

To tackle student cheating, we need to reimagine university assessment

Essay mills are becoming increasingly normalised. The only way to beat them is to design assessments they can't reproduce

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'If required, a typical undergraduate essay, on pretty much any topic, can be turned around by an essay mill in under 24 hours.' Photograph: Alamy

Ghost-writing academic work is nothing new but until relatively recently it was out of reach of most students. Now essay mills have started rolling on an industrial scale. Their sophisticated websites offer production of a whole range of assignments up to and including dissertations and theses. If required, a typical undergraduate essay, on pretty much any topic, can be turned around in less than 24 hours.

They have become so normalised that last month, a BBC investigation [uncovered YouTube stars](#) being paid to promote an academic cheating website based in the Ukraine, in videos with more than 700m views. This is an international business, with writers ranging from undergraduate students through to academics lining up to bid to write the assignment for the prospective client at prices often well below £100.

It's clear that essay mills are here to stay, so where do we go next? Technological solutions can include textual analysis of a student's writing pattern in order to recognise significant changes in writing style. At the other end of the scale are calls for all evaluation that counts towards final grades to be set as exams, so that the institution can be confident that the submitted assignment is the student's own work.

But even in the exam hall, there can be challenges, with different smart devices, such as watches, enabling access to online communications. Increasing numbers of institutions require students not only to leave their phones outside but also to remove their watches and place them on the desk in front of them.

The problem with the exam approach is that they are not a very good indicator of the breadth of the skills and the intellectual abilities that are looked for in the current generation of graduates. Writing three essays in three hours following several weeks of cramming of lecture notes is still a very common assessment hurdle for students. But it's not comparable to the types of task the vast majority of graduates are ever likely to have to undertake again.

Instead, universities – including my own – are starting to think creatively. This includes introducing “authentic assessments”, which evaluate students' learning through assessments designed to replicate the type of problems they're likely to face in their

future workplaces. These allow the student to experience the tasks and demonstrate the skills that they are likely to require in graduate employment. When well-designed, such assessments can also reduce the marking time for academics.

For example, an authentic assessment might require students to develop a research proposal to investigate a specific problem and make a pitch to present it, similar to the Dragon's Den television show. This evaluates a number of transferable skills: researching the topic, identifying the nature of the problem, interpreting the information and explaining their research approach and understanding of the methodologies they used. This is presented as a short paper, with a brief oral presentation, followed by questions. The exercises may be done individually or as a group exercise.

The main barrier to these assessments is how much time it takes to develop them. But while a standard essay is quick and easy to set, marking is time-consuming. Authentic assessments require significantly less time to mark than ploughing through a pile of 3,000-word essays.

Authentic assessment can also be much more personalised, for example by including reflective elements. This makes it much harder to contract out to the mill workers. Introducing authentic assessments may be time-consuming at the start, but it will be worth the effort if it means institutions finally gain the upper hand in the battle against plagiarism and cheating.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2018/jun/13/to-tackle-student-cheating-we-need-to-reimagine-university-assessment>