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Contract cheating in UK higher education: A covert investigation of essay mills

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Contract cheating is currently a concern for universities and the higher education (HE) sector. It has been brought into the spotlight in recent years through the growth of online essay mills, where students can easily commission and purchase written assessment responses. This study contributes to the wider literature on academic integrity in HE by examining the phenomenon of contract cheating from a supply-side perspective, thereby considering the essay mill offering and student interaction with it. The authors covertly engage with five essay mills, before successfully completing an assignment purchase with two of these providers. The pre-purchase stage of an assignment transaction is first examined, unpacking ten reassurance cues used by essay mill providers in the text of their websites. These reassurance cues help to ensure the attractiveness of the essay mill product to potential student consumers. The analysis then moves to explore the ethical discourses around academic integrity that essay mills provide, revealing inconsistencies in their stance towards the potential for academic misconduct from the use of essay mill services. Finally, the article explores the quality of the essay mill product, through grading and Turnitin[®] reports for the two purchased essay mill assignments. Following recent calls for the outlawing of essay mills, this article provides a timely addition to current understanding of this phenomenon, and the associated challenges of contract cheating in HE.

Keywords: contract cheating; essay mill; academic integrity; covert research

Introduction

In October 2017, students' use of essay mills to write their assignments hit the UK headlines (Kelly, 2017). An 'essay mill' (Bartlett, 2009) or 'paper mill' (Park, 2003) is a colloquial term for websites that provide pre-written assignments to students. These typically require payment for work done, with essays commissioned on a (supposedly) bespoke basis from ghost writers (Austin & Brown, 1999). This differs from websites where students can purchase essays from an off-the-peg selection, which might be better termed 'essay banks', reflecting their nature as repositories of pre-written work. The practice of a student submitting an essay mill assignment to their academic institution, without any changes being made, amounts to 'passing off', or in other words, plagiarism. This moves into the realm of 'contract cheating' (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006), and is deemed an ever-present threat to the academic integrity of universities worldwide (Lancaster, 2017).

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The authors of this article were concerned about essay mill submissions compromising the assessment process at their own higher education (HE) institutions. This led to the design of an exploratory study, which aimed to understand more about essay mill providers and how they interact with students. Following the logic of it being better to ‘know your enemy’, three research questions were posed: First, how do essay mills reassure potential ‘customers’ about the products that they offer in the pre-purchase stage? Second, how do essay mills negotiate ethical issues for those using their services? Third, what is the quality of the tangible ‘product’ (i.e. the written assignment) provided by essay mills? These three questions were addressed using a two-phase exploratory study involving elements of covert research.

Existing studies of contract cheating typically focus on: (i) students who might perpetrate or ‘consume’ it (e.g. Selwyn, 2008; Rigby *et al.*, 2015) and (ii) the detection and policing of contract cheating by HE institutions, staff and systems (e.g. Baird & Clare, 2017; Clare *et al.*, 2017; Rogerson, 2017). The contribution of this article is that it examines contract cheating in HE from a supply-side perspective, specifically in terms of the ‘manufacture’ of work for students by a third party. Such an approach builds substantively on a recent QAA (2017) report by proceeding through the entire essay mill transaction process, including interaction with essay mill employees, purchase of the product offered and subsequent interrogation of its quality through grading and the plagiarism detection software Turnitin[®]. By providing a better understanding of the supply side for contract cheating, this article will offer valuable insights for academics and HE managers attempting to understand and curtail it.

The discussion begins by exploring the phenomenon of contract cheating, initially through the literature on academic misconduct and integrity in HE. This is followed by a critical summary of existing work on student plagiarism in HE, thereby providing further insight into contract cheating and the reasons why students might engage in such practice. After detailing the methods employed to collect primary data, the findings are presented. These are structured broadly around the three research questions, and thematic interpretations are revealed in relation to these. The article concludes by identifying some academic and HE management implications from the research, moving beyond the large body of work on student motivations to plagiarise to cast light on the services that provide students with the means to engage in the practice of contract cheating.

Academic misconduct and integrity in HE, and contract cheating

Academic misconduct and integrity are necessarily linked concepts. In all its forms, academic misconduct represents a threat to the integrity of any students involved (Mahmood, 2009; McCabe *et al.*, 2012) and to the institutions in which it takes place (Park, 2003). Perhaps most prominent in previous literature around academic integrity and misconduct is the issue of student plagiarism, which involves copying some or all of the work of another without crediting the original source (Page, 2004; Youmans, 2011). A form of academic misconduct related to student plagiarism is ‘contract cheating’ (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006; Mahmood, 2009; Walker & Townley, 2012; Rigby *et al.*, 2015; Clare *et al.*, 2017; Rogerson, 2017). This is ‘the process of offering the process of completing an assignment for a student out to tender’ (Clarke

& Lancaster, 2006). While some UK universities include contract cheating within their definition of plagiarism (e.g. University of Manchester, 2014; Lancaster University, 2017), many others see it as a distinct academic integrity offence (e.g. University of Huddersfield, 2015), or in some cases present it as a more serious case of academic misconduct, as distinct from simple plagiarism (e.g. University of Chester, 2017).

While contract cheating may include cases where students contract out assignment work and assessment tasks to friends and family (Mahmood, 2009), attention has focused more recently on students making use of internet-based essay mills (Bartlett, 2009). This practice was first documented by Clarke and Lancaster (2006). They examined a site named RentACoder, whereby a buyer makes a request and sellers then bid to produce the product (e.g. a piece of computer code) for them. Their analysis indicates that the majority of the misconduct usage seems to be for students on computing degrees, although work by the QAA (2016) indicates the problem of essay mills is much wider in terms of the disciplines covered.

Ease of internet access is widely seen as a facilitator of contract cheating (Walker & Townley, 2012). Word processing allows a cut-and-paste approach to essays and the internet provides access to pre-written assignments on essay mill websites (Austin & Brown, 1999; Scanlon & Neumann, 2002). These established technological developments have increased the possibilities and temptation for contract cheating to occur. Compounding this problem, Lau *et al.* (2013) identify that even in a secondary education context there is now a generation of students brought up with the internet who are familiar with using it to access media and information. Furthermore, notions of students as consumers (Woodall *et al.*, 2014; Bunce *et al.*, 2016) link logically to the idea of buying assignments off the shelf. These notions of a (financial) transaction in contract cheating have led some authors to suggest that it represents a more serious academic integrity offence than simple plagiarism, as plagiarism may occur unintentionally, through students' lack of referencing knowledge (Löfström, 2011) and usually requires some effort on the part of the student to weave together material from different sources (Page, 2004). In contrast, the level of student effort involved in contract cheating may be minimal, with the main cost being financial.

As indicated above, much prior work on contract cheating has focused on either the demand side, in terms of students' willingness to pay for its outputs (Rigby *et al.*, 2015), or on the institutional perspective, with a particular focus on the detection and prevention of contract cheating by universities (Mahmood, 2009; Baird & Clare, 2017; Clare *et al.*, 2017; Rogerson, 2017). In terms of institutions militating against contract cheating, Baird and Claire (2017) have suggested introducing a series of interventions into the design of student assessments. These include (*inter alia*) varying the basic group work assessment around different conditions, making it harder to share data between groups (an example of increasing the *effort* required to cheat) and making academic misconduct penalties more visible to students (an example of increasing perceived *risk* of contract cheating).

From the student perspective, studies have suggested that contract cheating might be usefully viewed through a criminology lens. In particular, Claire *et al.* (2017)—drawing on the work of Cornish and Clarke (1986)—suggest that contract cheating might be influenced by a 'rational choice perspective', in which the propensity and decision to offend is ultimately affected by a potential or actual perpetrator's

perceived trade-off between the rewards gained from a given offence and the risks and efforts of undertaking it.

Student plagiarism, contract cheating and reasons for its occurrence

Much existing academic work on academic integrity offences focuses on student plagiarism in HE and considers why this occurs. Various contributory factors are identified, including gender, age, ethnic differences and moral capability. For example, Etherington and Schulting (1995) contend that male students are more likely to plagiarise than females, due to males' lower moral cognitive capabilities and reduced fear of the consequences of being caught. Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead (1995) report differing attitudes to plagiarism related to age, with those over 25 likely to see it as a more serious offence than younger students. Ethnic differences are also frequently cited in plagiarism studies. In particular, there is a perception that Chinese students, due to cultural attitudes, are more likely to engage in plagiarism than their Western counterparts (Sowden, 2005; Ehrich *et al.*, 2016).

Various authors have chosen to identify and often list the reasons, motivations, antecedents or causes for students to engage in plagiarism (e.g. Park, 2003; Bennett, 2005; Devlin & Gray, 2007; Malgwi & Rakovski, 2009; Gullifer & Tyson, 2010; Guo, 2011). Summarising and collapsing all of this work would suggest that the propensity for student plagiarism to occur is affected by three fundamental spheres of influence. The first of these relates to a given student's psychological traits and personal moral capability, particularly in terms of the internal interplay between his/her desire for academic success and strength of belief that cheating is wrong (e.g. Bennett, 2005; Guo, 2011; Lau *et al.*, 2013).

The second sphere of influence determining student plagiarism in HE relates to institutional practices, which may make such behaviour more or less likely to occur. Examples would include the clarity, visibility and resultant understanding of plagiarism policies for both students and academic staff (e.g. Devlin & Gray, 2007; Löfström, 2011), the relative levels of anonymity of these two stakeholder groups (e.g. Walker & Townley, 2012) and the perceived and actual effectiveness of any plagiarism detection systems and deterrents such as Turnitin[®] (e.g. Park, 2003; Youmans, 2011; Heckler *et al.*, 2013). If a student is aware that their work will be run through a system such as Turnitin[®], evidence suggests that they will be less likely to plagiarise (Martin, 2005; Heckler *et al.*, 2013). However, systems like Turnitin[®] can also be compromised. Warn (2006: 195), for example, suggested that students have become wise to such software, leading to a culture of paraphrasing others' work in order to 'drop below the radar of the detection'. While the internet and software such as Turnitin[®] have made it easier for academics to detect cases of simple (cut-and-paste) plagiarism (Lyon *et al.*, 2006; Youmans, 2011), contract cheating, whereby the work produced is original (albeit by the essay mill writer rather than the student), is very hard to detect (Walker & Townley, 2012). Thus, the presence of plagiarism detection software may not act as a significant deterrent to students in such cases.

The final sphere represents the societal, cultural and financial pressures to which a given student may be exposed and made vulnerable, and which might, in turn, increase their likelihood to engage in plagiarism. Examples include family

expectations, job market competitiveness and the financial cost of education, which can lead to a felt need or desire to see a tangible return on that investment (e.g. Bennett, 2005; Devlin & Gray, 2007; Malgwi & Rakovski, 2009; Gullifer & Tyson, 2010; Guo, 2011). The latter of these points fits into the wider narrative concerning the marketisation of higher education and the perceived 'rights' of fee-paying students as customers with entitlement (Molesworth *et al.*, 2010).

While all of the above-mentioned factors can motivate plagiarism, the latter sphere, in terms of societal, cultural and financial pressures, may be especially pertinent in the context of contract cheating (Walker & Townley, 2012), rendering students vulnerable to the advances of essay mill providers offering a 'quick fix' solution. In light of this, our article extends the body of knowledge on contract cheating by exploring it from the supply-side perspective, namely studying in detail the promises made by essay mills and the products they provide.

Method

The three research questions were addressed using a two-phase exploratory study. Phase one was an investigation of essay mill providers involving covert participant observation. Phase two was an additional task-driven and covert exercise comprising the multiple grading of two assignments purchased from essay mills. Key steps in this process are now outlined, before discussing research ethics, which was a major consideration.

Data collection

The first phase of the study involved five essay mill providers, the names of which have been anonymised due to the covert nature of the research. These were identified using the search terms 'essay writing services UK' and 'essay writing help UK' in Google. All five providers were selected for their high internet visibility to prospective users, with each appearing on the first page of hits in response to these search terms. A detailed record was made of the landing pages of the five websites using multiple screen shots for subsequent detailed content analysis (see below). However, more basic observations could be made at this early stage in the study. First, these sites provided an order form for the service required—in some cases providing instant quotes. This typically specified key criteria such as the subject and title of the piece of work required, the word length, format (e.g. essay, dissertation, assignment, etc.), level (e.g. undergraduate year 1, 2 or 3, MSc, PhD), required grade (e.g. 2:1, first) and turnaround time. Prices always increased with word length, the prestige of the qualification (e.g. MSc work is more expensive than BSc), the grade standard (e.g. a distinction or first-class piece of work is more expensive than a merit or 2:1) and the turnaround time (i.e. shorter turnaround times were more expensive than longer ones).

A potentially revealing means of obtaining data for the study was to engage in live chat with site representatives, which is something all five providers offered, typically via a pop-up box. To achieve this, we adopted a covert participant observation approach, undertaking live chat interactions via a fabricated student identity named

‘Ryan’, contactable through a Gmail address. Ryan was envisaged as a UK-born, male student aged 21, studying in the final year of a Management BSc at a UK-based business school. On initial engagement in live chat, Ryan’s question was always the same:

Hi, I have been set a branding assignment for my Management BSc degree. Is this something you can help with?

This stimulated a series of interactions in which the title of Ryan’s proposed assignment was disclosed:

The branding literature still favours discussion of product brands, typically fast-moving consumer goods. How appropriate is this to a 21st-century definition of branding? (2000 words)

Further detail on assignment content was kept purposely thin so as not to over-direct the nature of the product delivered and to explore how essay mills individually interpreted and responded to the task. Other areas of enquiry, relating to the cost and delivery timescales for ordered assignments, were probed through the natural flow of interaction within the live chat environment. Of particular relevance to addressing our second research question, variations on the following question were also posed in live chat to try to stimulate a conversation around the ethics of contract cheating with providers:

All work submitted at my university has to go through something called Turnitin®. I am worried about this. Do you think it will be a problem?

Following these interactions, two final-year undergraduate assignments were ordered with a 15 working day turnaround, each from a different essay mill provider (A and B). One assignment was requested at 2:1 standard and the other at first class. The first-class assignment was not delivered, and was therefore reordered from a third provider (C). Table 1 provides details of the orders placed.

Table 1. Orders placed with essay mills

Essay mill provider	Order details	Cost	Details of order delivery
A	2:1 assignment with proposed title and 15 working day turnaround	£250—receipt of transaction emailed	Assignment delivered two days before the deadline, with accompanying ‘quality report guarantee’ document
B	First-class assignment (‘ultimate’ service) with proposed title and 15 working day turnaround	£170—receipt of transaction emailed	Assignment never delivered; money claimed back through credit card
C	First-class assignment with proposed title and 15 working day turnaround	£370.50—receipt of transaction emailed	Assignment delivered nine days before the deadline, with accompanying plagiarism scan document

To examine the quality of the two purchased assignments, they were graded by ten academics at different HE institutions (eight in the UK and two in Europe), all of whom taught undergraduate brand management courses that were directly relevant to the assignment task. Each academic graded both assignments. Those agreeing to this task did so on the basis that it constituted part of a research study, the purpose of which would be revealed on the study's completion. A marking guide asked graders to comment on the strongest and weakest aspects of the assignment and to provide a mark out of 100. In addition to this, the researchers separately ran both assignments through Turnitin® plagiarism detection software.

Data analysis

The research delivered multiple data sources for analysis. These included: screen captures of landing pages and wider website architecture for the five essay mills; transcripts of live chat interactions; the two ordered assignments and accompanying documents (see Table 1); Turnitin® reports for the two assignments; and grading feedback. Consistent with the approaches of Heracleous (2006) and Abdallah and Langley (2014), all of these data, with the exception of the numeric assignment gradings and Turnitin® scores, were viewed as text. Emphasising inter-coder reliability in data analysis, each researcher independently reviewed the textual data, before aggregating their findings into agreed interpretations relating to the three research questions.

Ethics

A significant challenge of the current study relates to ethics. First, live chat interactions with essay mill representatives did not involve informed consent. Second, those agreeing to mark the assignments did this in the knowledge that they would only be made aware of the purpose of this exercise after the task was completed. Arguments concerning the use of such covert research techniques vary. Some argue that they involve elements of deception, violation of trust and misrepresentation (Homan, 1991; Herrera, 1999; Spicker, 2011), as was arguably the case here in the use of a fabricated persona to interact in live chat and withholding critical information from markers until a task was completed. In such scenarios, Calvey (2008: 905) suggests that covert approaches to data collection become 'effectively marginalized as a "last resort methodology"'. Others have argued that there may be unique situations in which covert research might be justified; for example, if doing the research by more overt means altered the phenomenon being studied (see e.g. ESRC, 2015). It is argued that this study equates to such a unique situation, on the basis that an overt approach to studying the essay mill websites would have been less likely to reveal the typical service they provide to their 'clients', whilst informing academics that the essays they marked were from essay mills beforehand may have impacted the grade given.

It is also worth considering that there is a long tradition of covert research in areas of human interaction that fall into grey areas of legality and morality. Examples from the last 20 years would include research on cannabis dealing (Fountain, 1993), bogus

advertising (Goode, 1996), organ trafficking (Scheper-Hughes, 2004) and workplace lying (Shulman, 2007). The current study, examining a transactional process that is legal but potentially leads to fraudulent student activity down the line, also falls into an established practice of employing covert observation to research human and organisational behaviours and actions of questionable and debateable morality.

Reassuring ‘customers’ in pre-purchase stages

A challenge faced by individuals purchasing products of questionable ethics and legality is that they may be exposed to unscrupulous providers, who take advantage of the fact that a customer’s ability to complain about a product that is of poor quality or not delivered adequately may be curtailed through a sense of shame or a lack of legal rights. Accordingly, trust between potential customers and a given provider has been suggested as critical for online markets that operate in ethical and legal grey areas, such as recreational drugs (Van Hout & Bingham, 2013). Essay mills face similar issues, and a legitimate task for providers in this space, therefore, is developing trust and confidence in potential customers about the product and service offered, through pre-purchase reassurance cues. The essay mill sites studied were for the most part professional in their presentation, with animated flash graphics in some cases. This in itself might instil confidence in potential customers about a provider’s professionalism. However, further detailed content analysis of the essay mill landing pages identified ten discernible pre-purchase reassurance cues embedded within their written discourse. These are presented in Table 2 and discussed below. We contend that the sites used all or some of these cues in an attempt to move student customers towards a transaction.

The first reassurance cue relates to *expertise in area*. Thus, as evidenced in Table 2, four of the websites emphasised the size and/or higher qualifications (e.g. Masters or PhD) of the company’s academic writing team. Qualifying phrases to convey expertise across all five sites included: ‘expert(s)’, ‘professionally written’, ‘fully qualified’ and ‘run by British graduates using British writers’. In some cases apparent student testimonials were used to give a veneer of legitimacy to these claims.

The second reassurance cue relates to *high quality standards*. All the essay mills conveyed this in landing page discourses, with four using the term ‘high quality’ or a synonymic phrase (e.g. ‘highest quality’, ‘outstanding quality’). Some also indicated rigorous quality assurance processes, with claims such as: ‘[W]e’ll revise your paper until it’s perfect’ (provider D) and an alleged quote from the CEO of one essay mill (provider A) extolling the dedication of its aftercare staff. The same site also used a newspaper testimonial to strengthen its quality claim. In other instances, quality was emphasised through references to repeat client business or referrals.

Four of the five websites used *price/value* as a pre-purchase reassurance cue. It appears that this is sometimes to dispel concerns over affordability, with one site offering staged payments (provider B), although, as noted above (see Table 1), we ordered an assignment from this operator and paid in full upfront, but the assignment was never delivered. Other essay mills made more generic claims of ‘affordable rates’ (provider C) and ‘We aren’t greedy. Affordable and student friendly prices’ (provider E). In two cases, references to price/value also took the form of a straightforward

Table 2. Pre-purchase reassurance cues on essay mill landing pages

		Essay mill provider				
		A	B	C	D	E
Reassurance cues		Illustrative discourse from landing page				
Expertise in area	<p>'We choose the best writer for your model answer, based on the knowledge of our pool of over 500 academic writers.'</p> <p>'Your order is written by an individual who has proven their degree qualification and grades.'</p> <p>'All of our services are provided by fully qualified writers who hold relevant degrees in the subject they are writing for.'</p>	<p>'A [provider B] essay is 100% written from scratch – after a thorough research by an expert. Quality is then evaluated by another expert before delivery.'</p> <p>'At [provider B], the final products of all our work orders have to go through rigorous research by experts...'</p>	<p>'Unlike many companies that outsource to countries around the world, our essay writing service is UK based, run by British graduates using British writers.'</p> <p>'...we have the best essay writers in almost every subject...'</p> <p>'MSc and PhD qualified experts provide a plagiarism-free essay writing service...'</p>	<p>'Have Your Custom Essay Written by a PhD.'</p> <p>'Over 700 writers with a Master's or a Doctorate in your discipline are ready to accept your order and deliver outstanding work.'</p> <p>Student testimonial: 'I'm very pleased with the order. It was professionally written in an academic language, one could see the extensive and thorough research that was carried out.'</p> <p>Ali, Nottingham</p>	<p>'PhD experts for every dissertation topic.'</p> <p>'Over 142 accomplished PhD and Masters Degree experts in our team.'</p> <p>Student testimonial: '... I thank your experts for helping me through. You are true friends.' Salim Hussein, London</p>	

Table 2. (Continued)

		Essay mill provider				
		A	B	C	D	E
Reassurance cues		Illustrative discourse from landing page				
High quality standards	<p>‘[Provider A] offer the highest quality of work – bar none!’</p> <p>‘Driven by Quality, Aiming for Perfection.’</p> <p>‘In 2003, <i>The Sunday Times</i> purchased an essay undercover and a top lecturer said it was 2:1 standard confirmed!’</p> <p><u>Quote from CEO:</u></p> <p>‘Our Aftercare quality checkers need to eat, sleep and breathe quality – we won’t tolerate anything but the best.’</p> <p>N/A</p>	<p>‘High quality. The quality of all our projects is uncompromising. When you place an order with us, be rest assured that you’re going to get a high-quality project.’</p>	<p>‘... we’re here to support you with high quality work...’</p> <p>‘...any work produced by us exceeds that considered acceptable by other agencies and provides our clients with materials that stand head and shoulders above the rest.’</p>	<p>‘The outstanding quality you’ve been looking for.’</p> <p>‘[W]e’ll revise your paper until it’s perfect.’</p> <p>‘There is a reason why more than half of our customers return to order again. Because they get the quality they didn’t find with other writing services.’</p>	<p>‘Our service feeds on a good reputation since majority of our clients are return clients or are sent to us through referrals. Therefore it would be detrimental to our business if we were to provide poor services.’ (Sic)</p>	
Price/value	N/A	<p>‘...an initial deposit of 20 to 50% of the due amount in order to commence work on your order.’</p>	<p>‘... we offer the essay writing services you need at very affordable rates...’</p>	<p>‘Want to make first order? Get 15% off.’</p> <p>‘Get up to 10% in bonus money! The more you order the less you pay next time.’</p>	<p>‘Free amendments’</p> <p>‘Get free outline’</p> <p>‘We aren’t greedy. Affordable and student friendly prices.’</p> <p>‘We are 20% cheaper than competitors.’</p>	

Table 2. (Continued)

		Essay mill provider				
		A	B	C	D	E
Reassurance cues		Illustrative discourse from landing page				
Timeliness of product delivery	<p>'You will be delighted when your order is delivered on time...'</p> <p>'The Press love to write about [provider A]. "We opt for a week-long turnaround... in fact, it arrives in just three days." – BBC <i>Fake Britain</i> – Dec 2015.'</p> <p><u>Quote from CEO on landing page:</u></p> <p>'We know that it's vital that your essay is delivered on time...'</p>	<p>'Excellent customer service. Customer service is available 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, in order to make sure that you're highly satisfied and able to respond to your needs quickly.'</p>	<p>'Timely delivery. Work delivered on time or get your work for free.'</p>	<p>'Get your essay on time, even if it's due in 3 hours.'</p> <p>'On-time delivery: you receive your paper on time or even earlier.'</p> <p>'Timely delivery and fast turnaround – that's another thing you are guaranteed to get at [provider D].'</p> <p><u>Student testimonial:</u></p> <p>'Excellent. [Provider D] kept me informed about my order at every stage. I felt confident with the service and my essay arrived earlier than expected.' Michael, York</p>	N/A	
Plagiarism detection	<p>'Each piece of work completed is rigorously checked for plagiarism...'</p>	<p>'Zero plagiarism.'</p>	<p>'Plagiarism free. Free plagiarism report with every order.'</p>	<p>'No plagiarism: you get an original paper and free plagiarism check.'</p>	<p>'Zero plagiarism.'</p>	

Table 2. (Continued)

		Essay mill provider				
		A	B	C	D	E
Reassurance cues		Illustrative discourse from landing page				
Client guarantee	<p>'We guarantee your final grade or your money back.'</p> <p>'Receive the correct grade from your tutor or we refund you!'</p> <p>'100% Originality Guarantee: We offer a £5000 no plagiarism guarantee.'</p> <p>'Delivered on Time Guarantee: We meet your deadline or your money back... if your order is only a minute late, it's free.'</p>	N/A	<p>'Grade guarantee. Get the grade you ordered first time or your money back.'</p> <p>'Free amendments. Free changes for up to 14 days.'</p> <p>'Timely delivery. Work delivered on time or get your work for free.'</p>	<p>'Money Back: you get the money back if you are not satisfied.'</p>	<p>'Best industry standards and guarantees.'</p>	

Table 2. (Continued)

		Essay mill provider				
		A	B	C	D	E
Reassurance cues		Illustrative discourse from landing page				
Risk reduction	<p>‘We are a registered British company based in [Anonymised City] UK [street address given].’</p> <p>‘You can visit our offices in [Anonymised City] all year around, we don’t hide away.’</p> <p>‘We take all the risk out of finding a writer.’</p> <p>‘Our press and media coverage lets you know exactly who you are dealing with.’</p> <p><u>Press logos used on website:</u></p> <p><i>BBC, The Sunday Times, The Guardian, the Daily Mail</i></p> <p><u>Quote from CEO:</u></p> <p>‘Never before have customers within this industry had such security, reassurance and peace of mind’ – [CEO]</p>	<p>Provides a UK telephone number.</p>	<p>Provides a UK telephone number. Street address given at bottom of site along with claim to be a ‘company registered in the United Kingdom’.</p>	<p>Provides a UK telephone number. ‘Contrary to what you may have read in the media, not all essay writing companies are out to exploit the idleness of that small minority of students.’</p>	<p>Provides a UK telephone number. ‘Genuine UK company. Addressed at [Anonymised Street] in London...’</p> <p>‘Beware of quacks. Are you being offered very low prices? Unrealistic promises? If the deal seems too good to be true, it isn’t true. Insist on dealing with a person/company that is in the UK. Be protected by UK law.’</p>	

Table 2. (Continued)

	Essay mill provider				
	A	B	C	D	E
Reassurance cues	Illustrative discourse from landing page				
Normalisation	Use of student testimonials. ‘[Provider A] – trusted by students since 2003.’	N/A	N/A	Use of student testimonials.	Use of student testimonials. ‘We have been providing reliable consultation services for the last 8 years to students just like you.’ ‘74% of our customers come back.’ ‘We have assisted over 10591 students so far.’ Logos of the following UK universities on the landing page: Exeter, UCL, Oxford, Warwick, Leeds, Bath and Cambridge.

Table 2. (Continued)

		Essay mill provider			
	A	B	C	D	E
Reassurance cues					
Empathy	<p>'We understand that university can be stressful for you. When using our market leading services, that stress instantly disappears...'</p> <p>'Our staff and writers care about your academic success' ... we do all the worrying so you don't have to!'</p> <p>'... leaving you calm and confident that you will get the grade you deserve.'</p>	<p>'We know sometimes you're having hard times writing your essays, or overloaded with so much work that you'd therefore need assistance.'</p>	N/A	<p>'Stressed because you need to hand in the paper today, and you still have nothing? Order right now and meet your deadline easy!'</p>	<p>'Struggling with dissertation? We shall walk with you to the end.'</p> <p>'Save time. Relax. Enjoy. Campus happens only once. You deserve to enjoy more and worry less about failing.'</p> <p><u>Student testimonial:</u> 'Studying when you have a family and you work is one of the hardest tasks in life. I am short of time and I am often fatigued and overworked. Your services have put a little bit more time on the table for me. I am now able to spare more time for my kids and for rest. Keep on with your good work.' Ray Stevens, Manchester</p>

Table 2. (Continued)

		Essay mill provider				
		A	B	C	D	E
Reassurance cues		Illustrative discourse from landing page				
Confidentiality	N/A		‘Confidentiality... [Provider B], will never disclose the identity of clients.’	‘Your order is 100% confidential.’ ‘Only for you. The work you order will never be re-used or re-sold.’	‘Privacy: using our service is safe and confidential for you.’	‘The reliable and confidential service...’

promotional tool to generate transactional activity, with offers such as 15% off the first order (provider D) and claims of being 20% cheaper than competitors (provider E). In the case of the former of these operators, the issue of value for repeat/future customer business was also addressed through the notion of a 10% loyalty bonus.

Potential worries for students entering into essay mill transactions are likely to be that the product requested will not be delivered on time, and/or might be identified as plagiarised by electronic detection systems used by HE institutions. Regarding the first concern, four essay mills used their landing page to instil reassurances around *timeliness of product delivery*, with phrases such as ‘delivered on time’. One provider claimed ‘timely delivery and fast turnaround’ was guaranteed, but provided no indication of how this guarantee was constituted (provider D). Another site suggested work not delivered on time would be free (provider C). Timeliness was also articulated as responsive customer service, covering ‘24 hours a day and 7 days a week’ (provider B), although this was the provider that failed to deliver the assignment ordered for this study, demonstrating a lack of sincerity in essay mill claims and the risks for students who relied on these. For one site, further reassurance over the timeliness came from an alleged student testimonial about earlier-than-expected delivery (provider D). Another made a similar claim, ironically by quoting from the BBC documentary programme *Fake Britain* (provider A).

Regarding reassurance cues for *plagiarism detection*, all of the websites studied suggested this would not be a problem with their products, using terms like ‘zero plagiarism’, ‘plagiarism free’ and ‘no plagiarism’. Three sites also emphasised how they undertook some form of checking or reporting process to ensure their assignments could not be identified as plagiarised by an HE institution. It is clear from the language used by the websites that, while academics and universities might be starting to differentiate contract cheating from simple plagiarism as a form of academic misconduct, the essay mill providers (and thus, potentially, the students as their target customers) do not make such terminological distinctions.

To further reassure potential clients and instil confidence regarding satisfactory delivery of the product, four essay mill sites declared some form of *client guarantee* on their landing pages. One claimed ‘Best industry standards and guarantees’ with no further details (provider E). Three other sites all suggested guarantees of money back if not satisfied with the service, with one provider (A) promising a £5000 refund if one of their assignments was found to be plagiarised. In two cases it was also suggested that dissatisfaction could relate to not getting the grade you ordered (providers A and C).

A concern of potential essay mill customers might be that they are dealing with an unscrupulous operator in an unregulated marketplace. All five sites adopted *risk reduction* cues in landing page discourses to allay such fears. These included: providing a genuine UK telephone number (four sites); a UK street address (three sites); a claim of being a registered UK company (three sites—these claims were checked and verified). Other risk reduction cues drew legitimacy for the provider from media coverage it had received, and reassuring quotes from the CEO (provider A), or from the claim that customers would be ‘protected by UK law’ (provider E)—although there was no evidence to support this latter claim.

Three essay mills used reassurance cues of *normalisation* in their landing page discourses, emphasising that use of their services was something other students did. Three sites achieved this by using apparent student testimonials, and in one of these cases (provider E) this was supported by statistics regarding the number of students who had been helped by the site; the percentage of students who had returned for repeat transactions; and the reassuring display of the logos of seven UK universities (although without any accompanying explanation for this). Two sites also provided normalisation discourses in terms of the number of years they had been helping students (providers A and E), demonstrating that use of their services was something other students did not just *do*, but had *been doing* for a long time.

Four essay mills appeared to draw students into their offering through reassurance cues of *empathy*, in which the ‘stress’ and ‘overload’ of academic work was identified as a common but unjust reality that an essay mill assignment could fairly and legitimately ameliorate. In one case this was again reinforced with a supposed student testimonial, conveying a similar empathetic message about how purchase of an essay mill assignment had freed up time for family life (provider E). Table 2 also shows that this site, and another (provider A), extended the empathy discourse into the idea that an essay mill assignment was something ‘you’ (i.e. the student) ‘deserve’.

The essay mills studied appear to recognise that potential customers for their services may fear being identified as users, presumably by their HE institutions or others, such as peers and parents. This would accord with literature suggesting that fear of sanctions and punishment may act as a barrier against students engaging in behaviour that could be deemed as plagiarism (Gullifer & Tyson, 2010). To circumnavigate such concerns, four of the five essay mills highlight *confidentiality* on their landing pages, in terms of privacy and safety of their services, making this the tenth identified pre-purchase reassurance cue.

Providers’ ethical discourses

Further examination of essay mill landing pages and websites, and analysis of live chat with their representatives, indicated that all these providers delivered different and sometimes inconsistent ethical rationalisation and guidance for customers regarding the services they offer. Central to understanding providers’ ethical stance was how they addressed potential or actual criticism that use of their services represents a form of academic misconduct, or at least facilitated such practices. Providers B and E made no attempt to address these issues in their websites, other than making claims evidenced in Table 2 regarding ‘zero plagiarism’ for their products. Conversely, providers C and D addressed academic misconduct concerns using a frequently asked questions (FAQs) section on their websites. An example from the latter suggested use of their services did not represent unethical behaviour:

FAQ:

Answer:

Is it cheating?

Our papers are for research purposes, therefore you are not cheating. Our service is absolutely legal. . . We guarantee you 100% confidentiality and 100% plagiarism free papers. In no way it can be considered a cheating. [Sic] (provider D)

Provider C took a stricter ethical line by suggesting the negative consequences of engaging in academic misconduct, or passing off one of their so-called ‘model essays’ as your own work:

- FAQ: *How do you know I won't cheat and simply submit the model essay I receive from you as my own work?*
- Answer: *Should anyone submit one of our model answers as their own work . . . , they are indeed cheating . . . Any student who submits one of our model essays as their own work therefore runs the risk of being caught out by the university and removed from their degree course. This would mean not only squandering the opportunity of an invaluable education, but may also seriously tarnish their professional reputations and limit their career prospects.*

In contrast to the above, Provider A dealt with issues of academic misconduct through a ‘fair use policy’ section on its website, which presented ‘The ethics of our model answer services’ and addressed the three key areas of: ‘Avoiding the temptations of plagiarism’; ‘How should I use the model answer?’; and ‘Can I submit the model answer to my university?’ In answer to the third of these points, the response was clear:

No - handing in the work of a researcher is plagiarism because you are passing off someone else's words as your own. Even if you did make minor alterations to the researcher's work, this would still be considered plagiarism; the work you submit to your university should be entirely your own.

Significantly, *all* these instances of ethical guidance for students were in the lower layers of website architecture, accessed through a tab or hyperlink, which for two of the above cases was in the small print at the bottom of the landing page.

Turning to live chat interactions, providers A, C and E gave responses suggesting that passing off a piece of work as your own would be unethical. In the case of the first two providers (A and C), this also reflected advice given on the website in their fair use policy and FAQs, respectively. A named employee for provider A outlined the company's stance clearly:

- Ryan (i.e. researcher): *Do I put it in my own words when I get it? - I'm bit worried because my university uses something called Turnitin®.*
- Named employee (provider A): *Yes, you would need to rewrite the work we provide into your own words. While our work would never show up on plagiarism detection software like 'Turn It In' [sic], you must never try to pass our work of [sic] as your own as it is unethical to do so.*

By contrast, provider D gave live chat advice that reinforced the rather ambivalent ethical message identified in this site's FAQs, as discussed above. This suggested that passing off an essay mill assignment as your own is acceptable behaviour:

- Ryan (i.e. researcher): *My university has something called Turnitin® to check copying. I'm a bit worried about this.*

- Named employee (provider D): *We use several plagiarism check engines including Copyscape and Plagium to ensure that the papers we provide are 100% original.*
- Ryan: *Does that mean I can just hand it in?*
- Named employee (provider D): *Yes.*

Provider B, which forwarded no ethical guidance on its website, appeared similarly relaxed about the manner in which their ‘product’ might be used:

- Ryan (i.e. researcher): *My university uses something called Turnitin[®], so I am worried if it is copied from somewhere it will show up.*
- Provider B representative: *Luckily, our writers don’t copy! They actually do the work. No plagiarism at all!*
- Ryan: *Ok - so I can just hand it in?*
- Provider B representative: *Yes, if you want.*

Clearly there were differences in how issues of ethics and potential academic misconduct were dealt with by the different essay mill providers, and this was reflected in the varying advice dispensed to prospective clients through website content and live chat discourses. To summarise, two of the sites providing website guidance on what was unethical in terms of potential plagiarism and contract cheating reinforced this advice in live chat discussions with employees (providers A and C). Equally, of the two sites that did not provide any written ethical guidance on their websites (providers B and E), one presented the passing off of essay mill assignments as legitimate behaviour in live chat (provider B), whilst the other suggested it was not (provider E). Provider D showed a relatively relaxed attitude to passing off actions in both written website content and live chat. Such a lack of consistency is indicative of the absence of regulation in a grey market.

Quality of the product

The assignments ordered from essay mills were promised to be of a certain standard; one a 2:1 grade and one first class. To determine their quality in this regard, they were marked by ten different academics. The resultant grades are detailed in Table 3.

Assignment 1 just makes the 2:1 grade promised when the mean score is considered; seven markers considered it to be of at least this standard. Assignment 2 performed slightly worse, with six markers considering the work below 2:1 standard and only two judging it to be at the first-class grade requested. The sample of markers is not large enough to draw any statistical inference, but it is revealing nonetheless, not least in the large marks range for such a small sample. On Assignment 1 this varies between a low third (40%) and a first (75%) classification, and on Assignment 2 between a low 2:2 (50%) and a high first (85%).

Similarities were noted in the qualitative feedback received from markers. Assignment 1 was praised for the wide range of sources and for being well written and organised. It was criticised for not directly answering the question set and also for a lack of precision in its use of terms. This raises the question of whether the essay mill author

Table 3. Grades awarded to essay mill assignments

Marker	Assignment 1 (ordered at 2:1 grade from provider A)	Assignment 2 (ordered at first-class grade from provider C)
1	40	70
2	65	52
3	60	50
4	75	58
5	68	50
6	68	60
7	62	58
8	40	60
9	58	52
10	67	85
Mean	60.3	59.5
St. Dev.	11.7	10.8

is using a bank of generic material to produce the work quickly, and at the expense of tailoring the answer to the question asked. Assignment 2 was praised for having a good understanding of the issues that underpinned the question, but criticised for not providing sufficient real-world examples to support points made, repetition and an over-reliance on textbook sources.

Both assignments were subjected to Turnitin[®] plagiarism detection software. Assignment 1 had a similarity index of 24%, the largest individual match being 3%. Assignment 2 had a similarity index of 14%, the largest individual match being 2%. These Turnitin[®] scores would not have raised any immediate red flags at the authors' respective universities, and, in isolation, would have been unlikely to warrant any further investigation. This reflects the view of Jones (2008), who suggests that academics are only likely to undertake investigations into potential student plagiarism when confronted by work showing high Turnitin[®] scores. This problem may be exacerbated in those situations where academic time for grading is pressured by large class sizes. The quality assurance documentation accompanying the two assignments varied. Assignment 2 arrived with its own Turnitin[®]-style report. This claimed a similarity index of only 6% rather than the 14% we identified. However, the provision of evidence that the purchased essay has passed successfully through plagiarism detection software is clearly provided to reassure a customer that their essay will be accepted by their institution as legitimate.

The provider of Assignment 1 appeared to have put more thought into quality assurance. It was delivered with a 'quality report guarantee' comprising a front page in the form of a certificate signed by a named aftercare manager. This report suggested that the assignment had been checked by another named essay mill employee for key quality indicators, including: word count, spelling and grammar, flow and referencing. The report also posed questions such as: 'Is the work critical, rather than descriptive?' As well as answering 'Yes' to such questions, the essay mill employee cites evidence from the text of the assignment to demonstrate that standards have

been met. The report also asks: ‘The customer ordered undergraduate 2:1 (60–69%). What standard would you grade this work at?’ The employee responds ‘Undergraduate 2:1 (60–69)’. The report finishes by asking for feedback from the customer and welcoming contact with any follow-up queries. Clearly the company is reassuring the client that they are a service-oriented, quality-controlled operation.

The conclusion drawn from the above is that a submitted essay mill assignment can pass successfully through the assessment process, although the grade that the work will receive is less certain. In this study, however, this seems largely down to inconsistencies in marking between different academics, and also for the same academic grading a different piece of work. Indeed, marker 1 assessed the two assignments as 30% apart, even though they were ordered within a classification of each other. In addition, only 3/10 academics marked Assignment 2 (ordered as first-class grade) as better than Assignment 1 (ordered as a 2:1 grade), despite the former being £120 more.

Conclusion and implications

By examining the supply side of contract cheating in HE, our study suggests that university assessment techniques, at least for discursive, assignment-based assessments in the humanities and social sciences, are vulnerable to passing off submissions from essay mills. Through three clear research questions, we have demonstrated how essay mills use a barrage of pre-purchase cues to ensure the attractiveness of their product, and have an inconsistent stance towards the ethical implications of their actions in respect of potential academic misconduct. Further, coursework which has been ghost written by an essay mill can, as our study demonstrates, pass through Turnitin[®] without raising significant concerns over its originality. Such vulnerability in the assessment process is compounded by clear inconsistencies in grading. Whilst this study only obtained two pieces of essay mill work and had them assessed by just ten markers, the range of grades for such a small sample only serves to emphasise how significant this problem of inconsistency is.

To counteract this vulnerability, HE assessment processes may need to move away from discursive forms of assignment-based coursework. As discussed extensively elsewhere in the literature on contract cheating (e.g. Mahmood, 2009; Baird & Clare, 2017; Clare *et al.*, 2017; Rogerson, 2017), this might include a stronger focus on timed and invigilated assessment techniques, varying assignments between classes (Baird & Clare, 2017), staged assessments and the use of a viva voce to support written work (Mahmood, 2009). These approaches are arguably less vulnerable to essay mill interference, as they require students to present themselves in person, or to engage in some form of interaction, to achieve the assessment outcome. This is not to say that these methods of assessment are immune to unethical behaviour, as current challenges concerning the identity verification of students under exam conditions clearly testify (Smith, 2015). Equally, and notwithstanding the documented effectiveness of such prevention measures, these solutions perhaps represent an idealised situation and fail to offer feasible solutions to educators in the context of mass higher education, with increasing class sizes, anonymous marking and growing academic workloads (Page, 2004; Walker & Townley, 2012).

As well as demonstrating the vulnerability of HE assessment systems to essay mills, our study also reveals how students themselves are open to abuse by these providers, even if they do bear a significant level of responsibility for this. First, they are lured into transactions through reassurance cues, which, as we have shown, can even attempt to manipulate students' emotional state through notions of normalisation and the deployment of empathy. Second, essay mills render students academically vulnerable as, aside from the risk of being caught out using them and punished, some providers do not always deliver at the grade promised or within the timescale required. Third, as in the case of provider B, some essay mills may not deliver at all, despite payment upfront. This highlights the potential for students' financial vulnerability.

Ultimately, our study suggests that academic inquiry examining the reasons and motivations for contract cheating from students' perspectives is not paying enough attention to the critical issue of how opportunities for such behaviour arise, and how a burgeoning online industry of contract writing interacts with students, manipulates them through sales techniques and plays on their vulnerabilities. If a form of unethical behaviour is commodified into an easily marketable transaction in this manner, then it is perhaps inevitable that it will take place. As MacDonald (2017) explains, students write essays to:

... satisfy university demand for them – which, in turn, allows universities to satisfy student demand for degrees. It is a simple business arrangement, with which an outsourcing agreement around essay production is entirely compatible.

Like most supply chains, the one for HE assessment is clearly susceptible to inward leakage of 'fake products' from essay mills. If the integrity of HE qualifications is to be maintained into the future, then this is perhaps the most significant challenge facing the sector. This has led the QAA (2017) to suggest actions in dealing with the problem, including restricting essay mills' ability to advertise on university campuses and blocking essay mill websites on institutional computers and WiFi connections—although with the internet's presence across multiple jurisdictions it is difficult to envision a wholesale and effective implementation of regulation in this area. Future research could address how vulnerability to essay mills varies across assessment methods and subject areas, and examine the relative success of different interventions in mitigating the challenges they present.

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