

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

Paper No ASQEC/21/6

ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE

11 March 2021

Agenda Item 9

COVER SHEET

CONTRACT CHEATING

Presenter: Mr A G Faulkner

Action is required of the Committee as indicated below:

To consider comments and recommendations from the Faculties, CHERP and the Students' Union in relation to the QAA's guidance on Contract Cheating [[Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education – How to Address Essay Mills and Contract Cheating](#)] (June 2020) (min 20.59 refers).

BACKGROUND

In October 2017 a report on 'Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education - How to address Contract Cheating, the use of Third-Party Services and Essay Mills' was published by QAA. Following this, the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee agreed that the University's Plagiarism Register should be extended and Faculties record all forms of cheating from 2018/19 (Min 18.67 refers).

In June 2020 the QAA published a second edition of guidance on contract cheating, 'Contract to Cheat in Higher Education – How to Address Essay Mills and Contract Cheating' https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/contracting-to-cheat-in-higher-education-2nd-edition.pdf?sfvrsn=6197cf81_24. A number of updates were made in light of:

- (i) increasing marketing of essay mills and increased uptake;
- (ii) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of adapting teaching, learning and assessment to digital provision, and providing additional student support.

Summary of updates:

- where equal emphasis was previously placed on prevention and detection of essay mills, the revised report highlights the importance and priority of detection as the main deterrent;
- the importance of assessment design in institutional strategy to address contract cheating is highlighted;
- recommendation that a designated member of staff be appointed to provide support and guidance in detecting academic misconduct to ensure consistency across the institution and highlight the importance of addressing the issue of contract cheating;
- with the increase in contract cheating, guidance is given on how to deal with this type of academic misconduct, in particular suspected first time offences;
- additional content on student support.

The University's Plagiarism Policy, Procedures and Guidance document states that cases of contract cheating should be dealt with under section 2 of the disciplinary procedures for cheating, and not under the specific section 3 on plagiarism.

At its meeting on 22 October 2020, the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee received The Annual Report on Plagiarism and Other Forms of Cheating Offences in 2019/20 (Paper No ASQEC/20/25b). It was noted that only one case of contract cheating had been recorded on the Central Register during 2019/20. No details regarding this offence had however been entered on the Central Register and the Faculty report stated that there had been no incidences of contract cheating during 2019/20. It was therefore concluded that it was likely that this offence had been

entered on the Central Register using the wrong code and that in fact no cases of contract cheating had been recorded.

The Annual Report recommended that, given the increased prevalence of contract cheating across the UK and Ireland, and the low number of recorded cases, Faculties, CHERP and the Students' Union reflect on the updated QAA guidance and report to a future meeting.

JOINT RESPONSE FROM FACULTIES

CONTRACT CHEATING

15 February 2021

The Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee, at its meeting on 22 October 2020, considered the annual report on plagiarism and other forms of cheating offences for 2019/20. The views of the Faculties, CHERP and Student Union were sought on the second edition of QAA's guidance <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/contracting-to-cheat-in-higher-education-2nd-edition.pdf>

Recommendations below from the Associate Deans (Education) which can contribute to the wider input from CHERP, Student Support and Student Union:

- That the University Policy on Plagiarism and Contract Cheating be reviewed to include more explicit mention of the latter and particularly on how it is dealt with at a policy/regulatory level, particularly as more cases/appeals come forward for consideration;
- That more information and guidance be provided for staff and students, for example:
 - For staff, proactive assessment design: focus on designing 'authentic' assessment strategies and a mixture of assessments from the outset; consideration of academic integrity;
 - For staff, detection: more practical guidance on how we might try and detect cheating behaviours (e.g. the QAA guidance refers to Metadata, notes from a viva voce meeting, etc);
 - For students and staff, university wide communications: as per the QAA guidance (good advice) and examples (e.g. similar to Sheffield Hallam), notably:
 - Give written information to students on the importance of academic integrity and consequences of cheating e.g. Fitness to practice.
 - Provide information that focuses specifically on the implications of using third-party assistance in cheating in Course documentation and reinforce at Module level.
 - Work in partnership with students to combat contract cheating and reduce opportunities to cheat.
 - Further develop skills in the use of academic sources, appropriate paraphrasing and research.
 - Guidance on dealing with cases effectively, fairly and transparently;

- Guidance on the potential use of vivas to investigate authorship with the student, and to help decide whether the case needs to go forward to the university or not. e.g. UUBS drafted guidelines earlier this year to assist staff, based on the QAA guidance (see below).
- That a group be convened to consider a review of the University's policies and processes on contract cheating and provide further guidance, effective academic regulations and best practice. The Group could use the QAA Guiding Principles as a framework for reviewing and developing practices to address contract cheating.

Extract from guidance given in UUBS

- *Inform the student of the viva (QAA Guidance utilises this term) meeting, with at least 1 week's notice. Give them some indication of what is underpinning the request, ie concerns regarding the file structure, properties of submitted work, different named embedded authors, the time taken for final assessment submission, a big difference in writing style, etc), and a need to explore this further through a face-to-face discussion.*
- *Inform them that 2 members of staff will be in attendance, one as the module tutor/subject expert and the other as a note taker. Tell them that it's likely to be around 30-45 mins.*
- *In planning the questions to ask (and start with the assessment brief/marketing criteria that had been given), you may wish to explore:*
 - *A range of particular aspects of the work, to explore the student's knowledge and understanding of those aspects, and general level of comfort in being able to talk about them; as well as*
 - *Aspects of the process undertaken by the student in completing this work (eg researching and gathering information; what source(s) did they use and how did they decide to include the material they did; how they structured the work; have they any early drafts they could show, to illustrate their planning process, how the work had come together, etc)*
- *You should consider their ability to articulate what they did/how they did it.*
- *On completion of the meeting, you should indicate to the student what will happen next, in terms of whether the work, as is, will be accepted; or whether the student will be asked to undertake a resubmission (capped unless extenuating circumstances)? They have the right to Appeal if they wish but would have to present evidence in support of this appeal.*

The following is an excerpt from Sheffield Hallam University's student-facing guidance, included in the QAA Guidance:

“CONTRACT CHEATING

You’ve probably come across sites offering you ‘plagiarism free’ help with assignments or essays. It is all too easy to be taken in by these so-called ‘essay mills’ or contract cheating websites. There are serious hazards in even accessing these sites though. Please do not be tempted or persuaded to look online for, copy and paste, or even worse, actually commission anyone to write your assignment or part of it.

Contract cheating websites, the so-called ‘essay mills’ are not your friends, and really only take advantage of the vulnerability of students. They don’t care about you, will charge you a fee, probably provide a very poor service, and some may possibly use your details to take advantage of you in the future. We block many of these sites from our managed PC’s on campus. The essay mills sites might look attractive and alluring with their promises of help, but if there are any suspicions that you have even inadvertently accessed these sites, and used them to get material for your assignment, you are likely to be investigated for the most serious form of plagiarism, i.e. Contract Cheating. If an allegation of contract cheating is upheld, there is a chance that you could be removed from the university... we don’t want this to happen!

As a university, you’ll understand that we have to ensure that our awards meet nationally agreed standards. To achieve this, the assessments you complete, need to accurately reflect or test the extent to which you have achieved the learning outcomes of your course. Contract cheating therefore represents a clear threat to our ability to assure the standards of our qualifications, and the reputation of the university and the higher education sector as a whole. For students studying on a course that is professionally accredited, there are clear and significant risks to the public if you graduate with an award having used contract cheating services, as you may be practising with inadequate professional skills. We regard this as a serious risk to the public, and all the more reason why we take contract cheating so seriously. 43 We know you want to work hard for your degree, and there is lots of help available.

If you’re struggling, or are not sure about the assessment task, or don’t know where to start, the worst thing you can do is to turn to one of the contract cheating sites. Please approach your marker, module leader or student support adviser for help or look at the Skills Centre which can help you to develop your academic skills. They offer workshops, forums and tutorials. Click the link above to find lots of useful resources and study tips.”

RESPONSE FROM CHERP

ASQEC meeting March 2021

Contract Cheating

CHERP's reflection on second edition of Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education (QAA, 2020).

We welcome this timely and very helpful publication which enables us to build our staff development activities and resources in this area. We incorporate assessment design and academic integrity in our professional development sessions in such programmes as: First Steps to Teaching, PgCHEP, MEd, Integrated Curriculum Design Framework (ICDF) workshops, and in more recent and current Assessment and Feedback focussed institutional-wide open webinar sessions.

We promote the adoption of effective assessment design as one of the key methods to reduce cheating opportunities and to ensure that we are embracing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that minimises barriers and maximises learning for all students (CAST, 2018). Some approaches to this include:

- Making use of alternative assessment formats (CAST, 2018)
- Avoiding the recycling of work and assessments too regularly (QAA, 2018)
- Making assessments more fit-for-purpose and authentic (Brown and Sambell, 2020)
- Low stakes assessment to build confidence and allow for formative feedback as well as summative high stakes assessment (QAA, 2020)

Authentic assessment makes it more difficult to rely on contract cheating (QAA, 2020) and whilst it can be a contested term - as stated by Brown and Sambell (2020), if students are to become autonomous learners and responsible for their own life goals then they need assessment which involves cognitive challenge, opportunities to practise the discipline, shaping their identity, building confidence and supporting their growth towards active citizenship. As part of ICDF, at programme and module design, we promote an integrated approach to curriculum design that incorporates these elements (Murphy and Curran, 2020).

We remain aware that assessment design alone cannot eradicate cheating and we are open to new ideas and collaboration with other University colleagues to develop new related policies and processes. We draw your attention to, and welcome your participation in, a forthcoming professional development opportunity on this topic:

Wednesday, 24th March 2-4pm

Assessment & Feedback: Designing assessment for academic integrity

This workshop will explore assessment strategies aimed at designing out plagiarism and fostering academic integrity.

To register, please go to:

<https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=h5QLb6hPqEKutL8uLCLU6ErW0i2lwdhHrRjtb3K0fqFUN0ZMTEY5OEZaNEFHm0RMUFk3Q1Q4VFFDUiQIQCN0PWcu>

References

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Murphy C. and Curran, R. (2020). Integrated Curriculum Design Framework. Retrieved from <https://ulster.sharepoint.com/sites/ICDF/>

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On behalf of the CHERP team
Dr Roisín Curran
Interim Head of CHERP
19 February 2021

RESPONSE FROM THE STUDENTS' UNION

After reviewing the QAA guidance and review document on Contracting Cheating in Higher Education, Nicole and I are happy with the content and would encourage this to be adopted into the processes and procedures carried out by the University. It may be worth noting that Nicole sat on the QAA Student Strategic Advisory Committee who were involved and had input into the earlier drafts of this document. We would emphasise (similarly to the guidance) that this be adopted with a holistic approach to consider the pastoral support and welfare needs of students as often those who take this route do so in desperation or extenuating circumstances alongside other underlying issues. It is important that we take all steps possible to protect students from being exploited by these illegal services. Both UU and UUSU should continue to promote Studiosity amongst our student community to mitigate against this. We are happy to expand on this during the next ASQEC meeting if necessary.

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