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Who wrote this? Essay mills and assessment – Considerations regarding contract cheating and AI in higher education

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ABSTRACT

The growing incidence of academic dishonesty (AD) involving students using commercial essay writing services (essay mills) or Artificial Intelligence (AI) risks the credibility of assessment approaches within higher education (HE) worldwide. Reflecting on experience from a UK business school, the article explores the potential for novel assessment design and feedback to reduce the prevalence of AD. Speculating on success and failure rates of students undertaking formal assessment, the article evaluates the broader ethical implications for universities in recruitment and learner support, particularly within contemporary discourses on international student attainment, mental health, and well-being.

1. Introduction

Academic dishonesty (AD) is a 'deceitful or unfair act intended to produce a more desirable outcome on an exam, paper, homework assignment, or other assessment of learning' (Miller, Murdock, & Grotewiel, 2017:121). The terms essay milling and contract cheating are also used (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006; Wallace & Newton, 2014), the latter defined as 'a form of academic misconduct that involves (…) students paying a third-party to produce an unsupervised assessment item that they subsequently submit as if it was their own work' (Clare, Walker, & Hobson, 2017). The article also reflects also on the arrival in recent months of AI instruments including advanced chatbots, such as ChatGPT, widely considered a new threat to academic integrity.

Research in higher education suggests that academic malpractice begins in high school and continues through undergraduate and postgraduate studies, eventually having a malign effect on ethics in the workplace (Ferguson, Flostrand, Lam, & Pitt, 2022; Hodgkinson, Curtis, MacAlister, & Farrell, 2016; McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2012). Hence, the implications of detection and control are substantial for higher education (HE) providers and constitute a major contemporary challenge for the sector worldwide. Across all disciplines, AD appears to be a growing threat to the assessment process, undermining the integrity of awards, and raising challenges over ethics regarding student behaviour, but also over the entire HE sector, and its responsibility to uphold awards standards.

We may assume that despite the widespread introduction of plagiarism detection software and policies on academic misconduct, there is still much that universities could do to reduce the extent of cheating by students. The issue is of vital importance, since academic dishonesty inflicts real and corrosive reputational damage on universities, undermining HE worldwide. At a recent Chartered Association of Business Schools conference, several participants declared that academic dishonesty is increasing, with essay mills a prominent contributory factor (CABS, 2022).

This article discusses why some students use external providers to write their assignments and what can be done to reduce such AD. It also discusses new threats from artificial intelligence (AI) instruments such as ChatGPT, launched in November 2022. To that end,

this short communication explores the role and responsibility of universities, beginning with a brief review of related literature, before reporting on the author's experience teaching international business and management in a UK university. This includes discussion of novel techniques regarding assessment aimed at reducing the incidence of essays bought from third parties (essay milling) and other forms of AD. The findings are discussed, and recommendations made regarding universities' responsibilities around AD.

2. Literature review

Academic dishonesty (AD) is a growing concern, widely reflected in higher education (HE) literature (Ahsan, Akbar, & Kam, 2021; Anitha et al., 2021; Curtis, 2021; Ferguson et al., 2022; Lancaster, 2019; Malesky, Grist, Poovey, & Dennis, 2022; Medway, Roper, & Gillooly, 2018; Stokel-Walker, 2022; Tomlinson, 2022; Walker & Townley, 2012). The use of so-called essay mills in HE is increasing (Austin & Brown, 1999; Bartlett, 2009; HM Government, 2021; MacDonald, 2017; QAA, 2016, 2017, 2020; Rigby, Burton, Balcombe, Bateman, & Mulatu, 2015; Ross, 2021). More recently, AI chatbots GPT-3 and ChatGPT developed by OpenAI, a research firm dedicated to developing artificial intelligence applications, appear to compound the threat of AD. The more sophisticated chatbots are a type of generative artificial intelligence that uses algorithms and predictive text to create new content in response to questions or prompts posted by users. They analyse huge corpora, such as Wikipedia, Reddit, and other web-based platforms to create text. ChatGTP and its Google rival Bard can produce grammatically accurate content derived from the mass processing of Big Data (Kleinman, 2023). The results can be used to compile credible-looking academic writing that may be undetectable by anti-plagiarism software (Sparrow, 2022), but Turnitin® now claims that it can detect text generated by ChatGPT (Mensah, 2023). Chatbots trained on large datasets may deliver output that *appears* credible, but risks being misleading or incorrect because there is no human checking for accuracy (Ali, 2023). They may also add quotes from sources, lending *apparent* veracity (Delouya, 2022). They can be used for a variety of purposes, but we should be sceptical and remember that they are machines without human intelligence. They are mirrors that return a modified and perhaps distorted version of what human input has contributed to the internet (Vincent, 2023).

A student website reports that ChatGPT is not yet sufficiently developed to provide a complete 2000-word essay but users can enter a series of questions and assemble the resulting text into a plausible looking essay, add some intext references from the module reading list, and this might be enough to get a pass (Snepvangers, 2023). AI capability is developing rapidly. In March 2023 OpenAI released GPT-4, an upgrade to ChatGPT, and available to users who pay $20 a month for premium access to the service (Derico & Kleinman, 2023).

Academic dishonesty using AI fits the notion of 'disruptive technology' (Lindebaum, Vesa, & den Hond, 2020). Any form of AD undermines academic standards and the credibility HE worldwide (Cooke, Staton, & Harlow, 2021; Ferguson et al., 2022). Students witnessing unchecked AD may begin to perceive such behaviour as normal and be more inclined to engage in similar misconduct (O'Rourke et al., 2010). The blurring of the distinction between what is a student's own work and what is fraudulent distorts students' perception of what the university is about, and erodes genuine academic enquiry and knowledge gained through legitimate studies. This has an insidious impact on the students themselves and may adversely affect later performance in employment. Moreover, qualifications gained through AD undermine graduate recruitment and professional expertise, with one expert asking us to imagine 'a doctor not knowing a disease, a nurse not knowing how to measure a particular medicine (or) an engineer not building a bridge properly,' (Curtis, cited in Shepherd, 2021).

Essay mills and AI tools that substitute for human judgement and original scholarship risk a future in which recourse to devices of this kind becomes more common and even normalised, an environment in which students barely distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not. In the HE context, AI and commercial interests behind such systems risk subverting everything the university stands for, an environment in which reckoning overtakes judgement (Moser, Lindebaum, & den Hond, 2022; Sparrow, 2022). AI allows its owners to exercise power and control in direct and indirect ways over citizens, customers, and societies (Vesa & Tienari, 2020). The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, which left many students vulnerable and isolated, may have raised the pressures on students, and engendered feelings of isolation. This may have exacerbated the problem of AD (Curtis, 2021; McKie, 2020; Tomlinson, 2022), and presented fresh opportunities for contract cheating providers (Hill, Mason, & Dunn, 2021). Draper, Lancaster, Dann, Crockett, and Glendinning (2021) and Yorke, Sefcik, and Veeran-Colton (2022) highlight a further troubling aspect of this vulnerability, in that once engaged in a dialogue with an essay mill, students are open to blackmail should they wish to withdraw. Draper et al. (2021) point out that few jurisdictions outlaw contract cheating or the provision of such services, also noting that essay mills can be based anywhere in the world, beyond the reach of legal sanction.

Many commentators have postulated that the expansion in student numbers and recruitment of less well-equipped students is endemic in contemporary HE settings, where postgraduate studies especially are often a cash cow for universities reliant on student fees to meet the needs of their business model (Collini, 2011; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Nixon, Scullion, & Hearn, 2016). Forty-five percent of all overseas students in the UK are studying a postgraduate course (UCAS, 2023). Universities' focus on income generation compromises standards with high fees and debt having important consequences for student health and well-being (Forstenzer, 2017).

In many UK universities, the numbers of overseas students, who pay higher fees than home students, has grown dramatically, rising from 442,000 in 2014 to 679, 970 in 2021-2 (Study in the UK, 2023; Universities UK, 2023). The largest number, 169,880 are from China, Hong Kong and Macau, followed by 126,535 from India and 44,595 from Nigeria (*ibid*, 2023; Universities UK, 2023; HESA, 2023). The EU provides a diminishing number of UK international students, totalling 120,140 in 2021–22 (Study in the UK, 2023; Universities UK, 2023). The most popular discipline for international students is business and management, with 217,610, 32 percent of the overseas student total (Study in the UK, 2023).

Reliance on overseas recruitment is not exclusive to UK higher education institutions, and business and management postgraduate

degrees are especially popular with overseas students throughout the English-speaking world. The People's Republic of China accounts globally for over one million students enrolled in overseas universities in 2021 (educationfair.nl, 2022). China is the top sender of international students in most leading education markets, including the US, the UK, and Australia (Chamas, 2021; Statista, 2023; Universities UK, 2023; US Mission China, 2021; White, 2022). It is concerning too that some business and management postgraduate programmes may be dominated by a single nationality, which does not reflect the globalised workplace that graduates aspire to join. This can have a negative impact on the student experience and the learning environment and does not adequately prepare students for intercultural understanding and tolerance (Kerby, 2012).

Moreover, there are widespread concerns throughout the sector about students' language competence, and level of preparation for Masters-level study, including their understanding of universities' expectations where integrity and assessment is concerned (Birrell, 2006; Eze & Inegbedion, 2015; Gatwiri, 2015; McLean, Murdoch-Eaton, & Shaban, 2013; Paton, 2007). Other studies suggest that many students have limited understanding of what constitutes plagiarism (Ehrich, Howard, Mu, & Bokosmaty, 2016; Hu & Lei, 2011).

These concerns are by no means limited to just a few institutions, or to business and management programmes especially popular with overseas students. The danger is that students with poor language skills risk being tempted into using essay mills, ghost-writers, AI chatbots, and other forms of academic dishonesty.

There is some evidence that weaker students are more likely to use essay mills, although this view is not universal. A study in Russia reported that AD of various kinds was more prevalent among high achieving students (Chirikov, Shmeleva, & Loyalka, 2020), while another in the US found that cheating was less common among high achievers, but still startlingly high (Miller et al., 2017). One prominent study suggests that students with English as a second or more language are three times more likely to engage in AD (Curtis, 2021). But other factors also drive recourse to essay mills. The President of the Australian National Union of Students, Georgie Beatty (cited in Shepherd, 2021) says that pressures are socio-economic, with many students facing a cost-of-living crisis, spending hours in low paid part-time employment, and facing acute time pressures, so recourse to external providers is a tempting solution to impending deadlines.

Identifying and proving that an assignment is derived from an essay mill is not straightforward (Clare et al., 2017; Rogerson, 2017). Plagiarism detection software will be of little use if the work is adapted, heavily disguised, or original (Warn, 2006). Software designed to detect plagiarism may be helpful, but it brings further institutional challenges over how to interpret results, set thresholds for punitive action, or determine where apparent academic misconduct is accidental or unconscious (Youmans, 2011).

3. Essay milling: students raise the alarm

Ferguson et al. (2022) made the important observation that students can provide important insight on AD, since they 'know a lot about how cheating occurs on campus, and (…) are motivated to share this knowledge'. In my university, alarm over the growing use of essay mills was initially raised by student representatives in a postgraduate staff student liaison committee in 2019. Student representatives reported that use of AI tools and ghost-writing of essays was increasing and was widely discussed among the student body. They said that advertising of essay writing services was widespread, even in posters displayed on campus, targeting a specific student community with posters in the students' own language. Such services are often disguised euphemistically as help with editing and proof-reading, or as English language support. Offers to write essays and prepare presentations, and even reflective statements, are widely advertised on the Internet, sometimes alongside universities' Facebook pages advertising degree programmes. Students can begin their application process while simultaneously entering a relationship with an outlet happy to supply a full range of tutoring services, and complete assignments with extensive bibliographies, even promising to demonstrate complete compliance with assignment briefs or module handbooks.

In one instance a ghost writer complained to the university that they had not been paid. They supplied a copy of their invoice to the student, the essay they had written, the assignment brief, and the module handbook. I do not know what the outcome was, but doubt that the invoice was settled.

Student representatives also reported that 'help with assessments' frequently appears in social media platforms, and many students see ghost written assignments as the way to secure a university degree. They also said employers and officials in their home country are aware of such abuse and consider this an endemic problem in UK higher education.

For several years I have taught an international political economy (IPE) module that is core in three international business-related postgraduate programmes. In recent years there has been a steep rise in cohort size, from around 60 to well over 200. This has coincided with a growing proportion of students failing the module, and an alarming fall in the mean mark from 60 to around 50. This means that approximately half the students do not achieve the pass mark of 50. A significant proportion of fails, between 10 and 15 percent, included submissions where AD is suspected.

Even if plagiarism detection software does not indicate AD, a tutor may suspect academic misconduct if assignments contain references unrelated to sources referred to in teaching the course, and not on the module reading list. Or, in an especially egregious example of trying to deceive the markers, there may be random referencing of reading list sources, but the associated content bears no relation to anything in the cited work. There may be chronological inconsistencies, such as referencing a work published in 2010 that supposedly comments on the UK leaving the European Union a decade later.

To combat the risk of ghost-written essays, the module introduced in 2020 a formative assessment process with the clearest possible indication of what was expected to pass the module, including key authors from the reading list that should inform the essay. Secondly, the summative assignment brief stipulated that all references should be from authors and institutional or governmental sources on the reading list, or mentioned in the module delivery. Students should be in no doubt that the assignment brief, as well as the formative assessment – consisting of the selected essay title (one from four options) and a single page essay outline, accompanied by key sources

to be used – require all references to be exclusively from module reading list and institutional sources.

Each formative submission receives tutor-supplied feedback, again reiterating exclusive use of module sources. The extensive reading list has been developed over several years. There is no shortage of available sources, and students may reference international organisations, government sites, think-tanks, and reputable media outlets. So, students should be in no doubt that both the formative and summative assessments require evidence of learning from module sources.

These measures proved a successful deterrent to using essay mills or ghost writing. Since limiting sources to those the module reading list, fewer submissions raise suspicion about essay mills, no more than 10 to 15 from cohorts of around 180 in both 2020 and 2021, between 5.5 and 8.3 percent, and fewer still in 2022. This is the good news, but the failure rate has remained high, around forty percent. At the top end, performance is excellent, but the fails divide roughly equally between compensation territory (40–49 percent), and outright fails (below 40 percent). Students that fail the module, and do not qualify for the compensation that permits progression, have one re-assessment opportunity. From the 2021 cohort, 26 out of 41 undertaking a reassessment passed at the second attempt.

We can draw two main conclusions. First, it is mostly very weak students who lack adequate language skills, academic preparation, or proper engagement with the module, who use essay mills. If they do not resort to essay mills, they submit poor essays anyway, do not meet module learning outcomes, and fail the module.

The second finding is that the formative assessment process, and explicit instructions to only use module sources, is effective. Fewer submissions aroused suspicions over contract cheating or essay milling. Insistence on using only module sources was effective in that in 2022 over 90 percent of submissions complied with this instruction. In some cases, there remained instances of random and inappropriate referencing, including crediting an author with an opinion on a topic they had not written about.

4. Lessons we should learn

1) There are ways to combat the essay mill, but overcoming low academic competence, especially in a first semester Masters-level module, is difficult even with various remedial measures in place, such as online and in-person writing support, a dedicated skills module running in parallel with core modules, a rigorous formative process with extensive individual feedback, and other forms of support delivered through the module virtual learning environment, typically Blackboard. Experience has shown that some students do not take full advantage of the formative assessment process. To allow for this, the teaching team provided generic guidance on answering the questions set, corresponding to a feedback template model. This approach is both time-efficient and equitable in terms of ensuring similar guidance is provided to all learners (Crisostomo & Chauhan, 2019).

2) The issue of weak students can be addressed either by lowering standards, and no university will admit to this, or by adopting more stringent student recruitment policies, ensuring that only students capable of Masters-level study are accepted onto Masters programmes.

3) There should be much-enhanced supervisory support, ensuring that weaker students get the help and advice they need to meet programme demands, so minimising the risk of AD, and relieving stress and ill-effects on students' well-being (Edwards, 2016). It is difficult for universities to mitigate socio-economic factors such as the cost-of-living crisis, but better supervision and monitoring can dissuade some students from taking on shift work or excessive hours, and so disrupting their studies.

4) Better learner training is needed, including enhancing the feedback process, ensuring that students properly understand the guidance given in formative feedback (Dwyer, 2021; Harms & Roebuck, 2010). Learner training should also help to ensure that students have a proper understanding of what constitutes AD, or plagiarism of any kind. This is challenging where students are unsure of what constitutes writing support and what is illegitimate outsourcing of academic work.

5) Course designers might also consider adjustments to the assessment process, especially in the light of new AI tools such as ChatGPT becoming a feature of the work environment. There are many ways to assess students' learning, beginning with the traditional combination of closed examination and essays, but also group work, literature review, project report, multiple choice questions, long answers, short answers, open questions, 24-h open book examination, presentations, videos, podcasts, role-playing, reflective statements, and more (Pugh et al., n.d.).

It may be prudent to shift the balance from the traditional essay, and while examinations can reduce the AI threat, they have fallen out of favour, not least with students. A viva voce element in which students present their written work and/or answer questions could be helpful. While this can be practical for small groups, its resource intensiveness means it is unsuitable for large cohorts, or large modules. Assessment using viva voce was more common before the huge increase in the number of students undertaking degree-level study (Scott, 2018). Analysis or review of a journal article is often a neat form of assessment (Taylor, Stickney, & DeMarr, 2021), but as with the annotated bibliography, risks being contracted out to an external provider, or being AI-generated. More radical change to assessment strategies could involve theatre and storytelling, which would certainly defeat the essay mill (Clark & Kayes, 2021). An innovative suggestion is to use set work, including essays, as the basis for a reflective assignment in which students 'show their thought processes' in answering a question. This calls for the *process* of essay writing to become the focal element in the assessment 'recasting the essay as a creative, idiosyncratic form of writing' (Tomlinson, 2022). The aim is to 'prompt (students) to think and write enjoyably and creatively – to use the capacious potential of the essay form to develop distinctive and inimitable voices' (*ibid*). The reflective, process-oriented assessment might also accommodate AI, but insist on critical engagement and commentary on whatever the chatbot contributes. This involves accepting, even embracing, AI as integral to the HE environment, integrated within assessment processes (Gonsalves, 2023). HEIs will surely have to be creative to protect the integrity of the assessment process while accepting that AI will become a fundamental element in the student experience.

5. Conclusion

This article has highlighted the growing threat from essay mills and contract services that promote academic dishonesty. It has focused on how assessment might diminish this threat, reporting on an example in which students reference only sources specific to the module. It has also addressed wider concerns around ethics and the responsibilities of the universities themselves.

Concerns around academic misconduct are widespread. They occur throughout the UK higher education sector and far beyond and involve undergraduate and postgraduate study across all disciplines. Accepting applications from students who lack the necessary preparation, including adequate language competence, adds stress and anxiety, and makes further demands on already over-stretched faculty and support staff. Lax student recruitment and too low admissions criteria has dangerous implications for mental health and student well-being. The capacity of university staff, both academic and administrative, to mitigate these problems and to deal adequately with students' anxieties are compromised by rising student numbers and excessive workloads (Draper, cited in McKie, 2020), as well as students' financial insecurity in the face of a cost-of-living crisis.

Academic staff need to be better equipped, and better trained, to cope with the diverse learning styles, preferences, and needs of students from various backgrounds and cultures, given the likely further increase in numbers from overseas (Burrows, 2016).

Moreover, universities have a responsibility to provide high quality in-service training for their teaching staff. This must include training in how to identify and respond to academic dishonesty, and the advent of AI tools such as Bard and ChatGPT. AI might disrupt more traditional contract cheating, but new and creative modes of assessment should be part of the response. Universities should involve students in gaining a better understanding of why students are prey to essay mills and similar services. Better learner training is vital, so students understand the meaning of academic misconduct, and the risk it poses to their success, including career prospects.

The issues raised in this article should be addressed with urgency, given that the credibility of our universities and degree programmes, and ethical considerations around recruitment, and matters of student mental health and well-being, and staff welfare, are all at stake.

We are only beginning to address these issues. HEIs recognise the limitations of traditional plagiarism detection systems faced by the growing challenge from essay mills and AI, but plagiarism detection software is improving, including identifying text produced by a chatbot (Leong, 2023).

The growth in AI requires a sector-wide response, given that AI is increasingly part of the twenty-first century work environment with profound implications for higher education (Sparrow, 2022). Even if universities get to grips with essay mills and contract cheating, they will need to determine guidelines on when incorporating algorithmic software into academic research and preparation of assignments constitutes academic misconduct. The key, Sparrow suggests, may be in transparency, where students indicate in their assignment what was created with the help of AI, and what was entirely their own work; and transparency on the part of universities, explaining what is legitimate, and what is not. This debate will run and run.

Author statement

Simon Sweeney, sole author, conceptualization and execution of the manuscript, all original content, own experience, referenced literature research.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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