical-distancing requirements, policies should be adjusted to allow for remote investigations and hearings.

Decisions and sanctions

Contract cheating might normally be considered an extremely serious matter because the deliberate, intentional decision of a student to engage a third party to complete work for them elevates the seriousness of contract cheating above what would normally apply to a case of plagiarism. The sanction should be proportionate to the seriousness of the matter, and to whether it is a first instance or one of a number of similar offences.

The recommended sanction for serious academic misconduct involving multiple offences should be suspension or expulsion. However, as contract cheating has become increasingly normalised, any approach must acknowledge that some students, particularly first offenders, might not be aware of the consequences and the seriousness of their actions and should be treated accordingly. Therefore, institutional policy on sanctions should reflect this, and the potential outcomes for academic misconduct should be consistent across the provider.

Regulations and policies should be clear about the standard of proof to be applied. We recommend 'the balance of probabilities' – that is, in all the circumstances it is more likely than not that academic misconduct has occurred. This is the standard applied by the courts in civil matters and by some regulators in professional admission cases where the character of the applicant is in question. The evidence required should be proportionate to this standard.

33. Office of the Independent Adjudicator, Good Practice Framework: Disciplinary procedures www.oiahe.org.uk/media/2045/good-practice-framework-disciplinary-procedures-section.pdf

There may be extenuating or mitigating circumstances where some leniency in the sanction applied could be justified, for example, newly-arrived students in their first assessment period in UK higher education who have had no access to information about the institutional expectations, norms and consequences, or students under extreme pressure following close bereavement or serious family crisis. It is important to ensure that any mitigation applies to the sanction imposed, rather than the decision on whether contract cheating has occurred. A more lenient sanction may be the compulsory attendance at a training course, or completion of an online module, aimed at encouraging good academic practice and ethical decision making.

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

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

QAA has produced [advice for members on misconduct cases and the use of penalties](#).



Key action points

- Specifically-appointed and trained academic misconduct officers may be used on straightforward or routine matters.
- The use of a panel to adjudicate on allegations of academic misconduct and appeals from first-instance decisions will help to ensure independence, fairness and impartiality.
- Mandatory staff development and training for adjudicators and other panel members will help to ensure a consistent approach to the conduct of proceedings involving alleged academic misconduct.
- Flowcharts, timescales and quick guides to meeting schedules will help to provide a supportive but timely student experience.
- A standard approach to the classification of different types of academic misconduct, the associated level of seriousness and the relevant sanction to be applied will help to ensure consistency of decisions across an institution.
- Consider using 'the balance of probabilities' as the standard of proof.
- The institution's stance towards extenuating and mitigating circumstances should be articulated in the regulations, policies and procedures, but do not fetter your organisation's discretion in decision making.

- Ensure any mitigation applies to the sanction and not to the decision.
- For sanctions less serious than exclusion, consider adding an educational element around academic integrity.
- Clear, written reasons for panel decisions and sanctions applied will assist the student in understanding the outcome as well as the options for challenge and appeal.

Case studies

In compiling the 2017 version of this guidance, we asked the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) whether they had any experience of complaints arising from misconduct hearings. OIA had considered one complaint, where panel members and the chair deciding on a case of plagiarism at a provider, had been involved in the earlier investigation of that case. They had given advice on how to proceed with the case and had already seen available evidence before the official hearing. The OIA subsequently concluded that the provider had failed to act fairly in not ensuring that panel members came to the matter afresh.

Research in the Academic Misconduct Benchmarking Research (AMBeR) Project showed that there are significant differences in the sanctions applied by providers for different forms of academic misconduct across the sector. The research team proposed a metrics-based method for deciding what sanctions to use to try to promote consistency across the UK higher education sector. Some providers have since adopted the AMBeR Tariff³⁴ or modified it for their own use. Others have chosen a different way of ensuring consistency of sanctions within the provider, but in many providers the decisions are still the remit of individual academics and there are no common policies or procedures for handling accusations or deciding sanctions.

34. Tennant, P and Rowell, G (2010), Benchmark Plagiarism Tariff for the Application of Penalties for Student Plagiarism and the Penalties Applied www.plagiarism.org/paper/benchmark-plagiarism-tariff

Record keeping and appeals

Maintaining and monitoring statistics on academic misconduct cases

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

What is important is that each provider understands what is happening within their organisation and is able to respond appropriately when there is a change in trend or concentration of activity. Understanding the type of offences committed will help you to develop your approaches to the management of academic conduct issues (for example, lower level offences may simply require a more detailed induction on academic writing, whereas serious offences may require a targeted approach to acts of a deliberate nature). It is also important to record cases in sufficient detail to allow effective analysis, and feed analysis back to the academic staff who reported the matters so they can be confident that the provider is taking appropriate action.

Appeals process

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



Key action points

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

Student leadership, review, research, distance learning courses and working with others

Student leadership

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

Students can be asked to support campaigns to counter contract cheating in many different ways. Several institutions train students to serve as academic integrity champions or ambassadors, who can signpost and support students at risk of using contract cheating services. Providers have seen good results by encouraging students' unions to run their own, student-led campaigns.

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

Regular review

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

Research

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

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

Distance learning courses and working with others

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

Establishing authorship and authenticity of work is difficult enough for campus-based students, but there are different challenges for institutions that offers distance learning/online courses with no attendance requirements, or reduced onsite attendance in light of COVID-19. Providers' regulations should set out the additional processes for offsite students to ensure that suspected contract cheating cases are identified and suitably managed.

Where providers are working with others to deliver courses, such as validation or transnational education arrangements, care should be taken when establishing relationships to ensure that partner organisations are taking the risks of academic misconduct seriously. The provider may wish to consider steps to scrutinise potential partners' processes and regulations when developing arrangements and continue to monitor ongoing operational processes.



Key action points

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



8 Good practice

In our survey to develop the guidance in 2019, we called for examples of good practice from the sector. The effectiveness of this practice, particularly around assessment design, will depend on the size and nature of the provider and the course, so may not be relevant in all circumstances.

In student-facing materials, the use of plain English is crucial, as is a focus on both positive academic integrity and what would constitute academic misconduct. One provider has developed an institutional-level template for school-level student handbooks and induction content to ensure provision of consistent information.

A number of providers have developed online skills modules to support the development of skills for successful transition to higher education, as well as on academic integrity. In some cases, these are voluntary; in others the provider requires them to be completed by all students. Other providers are using academic integrity videos on the various types of misconduct to support student understanding alongside online resources.

Providers are setting up Academic Integrity Forums to share issues and maintain consistency of approach in detecting and investigating issues across the institution. Academic Practice teams, which are mainly organised at a school level, are being set up, as are internal networks of academic conduct officers (at least one per department) with regular meetings to discuss national developments/new guidance, review case studies and air problem cases relating to academic misconduct. Students' union sabbatical officers are being included on misconduct panels.

Providers are considering whether students on profession-related courses remain fit to practice following a finding of academic misconduct. Fitness to Practise procedures are being amended, and committees involved in these processes are being given the option to decide whether the finding should be reported to the professional body where appropriate.

Assessment design and academic integrity is being included in Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education curricula for early-career teaching staff.

Providers are designing assessments to try and preclude contract cheating (and other cheating/plagiarism) through setting bespoke topics, using iterative assessment processes (for example, submissions of multiple drafts to a supervisor as with a dissertation, which could be adopted for smaller pieces of work), introducing more authentic assessment methods that draw on situations experienced in the workplace, and identifying good practice elsewhere in the sector.

Case management processes are being rewritten for plagiarism investigations to include essay mills/contract cheating, using the guidance as point of reference. Flowcharts are being used to clarify the processes for academic colleagues, should there be a suspicion or detection.

Inspiration is being drawn from vocational qualifications, which enable assignments to be less generic and have a range of assessment tasks such as video evidence, professional discussions, and action research from work placement with supporting evidence. This may not make contract cheating more difficult, just more expensive, which could, in itself, disincentivise students from purchasing.

Providers are working to provide support for first-time offenders. Some providers' data suggests that black, Asian and minority ethnic students are overrepresented in academic misconduct cases, so such support can be linked to inclusivity and narrowing attainment gaps work.

Case study

The following text is an excerpt from Sheffield Hallam University's student-facing guidance:

'CONTRACT CHEATING

You've probably come across sites offering you 'plagiarism free' help with assignments or essays. It is all too easy to be taken in by these so-called 'essay mills' or contract cheating websites. There are serious hazards in even accessing these sites though.

Please do not be tempted or persuaded to look online for, copy and paste, or even worse, actually commission anyone to write your assignment or part of it. Contract cheating websites, the so-called 'essay mills' are not your friends, and really only take advantage of the vulnerability of students. They don't care about you, will charge you a fee, probably provide a very poor service, and some may possibly use your details to take advantage of you in the future. We block many of these sites from our managed PC's on campus. The essay mills sites might look attractive and alluring with their promises of help, but if there are any suspicions that you have even inadvertently accessed these sites, and used them to get material for your assignment, you are likely to be investigated for the most serious form of plagiarism, i.e. Contract Cheating. If an allegation of contract cheating is upheld, there is a chance that you could be removed from the university... we don't want this to happen!

As a university, you'll understand that we have to ensure that our awards meet nationally agreed standards. To achieve this, the assessments you complete, need to accurately reflect or test the extent to which you have achieved the learning outcomes of your course. Contract cheating therefore represents a clear threat to our ability to assure the standards of our qualifications, and the reputation of the university and the higher education sector as a whole. For students studying on a course that is professionally accredited, there are clear and significant risks to the public if you graduate with an award having used contract cheating services, as you may be practising with inadequate professional skills. We regard this as a serious risk to the public, and all the more reason why we take contract cheating so seriously.

We know you want to work hard for your degree, and there is lots of help available. If you're struggling, or are not sure about the assessment task, or don't know where to start, the worst thing you can do is to turn to one of the contract cheating sites. Please approach your marker, module leader or student support adviser for help or look at the Skills Centre which can help you to develop your academic skills. They offer workshops, forums and tutorials. Click the link above to find lots of useful resources and study tips.'



9 Glossary

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

Academic integrity

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

Contract cheating

A form of cheating where a student outsources their learning by submitting work to a higher education provider for assessment, where they have used one or more of a range of services provided by a third party to produce that work, and such input is not permitted. The contract with the student can include payment or other favours. It also may be referred to as ‘commissioning’.

‘Services’ may include essays or other types of assignments, conducting research, impersonation in exams and other forms of unfair assistance for completing assessed work.

‘Third parties’ include people working for web-based companies and/or advertising their services via social media, freelance sites, auction sites and/or note sharing websites (essay mills, people working for coaching and tutoring companies), or an individual such as a lecturer, colleague, fellow students, former student, friend or relative.

‘Input’ means that the third party makes a contribution to the work of the student, such that there is reasonable doubt as to whose authorship/work/learning the submission represents.

In a strict legal definition, a contract must have some form of consideration – something of value (goods or services) must be exchanged. However, this guidance is relevant to all situations where the work has not been carried out by the person submitting, even if there is no consideration.

Essay mill

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

Facilitation

Where students in any way act as agents or intermediaries between other students and essay mills/ghostwriters.

Plagiarism

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

Sanctions

An outcome imposed in response to, and in order to penalise, academic misconduct, for example, expulsion from a provider or removal of academic credit. Providers will typically use a range of terms here (such as sanction, outcome or penalty) with different descriptors. We are using 'sanction' to reflect the potential effect on students and the potential deterrent value associated with the term.

10 Resources and further reading

Books/journal articles

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Second edition, published 17 June 2020

First edition, published 9 October 2017

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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