

Procedure where there is a suspicion of contract cheating



Summary			
This document sets out the procedure that staff in schools should employ if they have a suspicion of contract cheating arise and provides a common basis for any investigation to establish whether there is a case to answer.			
Scope - This document applies to:			
Academic staff in schools, in particular School Education Directors, Senior Tutors and those in academic integrity or plagiarism roles; and, professional services staff in schools, in particular the Student Administration Manager.			
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1. **What is contract cheating?**

- 1.1 Contract cheating is defined by the QAA as: “A form of cheating where a student submits work to a higher education provider for assessment, where they have used one or more of a range of services provided by a third party, and such input is not permitted. The contract with the student can include payment or other favours, but this is not always the case.”¹
- 1.2 In essence, it is acquiring or commissioning a piece of work from a commercial service, which is not a student’s own, and representing it as if it were. It covers purchasing from online ‘essay mill’ sites.
- 1.3 Some third parties will also provide proofreading and copyediting services. While these two services may not in and of themselves constitute cheating, it can depend on scale: major changes can lead to work being submitted by the student that is substantially different from what they originally wrote.

2. **Why is it considered to be a serious breach of academic integrity?**

- 2.1 HE providers have an obligation to ensure that awards that they make meet certain academic standards. Contract cheating therefore represents a threat to providers’ ability to assure the standards of their qualifications.
- 2.2 Contract cheating undermines *academic integrity*, as adopted at Bristol. It specifically impacts on the values of intellectual and personal honesty, trust and fairness in building a community and culture of learning and encouraging an interactive and co-operative community.
- 2.3 Transgressions of these academic integrity values through ‘contract cheating’ are considered to be a deliberate attempt to deceive and will therefore likely be judged a serious case of academic misconduct.

3. **Procedure for testing a suspicion of contract cheating**

- 3.1 This three-stage procedure is supplementary to the regulations for academic misconduct in the Examination Regulations and is a means of:
 - initially testing a suspicion, and
 - gathering evidence or finding that a student has no case to answer prior to any actual allegation being made via the formal academic misconduct process.
- 3.2 The operation of this procedure in any single case is not in itself an allegation of misconduct and should be exploratory in nature.
- 3.3 The outcomes of each stage should be recorded, and records kept. The student may appeal the outcome of the formal misconduct process in the normal way.
- 3.4 Stage 1: during the marking process
Responsibility = the marker

¹ [QAA Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education](#): how to address contract cheating, the use of third-party services and essay mills, October 2017

- a. In most cases, the student who submitted the work is anonymous to the marker, therefore it is only the work itself that should be the subject of any cause for concern during this stage. The marking of the assignment against the marking criteria should be completed before any further investigation of the suspicion takes place.
- b. A marker may have reason to doubt that the work was not written by a student in one or more of the following instances:
 - a. The work is not reasonable likely to be written by a student at that level due to the high quality of the arguments being made
 - b. Failure to align with the assessment title
 - c. Different styles and voices throughout the assignment
 - d. Generic terms, or unusual spellings or formatting
 - e. The meta information in the document's properties casts doubt on the authorship (see appendix A)
- c. The marker may also initially test authorship by undertaking an online search of the title of the assignment, which may show instances of students trying to commission answers.
- d. Some honest assignments may include one or more of these characteristics; they are not in themselves likely to sufficiently prove guilt but should be treated as indicators that further scrutiny of the authorship of the work is warranted. If there is sufficient reason to doubt the authorship of the work, stage 2 of the procedure should be instigated and the case referred for further investigation.
- e. A 'viva' or presentation on the subject of the work may be used to check the authorship of the work, but only where it already forms a part of the assessment portfolio for the programme.

3.5 Stage 2: investigation and detection

Responsibility = School Academic Integrity Officer (School Plagiarism Officer) or School Education Director, in liaison with the marker

Wherever possible, the operation of this stage should be managed via the candidate/student number of the student to maintain anonymity; however, the anonymity of the student may be removed where it is necessary to fully implement the detection methods.

- a. Firstly, text matching or analysis software such as Turnitin should be used as it is possible that outsourced writers may resort to plagiarism themselves or have 'cleaned' the paper entirely.
- b. Secondly, in order to establish authorship, it will be necessary to be familiar with the student's normal output in terms of their writing style and the quality of the content. This should be enacted by:
 - i. Reviewing against other (summative and formative) work in the unit, including any drafts that have been submitted, class presentations or other forms of work that relate to the subject the student has written about
 - ii. Reviewing against work produced in the year of study, or if required from previous years
 - iii. The student's personal tutor or another member of staff that is most familiar with the student's style may be included in this task.
- c. Thirdly, a check as to whether the mark is a particular outlier both for the student and against the cohort undertaking the work.

- d. Fourthly, a review of the student's engagement with the learning and attendance at teaching may be an indicator that they have disengaged with their learning.
- e. Again, a positive match in any of these actions are not sufficient to establish guilt but are indicators as to whether there is case to answer. A review of all the information to hand should be undertaken to decide whether there is sufficient evidence to doubt the authorship of the work and to therefore test such doubts with the student.
- f. On balance of probabilities, if it is believed that there is more a case to answer than not, then the student should be invited for an interview to discuss their work.

3.6 Stage 3: Interview with the student

Responsibility = School Academic Integrity Officer (School Plagiarism Officer) or School Education Director

At this point, the anonymity of the student needs to be removed, if not already.

- a. The interview should be informal and not determine whether the suspicion is substantiated but to explore, test and investigate any doubts, as suggested or evidenced from the previous stages, with the student by allowing them to talk about the submitted work.
- b. The student should be invited to discuss their submitted work on the basis that it is to explore some perceived anomalies in their work; they should also be informed of the potential outcomes from the interview (e.g. satisfied that there is no case to answer or that the case might proceed to formal stage of alleged academic misconduct, with the conclusions of this investigate stage constituting evidence). The interview should normally be conducted by the School Academic Integrity Officer (School Plagiarism Officer) or School Education Director. Students may be directed to JustAsk for further advice.
- c. The student should be asked to bring any notes etc they used in preparation for the assignment, if available. The student is not prohibited from bringing someone along with them to the interview, should they wish to.
- d. The student need not attend the interview; but the case will not benefit from the input of the student if they choose to decline. Where this occurs, the case will be evaluated on the basis of the information garnered from stages 1 and 2 only.
- e. The interview should be conducted in a collegiate way and held in a suitable private and 'neutral' venue (e.g. not in staff offices).
- f. No accusatory language should be used; the interview should be used as a means to test whether the student understands the work they have submitted by asking them about the process they adopted to write the assignment and test any assertions they have made in the work on the assignment topic
- g. Questions that might be asked are:
 - o What made them choose the topic
 - o What their approach was to writing the assignment
 - o Why they made certain assertions
 - o What sources were used
 - o Whether they had discussed their work or shared it with other people beforehand
 - o Whether their approach to this assignment had been different to their usual approach
- h. Any thoughts or conclusion as to the authorship should not be aired during the interview, but the student should be thanked for attending and engaging in the process and informed that they will be contacted in the near future as to the outcome.

- i. The interviewer may make personal notes of the discussion; but no formal record of the interview is required. Instead, the conclusions of the interviewer as to the case should be recorded in a report following the interview; the report may then be used as evidence if a formal allegation is then made (see below).

3.7 Outcome

The School Academic Integrity Officer (School Plagiarism Officer) or School Education Director should subsequently review all the information regarding the case and judge whether there is sufficient evidence for an allegation of academic misconduct to be made:

- If it is deemed there is no case to answer, the student should be contacted to explain the reasoning behind instigating the interview and advice given on avoiding poor academic practice in their work in future;
- If it is believed the student has a case to answer, then an allegation of academic misconduct should be made under the Examination Regulations, with the case referred to the Faculty as a serious offence.

Appendix A

Based on: *Contract Cheating, some things to look for*, University of Northampton

1. In the 'Author' and 'Last modified by' on the Properties pane (as labelled in Word, equivalents in other software), is the student's name/ID appearing to be someone else?
 - In Word: click on 'File' tab; under 'Info', the 'Author' and 'Last Modified by' information will appear in the right pane

One or both not being the student's name/ID can indicate ghost-writers (but can also arise from a student borrowing someone else's computer). Also, if most or all of this information is blank, that's a good indication that an essay-mill, ghost-writer etc. has taken deliberate steps to redact it to avoid detection.

2. In the Properties pane, does the 'Total editing time' and 'Created' date look reasonable or are these out of kilter with what you would expect?
 - a. In Word: click on 'File' tab; under 'Info', the 'Total editing time' and 'created' date will appear in the right pane

A 'Created' date that predates the assignment being set can indicate a ghost-writer has adapted a previous assignment "from stock". A very long total editing time and/or high number of revisions can indicate a ghost-writer has adapted a previous assignment "from stock". Also, a very short, effectively zero, editing time can indicate that a student or ghost-writer has copied-and-pasted from another document, possibly ghost-written, into the document he/she has submitted.

3. Check the document language setting, e.g. British or US (or other variant of) English.
 - In Word: the language setting will appear in the bottom left of the document view