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Academic Integrity: Campaigning Now and Beyond

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has repositioned teaching and learning from in-person provision to delivery online via new platforms. In the evolving educational ecosystem, contract cheating has continued to rise before and throughout the pandemic. Students indicated that they were unaware of university-provided teaching and learning developmental communities raising questions as to the visibility of campus guidance and support.

Using mixed-methods tools to explore the extent that learning development teams and tutors are recognised by the UKHE sector this study examines institutional approaches to, and techniques for, (re)connecting, (re)building, and promoting this vital academic support to digital students studying for qualifications at a UK university, and to better understand student engagement with external services.

In response use of cheating sites and academic misconduct, and potential gaps in scholarly integrity, the study will help institutions reflect their current communications efforts, review best practice, and identify areas for better communication of knowledgeable, legitimate, focused institutional support.

Paper:

Academic integrity has never been so much under the spotlight.

Questions around morals, ethics and integrity are continually debated (Bruhn et al. 2002; Lanier 2007; Ganske 2010) around contract cheating and essay mills (Foltýnek et al. 2017, QAA 2020). With technological enablement, indications suggest a global rise in engagement with cheating sites

(Kennedy 2020). Leading up to and during the Covid-19 pandemic, opportunities to cheat has increased (Lancaster and Cotarlan 2021) further driving the call to legislate against essay mills. Ongoing are discussions around legislative frameworks in few countries and their efficacy (HEPI 2018) and are notable in terms of genuine mitigation.

At a time of crisis, institutions, in the face of an accusation of failing to support their students, their learning development and support teams are the first line of defence. Institutions without strong, expert teams available to cope with student demand may have found their cohorts turning to contract writers and essay mills.

Where institutions provide teams, tutors, and academics to support students, we ask why, when students appear at academic offences panels, they state that they were unaware of the support available. Contract cheating sites, which are viable commercial operations persuasively communicating, informing, persuading, and providing quick turnover low fee services (Rowland et al. 2017) reaching students through a suite of marketing communications and multiple platforms such as Twitter optimising automation tools that can undertake market segmentation and create leads for specific subject areas (Amigud 2019). Nixon and Crook (2021) highlight the poisoning of student minds with aggressive marketing and promotional communications suggesting that university staff are not interested in the individual, using soft-sell techniques to persuade outsourcing behaviours. Despite the friendly-sounding advertisements that promise to solve student deadlines with offers of bespoke, high quality and work guaranteed to be undetectable, research highlights variations in assignment quality (Sutherland-Smith and Dullaghan 2019).

(Sutherland-Smith and Dullaghan (2019) also point out the small print that allows cheating sites to share details with third parties. According to Birk et al. (2020) sites often share such information with the student's institution of study or hold the student potentially hostage. Grue et al. (2021) likens cheating sites organisations to organised crime. In countries where there is no or emerging legislative framework to counter such operations, institutions can only fight back through the provision of in-house practical and empowering support through a variety of strategies that appeal to the heart and mind, logic, reason, ethics, and accountability, key marketing ploys to engage audiences. Comas-Forgas et al (2020) point out that whilst contract cheating sites have achieved success through the use of information and catchy slogans, the implication of fraud is never presented. Notably, universities do provide learning developers and academic skill support for students, and also have marketing and communications teams.

Whilst worthy efforts are being undertaken to understand institutional engagement and action in supporting academic integrity and neutralising essay mills (QAA 2020) the lack of effective communications raises questions as to the level of, and commitment to, institutional efforts regarding seemingly competing yet official support for the student body. To be clear, the marketing and promotion of the university recognised professional learning developers.

We focus on institutional offerings how they advertise and promote their learning support services and communities both internally and externally. Further, we explore how subject staff recognise learning developers and tutors, and attitudes towards signposting students to those expert teams. We also seek to understand the subject areas that do not make use of LD teams, their philosophical perspective of external offerings, along with reflections of staff engagement with regulations. We seek to understand how institutions ensure that students learn and develop within the spirit of the academy before moving into the professions.

Using an online questionnaire and interviews, this mixed-method approach aims to provide, at a time when contract cheaters online visibility is highly marketed, and as society moves through the pandemic, insights on how to improve the visibility of learning development in and beyond education ecosystems.

The data will assist university managements in reconsidering not only the support available to the student body and the extent to which it celebrates and promotes this legitimate professional strand to the wider academic community in a call for 'academic integrity: campaigning now and beyond'.

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