

# COVID-19 supporting resources

[www.qaa.ac.uk/covid-19](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/covid-19)

## Assessing with Integrity in Digital Delivery

### Introduction

The security of academic standards is central to higher education and key to securing standards, is the integrity of assessment. Confidence in assessment processes is a cornerstone of the UK higher education sector's reputation. Its importance is made clear in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) and in the accompanying [Advice and Guidance](#). Secure assessment practices provide stakeholders, including employers and professional bodies, with certainty that students have achieved the expected academic standards.

As a consequence of COVID-19, higher education institutions have, in a very short time frame, needed to adapt their assessment practices to fit online delivery. In doing so, providers have needed to ensure that the assessment arrangements are robust, guarding against academic misconduct while also ensuring the fair treatment of students who have had to submit their work in challenging circumstances.

This paper considers academic integrity as an integral part of learning, teaching and assessment practice. It provides an overview of the approach providers can take against the use of essay mills and other forms of contract cheating, plagiarism and academic misconduct. It also outlines the ways in which providers can support students to promote good academic practice. It includes a series of reflective questions which providers can use to evaluate their move to online assessment.

### What do we mean by 'academic integrity'?

Academic integrity includes principles, values, conduct, measures and systems relating to fairness and honesty within teaching, learning and assessment. In our context, we are concerned with measures taken by higher education providers that could have either a positive or negative impact on academic standards and the quality of the student experience, including the value placed on academic awards. Academic integrity is often referred to in a more specific context of supporting students to avoid academic misconduct. This paper focuses on the approach that higher education providers can take to ensure that their learning, teaching and assessment practices will secure the academic integrity of awards made during the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary aim being to ensure that awards made in 2020 will have the same value as every other year. Academic integrity should always be at the heart of institutional approaches to quality and standards, and has particular importance now for ensuring that:

- students can learn and benefit from the process of learning
- all students are treated fairly and equally
- processes are transparent
- all staff understand and follow these processes
- the standards and value of academic awards are maintained.

## Is contract cheating more likely when students study online?

The QAA publication '[Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education](#)' provides guidance for higher education providers, setting out how to combat contract cheating and the use of essay mills within their institutions. Updated guidance is expected to be published by QAA in June 2020.

In recent years, contract cheating has been typified through the media and in public policy debate through the operation of essay mills. These are organisations or individuals, usually with a web presence, that contract with students to complete an assignment or assignments for a student, for a fee. However, contract cheating can also involve ghost writers that are family, friends or other students.

Essay mills are commercial entities that use sophisticated marketing techniques to target students. Many of these companies have sought to capitalise on the concerns and uncertainties faced by students as a consequence of COVID-19. There are numerous examples, often using social media channels favoured by students, currently advertising discounts to students for essay writing services, suggesting they could fill a gap caused by 'students receiving a lack of supervision' or offering essay writing to help students 'stay safe'. As well as essay writing, they can offer a range of services - which might involve logging into virtual learning environments - to complete assignments, having a worker available to complete exams at agreed times, completing project reports and dissertations on a chapter-by-chapter basis and even circumventing university cybersecurity to adjust results.

Many institutions seek to block essay mills' advertising, but this may not be fully effective when students are working off-campus and using their own computers. Irrespective of the steps a university takes, it is inevitable that students will be aware of contract cheating services, and many students will be contacted directly. It is important to recognise that this will happen and to ensure that students are offered support and education about the consequences of being tempted to use these services to cheat.

## How can providers prevent cheating?

Students who are working remotely, away from their familiar academic community, can feel less supported than usual. Students who feel vulnerable and isolated may be more tempted to cheat. Regular effective communication with students will let them know they are still part of an academic community and support is available to them.

Good practice includes the following:

- Ensuring students are prepared and that they have developed the skills necessary to succeed in their assessments, such as academic writing and referencing skills.
- Discussing academic misconduct with students so they are clear about what is prohibited and why.
- Ensuring students understand the long-term and ethical benefits of completing their own work.
- Discussing the risks of engaging with contract cheating services. In particular, this includes blackmail and extortion because, once a student has cheated, they will be permanently vulnerable, not only while in higher education but into their professional careers.
- Ensuring students are aware of the institutional processes and potential consequences if they are caught cheating.
- Developing internal networks of academic integrity support. It is important that these involve students given the majority of students are strongly opposed to essay mill use - both for ethical reasons and because they see such malpractice as a threat to the value of their own qualifications.
- Making use of available guidance, such as that provided by QAA.

## Can technology support the detection of cheating?

There are a range of technological support options available to assist with the detection of plagiarism and academic misconduct. While these can prove effective, they should be looked on as a tool to support other institutional prevention and detection processes rather than a solution. Examples include the following:

- Text matching software - this can identify copied text and indicate plagiarism. This can be of limited benefit in detecting a bespoke essay written by an essay mill, as they are often pre-checked for plagiarism, and some essay mills offer 'plagiarism-free' guarantees which can result in zero or very low similarity scores. However, many essay mill writers themselves take short cuts by copying work, so text matching software does retain value. Some writers also recycle material for subsequent commissions.
- Analytics software - this can be used to determine whether there have been multiple authors of work submitted by the same student, or if there are significant variations in writing style from different pieces of work. Some tools can track writing styles (stylometrics), typing patterns and linguistic style.
- Remote invigilation (such as webcams or facial recognition software) - some universities are installing this on student computers when students are taking remote exams. It should be noted that some students have raised privacy concerns and are opposed to this practice. Any move to introduce these options should be approached in collaboration with students.

## What about whistleblowing policies?

Whistleblowing policies set out procedures for students, staff and third parties to raise concerns regarding malpractice or wrongdoing within a higher education institution. Many institutions have whistleblowing policies, and there is a balance to be drawn in developing them between promoting their use to support the detection of academic misconduct and protecting against their potential misuse. On the one hand, students who are aware of academic misconduct can be encouraged to whistleblow if the policy offers them anonymity. However, this needs to be carefully balanced against the possibility that the policy might be used maliciously. One approach might be, for example, taking measures to protect the identity of the whistleblower from the person they are accusing.

Any policy should be developed and reviewed in collaboration with the students' union or equivalent body.

## How can we promote positive academic practices in an online environment?

The pandemic has placed many students into an unfamiliar study environment. In addition to designing assessment processes that can adapt to the online setting, providers can ensure that they have put in place support systems and mechanisms to help students adapt. Good practices include the following:

- Introducing frameworks and structures, for example, daily and weekly planners that keep students on track.
- Planning from the student's perspective - consider the challenges students are facing and organise intuitively around those.

- Giving students regular updates so they know what is happening and what is expected of them.
- Offering moderated discussion forums, or other forms of peer mentoring or peer learning, can be helpful to promote peer engagement and support. Providing direct contact with students offering academic mentoring can also help students to feel engaged and supported; and can help with supporting mental health and wellbeing needs.
- Being clear on expectations and understanding of what is and is not permissible in assessment and examinations. For example, if under 'usual' exam conditions students would not be expected to offer directly attributed quotes, students assessed remotely by examination (rather than coursework) should be advised not to copy quotes from online text as this would be inconsistent with their normal examination practice.
- Keeping virtual office hours to reassure students that there is contact available and give the sense of 'normal' academic life continuing.
- Considering the location of students to check that class times and virtual office hours are compatible with their time zones. It is also important to be aware that some applications (such as Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp and Google) may not be accessible in all countries.
- Maintaining (as far as possible) activities and practices that are familiar to the students.
- Using student-friendly channels to communicate university support. Offer reassurance and make students aware of relevant policies such as 'no detriment', extenuating circumstances and those concerning mental health and wellbeing.
- Taking advantage of available online resources such as those from UK Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) which provide advice on supporting students while studying remotely.
- Provide clear signposting of the individuals and services within the institution who are available to help students in different situations, so they do not turn to essay mills. This information should also be sent to personal tutors.

The use of online platforms, such as Zoom, has allowed greater scope to engage effectively with students. There are a variety of techniques that can make their use more engaging:

- Showing the tutor's face - not just a set of slides - is important in promoting a sense of continuity, maintaining the human element and helping students to recognise the tutor's usual teaching style.
- Encouraging discussion and keeping an awareness of student views, being mindful that students can be less inclined to ask questions about expectations in a remote format.
- Referencing familiar resources and making sure they are open access.
- Keeping podcasts to the point and making sure they are easily accessible once uploaded.

- Providing low bandwidth, downloadable or offline activity that all students can access.

## Are there special arrangements for marking student work at this time?

The rapid move to online delivery and assessment does not change the fact that student work should be marked in a fair and consistent manner. Providers should ensure that they have responded effectively to the circumstances, maintaining the academic standards and integrity of their awards while acting in the best interests of students to ensure a fair and proportionate outcome. QAA has produced [thematic guidance on academic standards and supporting student success](#).

Students' work should continue to be marked in accordance with the requirements of the relevant regulatory framework, taking into account any accompanying guidance and institutional regulations and policies. The requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) may also be relevant and may have been adjusted as a consequence of the pandemic.

## Reflective questions

The following questions can be used by providers when moving their assessments online:

- 1 All four Expectations of the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) relate to assessment, directly or indirectly. Are any changes introduced compatible with the Quality Code, and consistent with the accompanying [Advice and Guidance](#)?
- 2 Do you have an existing institutional policy on e-assessment? How could existing policies be adapted for the current circumstances?
- 3 Do all assessments require a change to practice, or will some remain unaffected?
- 4 How will you assess learning outcomes without invigilated exams and, where relevant, practical examinations so that the outcomes are equivalent to other years?
- 5 Are there professional body requirements that will need to be taken into consideration? For example, some professional bodies might require proctored exams.
- 6 Is there scope for assessment or exam questions to have greater emphasis on unique case studies and scenarios, or on comparative analysis, rather than using fact-based responses?
- 7 Is the use of viva voce being considered to guard against academic misconduct? And, if so, are special regulations or policies required?
- 8 How much flexibility can be built into the timescales for students to complete assessments, for example, to help with students' anxieties?
- 9 What adjustments will need to be introduced to promote equality, diversity and inclusivity for students as a result of the move to online learning and assessment?
- 10 What allowances can be made to recognise that students have different levels of ability in using technology and engaging with online assessment tools, where these are not directly relevant to their learning achievement?

- 11 How will you ensure that all students can access the assessment? Do they have the required hardware and software, and do they understand the process for assessment submission including logistical issues such as start and stop times, log-in passwords, and how to save their work? Do students know who to contact if they have problems with these aspects?
- 12 Technical issues such as computer problems and unreliable internet connections are not normally considered an extenuating circumstance. Should this approach be modified under the present circumstances?
- 13 Do marking protocols need to be reviewed?
- 14 How are you working with your students' union to secure engagement with any changes in assessment practice?
- 15 How effective is your communication with students about necessary changes? Have you considered preparing responses to frequently asked questions?

Additional questions to consider for students based outside the UK:

- 16 Are students studying in different time zones able to access the support they need?
- 17 If there is a need for collaborative working, are groups able to function effectively across different time zones?
- 18 Are there any technology barriers that might present issues in accessing materials and submitting work? Can students studying outside the UK still access the sites and services they need?

## **Best practice principles for academic integrity**

Universities Australia have published a set of seven [best practice principles](#) that should underpin any Australian higher education institution's approach to academic integrity. These are equally applicable to the UK and providers can use them to help develop their institutional policies. The principles are:

Principle 1: institutional autonomy

Principle 2: everyone is responsible

Principle 3: a 'whole community' approach

Principle 4: consistent and effective institutional policies and practices

Principle 5: engage with and empower students

Principle 6: empower and engage with staff

Principle 7: working together as a sector.

## Additional resources

- UK Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) ([www.ukat.uk](http://www.ukat.uk)) have a range of resources to help you support your students while studying at a distance. UKAT are encouraging questions in the Personal Tutoring JiscMail list ([personal-tutoring@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:personal-tutoring@jiscmail.ac.uk)) so that as many as possible in the higher education community can benefit from the sharing of ideas and solutions.
- A wide range of resources to support the move to online delivery and assessment are available on the Resource Hub from the QAA Scotland Focus On: Technology Enhanced Learning project. The Resource Hub provides toolkits for staff and materials to support engaging students and establishing a sense of belonging. [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/technology-enhanced-learning](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/technology-enhanced-learning)
- QAA has compiled examples of policy and practice from higher education institutions around the world [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/news-events/support-and-guidance-covid-19/international-policy-practice](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/news-events/support-and-guidance-covid-19/international-policy-practice)
- Professor Sarah Eaton from the University of Calgary has written a blog reflecting on academic integrity during the pandemic in Canada [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/news-events/blog/academic-integrity-in-canada-during-covid-19-reflections-from-the-university-of-calgary](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/news-events/blog/academic-integrity-in-canada-during-covid-19-reflections-from-the-university-of-calgary)
- Jisc's Future of Assessment report sets out five principles institutions could be working towards in preparation for the future as they review their assessment processes [www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/the-future-of-assessment](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/the-future-of-assessment)

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