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# ACADEMIC INTEGRITY REPORT

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LONDON  
HIGHER



Supporting Higher Education in London



# Academic Integrity and Universities: Briefing Paper

## Introduction:

UK higher education has a world-renowned reputation for academic excellence and student experience. As the UK's capital, London's institutions represent around 20% of England's students, nearly 30% of UK's international student intake and a hugely diverse student population, where over 44% of home students are from Global Majority backgrounds. London's higher education institutions are committed to ensuring that higher education in the capital remains an attractive and prestigious option for students across the UK and the globe.

Academic integrity, and particularly the growing role of technology in this space, has prompted significant discussion in recent years, most notably with the inclusion of legislation to tackle 'essay mills' and wider contract cheating in the [Skills and Post-16 Education Act](#).

London Higher has recently convened a series of events on a variety of issues pertaining to academic integrity, covering: (i) plagiarism and academic misconduct; (ii) essay mills and contract cheating; and (iii) the verification of English language qualifications. The events provided an opportunity to hear from those engaged in this work across the sector, share information and showcase examples of best practice, as well as acting as a springboard for future discussion.

Academic integrity issues are in no way exclusively a London problem but, as a group representing a large sub-section of the UK higher education sector, with a high proportion of vulnerable students from overseas and from under-represented backgrounds, London Higher feels that it is important that London institutions are upfront tackling these challenges and taking the measures necessary to uphold quality in our sector.

*This briefing provides an overview into academic integrity based on presentations and material covered during the London Higher events series.*

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## Academic misconduct and contract cheating

### What is academic misconduct?

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [notes](#) that academic misconduct includes various offences including, but not limited to: contract cheating; plagiarism; collusion; impersonation or illegal proxies.

Academic integrity issues are in no way exclusively a London problem but, as a group representing a large sub-section of the UK higher education sector, with a high proportion of vulnerable students from overseas and from under-represented backgrounds, we feel it is important that London institutions are upfront tackling these challenges and taking the measures necessary to uphold quality in our sector.

### What is contract cheating?

Academic integrity expert Dr Thomas Lancaster [outlines contract cheating](#) as follows:

*Contract cheating describes the process through which students can have original work produced for them, which they can then submit as if this were their own work. Often this involves the payment of a fee and this can be facilitated using online auction sites.*

Platforms such as essay mills, small ads sites and social media forums such as Reddit facilitate contract cheating. It is not a new phenomenon, being seen across cultures and throughout history, however the advent of technology has facilitated access to services of more sophisticated contracting cheating services that offer bespoke, 'plagiarism-free' services. Conversely, technology is also more capable than ever in terms of identifying and aiding the reduction of academic misconduct.

### What are the challenges?

- **Targeting by contract cheating services:** Students from certain backgrounds and entry pathways such as partnership degrees have received targeted messaging from essay mills and other services. Appropriate messaging is required so that the risks of using contract cheating services and the dangers of wider academic misconduct are clearly communicated.
- **Entry pathways:** In the same vein as above, students from certain backgrounds or those doing partnership degrees have been targeted by contract cheating services, therefore these students clearly need to be informed of the dangers of academic misconduct.
- **Marketisation of HE:** There is a danger that some institutions are prioritising the intake of international students as they bring in more revenue, but it is imperative to consider students' suitability for study and our duty of care to these students' success and satisfaction.
- **Advertising:** Forums such as Reddit offer spaces for ['homework help'](#) which facilitate contact between students looking to cheat and providers of relevant services. **Small ads sites** such as fiverr.com or gumtree have advertised contract cheating services. In some cases, these are offered by people that acknowledge the unethical nature of contract cheating, but [who benefit from the demand in Western countries](#) and are subsequently able to make a living. **YouTubers** and other online influencers [have been known to advertise](#) and promote essay mills and other services. Some contract cheating services have been able to embed themselves on institutional websites and position themselves as legitimate and trusted academic resources. Jisc has said that this activity is equivalent to organised crime. The appearance of contract cheating services on websites

is part of a wider problem concerning HEIs' cyber infrastructure: ['spear phishing'](#) penetration tests carried out by Jisc saw hackers able to breach university cyber-defences with a 100% success rate within two hours.

- **Illegal proxies:** Certain online timed assessments have seen patterns of activity from outside the UK, suggesting that persons other than the named students are undertaking a test, examination, essay or even misconduct hearings on their behalf.
- **Impact of Covid:** Covid has exacerbated students' feelings of isolation, a lack of community and disengagement with peers and their institutions, meaning that they have been more susceptible to turning elsewhere for help.
- **Pivot to online learning:** With Covid and the move to online learning and examinations leading to increased vulnerabilities, some services have reduced the rates they charge and offered discounts to long-term customers, being seen as sources of support by the students who use them.
- **Remote Proctoring:** A shift to online learning and off-site examinations has led to professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) insisting on increased proctoring, due to a perceived increase in academic misconduct. Without appropriate due diligence and effective student engagement learner may feel unduly and unfairly scrutinised, leading to mistrust.
- **Institutional Culture:** Different HEIs will have different approaches to penalisation of misconduct, ranging from zero-tolerance to 'strikes' policies; how can an approach to addressing misconduct be implemented with such variation?

## What solutions are there?

### Potential Solution: Legislation

- **Legislative landscape:** As part of the Skills and Post-16 Education Act, it is now ['a criminal offence to provide, arrange or advertise these cheating services for financial gain to students taking a qualification at any institution in England providing post-16 education including universities'](#).<sup>1</sup>
- **Scope of legislation:** This legislation specifically criminalises essay mills, of which there are over [1,000](#) in the UK. It does not extend to penalising family or friends who produce work on behalf of a student, though this is still academic misconduct. It focuses on all post-16 provision, not just HE, as there have been concerted efforts by contract cheating services to [advertise to school-age children](#). Furthermore, the essay mills legislation only concerns England; there is a need for a UK-wide approach to ensure that essay mills are suppressed across the country.
- **Statutory regulation:** No new body will be established to implement statutory regulation; this will be the responsibility of the Police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). In Australia and Ireland, statutory regulation lies with the regulator, rather than with the police or prosecution service, as will be the case in England. Therefore, in order to aid prioritisation of breaches, the sector will have a duty to report identified breaches to the police or CPS. The relationship between the sector and the implementing authorities will develop as the process for statutory regulation is embedded.
- **Prioritisation of breaches:** The sector will have to work closely with the police and CPS to identify and take action against the most egregious breaches, as implementation of this legislation is just one part of these bodies' wider responsibilities and there is no separate statutory regulator.
- **Building relationships with the Department for Education (DfE):** Once the impact of banning essay mills can be demonstrated, other areas affecting academic misconduct can be similarly targeted by the sector, in partnership with the DfE.

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• <sup>1</sup> **Government rationale** for banning essay mills can be found [here](#), pp.28-35. Amendments to the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill tackling essay mills (54-57), proposed in the House of Lords can be found [here](#).

- **Building relationships with the Office for Students (OfS):** Individual providers that have identified higher levels of cheating within their institution are being supported to build a better relationship with the regulator, in order to maintain quality and standards.

#### Potential Solution: Academic Integrity Charter

- **Academic Integrity Charter:** This [Charter](#), developed by QAA in conjunction with the UK Academic Integrity Advisory Group, comprises guiding principles that seek to inform the development of institutional policies and practices related to academic misconduct. Over 170 institutions – from all four nations of the UK – have signed up to the Charter, representing their institutional commitment to preserving academic integrity.

#### Potential Solution: Assessment Design

- **Authentic assessment design:** Engaging students in situations that are more representative of real-world/professional environments rather than focusing on memorisation and recall may make cheating more difficult, as these assessments are harder to outsource.
- **Incorporating values:** Embedding academic integrity values of honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility, and engagement with curricula means that students can develop themselves academically, but in a more holistic sense. Evaluating the assessment *process* and rewarding the creation of refined academic products rather than just the output can lead to better student engagement with the work.
- **Limitations:** It is important to be aware that no assessment is fully cheat-proof, nor will zero misconduct be achievable owing to increasingly sophisticated technologies. Focusing on reduction and prevention through identification of factors that lead to malpractice can help in the creation of solutions, rather than aiming for eradication.

#### Potential Solution: Achieving Culture Change within Higher Education Institutions

- **Institutional responsibility:** Moving away from a student deficit model and recentralising institutions in upholding academic integrity and preventing misconduct. Framing academic misconduct as a pedagogical issue rather than simply a student behaviour issue enables solutions to be duly developed, such as designing assessments that meaningfully improve learning outcomes.
- **The need for common language:** To facilitate cooperation between institutions in recognising and combatting misconduct, language must be standardised. Additionally, institutional regulations are often written in inaccessible language, therefore it is important to work with student representatives to ensure that policies and potential penalties are clearly conveyed.
- **Building student-staff relationships:** Better relationships between students and staff can help staff pick up on irregularities in a student's body of work, and it can also reduce a student's feeling of disconnection or isolation, leading to more earnest engagement. Tailored and honest feedback of a student's work can increase their connection to the work as part of wider academic development. The National Union of Students (NUS) has [called](#) for the Government to work with universities to ensure that students are never in a 'position where they feel they must turn to essay mills'.
- **Support structures:** Moreover, nationality alone is not a useful indicator of susceptibility to cheating; vulnerabilities should also be considered. For example, in addition to poorer language levels that may compel a student to cheat, they may also not benefit from the same peer support as other students. Establishing safe spaces for skills development may be beneficial in addressing root causes of academic misconduct.
- **Academic literacies:** Recognising skills gaps and contextual differences between disciplines can inform academic delivery and may help reduce cheating.
- **Amnesties:** Contract cheating services employ blackmail tactics to ensure that targeted students use their services, such as through the falsification of UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI)

correspondence. Fostering an environment of understanding allows students to come forward, admit mistakes and benefit from earlier staff intervention.

- **Alleviating demands on staff:** It is crucial to give staff sufficient time to update and refresh assessments at subject level; this would serve to hinder contract cheating services as they would be offering out-of-date services.
- **Educational models:** Promoting education's inherent value rather than positioning it as an absolute indicator of future success may reduce pressure on students and therefore reduce cheating.
- **External factors:** Identifying factors that lead to academic misconduct and compel students to cheat helps inform solutions.

### Potential Solution: Technology

Technology's presence in education is greater than ever, which brings new and increasingly complex challenges to the fore; its undeniable importance arises from both the advantages and the disadvantages that it brings to higher education and wider society. For example, the internet allows for the existence of more sophisticated contracting cheating services that offer bespoke, 'plagiarism-free' services, but technology is also more capable than ever in terms of identifying and aiding the reduction of academic misconduct, detailed below.

- **Turnitin:** the role of Turnitin in formative assessments has been researched and can be found [here](#). Turnitin practice areas and unlimited submissions allow students to check their work, incorporate feedback and strengthen the integrity of their work, rather than just utilising Turnitin as a summative check at the point of submission.
- **Authorship for Investigators:** This Turnitin bolt-on provides an ['institution-wide dashboard and evidence-gathering report'](#). It scans document metadata, compares a student's suite of assessment submissions and analyses factors such as languages levels in order to identify possible instances of academic misconduct or contract cheating.
- Comparisons showing which demographic groups are more subject to academic misconduct claims and awarding gaps may help refocus on the centrality of institutions in educating against misconduct.

## International qualification verification and English Language testing

### What is qualification verification?

International qualifications are benchmarked against UK standards in order to assess veracity and suitability. The [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#) is the legal agreement for cross-border credential evaluation under whose auspices National Information Centres (ENICs) operate.

[Ecctis](#) runs the UK [ENIC](#) (formerly UK NARIC) under government contract via the DfE. This is the UK's national agency for qualification verification. It has a database of international qualifications (also accounting for national variations) that it benchmarks against UK equivalents.

UK ENIC also advises government departments on international education systems; qualification verification is not just relevant for HE, but for FE, accredited bodies, employers and information, advice and guidance (IAG) services, and overseas agencies or government departments. A third of UK ENIC's membership is based overseas.

## What is the qualification verification process?

- **Consideration of qualification characteristics:** Although awards and their design differ between countries, UK ENIC considers the key components and functions that result in certain competencies; it evaluates whether the qualification serves its purpose before comparing it to UK standards.
- **Evaluation Criteria:** For Ecctis, this includes recognition of a qualification in its national context and how it has supported key learning outcomes.
- **Fraud verification:** In addition to considering whether an international qualification is rigorous and adequately represents a certain standard, UK ENIC also assesses its veracity in the literal sense, such as identifying cases of forged or otherwise fraudulent certificates, for example.
- **Qualification Check:** This provides a [qualification checked at source](#) (such as an awarding institution).
- **Home Office criteria:** As sponsors, UK ENIC must evaluate students against Home Office criteria for visa requirements, comprising 70 points across three mandatory categories. These are:
  - Student identity; intention to study; entry qualifications; grades; suitability for study; and where necessary, [Academic Technology Approval Scheme](#) (50 points).
  - Finances (10 points).
  - English language proficiency (10 points).

## What is the English language testing process?

- **Assessing language level:** Some organisations assess language level against the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), and SELTs (secure English language tests) map onto this, such as the [IELTS, the English language test for study, migration or work](#). However, SELTs do not have common grading systems, therefore it is important to select tests that measure established and valid constructs of language proficiency.
- **Entry pathways:** Different immigration routes require different CEFR levels; for programmes at Bachelor level or above, this is at a minimum of B2.

## What are the challenges for qualification verification and English language testing?

- **Numbers of fraudulent applications:** Applications that are successfully identified as fraudulent are generally not reported, therefore it is unclear how many are submitted per year. Anecdotal evidence can help identify trends (such as spikes of fraudulent activity from certain countries or during certain time periods), but concrete data may help demonstrate to UKVI that HE is committed to safeguarding the integrity of institutions and the country.
- **Language proficiency as a predictor of academic success:** This is useful for as long as the level of language represents a barrier to learning. It is suggested that a score of 7.0 IELTS or below would represent such a barrier.
- **Security Features of SELTs:** Much like degree certificates, verification extends beyond the *level* of qualification, and verifiers must identify physical discrepancies such as false watermarks.

## What solutions are there?

- **Collective vigilance:** To protect academic integrity and combat plagiarism, essay mills and fraudulent activities, institutions must be actively involved in the qualification validation process. The relationship between English language testers and HEIs must not just be transactional in nature.
- **Pre-sessional learning:** Pre-sessional English courses upon arrival at an institution may not be validated like SELTs, however, they often include content on promoting academic integrity and combating misconduct, suggesting that they may have a value beyond just improving language levels.

- **Course context:** Depending on how linguistically demanding a course is, different standards may be sufficient. For example, a student reading English literature will require a more advanced language level (such as an IELTS score of 7.5 – 9) than a student studying a subject like mathematics (below a score of 7.5).

**Further Information:**

If you would like to discuss this briefing paper further or require any further information, please contact Darren de Souza, Policy and Projects Officer at London Higher on [darren.desouza@londonhigher.ac.uk](mailto:darren.desouza@londonhigher.ac.uk)

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