ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK TOOLKIT

PLAGIARISM AND 'CONTRACT CHEATING'

PRACTICAL ADVICE TO PREVENT "CONTRACT CHEATING"

"Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value."
Albert Einstein

INTRODUCTION

This guide aims to increase CU academic staff awareness of plagiarism related to "contract cheating" and the use of so-called "essay mills". It is recommended that this guide is explored alongside the guide on designing out plagiarism.

Research shows that there is a lack of information and knowledge with regards to this type of plagiarism, and this can be one of the major reasons that students are tempted to use so-called "essay mills".

SO WHAT IS CONTRACT CHEATING?

The term '*contract cheating*' was first used by Clarke & Lancaster in 2006. Contract cheating usually happens when students commission/use a third party to complete their assessed work on their behalf. Students then submit the commissioned work as if they have done it themselves. The third party can range from essay writing service, a friend/family/another student, to a private tutor/copy editing services/etc.

According to the QAA (2017):

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

(QAA Report on Plagiarism in HE, 2017:3)

This form of plagiarism is also known as custom essay writing, *"paid plagiarism, turn-in fraud, literary fraud, academic fraud, essay fraud, assessment fraud, paid third party plagiarism, cuckoo essays and imposter essays. Providers of such essays are referred as 'essay mills'"*. (QAA report on Plagiarism in HE 2016:8).

In this guide we use the term '*contract cheating*' to refer to this form of plagiarism. Contract cheating is an academic offense. According to Walker and Townley (2012), due to its nature (i.e. the involvement of third parties) it is very hard to detect, and it can be considered as academic dishonesty and fraud. It has an enormous negative effect on the credibility of HE qualifications, institutional reputation, individual students' learning, and societal views towards graduates. Contract cheating is a real threat to the academic values, standards and integrity upheld by the majority of students who achieved their qualification by working hard and honestly.

A BIT OF BACKGROUND…

The development of technology and the Internet enables students to easily access information and educational websites on the Web, as well as commercial providers of academic services, custom essay writing services, pre-written essay banks, and file sharing sites. Reports show that many of these providers misled students and try to convince them that the work is not going to be picked up by detecting software tools like Turnitin and so is 100% "plagiarism free". Conventional detecting software tools like Turnitin cannot identify this form of plagiarism as it is not a simply a matter of copy-pasting or paraphrasing of someone else's work. Nor does it involve using information without proper citation or using someone else's ideas and theories.

Consequently, having a clear and transparent image of the scale of this type of plagiarism is a very challenging task. However, a recent QAA report on plagiarism (2017) showed 17000 students per year (**0.7 percent of students per year!**) were involved in some form of plagiarism in UK universities during the previous three years. Although this figure does not give any information on the number of instances of contract cheating plagiarism, but it reveals that plagiarism is very common among students. This shows the importance of promoting academic integrity in academic institutions.

WHO CHEATS?

According to the QAA (2017), "Many students who plagiarise do not do so intentionally. They may be unclear about what constitutes plagiarism and therefore may not realise they are inadvertently submitting plagiarised work." (QAA Report on Plagiarism in HE, 2017)

Although there are students who may commit plagiarism unintentionally, there are certainly students who deliberately use contract cheating. Numerous studies show the demographic influences and contextual factors which may be associated with which students cheat. Bretag's TEQSA report (2017) highlighted the factors that may influence the occurrence of contract cheating, including:

Gender - Men are more likely to confess and self-report cheating than females.

Age - Younger students tend more to cheat and also engage in more "collaborative cheating" than older students.

Discipline of study – Cheating is more likely to happen in Business related studies than other disciplines. This then is followed by engineering, science and the humanities.

Learning orientation - Students with lower grades are more likely to cheat.

Linguistic background - Students for whom English is not the first language are more likely to plagiarise. They might struggle to adapt to the UK Educational system and the English language requirements to complete their tasks.

WHY DO STUDENTS CHEAT?

Further to some the factors mentioned in the previous section, there are some external motivators of students' cheating behaviour. The QAA report in 2017 highlighted some of these external factors as follows:

- Student financial circumstances
- Work and family issues
- Parental pressures
- Fear of failing

Gullifer and Tyson (2014) emphasised students' lack of knowledge of University's plagiarism policy and academic misconduct as an important factor which needs to be taken into account.

HOW TO PREVENT THIS IN PRACTICE?

This is a very challenging question and requires a multi-multidimensional approach to enhance and develop academic integrity, from the admissions process to assessment practices and curriculum design. Having rich (and ongoing) orientation programs in place will go a long way towards increasing students' awareness of academic integrity from the very first days of their learning journey. Similarly, staff development is essential in increasingly designing out plagiarism where possible, and rethinking ways in which assessment can be personalised. See guidance on designing out plagiarism.

Some other good practice examples to consider:

- Include information about academic integrity and contract cheating in online platforms, course outlines and mandatory courses
- Foster 'personalised' teaching and learning relationships.
- Encourage conversations between staff and students about contract cheating.
- Ensure that students have access to resources to prevent use of unacceptable resources and practices.
- Clearly define contract cheating in academic integrity policy.
- Visual reminders that contract cheating is not acceptable.
- Student-led activities to promote a culture of integrity.
- Include information about contract cheating in academic integrity policies.
- Use data to identify contract cheating 'hot spots'.

- Communicate outcomes for contract cheating to all stakeholders, students, staff such as VC and senior managers, governing bodies, professional bodies, etc.

Bretag's TEQSA report (2017:19) makes reference to a presentation by Rogerson (May 2017) that identified some **possible clues** to look out for with regards to referencing. The table below is adapted from Rogerson's presentation:

In-text citations not matching the list of references.	No in-text citations used / no sources acknowledged.	References not relevant to the discipline or the author.
Inappropriate references.	Using bibliographic 'mashups' – e.g. fictional references.	Over reliance on old sources as references.
Internet access dates that are not current or dated.	Missing or falsified data in the citation or reference.	Too many references not really used or cited in the text.

Bretag's report (2017) includes numerous examples of good practice and examples to explore. It is highly recommended reading in particular the following:

Case study 4 (Bretag, 2017:34)

Good practice in assessment: Innovations to minimise contract cheating.

Case study 5 (Bretag, 2017:35)

Good practice in assessment: Student-Centred Active Learning Environment with Upside-down Pedagogies (SCALE-UP) to address contract cheating.

REFERENCES

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Walker, M. and Townley, C. (2012). Contract Cheating: A New Challenge for Academic Honesty? Journal of Academic Ethics, 10(1), pp. 27-44.

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