

QAA Viewpoint

Plagiarism in UK higher education February 2016

Background

In recent years there has been persistent media coverage of cheating (of which plagiarism is one kind) in UK universities and colleges, including allegations that it is particularly prevalent among international students. Recent [media attention](#)¹ has focused on the issue of so-called essay mills.

These companies offer students essays in return for payment. They are not illegal, and they generally issue [disclaimers warning against plagiarism](#).²

Summary of QAA's position

Cheating and plagiarism has no place in UK higher education, and universities and colleges take their responsibilities in this area very seriously. Use of [Turnitin](#)³ (software identifying plagiarised work) and other similar products is widespread.

The response to recent FOI requests suggests universities and colleges are routinely identifying plagiarism and cheating where it exists. From our reviews, we know that universities and colleges work closely with students to avoid inadvertent plagiarism, and design robust and varied assessments to make deliberate plagiarism difficult.

The findings that '50,000 students over three years' are caught cheating is about 17,000 (or 0.7%) of students each year. QAA's historical analysis of our review findings shows a reduction in the number of recommendations about cheating and plagiarism, which suggests that the vast majority of providers have sound and effective procedures in place.

Nevertheless, because of the difficulty of detecting plagiarism using essay mills, we are now in the process of discussing this issue with partners in the higher education sector.

Responsibilities of universities and colleges

Universities and colleges, as autonomous and independent institutions, are responsible for identifying, proving and penalising cases of cheating and plagiarism.

Universities and colleges have clear policies on what constitutes cheating and plagiarising. There is a difference between a first year student copying a statement from a publication without appropriate referencing (which may be detected by Turnitin) and a PHD student commissioning an essay mill to write their thesis. Both would be deemed cheating but not attract the same consequences. The penalties should of course be proportionate to the nature and extent of the cheating that has taken place.

However, no matter how good policies and software are, it is difficult to detect whether tailored work has been written for a student by a third party such as an essay mill.

QAA's responsibilities and findings

QAA oversees how universities and colleges fulfil their responsibilities to meet the Expectations set out in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. *Chapter B6* requires that 'assessment is equitable, valid and reliable'.

QAA reports publicly on the findings of its cyclical reviews of universities and colleges. Between 2012 and 2015, QAA carried out approximately 650 reviews of institutions. We had cause to make recommendations to only 30 individual universities and colleges on the need to improve systems and information related to plagiarism.

QAA also investigates concerns from students, academics and members of the public about the way universities deal with cheating and plagiarism.

In its recent guidance for higher education providers on *Supporting and Enhancing the Experience of International Students in the UK*,⁴ QAA recommends that during academic induction providers give international students advice about what constitutes 'academic integrity and what the regulations are relating to academic malpractice, including its consequences'.

Solutions

QAA is undertaking a project on the application of the Quality Code. Through this we will contact universities and colleges to identify good practice in detecting and dealing with cheating and plagiarism. We will share findings in due course.

QAA encourages students, academics and members of the public to report any concerns they have about cheating and plagiarism directly to us to if they do not consider them resolved by their university or college.

QAA is discussing with its partners in the sector whether the issue of so-called essay mills requires a QAA-led inquiry into their operation and impact. We are also exploring whether there is a need for a sector-wide awareness-raising campaign (involving students' representative bodies) that warns of the risks to students' qualifications and future careers of using such enterprises.

References

- 1 The Times (Jan 2016) 'Universities face student cheating crisis', available at: www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/education/article4654719.ece
- 2 Example of essay mill disclaimer: <http://essaymills.com/disclaimer>
- 3 For more information on Turnitin, see: www.turnitinuk.com
- 4 QAA (June 2015) *Supporting and Enhancing the Experience of International Students in the UK*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=2953