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Challenges and Solutions to Combatting Predatory Essay Mills: Supporting Student Academic Integrity in UK Higher Education

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: The Office for Students' Director of Regulation Susan Lapworth (2021) recently published an article expressing concern about the rise in "essay writing services" also known as essay mills, and contract cheating sites, arguing that students should be protected from these predatory 'services'. As of February 2021, there were at least 932 such sites operating in the UK alone (Skidmore 2021): global figures are unquantifiable. Lancaster and Cotarlan's (2021) analysis of a single contract cheating site found that learning in the Covid-19 landscape, which arguably has had significant impacts on student mental health, has led to an increase in academic offences.

Scholars have argued that rather than adopt a punitive approach to students who have 'cheated' the principles of academic integrity should be embedded in teaching and learning endeavours (eg., Eaton and Turner 2020). This paper explores the possibilities and responsibilities for protecting students from the consequences of breaching academic integrity.

Paper:

Lapworth (2021) expressed concern about the rise in predatory contract cheating sites and services, arguing that students should be provided with appropriate advice noting the risks to students who are successfully "targeted by these services" stating that they are "exposing themselves to a shadowy industry where cybercrime looms large and their personal data is at risk." Lapworth (2021) also highlights the threats to academic standards in UK Higher Education. According to Skidmore (2021), as of February 2021 there were 932 such sites operating in the UK alone; for context, Skidmore sates that according to the QAA there were 635 sites as of June 2018. It is also important to note that this is a global phenomenon, and therefore the discourse surrounding academic cheating and breaches of academic integrity, often focuses on the difficulties in policing what is becoming a vast and highly profitable industry (Adams 2021). In efforts to combat breaches of integrity academic the QAA (2020) has established an Academic Integrity Charter, to which 118 of the 165 UK higher education providers have signed up.

There is also the matter of deceptive, exploitative essay writing sites, for example StuDocu (2021a, b), which purports to be a notes sharing site that entices students to sell study materials and essays allowing subscribers to access these and other assignments. As Norris (2019, p. 4) notes "some students cheat for the sole purpose of earning income. Many online". We have observed this phenomenon in our own institution, whereby students were found to have uploaded teaching materials to websites for payment. The initial institutional response has been to propose to include a new clause in the IP section of the Student Agreement, limiting the use of all teaching and learning materials to their own private study purposes (personal communication). This updates to the student/university contractual agreement will explicitly that students must not upload teaching materials

"(…to an internet site or social media platform) without prior confirmation from us that your proposed use is authorised or permitted by the owner or licensee of the legal rights in the materials."

Lancaster and Cotarlan's (2021) analysis of the American site Chegg (accused of being a cheating super spreader and currently valued at more than $12 billion (Adams 2021)) found significant impacts on student mental health, and an increase in academic offences. Eaton and Turner (2020) contend that rather than adopt a punitive approach to students who have 'cheated', the principles of academic integrity should be embedded in teaching and learning endeavours.

The notion of academic integrity is not new; however, it has attracted significantly increased attention in recent years. Pavela et al. (2017) updated their proposed 10 principles of academic integrity, contending that all faculty staff should:

1. "Affirm academic integrity as a core institutional value.
2. Provide clear expectations for academic integrity and assess how well students understand them.
3. Reduce opportunities and temptations to engage in academic dishonesty.
4. Respond to academic dishonesty when it occurs.
5. Know your students and encourage their capacity for learning, self-management, and trust.
6. Develop creative forms of assessment that enhance student learning.
7. Affirm the role of teachers as guides and mentors.
8. Foster a lifelong commitment to the pursuit of knowledge.
9. Recognize that promoting and protecting academic integrity is a collaborative endeavor involving shared leadership by students, faculty members and administrators.
10. Align the aims of your academic integrity program as a foundation for other core values, including student self-management, inclusiveness, community responsibility, fundamental fairness, and intellectual virtues associated with successful scholarship".

A number of studies, of which Daoud et al.'s (2019) is typical, have investigated the efficacy of the plagiarism detection software such as Turnitin, the authors found that software not only polices "academic dishonesty …it can be an efficient educational tool". We argue however that efforts to support students in higher education must focus on Pavela et al.'s (2017) principles of academic integrity, whilst acknowledging and acting on Eaton and Turner's (2020) findings that fear and anxiety can lead to students breaching academic integrity. Doing so would support efforts by faculties and institutions to address concerns regarding academic integrity and student mental health.

Adopting this approach would, at least in part, respond to growing concerns that the reputation of higher education in the UK is significantly compromised by the proliferation of contract cheating sites and services. It could also allow students and educators to return to the core principles of academic integrity, combatting the array of forms of academic misconduct which threaten institutions and students. This paper explores the possibilities and responsibilities for protecting students from the consequences of breaching academic integrity.

Keywords.

Academic Integrity; Student Mental Health; Contract Cheating.

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