

Of Essay Mills

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The universities minister, Jo Johnson, has threatened a new initiative on essay mills.¹ These enterprising organizations make their money by writing essays (or dissertations, or theses) for students. Johnson's initiative follows that of Lord Storey, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson on education. Storey's amendment to the Higher Education Bill, proposed in January this year, would have criminalised essay mills.

Much of the evidence that essay mills are a thoroughly bad thing comes from the QAA, the Quality Assurance Agency. Its report on the subject, *Plagiarism in Higher Education. Custom Essay Writing Services: an Exploration and Next Steps for the UK Higher Education Sector*,² was published in August of 2016 and covered in *Times Higher Education* ('Bar essay mills from advertising and search engines, says watchdog', *THE* 18 August).

Essay mills have not always been considered a problem. In 2009, a Commons committee had recommended that "the government ... advise whether those providing or using so-called 'writing services', to produce work which students can misrepresent as their own, are liable for criminal prosecution."³ Nowt to do with us, the government advised, best leave the matter to universities.⁴ When Lord Storey posed a question about them in the Lords in January of 2016, he was fobbed off. No big deal, declared the Lord Privy Seal; the QAA had the situation in hand. It had carried out 650 reviews of universities and colleges between 2012 and 2015 and only 30 had required tighter plagiarism controls.⁵ The QAA itself reassured Lord Storey: "We don't regard this as a particularly serious problem. The number of people we are talking about is miniscule."⁶ This accords with the

attitude of the CEO of Universities Australia, reported in 2016 as saying that only “a small minority of students seeking an easy path to success” used essay mills.⁷ Nor was the world at large much bothered: a petition to Parliament in the UK condemning essay mills garnered just 1,587 signatures before its withdrawal in October 2016. This compares with, say, a contemporary petition for the compulsory microchip scanning of deceased pets discovered on railway lines, which attracted nearly 18,000 signatures.⁸

Surprising, then, that a serially reluctant government should have commissioned *Plagiarism in Higher Education* from a serially reluctant QAA.⁹ And startling that, between January and August 2016, the QAA completely reversed its opinion of essay mills. Essay mills were suddenly elevated from a matter of little consequence to a major threat requiring immediate and radical government action. Let us consider how, and then why, but first to the QAA report itself.

The QAA report

The QAA report is not an academic document, nor does it purport to be. However, a publication from a quality assurance agency is inescapably burdened by the implication that its quality is assured.

Plagiarism in Higher Education is itself, though only in small part, plagiarized. There are places, bare of quotation marks, where whole passages have been lifted from elsewhere, and other sections where minimal change has been made from an original source. The QAA report also distorts information. Take just a single instance: the report cites a paper claiming that 22% of students at one Saudi Arabian university have paid for essays to be written for them.¹⁰ To be sure, the paper does say this, but only in passing. Its main point, that in Saudi Arabian society the students’ parents must have colluded in buying essays, is ignored. Lord Storey ignores even the Saudi Arabian context, declaring in Parliament that “22% of students reported having paid someone to complete their assignment.”¹¹

The QAA report employs boxed vignettes of quotations from essay mill websites. These it calls ‘case studies’. The quotations have been doctored. Words have been removed from the website text mid-sentence, mid-list and mid-paragraph. The result is that essay mills are shown in their worst light.¹² For example, Case Study 4 quotes from the Custom Essay Writer website.¹³ What the essay mill website actually guarantees is:

“100% Confidentiality
 Communication at any time
 Plagiarism-free custom essays
 Affordable prices + discounts
 Quality guarantee
 Friendly customer support”

The QAA version of this quotation is:

“100% confidentiality
 Plagiarism-free custom essays
 Affordable prices + discounts
 Quality guarantee”

Excised is any suggestion of tutoring and social support, particularly valued by those who use essay mills.

Similarly, the quotation from Case Study 5, British Essay Writers (whose website is in excruciating pidgin English), omits the lines:

“24x7 customer support assistance: We are available for you by 24x7. If you have any query, you can contact us anytime you need to.”

Case Study 2, of Essay Tigers, quotes from scattered parts of the company’s website, and manages to overlook the lengthy advice offered to students on how to write their own essays.¹⁴ Thomas Lancaster, an academic advisor in the writing of the QAA report, admits by tweet that “Some of the best guides to writing good essays I’ve seen have been the ones supplied to writers by essay mills.”¹⁵ Lancaster, though the nemesis of essay mills, can still tweet: “Being a researcher into #contractcheating means understanding this from all sides, not just automatically saying it is always wrong.”¹⁶ Apparently the QAA was not convinced. The QAA is guilty of cherry-picking, selecting evidence that suits a single argument, and ignoring that which does not.

Academic convention is that the involvement of interested parties is declared in publications. This is another nicety the QAA ignores. Turnitin is certainly an interested party in that it has much to gain from the demise of essay mills. Turnitin dominates the world market for plagiarism detection software, and has a virtual monopoly in the UK. According to a company website, Turnitin supplies its software to 15,000 higher education institutions in 140 countries.¹⁷

Turnitin is geared to detecting copying from existing sources. At least in theory, a Turnitin report on a student essay shows just what bits have been copied and from where. In practice, Turnitin does not cope well with foreign languages and grey literature, and struggles even with books. It catches out students who are least good at gaming, perhaps the most honest students. In 2004, Turnitin was accused of fostering a 'plagiarism panic', held in check only by the services it provides.¹⁸

To prevent the re-use of student essays, each one checked by Turnitin now joins the company's database to be checked against other student essays. To date, Turnitin has amassed 600 million student papers,¹⁹ a collection growing at the rate of 423 new papers every 60 seconds (the website counts as you watch).²⁰ Students protest that this is a blatant infringement of their copyright,²¹ that they do not write essays to boost the profits of a private company. More serious for Turnitin is that a few universities are at one with their students and have ended their relationships with Turnitin.

Essay mills have become a real threat to Turnitin's business because Turnitin cannot tell whether an original essay was written by an essay mill, the student's friend, her giddy aunt, or the student herself. Turnitin sponsors conferences on essay mills,²² and should take some credit for mobilizing opinion against them. Each of the slides Thomas Lancaster presented at a plagiarism conference in Belgrade in February 2017 carried the Turnitin logo, and Turnitin has tweeted a picture of Lancaster being interviewed against a background decorated with further Turnitin logos.²³

How?

An investigation in 2012 by the *Independent on Sunday* found that 45,000 UK students had cheated over the previous three years.²⁴ No one seemed to care. Four years later, in early January 2016, two *Times* journalists, Alexi Mostrous and Billy Kenber, used freedom of information requests to UK universities to discover that 50,000 students had been caught cheating over three years.²⁵ This time, headlines shrieked.

Actually, the Mostrous and Kenber investigation was into student cheating as a whole, not essay mills in particular, and not even plagiarism. Most of the cheating it unearthed was no more insidious than students looking over the shoulders of others in examination rooms. Although the QAA report appreciates the limitations of the Mostrous and Kenber investigation, the QAA itself did not, comfortably eliding the Mostrous and Kenber findings with the activities of essay mills in February 2016.²⁶ Nor did Lord Storey see any need for making the distinction: “It’s a huge issue,” he is quoted as saying, “It is estimated that around 50,000 students per year are using these [essay mill] services, so it is a very, very serious problem indeed.”²⁷

The QAA report makes much of the publications of Thomas Lancaster and his various co-authors. These take the view that essay mills should be persecuted, and the students who use them detected and punished. Lancaster describes one of his co-authors as “The world’s foremost contract cheating detective”²⁸ and himself as “working with the media to raise awareness about plagiarism and academic integrity issues.”²⁹ His papers are uncompromising in their crusading zeal (titles include ‘Eliminating the successor to plagiarism?’ and ‘Preserving academic integrity – fighting against nonoriginality agencies’).³⁰ Lancaster promotes his message on social media, and is much in demand as a speaker at plagiarism conferences. A *Twitter* post of 26 February 2016 reads: “Have a few gaps in the next few months for #contractcheating talks, research and teaching seminars - let me know if looking for a speaker.”³¹

Though the QAA report does not acknowledge individual authors, a press release from Swansea University claims that Philip Newton, of the university’s medical school, was

part of an expert group that wrote the report.³² This seems unlikely. Newton is co-author of several papers arguing that essay mills are a problem to which putting them out of business is the solution.³³ He is an author of ‘Are essay mills committing fraud?’, a paper published in 2017 which concludes that existing legislation is inadequate to convict essay mills and that new legislation is required.³⁴ This paper is based on analysis of 21 essay mill websites, whose identities have not been revealed, except to the paper’s referees and - strangely - the QAA.³⁵ The QAA report draws heavily on the work of Lancaster and Newton, and neglects a considerable academic literature that takes a more nuanced approach to essay mills.³⁶

Lancaster and Newton were the only academics to serve on the QAA’s curiously-named Custom Essay Writing Services Invitation-Only Forum. The QAA refers to this Forum as a “stakeholder group”, a press release from Swansea University as an “expert group to examine approaches to tackling contract cheating.”³⁷ It seems the Forum was hurriedly convened in June 2016 to allow its 14 members to comment on a final draft before the report’s publication in August. On 17 August 2016, Lancaster tweets: “Looking forward to the QAA report release too. Many good #contractcheating #customessays ideas.”³⁸ The same day, Newton responds: “New report on #contractcheating from #QAAtweets endorsing recommendations we made ...”³⁹

Lord Storey was also a member of the Forum, as were two Turnitin employees, one of whom, now education manager at Turnitin, has observed that Turnitin is finding ever less plagiarism in student essays.⁴⁰ Turnitin is very much a QAA stakeholder and the QAA admits to having had discussions with the company during the writing of its report.⁴¹ Understandably, Turnitin has close links with higher education in the UK, some remarkably close. JISC (once the Joint Information Systems Committee), for instance, integrates the UK’s public sector computing resources. In 2002, JISC launched Plagiarism Advice, an organization operating across Europe and, not surprisingly, providing advice on plagiarism. Plagiarism Advice came to be managed by Northumbria Learning in 2006, then the exclusive distributor of Turnitin products in Europe.⁴²

Plagiarism Advice, Northumbria Learning and Turnitin's European HQ were all based in Newcastle. JISC still openly promotes Turnitin on its websites:

“Turnitin® (pronounced “Turn–it–in”) is the world’s most widely used plagiarism detection solution. Recommended by Plagiarism Advice, it is used by over 90% of UK universities”⁴³

Publication of the QAA report in August 2016 was followed by much media coverage, all highly critical of essay mills. In October, a QAA press release boasted that the first international day of action against contract cheating would be building on the QAA report,⁴⁴ as did a piece by the director of the Academic Integrity Office at the University of California, San Diego (‘Join the international day of action against contract cheating’, *THE Rankings*, 3 October 2016).⁴⁵ Pressure was mounting. Lancaster and Newton took to social media to announce the impact their papers were making. In November, Newton tweets: “Off to the Council of Europe to share our research on #contractcheating and, hopefully, get something done about it!”⁴⁶ Just before Christmas 2016, Newton again tweets: “A #contractcheating amendment has sneaked into the HE bill?”⁴⁷ Thomas Lancaster responds: “Excellent news. We knew it had been discussed, let’s see if the bill passes.”⁴⁸ From Australia, Tracey Bretag, editor of the *Handbook of Academic Integrity*,⁴⁹ congratulates: “Nicely done to all the team, especially our colleagues in the UK!”⁵⁰

In early January this year, Douglas Blackstock, chief executive of the QAA and tweeting as Black_dug on his personal Twitter account, remarks on the similarities between Newton’s paper and the QAA report: “@NewtonNeurosci makes the case for new law to stop essay mills, also proposed in @QAAtweets report.”⁵¹ Later this month, Black_dug re-tweets a newspaper report covering another Newton paper,⁵² re-tweets a range of other tweets critical of essay mills, and then tweets a picture of Lord Storey asking his question in the House of Lords. The same day, Newton posts the complete video of the Lords’ proceedings.⁵³ Swansea University joins the fray by re-tweeting an article claiming that “Lord Storey supports our academics [sic] research”.⁵⁴ By February, Newton seems anxious for the kill and tweets: “Back to the Council of Europe to see what we can do about #contractcheating.”⁵⁵

Why?

The government and universities should bear some responsibility for students resorting to essay mills.⁵⁶ A huge increase in student numbers and desperate competition for foreign custom has led to the admission of some students who would struggle to write a postcard never mind an essay.⁵⁷ They plagiarise, cutting and pasting as many have been expected to do at school. So, universities bring in the likes of Turnitin to check student essays, thereby treating all students as potential offenders. Trial-by-Turnitin encourages students to beat the system, an attitude that leads inexorably to essay mills.⁵⁸ The path to essay mills has been made the more attractive by universities (and the QAA) eschewing examinations and requiring anonymous marking of essays. University teachers are unlikely to spot change in writing style or performance when they have little personal contact with students.

A further complication arises from the understandable reluctance of universities to prosecute students who are also paying customers.⁵⁹ Too little prosecution may cast doubt on academic standards: too much may deter the punters. Turnitin software allows universities to adjust the point of balance to accommodate the market, specifically promising to safeguard the university's reputation.⁶⁰ Academic staff, less aware of these strategic considerations and unable to rely on university support, are often reluctant to bear the burden - and personal risk - of reporting plagiarism.⁶¹ Students are exhorted to consult the guidelines on plagiarism that all universities publish on their websites. That many of these guidelines are themselves plagiarized would seem to indicate an attitude to the problem more businesslike than scholarly.

The QAA report has nothing good to say about essay mills: they seduce gullible students with a rubbish product. And yet, essay mills would not survive long in a highly competitive market if they did not offer something of value to their customers. This is precisely the argument presented by the QAA in another context - to confirm the high

standard of UK universities. Students are less gullible than desperate, and responsibility there lies not with essay mills, but with university practice and government policy.

In explaining why students use essay mills, the QAA report resorts to a lame stereotype – students are lazy, disorganized, unaware they are doing wrong – and steadfastly avoids a more fundamental explanation. Many students are uncertain just why they are at university. It is not at all clear to them what part learning has in the ‘student experience’ and getting a degree. Nor is it always obvious that universities themselves are much concerned with learning, at least not with the part essays play in learning. The student might be forgiven for feeling that the only point of writing an essay is to generate numbers for performance measures.

In castigating the quality of the essay mill product, the QAA also resorts to a stale stereotype: the essay mill is an unscrupulous employer, the typical essay writer a student from the developing world who will copy and paste for a pittance. No doubt examples are plentiful, but essay mills look to repeat custom and depend on the reputation they acquire on social media. In the UK market, essay mill writers are often postgraduate students and new academic staff, coping as best they can with the meager salary and uncertain prospects universities offer young academics. In a curious way, the essay mill may allow them to give back something of what they have learned. This can be difficult in a higher education system dominated by performance measures and league tables. It is no surprise, then, except perhaps to the QAA, that the quality of work from essay mills can be very good.⁶² Indeed, customers sometimes complain that it is much better than universities expect from their students and needs to be dumbed down to avoid arousing suspicion.⁶³

Universities have proliferated in recent decades, encouraged by government belief that graduates are fundamental to a modern economy. While 3% of the post-school cohort attended university in 1960s Britain, the figure is now over 40%. Not all students go to university to learn: for many, university is a rite of passage, what happens after a gap year; for yet more, a hurdle to be jumped to get a degree and a job. Universities compete for custom in what has become a huge international market; they sell a product and are

managed much like any other multinational. Students might be forgiven for believing they have entered into no more than a business arrangement with the university – a degree in exchange for a fee.⁶⁴ This is entirely compatible with an outsourcing agreement with an essay mill.⁶⁵

While the QAA draws attention to the dissatisfied customers of essays mills: it ignores the dissatisfied customers of universities. Many feel the university has reneged on its promises.⁶⁶ University managers know full well they are running a no-frills, bums-on-seats business. This means costs pared to the bone, and tight control of performance indicators. Class sizes are huge and staff-student contact minimal. At the same time, university prospectuses promise an unforgettable ‘student experience’, a fun time enjoyed in a supportive collegial atmosphere, and a rewarding career at the end of it all. The reality may well be work in a call centre – or an essay mill.

It may also be that a secondary education, with its focus on right answers, indicators of achievement and league tables no longer prepares students for independent study and subjective thinking. Two decades of remorseless grade inflation in UK secondary schools has been mirrored in universities to the extent that 75% of students can now expect to graduate with at least a 2.1.⁶⁷

Intolerance of essay mills is in stark contrast to the tolerance of ghostwriting in society at large. Politicians and senior managers do not write their own reports and speeches. Junior employees do this and without their efforts being acknowledged. This is ghostwriting, it is plagiarism, and it is precisely the service provided by essay mills. In fact, some essay mills (e.g., Freelancer) do not distinguish among markets, catering for student, politician and senior manager alike. Universities respond with the specious argument that students are meant to write their own stuff because the university assessment system depends on it. Prominent people need not write their own material because they are, well, prominent.⁶⁸ It follows that it is quite acceptable that Jo Johnson’s statements castigating the ghostwriting of essay mills have themselves been ghostwritten.

Even more telling is that the university's senior managers and many academics use ghostwriters themselves.⁶⁹ Vice chancellors employ staff to write in their name - even to attack essay mills. For academics - and especially young academics - pressure to publish is huge and an illustrious co-author much improves the chances of a paper's publication.⁷⁰ Heads of units routinely expect honorific authorship that does not involve the inconvenience of writing a paper, or perhaps even reading it. This is 'hat-tipping', ghostwriting by another name. Sometimes companies, notably in the pharmaceutical industry, write papers for academics to front in academic journals.⁷¹ And yet, it is only student use of essay mill ghostwriters that is "a serious breach of academic honesty."⁷² Similarly, perhaps, Turnitin's seizure of the student's intellectual property is quite proper, but the students purchase of intellectual property from an essay mill is not.⁷³

Essay mills speak to millennials, students who receive most of their information from the internet and determine its relevance through mobile devices and social media.⁷⁴ For millennials, information is easy to acquire and hard to evaluate, which is why the opinion of peers in networks is vital. It is no accident that essay mills stress bringing together thousands of like-minded people, that they offer extensive interaction with a writer, turning the construction of an essay into the sort of social exercise with which millennial students are comfortable. In this digital world, information as property is an artificial construct and detecting plagiarism has no more sense to it than finding witches.⁷⁵ There is no natural place for the notion of an individual student writing an essay to demonstrate personal learning.⁷⁶ The exercise seems as pointless as writing in copperplate, or sewing a sampler.

Essay mills were not considered a problem until last Spring, when the government unexpectedly commissioned the QAA report. Even Thomas Lancaster was mystified by the sudden interest tweeting: "It still seems odd to me that so many #contractcheating stories are not far removed from our 2006 coverage."⁷⁷ *Plagiarism in Higher Education* makes a mockery of notions that policy-making should be transparent and evidence-based. The QAA report serves the interests of its stakeholders, and ignores the interests of

students and society at large in that it diverts attention from deficiencies in higher education policy and practice that have become endemic.

The very existence of essay mills suggests that something is seriously wrong with higher education. But essay mills are only an indicator of rot, and eliminating them – even were this possible – would do nothing to address the basic problem. Essay mills will survive, but they will be more discreet, less threatening to university reputation. Government and universities will be seen to have taken action, and nothing fundamental will have changed. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

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- ⁷⁵ Lea Evering and Gary Moorman, ‘Rethinking plagiarism in the digital age’, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 56, 1, 2012, pp.35-44.
- ⁷⁵ Thomas Lancaster, *Twitter*, 18 May 2016.