

## **How internet essay mills portray the student experience of higher education**

### **Abstract**

Higher education is under mounting pressure to confront student practices of assignment outsourcing to internet services. The scale and buoyancy of this 'essay mill' industry has now been well documented, including its various marketing techniques for urging students to purchase bespoke academic work. However, the inherently suspect nature of such services demands that they adopt a particularly shrewd and empathic rhetoric to win custom from website visitors. In this paper, we investigate how such rhetoric currently constructs a critical version of the student's higher education experience. We present a thematic analysis of promotional text and images as found on a large sample of essay mill sites. Findings reveal how these sites promulgate a hostile and negative attitude towards higher educational practice. Yet these findings may also indicate where the higher education sector needs to reflect on its practice, not least in order to resist the toxic messages of essay mills.

### **Keywords**

Empathy, essay mills, promotional communication, rhetoric, student experience.

### **Highlights**

- 95 essay mill websites scrutinised in relation to their promotional text and images
- Analysis exposes hostile and negative narratives of prevailing experiences of students in higher education
- These narratives systematised around six themes
- The analysis provides a platform for the higher education sector to reflect on good teaching and learning practice and how they are projected to students and the public

## 1. Introduction

Higher education (HE) has long sought to tackle violations of academic integrity, most commonly via codes of conduct and formal arrangements of detection and sanction (Bowers, 1964; Bertram Gallant (2008); Crook & Nixon, 2019; Mellar et al, 2018). Such efforts to manage academic integrity in the academy now face an additional challenge: the easy access to a plethora of essay-writing services afforded by the internet (Lancaster & Clarke, 2015; Newton, 2018). Extant scholarship has shown the essay mill industry to be well established, readily accessible online, and increasingly sophisticated in terms of offerings and persuasive techniques. Across the HE sector, contract cheating - “the phenomenon through which students employ or use a third party to undertake their assessed work for them” (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016 p. 639) - is an international problem that is said to be “booming” (The Guardian, 2018), effectively creating “degrees for sale” (BBC Three, 2018) and promising to “erode trust in science” (Bretag, 2019, p. 559). Universities are accused of failing to detect offences (Channel 4, 2019) with their staff even “topping up earnings by helping students to cheat” (The Telegraph, 2017). A widespread institutional reaction has been to invest in commercial plagiarism-checking services (Naik, Landge & Mahender, 2015). Because plagiarism involves a failure of authorship attribution, and assignments that are improperly ‘contracted’ necessarily involve an undeclared author. Yet there are two weaknesses with this plagiarism-checking strategy. First, it makes little impact on the thriving essay mill industry: not least because those sites guarantee that their work is ‘plagiarism free’. Second, making plagiarism-checking so prominent risks *commodifying* the essay. By hyper-focussing on the essay as a product, institutions may undermine those processes constituting the essay as a rich form of educational practice.

This paper reports the findings of a systematic study of 95 essay mill websites, with a particular interest in these businesses’ portrayal of HE and the student experience. We propose that scrutinising the rhetoric of essay mill sites not only helps us understand their continuing presence but offers a challenge to institutions who may remain narrowly reliant on plagiarism-checking for confronting lapses in academic integrity. Though extant literature has revealed the range and sophistication of internet marketing techniques used by essay mills, here we attend to the manner in which the teaching and learning practices of HE are characterised in these widely accessed websites. By analysing the promotional rhetoric of essay mill websites, our work exposes the narratives about HE these companies deem effective in converting website visitors to customers. This helps us understand the possible reasons students use such services, which are overlooked when institutions respond with further investment in plagiarism-checking software. Our findings can thus inform sector-wide efforts to reduce academic dishonesty; by adjusting tutor-student communication, for example, or by changing assignment design and assessment in ways that reduce the effectiveness of essay mill rhetoric. Our research contributes to existing literature by offering a thematic analysis of a larger sample of such websites than has previously been achieved, considering different elements of these sites (including pictorial communication and text beyond the landing page), and with its focus on the different ways essay mills endeavour to build empathy with website visitors.

### 1.1 The ‘milling’ of educational assignments

The provision of assignments that students could submit as their own work is a service that has existed since the first appearance of the college ‘term paper’, the informal trading of which has evolved into its current presence as a widespread and sophisticated industry (Dickerson 2007; cf., Ellis, Zucker & Randall, 2018; Newton, 2018). Such businesses are flourishing, buoyed by the migration of assessment procedures from examination to coursework that has occurred across the HE sector (Richardson, 2014). As a form of academic misconduct, it is not a contemporary problem;

yet over the last century there has been a “change in public perception from amusement to moral panic” (Bertram Gallant, 2008, p. 28). Public discussion of the practice has been built around the metaphor of ‘milling’ educational commodities. This was first applied to the marketing of false qualifications, i.e., “diploma mills and other workers of iniquity” (Thompson, 1883, p. 646) and then the phrase ‘term-paper mills’ arose in the 1960s (Stavisky, 1973). ‘Essay mills’ became the dominant description for a service that supplies bespoke answers to a wide range of assignment types that students have been set by their tutors. Finally, the phrase ‘contract cheating’ emerged to describe this particular form of academic misconduct (Lancaster & Clarke, 2015) – serving to emphasise the transactional nature of this market relationship and its apparent violation of accepted morals.

The internet has greatly facilitated the accessibility and advertising of assignment ‘solutions’ applicable to students in HE. Close monitoring of relevant internet activity identifies essay mill companies as a major force behind the growth of contract cheating (Lancaster, 2016; Owings & Nelson, 2014). The influence of the internet is also implied in Newton’s (2018) analysis of data from research wherein students were asked to self-report whether they had “purchased, or in some other way paid money for an assignment”. Though the data does not differentiate between assignments purchased from essay mill sites and private tutoring, his analysis reveals a striking increase in the percentage of students admitting such ‘outsourcing’ practices over the past 10 years – a period marked by the growth of digitally mediated services. Such services are attractive because of how effectively they manage the contract between student and provider. They ensure the discretion that such purchases are likely to necessitate, as well as simplifying processes of payment, detailed customisation and prompt delivery. Some commentators (e.g., Macdonald, 2017) have argued that educational institutions and educational politicians chose to overlook the unsavoury practices of essay mills during this period. Nevertheless, HE is certainly now under pressure to confront the problem, not least because it attracts embarrassing publicity.

Below, we review existing research on the essay mill industry, before developing our own concern with the rhetoric that these services deploy. Our belief is that this rhetoric has been relatively neglected by those who need to understand and manage the influence of contract cheating services. Certainly, some studies have considered the persuasive discourse of these websites in order to document their marketing techniques (e.g., Medway, Roper, and Gillooly; 2018). However, the present research focusses on how the industry might contribute to a wider discourse regarding higher educational practice. It is important for institutions to be aware of how the student experience is presented by others but, in particular, to be alert to how such presentations may disturb the public understanding of institutional communities and their values.

## 1.2 Empirical scholarship on essay mills

The phenomena of essay milling and contract cheating continue to attract empirical research internationally. To outline the contributions of existing studies we group them here into three themes according to their focus: (i) the conduct of internet-based services, (ii) the practices, perceptions and motives of students using them, and (iii) the institutional response.

First, research on essay mills has made visible the scale and buoyancy of the industry (Owings & Nelson, 2014) and the *modus operandi* of their business (Ellis et al, 2018; Clarke & Lancaster, 2013; Lancaster and Clarke, 2008, 2016). Essay mills’ main techniques of online customer persuasion are sophisticated (Amigud, 2019; Medway, Roper & Gillooly, 2018; Rowland, Slade, Wong & Whiting, 2018), employing various marketing practices to establish a convincing narrative of perceived value for the customer. The composition and motives of those who author the assignments have been explored through interviews (Sivasubramaniam, Kostelidou & Ramachandran, 2016) and within

personal reflection (Tomar, 2012), while the quality of such assignments has been judged through blind evaluations (Lines, 2016; Medway et al, 2018; Sutherland-Smith & Dullaghan, 2019). It is clear from this work that assignment authors effectively rationalise their involvement in such practices and, though the work they produce may not always meet the levels promised, usually it is of adequate quality for passing the assignments that universities set.

Existing research on the scale and drivers of student engagement with essay mill services suggests we are right to be deeply concerned about this industry. This is apparent from both internet mining of server activity (Lancaster, 2016) and from economic analysis of the business records from typical sites (Owings & Nelson, 2014). Given the morally suspect nature of such practices, studies that rely on self-report and selectively sampled surveys may tell an imperfect story. Yet even in Rigby, Burton, Balcombe et al's (2015, p. 36) anonymous essay-purchasing simulation experiment, results led to a conclusion that "it [is] remarkable how many students, in a study administered by academics, indicate a willingness to buy". Other research has drawn from the publicly visible messages placed by students on social media platforms (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019) or from declared motives for cheating solicited from students in surveys (Beasley, 2014; Bretag, Harper, Burton et al, 2019). The literature implies that the absolute frequency of purchasing assignments from essay mill sites may be small but, in relative terms, the scale of their use is extremely troubling. Within this body of work there are recurring themes relating to student motives for contract cheating: namely perceived (lack of) aptitude, personal pressures, competing objectives, and feeling victimised by poor assignment design or practice.

Finally, research has been directed towards ways in which institutions can detect or deter the use of essay mills. Although institutions may make great efforts to define their regulations on misconduct (Crook & Nixon, 2019), it is very clear that students are often unaware of these or do not attend closely to them (Adam, Anderson & Spronken-Smith, 2016; Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997; Gullifer & Tyson, 2014; Sutton & Taylor, 2011). Whether or not regulations are understood - or even applied (cf. Awdry & Newton, 2016; Coren, 2011) - universities still need methods to detect assignment outsourcing and thereby expose offences. As the massification of HE increasingly disconnects individual tutors from their own students (Allais, 2014), hope for the detection of outsourced assignments is seen to rest more on machine-based solutions than on human intuition (Amigud, Arnedo-Moreno, Daradoumis et al, 2017; Clare, Walker & Hobson, 2017). Yet such machine techniques are at an early stage (McHaney, Cronan & Douglas, 2019); more realistic solutions may arise from innovations of assessment where the assignments offered are specifically designed to be resistant to essay mill involvement (Bretag et al, 2019; Joughin, 2010; Patall and Leach, 2015; Sotiriadou, Logan, Daly et al, 2019; Trevelyan & Wilson, 2012; Villarroel, Bloxham, Bruna et al, 2018).

In sum, this brief review illustrates that the industry is strong, versatile and not lacking in self belief. Moreover, in business terms it is effective, while HE institutions may have much work to do if this success is to be challenged. While the HE sector must hope that research investment of the kind outlined above will provide guidance on how institutions can confront the essay mill industry – which to some extent it may be achieving – in this paper we specifically attend to the portrayal of the HE experience discursively constructed by essay mills through their promotional rhetoric. The increasing sophistication of marketing communications from essay mills targeting the student population suggests that their messages about educational practice and the student experience may be significant and influential, and thus important for universities to heed and understand.

### 1.3 The use of empathy as reassurance

Existing studies that have analysed essay mills' website content (Medway et al, 2018; Rowland et al, 2018) document how sites pursue assignment contracts by using various forms of persuasive reassurance. Much of the persuasive text is identified in these studies as information about the nature of the product and service, proclaiming their guaranteed quality, their competitive price, and the efficient customer service these sites provide. However, businesses offering such a socially controversial service need to provide additional reassurance, one that goes beyond transmitting the 'facts' centred on price and quality. Essay mills need to neutralise a visitor's awareness that assignment outsourcing is, we assume for many potential customers, a deeply suspect practice. Medway et al (2018) have illustrated how sites may address this aim by building *empathy* with potential customers. The empathic reassurance cues they identified typically referred to students feeling the "stress and overload" (Medway et al, 2018, p. 410) of study. However, the terms in which such stress is discussed by sites deserves closer scrutiny. A site that simply commiserates with workload stress risks leaving the customer only with a sense of their own inability or incompetence. Attempts to build empathy with website visitors could, conceivably, be more compelling if the experience of stress is anchored to a particular depiction of educational practices. This depiction may be affirmative, where a persuasive narrative might suggest, for example, that scholarship is an intrinsically worthy challenge and outsourcing is one route towards being successful within it. Equally, it could constitute a more negative perspective by casting students as victims of an education system that has let them down, a disappointment for which outsourcing is a fair response.

Exploring the direction and roots of empathic reassurance requires mining the promotional communication of essay mill websites more deeply than has so far been attempted. In doing so, we seek to alert the HE sector to the manner in which their practices are characterised – perhaps undermined – in these widely accessed websites. If countervailing responses by institutions are called for, then the present findings may help identify the form they should take. Accordingly, our primary research question here is 'How do essay mills portray educational practices and the student's experience of those practices?'. Our aim is to illustrate the industry's promotional communication through close analysis of representative websites. The primary research question will be approached through two sub-questions. One is ontological in focus: how is the student experience represented? The second is more epistemic in focus: what are the beliefs about teaching and learning that potential student customers might be encouraged to hold after engaging with these sites?

## 2. Material and methods

We sought a corpus of examples large enough to allow mapping of the different perspectives on educational practice that essay mills might express and also the diverse range of strategies by which this was being approached. This required a sample larger than those typically recruited for research focusing on persuasive techniques in this arena (e.g., Medway et al, 2018; Rowland et al, 2018). Yet the shadowy distribution of these sites on the internet constrained any ambition to recruit a sample with any claim to be random, merely one large enough to document confidently the variety of portrayals. It should be a sample that reflects the range of sites returned by an internet search with terms a potential customer might employ. Accordingly, the string "essay writing service" was entered into a Google search. This allowed harvesting the first 100 URLs of sites offering to deliver on assignment briefs provided by customers. During analysis, five of these sites disappeared. Therefore, data reported is based on 95 active sites.

Rather than solely focus on text, our research questions required an analysis of essay mills promotional communication that included identifying and analysing common components of essay mill websites. Since images are a powerful way to project desirable scenarios and identities to a

target audience, we included relevant pictorial communication. Our inductive approach to identifying and systematising the content of these components followed a pattern of thematic analysis based upon the staged model described by Braun and Clarke (2006) combined with a descriptive (quantitative) content analysis of website images.

**Stage 1.** Sites were browsed to achieve familiarity and to establish the common structural features of this form of online communication. This identified the following four recurring design elements relevant to building a narrative about educational practice and the student experience: (i) images, (ii) promotional text (locating services and articulating their strengths), (iii) user testimonials, and (iv) study guides (advice on careers, writing genre and study skills). This fourth element will be referred to as 'blogs', as this is the form in which study advice was most often packaged.

**Stage 2.** The sites were re-visited with attention to each of these design elements separately. In the case of *images*, they were plentiful; however, only those depicting actors, locations or artefacts relevant to educational practice were selected. This excluded cartoons or other schematic designs, icons, and photographs illustrating services (such as people purporting to be chat line personnel or testimonial authors). This supplied a total of 210 images, although a small number of these were used on more than one site. Occasional photographs inserted into (study skill) blog posts were not included. The core of the *promotional text* surveyed was repetitive, because the same tropes were applied to marketing a wide range of different writing products. *User testimonials* could also be plentiful. Only content of the first listed (up to five) were considered. Finally, *blogs* were scanned by title to capture their subject; their content was then browsed to determine their perspective and credibility. For each of these elements, initial codes for their content were developed.

**Stage 3.** Coding tables were used as a basis for detailed examination of the sites, recruiting a spreadsheet to ease the process of navigation and thereby systematising each corpus. Of the final 95 sites, 58 deployed minimal persuasive discourse: that is, merely stating their product, pricing, and favourable customer relations, while the promotional text of 42 sites invoked HE institutional practices or characterised the student's own relationship with institutions. Often, tropes of this kind were repeated throughout the site – simply attached to a range of different service offerings. These were not enumerated but are represented here in the form of 129 unique coded text extracts. Some longer extracts attracted more than one code. For each corpus (images, promotional text, and testimonials), tentative themes were defined by the researchers, involving the consolidation of overlapping codes.

**Stage 4.** Provisional definitions for these themes were corroborated by revisiting the sites of these extracts and confirming that they accurately reflected the content of the site in which they were originally identified or modifying them to ensure this.

**Stage 5.** The two researchers analysed the sites independently according to the method described above. Collaborative discussion then took place to establish agreement regarding the themes arising, how they might be characterised, and then integrated as patterns of meaning that addressed our research questions. Six themes were identified; they are defined and discussed below in Sections 3.1 – 3.6.

### 3. Findings

Our analysis of the promotional communication around educational practice and student experience yielded six distinct themes that we discuss below. Sources that best illustrate themes are identified

with their URL. However, to avoid the clutter of long internet addresses, these URLs were simplified to a short form, citing only the 7-character code of an 'http://bit.ly' transformation (this part would need to be prefaced to any citation code if tracing it online manually). All addresses were valid at the time of writing (23-12-2019), although where this is no longer the case, screenshots are available on request.

### 3.1 Student decoupled from pedagogy

In this theme students and their contexts are represented in ways that make no reference to the interactional conduct of educational practice. Codes for images were combined into the themes of 'human actors' and 'educational contexts'. The former was differentiated in terms of gender, ethnicity, social configuration and disposition. The latter theme comprised educational artefacts (desks, books, pens etc.) and educational settings (locations). Most images were of students (86%), generally as individuals (70%) or otherwise in pairs (10%) or small groups (20%). 70% of individuals depicted were women and 94% were judged Caucasian. Table 1 summarises the apparent dispositions of these individuals or small groups.

Table 1. Disposition projected within photographs of people

<b>Disposition of individuals depicted</b>	<b>% of all</b>
<i>Profile</i> : Individual(s) address camera with no explicit educational reference	24
<i>Print study</i> : Engagement with some print source during apparent studying	19
<i>Scholar pose</i> : Inactive but with or against paraphernalia of study (books etc.)	18
<i>ICT study</i> : Engagement with some digital device during apparent studying	14
<i>Document focus</i> : Shared or sole engaged attention to single document	9
<i>Collaboration</i> : Working together with sources and implicit joint awareness	7
<i>Graduate pose</i> : With academic dress or in graduation context	6
<i>Classroom</i> : Engaged within configuration of organised learning	3

The most common disposition has been termed 'profile', as it expresses the mood of a posing individual or group, with no allusion to institutional pedagogy. Almost always that mood was positive; those depicted communicate contented and/or convivial attitudes. Photographs of pairs and groups were usually situated in recreational contexts; the representation of joint *study* was quite rare. Beyond this, around three quarters of those images of people mark some sort of engagement with private study. Figure 1 illustrates key formats from Table 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

These images are not unfamiliar: they echo the promotional material of HE institutions themselves. Despite that familiarity, the form of identity projected here still invites careful consideration for the meanings it constructs. Advertising strives to create attraction through identification (Kelman, 1958) and most photographs we viewed depicted individuals with a freshness and innocence of manner, a satisfied commitment to study, while thriving within an upbeat and collegial peer group. The closest any image category comes to representing the tangible product being promoted is 'document focus', where a shared positive reaction to some document might suggest the admiration that a purchased product could win.

Considering the persuasive intent of the websites, this is not surprising. A strong focus on the iconic college student - and the absence of the unpalatable aspects of outsourcing one's assignments - helps shape how potential customers understand themselves in terms of the commercial relationship they are contemplating. The visitor is being encouraged to identify with those undertaking serious study, at ease with their progress, and achieving success. Nevertheless, it is striking how little reference is made to the conventional experiences of *teaching*. Of course, these might be the very aspects of college life that might trigger feelings of responsibility to an institution or even guilt. Similarly, ivory tower motifs that might otherwise suggest the individual's commitments to a scholarly community were markedly absent. There is also a striking absence of actors other than students. For instance, families could form part of the admiring context (particularly in celebratory scenes of graduation), but they do not. Moreover, no image depicted an individual who one might assume was a teacher.

In sum, the depiction of the student in pictorial communication is idealised and uniform; there is engagement with study, but in a manner suggesting a strong sense of individual agency. There is no visual reference to teachers or to acts of teaching. References to *sites* of teaching and learning are also very scarce. Such pictures may enjoy an immediacy of impact that establishes for the customer a desired and reassuring identity. The depiction of the student is rooted in effort, agency, and social confidence; if a scholarly community is referenced it is based only on the peer group. The relative absence of otherwise thematically relevant material in the pictorial communication - such as teachers, classrooms and groupwork - implies a message that success can be independent of pedagogy.

### 3.2 The nature of the learning experience

In this theme the students' typical involvement in required practices of learning are characterised. Although an essay mill website may include images, testimonials, and study support material, most of its content comprises persuasive text designed to encourage custom. This persuasive text includes some development of a perspective or narrative about the educational culture within which the customer's assignments are set. These narratives offer ways of making sense of the student's academic predicament, perhaps seeking to neutralise a student's unease with the idea of being a customer or linking events together to provide a story that deflects the responsibility for anticipated misconduct. This theme collates essay mills' narratives of "the learning experience", to illustrate how sites define the overarching quality of current educational practice. In our sample, narratives of the learning experience could be positive or negative. A positive perspective was certainly common in relation to education's *rewards* - that is, acknowledgement of the useful qualifications that might be won through study. However, this positive attitude was rarely extended to support the specific educational practices that lead to such outcomes. For example, the customer's supposed feeling of workload stress was commonly cast as the consequence of miserable HE practices that disrupt work-life balance:

*Want to know the worst part? Term paper writing steals a lot of your free time. You could be spending your evening on hobbies, friends, and relatives, but instead you have to do research on this difficult topic you're sick of. (2yfx4G)*

Moreover, such narratives sometimes suggested that the stress thereby enforced was something ignored by the education system. Rather than casting tutors as *challenging* their students, instead they were more likely to be cast as *punishing* them: perhaps with demands for more private study - and yet setting tasks that only turn out to be tedious. The customer's reasonable expectations of



what should be involved in the 'work' part of a student's work-life balance were thus undermined, overtaken by forms of activity that offer none of the expected inspiration:

*Being a student implies much more than attending classes, studying and taking exams; it also means spending long hours in the library working on projects that don't interest you at all. ([2K4oViT](#))*

*The actual reading of the book takes up several hours of your precious time - not to mention the fact that the majority of scholastic book report assignments are on books you would have absolutely no intention of reading on your own time! Truthfully, most students consider them to be outdated and boring. ([2tziX56](#))*

In such terms, routine study was characterised as excessively boring and made remote from any spontaneous interest. A common elaboration of this narrative was to dismiss academic demands as not simply boring, but as irrelevant to the student's career ambitions. Such ambitions were positioned as more likely to depend upon the individual's passion or their native intelligence, rather than depending on classes or the reading associated with them:

*You have the knowledge to do the job, right? But you can't simply let the rest of your life slip into oblivion, all because of academic papers, most of which are absolutely useless for your future career. ([2ZWb1qz](#))*

*We all understand that sometimes an advanced degree is just a sort of union card for your dream job. However, your actual expertise might arise from your passion and insight, not the classes which you've taken! ([39Ohjik](#))*

In short, "assignments can be so boring that you're not motivated to complete them at all" ([2LF62GN](#)) and so, by implication, your presence on an essay mill site is understandable and fair. Inevitably, the solution proposed for this disconnect between ambition and formal study was to outsource the work required:

*Students of marketing usually dream of working for an advertising agency or a media organization. Their dreams usually don't include completing homework assignments or writing marketing academic papers. One possible solution is to buy marketing papers online. ([2MYJf7S](#))*

It was unusual for such reflections to refer selectively to a specific discipline, as in the last example. Instead, comments were pitched generically in order to apply to any subject for which an essay-type task had been set. (While most sites did advertise services for other types of assignments, traditional essays were clearly the most anticipated custom.) We observed that the dominant perspective of the learning experience was one in which it is pressured, dull, and irrelevant to students' likely ambitions. Meanwhile, institutions and their tutors were cast as indifferent to the painful consequences of their demands. Yet the ease with which such claims can be voiced might cause us, and customers, to write them off as simply too colourful or lacking nuance. However, this perspective can gain more credibility when essay mills give specific examples of failing educational practice. The following themes illustrate the particular accounts of educational practice and student experience used to enhance persuasive effect.

### **3.3 The indifference of tutors**

In this theme the typical practices of HE tutors are characterised in terms of a disconnection with the needs of their students. University tutors are both the architects of assignments and the people who

tend to be the most responsible for nurturing the student's response to them. We found that relationships with tutors were represented by essay mills as troublesome. This was expressed in terms of four possible attitudes that tutors could adopt in relation to their students. The first is simply a kind of indifference: "No one listens to students' complaints; each professor expects them to study harder and submit multiple papers in order to receive satisfactory final grades" ([2K4oViT](#)). Second, this indifference was presented as stemming from a denial of students' legitimate agency within their relationships with tutors. The 'student-customer' was therefore encouraged to have greater faith in their *own* potential or vision, and not to be intimidated by the unilateral demands of their tutors:

*We want to give you an opportunity to channel your energy into what really matters to you, not your professor. Time is always of the essence, and there's no real reason to spend so much of it trying to fit other people's idea of what you have to be... You deserve a chance to realize your full potential without any additional obstacles placed before you by the very people who are supposed to help you realize it. ([2ZW7clq](#))*

Third, tutors were said to deflect their responsibility for helping students. Instead they would simply direct those students into private study, a practice that demands the very agency or independence invoked by the essay mill rhetoric (themes 3.1 and 3.2). Yet the challenge of private study was rarely something celebrated by essay mills. In a reflection on the demands of carrying out difficult assignments on statistics, the idea of taking personal responsibility for finding a solution is simply dismissed:

*The problem is, not every tutor or professor explains in great detail the ins and outs of approaching and performing this kind of task - to write statistics papers. They usually refer students to some theoretical manuals so that they'd figure things out on their own. ([2QQWAA4](#))*

Finally, a familiar trope was employed whereby tutors were represented as preoccupied with other matters irrelevant to their students' best interest. In particular, tutors were described as pursuing their own research at the expense of finding time for tutorial guidance. Naturally, the solution proposed for escaping such neglect was to turn to the essay mill as a more sympathetic source of help:

*They tend to be very busy, too caught up in their own research and their own writing to give very much attention to students needing help with dissertation writing. ... You no longer need to wait until your advisor has time to help you. ([2YvhfPW](#))*

It would be unfair to view this argument only through a lens of cynicism. In our sample 35% of sites offered collections of study support material as a free service. Typically, it was organised in the format of a blog, although some sites also linked detailed study guidance with individual subject areas being promoted such as dissertations ([2MhMCqV](#)). Occasionally, this advice could be quite wide-ranging ([312e93M](#)); even though, ironically perhaps, a few sites plagiarised material from elsewhere (e.g., useful videos from the University of Leicester ([2Oomc9C](#))), but this did not appear to be typical. Blog posts offered general study skills, sample essays, suggested essay topics, and advice on choosing a degree subject. Some of these postings were no more than a page, often containing links and encouragement to the website's services. In around a quarter of the blogs the advice appeared comprehensive and useful (e.g., [2Yp1fiE](#), [2SMLywh](#)), with one essay mill including a

credible reflection on Montaigne ([2Oomc9C](#)). Furnishing such open source instructional content complicates how these sites are perceived. It may simply be a calculated strategy for attracting site visitors. More subtly, it may afford some credibility to the service or appeal to customers because it reinforces a site's commitment to student progress (rather than just success). Some do publicise their business in such positive terms (e.g., Mail Online, 2019). However, even casual contact with most sites will fail to suggest such generosity of spirit.

Much of this free support concerned academic writing, especially guidance on the structure of argumentation in different disciplines. Indeed, support for academic writing norms was the theme that essay mills accused tutors of most commonly neglecting: "...professors simply don't bother to provide clear instructions along with their projects and yet somehow expect their students to deliver texts of outstanding quality" ([2GxILCf](#)). Essay mills proposed an interpretation of this situation, and a response to it. They would claim that what the student was being irrationally denied was a source of *example material*. Confidence in expressing disciplinary expertise was argued to depend only on adequate exposure to well-formed examples. This narrative inevitably overlooks the idea that a student's progress might arise from constructing their *own* account of disciplinary content. The necessary solutions were positioned as existing outside of the students' effort – independent of it rather than constructed within it. Such a view is illustrated in the following fragment of reassurance given to students of Education:

*You want to be a teacher. You should want to write papers for yourself, because you may one day be the one correcting them. However, how are you going to become a good teacher if you can't see an optimized paper-writing process for yourself?* ([35xCf8m](#))

An optimal paper is something seen, rather than constructed. Nevertheless, good pedagogy would surely recognise the role of exemplary material in supporting student development. However, essay mills place model examples in a highly unmediated relationship to the learner. Such exemplary material was discussed in 'template' terms, rather than as material to be explored within a personal act of exposition. This theme intersects with the next, where we illustrate how essay mill commentary trivialises the demands of academic writing.

### **3.4 Marginalising academic literacy**

This theme refers to the expectation that students acquire an awareness of good practice in relation to their communication of scholarly ideas. The core business of essay mills is essays. Yet browsing their websites reveals the milling of assignments in a wider range of expository formats than only the traditional essay. These formats might include laboratory reports, discussion forum postings, PowerPoint presentations, and even poems. Yet a common reassurance technique of the essay mill was to frame the student's predicament as one of struggling with the act of assignment *writing* or academic literacy (Casanave, 2005), rather than its expressive content. So, the promotional text of these sites commonly invited the customer to identify with "some of us who are not born writers" ([32VITVE](#)) or suggested that essays "can only be helpful to those students who plan to become a writer or a journalist" ([2YaAgb9](#)):

*Are you one of the millions of students who feel that it isn't fair that being an expert writer is a condition of your graduation? When did it happen, exactly, that being able to write flawless prose became a necessary requirement for almost every single subject in higher education, from Chemistry to Business? Why is it*

*that the written word has become just about the only way to show advanced knowledge in your chosen field? (2SENNSI)*

It is not therefore surprising that we found user testimonials confirming the consequences of this tension, for instance noting that “...even though I know I thoroughly understand the whole book, I still have a hard time to put my idea into words” (2sSRyLm). Whatever the credibility of testimonials on essay mill websites, such feelings are surely real enough for many students. So it is quite appropriate for sites to acknowledge that “...there are many alternatives for students who want to achieve the best academic results but feel that their capabilities do not really lean towards organized writing” (36yCgKi). Yet the alternatives proposed by the essay mill industry are not “many” in number. Only one solution is proposed: one that neither invites the student’s independent and inquiring engagement with relevant literacies, nor their entering into some scaffolding tutorial collaboration around the challenge of authorship. The single alternative offered is the blindly transmissive solution of assignment outsourcing. What we therefore mean here by a “marginalisation” of academic literacy refers to the manner in which these sites dismissed its significance. The demand of essay writing was cast as something secondary to developing disciplinary understanding – another form of minor or trivial skill. This is vividly expressed with the following analogies:

*When pipes leak in your bathroom, you call a plumbing service. When bugs are bothering you and cockroaches are after you all the time, you call a pest control service. But who you're gonna call when you need to write custom assignments, but have no time to do that on your own? (2KeeAku)*

To which the answer given is “professional essay writers, of course!” HE institutions know that this is not the answer, but the seductive arguments presented by essay mills must invite some questioning as to how adequately the challenge of engaging with academic literacies is addressed within higher educational practice.

### **3.5 Assessment obstructs real learning**

This theme captures the essay mills’ interpretation of the relationship institutions construct between assessment and the student’s intellectual progress. Just as essay mills positioned the demands of academic literacy as trivial, we also observed the marginalisation of the value of educational assignments themselves. The ultimate rationale offered for outsourcing is that the assignments have no useful place in the mainstream of a student’s study regime. Put simply, they “...take up invaluable study time and are often responsible for students getting behind” (2YIHOCv). Here compromising on assessment authorship was justified by casting assignments as distracting and unnecessary. Investing time on assessment comes at the expense of engaging with other more ‘legitimate’ forms of learning:

*Students sometimes complain that, while the topics are interesting and they are engaged in the field, they have to channel so much of their time into [assignment] tasks that they can't give the literature the time it deserves. (2ymwYSF)*

*If you are aspiring to become a doctor and therefore you are in nursing school, you will be given various assignments to determine your improvement. Being in a situation where you have quite a busy schedule and limited time, don't you think it's better to employ the services of specialists to handle your work? (2K6FWJm)*

One interpretation of coursework demands was that succeeding on them would allow the student to “...transfer into that privileged group that is allowed never to do the homework” (2T7pnTA). This seemed to imply that getting assignments painlessly out of the way would provide a fast track towards a more mature experience of studying – one less interrupted by homework tasks. More credible claims invoked the educational system’s apparent denial of student agency, whereby assignments were something imposed on a reluctant student whose preferred trajectory was being impeded:

*We help students evade the assignments they would otherwise simply decline under a non-prescriptive educational system. In a way, we bring you to that system! Here and now. We empower you to choose your assignments. (2MoUI6o)*

### 3.6 Delegation before collaboration

This theme concerns the way in which essay mills represented the institutional demands for collaborative learning. As noted in our first theme based on images, website photographs of students in a peer group rarely showed them as engaged in joint study. In our sample, studying was not portrayed pictorially as a collaborative experience. Indeed, in the promotional text, study was occasionally described in terms of an implicit *competition* with peers, rather than a harmonious form of joint inquiry:

*When we stop to take a look at how fast-paced and cut-throat our world has become over the last few years, it's no surprise that students at all academic levels have become so competitive. Ambitious students are striving for that extra edge to set them apart from the rest of the pack. (2YpauLu)*

However, a more prevalent version of the socially-mediated nature of study was that of delegation rather than collaboration. After all, “the majority of successful people practice the delegating of huge and ineffective workloads to well-trained professionals” (2FrPKvx). An association with this seemingly respected professional practice is one that invites customers to imagine themselves wisely pursuing:

*One of the secrets of highly successful people and good leaders is that they quickly learn how to delegate. Despite how trivial it may sound, delegating is a crucial skill needed when one is seeking to excel in their professional life. Many of the well-performing students who come from prestigious families understand this. (2ymwYSF)*

Essay mills’ promotional text predominantly defined themselves as providers of help and support (Theme 3.3 above). There was a recurring suggestion in our sample that the customer could work in conversation with their commissioned writer and thus potentially regard an outsourcing contract as one of collaborative authorship. However, it remains unclear how deep this relationship runs in practice, and testimonials gave little indication that it was a common customer experience. It is therefore unsurprising that sites tend to frame the commissioning of assignments as delegation rather than collaboration.

## 4. Discussion

We have reported a close analysis of essay mill websites, systematising the distinctive narratives on higher educational practice and the student experience that they currently project. Lengthy immersion in such material will have a dispiriting effect on the visitor who cares about the student’s

partnership with higher education; the six themes identified above reveal how HE is being represented in very troubling terms. The student experience is portrayed as predominantly one in which the individual deserves to achieve, despite the apparently oppressive demands of HE life. At best, tutors are represented as absent, setting irrelevant or painful assignments through which the student learns little or nothing - while the ability to communicate knowledge and informed argument in writing is trivial and thus its delegation to a skilled other is perfectly sensible.

Given the potentially disruptive nature of the messages found, a practical goal must be to use this material as a basis for framing advice to the sector. Yet the force of any such advice depends upon the material reviewed here having some influence on the attitudes of students themselves. This can only be inferred: perhaps from the documented scale of these services (Lancaster & Clarke, 2015; Newton, 2018) and from their demonstrated economic success (Owings & Nelson, 2014). It is certainly clear that the sites attract many real customers and doubtless they are read by others, merely through curiosity. Moreover, essay mills have access to a corpus of routine service correspondence in which students indicate the motives behind their requests for help (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019). It would be surprising if the critique of educational practices we report here was not recruited from within this correspondence by essay mills - and suitably amplified.

However, if some credibility can be ascribed to these forms of disaffection, it remains to clarify what any resulting advice to the HE sector is *for*. In general, we suppose it must always be valuable for HE to recognise and respond to how its work is presented in any public arena. In this case, the wide publicity given to contract cheating requires the sector to appear more animated in countering the outsourcing industry. An important strategy for doing so must be to learn from – and, incidentally, confront – those manipulating the attitudes of disaffected students for commercial gain. Those students may be a minority, but they may be the minority who will sustain the current success of the essay mill industry. We therefore suggest three directions for responding to the material presented in this report: namely, managing student understandings around HE assessment; managing help-seeking by students; and influencing how students understand their relationship to a curriculum.

First: how are students to understand the practice of assessment? For the essay mill industry, the student assignment is a *product* – one that merely feeds the ritual that is assessment. This reduces what should be a rich educational practice to a material artefact: the ‘essay’ (but also ‘the practical report’, the ‘poster’, the ‘video’ – all of which are catered for in outsourcing). A key problem with this perspective is that the assignment (and assessment more generally) becomes disconnected from the act of learning. For a tutor drawn towards such a view, the assignment is no longer a tool that supports a process of instruction, a site for creative innovation, or a reference point for learning conversations. A student adopting such a view risks approaching assignments as merely punctuation points in the broader narrative of their learning. They may even be regarded as obstacles vindictively prescribed by lecturers. Certainly, within our own experience of the sector, it can be difficult for students to always see assignments as projects in which learning is consolidated, and around which the dialogue of feedback can be constructed. Perhaps such disconnected understandings of assessment may be rendered plausible if students embrace too starkly the formative/summative distinction (William & Black, 1996). Given the increasingly ‘grade goal’ orientation of students (Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2017, p. 1958), there is a growing tendency for them to neglect assessment described as formative, while assessment clearly defined as summative may not be regarded a credible route for learning, or a useful source of feedback. Institutions should therefore do as much as they can to ensure all assessment experiences are designed and presented as vital activities for the consolidation of learning and as sources of feedback for further development.

The emphasis placed by essay mills on the necessity of working from model answers may also be grounded in a misunderstanding of assessment as a challenge, in that students may frequently express uncertainty as to what exactly an assignment requires them to do. It is easy for essay mills to argue that an illustrative example will serve to fix the problem. Of course, genuine lack of clarity in assignment design evidently can occur in the sector. The case for addressing this through the advance circulation of assessment guidance rubrics remains an appropriate practice (Winstone & Carless, 2019). Yet the use of worked exemplars for the live task is controversial (Handley & Williams, 2011). Tutors may need to stress more often that understanding the precise requirements of an assignment task will depend on the student having immersed themselves in the scholarly literature to which that task is a response. It needs to be made clear to students that a seeming lack of transparency in assignment briefs is not a 'trick' on the part of tutors; investment in study is a condition for understanding the intent that lies within an assessment task.

Second, the management of help-seeking. It is reasonable to suppose that many essay mill customers are more desperate than devious; they primarily seek help rather than undue advantage. The workload stress we identify in much essay mill promotional text may – as suggested above – be justified by students' own publicly-aired expressions of anxiety (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019) or it may be derived from the private correspondence between essay mills and their clients. Therefore, it reflects stress that may often be real. In either case, these services may provide significant rescuing help to many. However, HE institutions must ask themselves how effectively they advertise and deliver the quality and intensity of assignment support that might deter the individual from turning to outsourcing as a solution. Evidence suggests that students infrequently draw upon the formal support that institutions provide (Clegg, Bradley & Smith, 2006). While, on the other hand, innovations such as online office hours (e.g., Li & Pitts, 2009) or 'surgery-style' support services (Lawson, Grove & Croft, 2019) are rather rarely found in the sector.

Finally, in terms of how students understand their relationship to the curriculum, we recognise how much of the rhetoric of these sites implies a strong sense of student entitlement and a student's right to choose as a sovereign consumer; a discourse that perfectly aligns with a conception of assignments as commodities. Yet the sites also simultaneously portrayed the student as victim, let down by their tutors or helpless in the face of ill-treatment by their institution. Taken together, such representations may cultivate a desire for comfort and a greater sense of individual agency on the part of the customer; something that essay mills are only too ready to offer. In this case, HE may need to bite harder on the particular bullet that challenges conceptions of knowledge as something easily reached. As with many individual passions outside of formal education, the individual's progress is inevitably built from the rewards of tackling 'desirable difficulties' (Bjork & Bjork, 2011) along the way. In an increasingly marketized HE sector, it may often be awkward to emphasise this, but universities should have the courage to do so.

## **5. Conclusions**

The present analyses have considered the promotional material presented on essay mill websites. Many of these sites adopt a relatively minimalist approach to customer persuasion; they merely stress the quality of their product, its modest price, and the efficiency of their service. When adopting a more personalised voice, almost all sites dwelt upon the importance of doing well in education and the pressures on time that assessment created. But just under half of our sampled sites developed their marketing strategies beyond this. They included commentary and reflection on the existing policies and practices of higher education. Here we have identified six themes that describe how the teaching and learning experience is thus represented. Rather than adopting a sympathetic attitude towards institutional practices, these sites typically portrayed the student

experience in negative terms – even conveying a sense of the student predicament in terms of ‘victimhood’. Because there is evidence that these sites are in widespread use, we argue here that their attitudes regarding the experience of HE need to be registered by HE management. Regardless of their credibility, these messages invite institutions to consider how their approach to the community of teaching and learning is represented by others and thus how it can be enriched. To that end, three directions are identified that may be taken by institutions to counter the kinds of concerns exercised on these websites.

## 6. Limitations

We have used our immersion in essay mill website design to identify broad themes that characterise the attitude of one prominent outside agency towards formal educational practice. These themes have been presented in qualitative terms – a taxonomy of discourse rather than a quantitatively structured breakdown of website content. We concluded that such a structure would be hard to extract given the manner in which the design of sites often scattered the same messages across a range of products. However, a more quantitatively organised analysis might be worth pursuing in the future, if the force of enumeration proved a more effective alert to the HE sector. We are not able to make claims regarding the extent to which the messages we have identified have a significant influence on the attitudes of site customers. This would be an important task for future research. However, institutional management should nevertheless find the themes identified a sobering challenge for reform and development. Finally, the findings reported here are based on a sample of only modest scale. Yet we believe that it was large enough to reach a saturation point in relation to the range of themes active in relation to characterising the student experience.

## References

- Adam, L., Anderson, V., & Spronken-Smith, R. (2017). ‘It’s not fair’: policy discourses and students’ understandings of plagiarism in a New Zealand university. *Higher Education*, 74(1), 17-32. <https://10.1007/s10734-016-0025-9>.
- Allais, S. (2014). A critical perspective on large class teaching: the political economy of massification and the sociology of knowledge. *Higher Education*, 67(6), 721-734. <https://10.1007/s10734-013-9672-2>.
- Amigud, A. (2019). Cheaters on Twitter: an analysis of engagement approaches of contract cheating services. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1564258>.
- Amigud, A., Arnedo-Moreno, J., Daradoumis, T., & Guerrero-Roldan, A. E. (2017). Using learning analytics for preserving academic integrity. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 18(5). <https://10.19173/irrodl.v18i5.3103>.
- Amigud, A., & Lancaster, T. (2019). 246 reasons to cheat: An analysis of students’ reasons for seeking to outsource academic work. *Computers and Education*. 134 98-107. <https://10.1016/j.compedu.2019.01.017>.
- Ashworth, P., Bannister, P., Thorne, P. (1997). Guilty in whose eyes? University students’ perceptions of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22(2), 187-203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079712331381034>.



Awdry, R., & Newton, P. M. (2019). Staff views on commercial contract cheating in higher education: a survey study in Australia and the UK. *Higher Education*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00360-0>.

BBC Three (2018 September 20th) Degrees For Sale: Inside The Essay Writing Industry: Students On The Edge. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOSVW8rGZTk> Accessed 5 February 2020.

Beasley, E. M. (2014). Students reported for cheating explain what they think would have stopped them. *Ethics and Behavior*, 24(3), 229-252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508422.2013.845533>.

Bertram Gallant, T. (2008) Academic integrity in the twenty-first century: a teaching and learning imperative. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 33(5),1–143. <https://10.1353/rhe.0.0088>.

Bjork, E. L., & Bjork, R. A. (2011). Making things hard on yourself, but in a good way: Creating desirable difficulties to enhance learning. *Psychology and the real world: Essays illustrating fundamental contributions to society*, 2 (pp. 59-68).

Bowers, W. J. (1964). *Student dishonesty and its control in college*. New York, NY: Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

Bretag, T. (2019). Contract cheating will erode trust in science. *Nature*, 574(7780), 599. <https://10.1038/d41586-019-03265-1>.

Bretag, T., Harper, R., Burton, M., Ellis, C., Newton, P., Rozenberg, P., ... & van Haeringen, K. (2019). Contract cheating: A survey of Australian university students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(11) 1837-1856. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1462788>.

Bunce, L., Baird, A., & Jones, S. E. (2017). The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(11), 1958-1978. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1127908>.

Casanave, C. P. (2005). *Writing games: Multicultural case studies of academic literacy practices in higher education*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263103230254>.

Clare, J., Walker, S., & Hobson, J. (2017). Can we detect contract cheating using existing assessment data? Applying crime prevention theory to an academic integrity issue. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 13(1), 4. <https://10.1007/s40979-017-0015-4>.

Clarke, R., & Lancaster, T. (2013, July). Commercial aspects of contract cheating. In *Proceedings of the 18th ACM conference on Innovation and technology in computer science education* (pp. 219-224). ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2462476.2462497>.

Clegg, S., Bradley, S., & Smith, K. (2006). 'I've had to swallow my pride': help seeking and self-esteem. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 25(2), 101-113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360600610354>.

Coren, A. (2011). Turning a blind eye: Faculty who ignore student cheating. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 9(4), 291. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.nottingham.ac.uk/10.1007/s10805-011-9147-y>.

- Crook, C., & Nixon, E. (2019). The social anatomy of 'collusion'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(2), 388-406. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3504>.
- Dickerson, D. (2007). Facilitated plagiarism: The saga of term-paper mills and the failure of legislation and litigation to control them. *Villanova Law Review*, 52(1), 21-66.
- Ellis, C., Zucker, I. M., & Randall, D. (2018). The infernal business of contract cheating: understanding the business processes and models of academic custom writing sites. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 14(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-017-0024-3>.
- Gullifer, J. M., & Tyson, G. A. (2014). Who has read the policy on plagiarism? Unpacking students' understanding of plagiarism. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(7), 1202-1218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.777412>.
- Handley, K., & Williams, L. (2011). From copying to learning: Using exemplars to engage students with assessment criteria and feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(1), 95-108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930903201669>.
- Joughin, G. (2010). *A short guide to oral assessment*. Leeds Met Press in association with University of Wollongong. Available at [http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2804/1/100317\\_36668\\_ShortGuideOralAssess1\\_WEB.pdf](http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/2804/1/100317_36668_ShortGuideOralAssess1_WEB.pdf).
- Kelman, H. C. (1958). Compliance, identification, and internalization three processes of attitude change. *Journal of conflict resolution*, 2(1), 51-60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200275800200106>.
- Lancaster, T. (2016). A decade of contract cheating – What shape is the bespoke essay industry in today? Retrieved from <http://thomaslancaster.co.uk/blog/tag/uk-essays>, Accessed 27 July 2020.
- Lancaster, T., & Clarke, R. (2008). The phenomena of contract cheating. In T. S. Roberts (Ed.), *Student plagiarism in an online world: Problems and solutions* (pp. 144-159). Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference. <https://10.4018/978-1-59904-801-7.ch010>.
- Lancaster, T., & Clarke, R. (2015). Contract cheating: the outsourcing of assessed student work. In T. Bretag (Ed.) *Handbook of academic integrity* (pp. 639-654). Singapore: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-098-8\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-098-8_17).
- Lancaster, T., & Clarke, R. (2016). Contract cheating: the outsourcing of assessed student work. *Handbook of academic integrity*, 639-654. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-098-8\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-098-8_17).
- Lawson, D., Grove, M., & Croft, T. (2019). The evolution of mathematics support: a literature review. *International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science and Technology*, 1-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020739X.2019.1662120>.
- Li, L., & Pitts, J. P. (2009). Does it really matter? Using virtual office hours to enhance student-faculty interaction. *Journal of Information Systems Education*, 20(2), 175-185.
- Lines, L. (2016). Ghostwriters guaranteeing grades? The quality of online ghostwriting services available to tertiary students in Australia. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(8), 889-914. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1198759>.
- Macdonald, S. (2017.) It's not essay mills that are doing the grinding. *Times Higher Education Supplement*. May 25th. Retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/its-not-essay-mills-that-are-doing-the-grinding>. Accessed 5 February 2020.

Mail Online (2019) Thou shalt cheat! Born again Christian running controversial essay-writing firm insists it is a 'godly business'. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6869307/Born-Christian-running-controversial-essay-writing-firm-insists-godly-business.html>. Accessed 27 July 2020.

McHaney, R., Cronan, T. P., & Douglas, D. E. (2019). Academic integrity: Information systems education perspective. *Journal of Information Systems Education*, 27(3), 1.

Medway, D., Roper, S., & Gillooly, L. (2018). Contract cheating in UK higher education: A covert investigation of essay mills. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(3), 393-418. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3335>.

Mellar, H., Peytcheva-Forsyth, R., Kocdar, S., Karadeniz, A., & Yovkova, B. (2018). Addressing cheating in e-assessment using student authentication and authorship checking systems: teachers' perspectives. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 14(1), 2. <https://10.1007/s40979-018-0025-x>.

Naik, R. R., Landge, M. B., & Mahender, C. N. (2015). A review on plagiarism detection tools. *International Journal of Computer Applications*, 125(11). 10.5120/ijca2015906113.

Newton, P. (2018). How common is commercial contract cheating in Higher Education and is it increasing? A Systematic Review. *Frontiers in Education* (3), 67. Frontiers. <https://10.3389/feduc.2018.00067> .

Owings, S., & Nelson, J. (2014). The essay industry. *Mountain Plains Journal of Business and Economics, General Research*, 15, 1-21.

Patall, E. A., & Leach, J. K. (2015). The role of choice provision in academic dishonesty. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 42, 97-110. <https://10.1016/j.cedpsych.2015.06.004>.

Richardson, J. T. (2015). Coursework versus examinations in end-of-module assessment: a literature review. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 40(3), 439-455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2014.919628>

Rigby, D., Burton, M., Balcombe, K., Bateman, I., & Mulatu, A. (2015). Contract cheating and the market in essays. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 111, 23-37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2014.12.019>.

Rowland, S., Slade, C., Wong, K. S., & Whiting, B. (2018). 'Just turn to us': the persuasive features of contract cheating websites. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(4), 652-665. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2017.1391948>.

Sivasubramaniam, S., Kostelidou, K., & Ramachandran, S. (2016). A close encounter with ghost-writers: an initial exploration study on background, strategies and attitudes of independent essay providers. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 12(1), 1- <https://14.10.1007/s40979-016-0007-9>.

Sotiriadou, P., Logan, D., Daly, A., & Guest, R. (2019). The role of authentic assessment to preserve academic integrity and promote skill development and employability. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-17. <https://10.1080/03075079.2019.1582015>.

Stavisky, L. P. (1973). Term paper "mills," academic plagiarism, and state regulation. *Political Science Quarterly*, 88(3), 445-461. <https://10.2307/2148993>.

Sutherland-Smith, W. (2010). Retribution, deterrence and reform: the dilemmas of plagiarism management in universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 32(1), 5-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800903440519>.

Sutton, A., & Taylor, D. (2011). Confusion about collusion: working together and academic integrity. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(7), 831-841. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2010.488797>.

The Guardian, (2018) Cheating at UK's top universities soars by 40%. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/apr/29/cheating-at-top-uk-universities-soars-by-30-per-cent> Accessed 5 February 2020.

The Telegraph (2017) University lecturers are topping up earnings by helping students cheat, review suggests. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/10/07/university-lecturers-topping-earnings-helping-students-cheat/> Accessed 5 February 2020.

Thompson, A. H. (1883). Present Systems and the Impending Education. *The American Journal of Dental Science*, 17(6), 256-264.

Tomar, D. (2012). *The Shadow Scholar: How I Made a Living Helping College Kids Cheat*. Bloomsbury, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Trevelyan, R., & Wilson, A. (2012). Using patchwork texts in assessment: clarifying and categorising choices in their use. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37(4), 487-498. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2010.547928>.

Villarroel, V., Bloxham, S., Bruna, D., Bruna, C., & Herrera-Seda, C. (2018). Authentic assessment: creating a blueprint for course design. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(5), 840-854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2017.1412396>.

William, D., & Black, P. (1996). Meanings and consequences: a basis for distinguishing formative and summative functions of assessment? *British Educational Research Journal*, 22(5), 537-548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192960220502>.

Winstone, N., & Carless, D. (2019). *Designing effective feedback processes in higher education: A learning-focused approach*. Abingdon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351115940>.