



Contract Cheating Guidance for Staff

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Guidance for staff on 'Contract Cheating'

'Contract Cheating' is becoming increasingly widespread throughout the higher education sector and the University takes a hard-line where there is evidence of 'Contract Cheating'. 'Contract Cheating' represents a threat to academic standards and academic integrity and in turn to UK Higher Education as a whole.

The University has an obligation to ensure that the awards it makes meet nationally agreed standards and that academic integrity is maintained.

A student's application to be admitted into a regulated profession, such as teaching, nursing, social work or physiotherapy may also be put at risk if they have committed 'Contract Cheating'.

Further sector-wide information about 'Contract Cheating' is available in [QAA Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education. How to address Essay Mills and Contract Cheating, updated September 2022.](#)

This guidance document is supplementary to the procedure for investigating and dealing with allegations of 'Contract Cheating' set out in:

- [Senate Regulation 6: Student Conduct \(Academic and Non-Academic\) \(revised version\) \(SR6.21e\)](#); and
- Paragraph 37 e of the [Academic Misconduct Procedure](#).

Advice and guidance about the academic misconduct procedure can be obtained by contacting conduct@brunel.ac.uk.

1. What is 'Contract Cheating'?

The University considers 'Contract Cheating' to have taken place where a student:

- **obtains or purchases work** from another person/organisation; and
- **submits it** for assessment **as their own**; and
- such third-party input/assistance is **not permitted**.

'Contract Cheating' includes:

- the use of 'essay mills';
- ghost-writing;
- buying work online (including code and/or games);
- a third-party conducting research;
- impersonation in exams;
- unpermitted use of artificial intelligence or chatbots in an assessment. (For further information, see:
 - [Use of AI in teaching and assessment \(brunel.ac.uk\)](#); and

- [Using artificial intelligence in your studies \(brunel.ac.uk\)](https://www.brunel.ac.uk) .

An 'essay mill' is an organisation or individual, usually with a web presence, that contracts with students to complete a piece of work for a student for a fee.

In 2022, laws were passed in England that prohibited the operation of commercial essay mills, including the advertising of their services. **Although the new law does not criminalise students, the provision of these services for money is now illegal.**

There are **huge risks** for students who choose to use essay mills. For example:

- Student personal data may be stored online with minimal if any security, exposing students to identity theft and bank fraud.
- Essay mills may contact students after purchases are made and threaten to identify them to their universities unless further money is given to them.
- Essay mills may contact universities directly if students fail to pay the agreed price.

Essay mills make extensive use of social media to find and engage with potential customers. Students should therefore be advised not to post details about their assessments on social media, or have conversations with contract cheating services who contact them.

2. How does 'Contract Cheating differ to Proof-reading?

Quality checking, sense checking and revising work are clearly important elements in the preparation of a student's assignment and students are encouraged to proof-read their own work before submitting it for assessment.

However, where a student is found to have used and/or paid for the services of a third-party proof-reader or copy editor, this may constitute cheating depending on the scale of the changes to the student's work. For example, where the final work submitted by the student is substantially different to that which they originally wrote and the changes were made following proof-reading or copy editing by a third party for a fee, it would be prudent to take steps to assess whether contract cheating has occurred.

3. What can staff do to prevent and detect 'Contract Cheating'?

(Please note that the practices below are guidelines rather than mandatory instructions. For further advice and guidance staff may email conduct@brunel.ac.uk):

- Staff could consider the **design and use of resilient assessment methods**, for example:
 - practical exams;
 - face-to-face assessment formats, such as
 - oral presentations,
 - placements,
 - peer assessment; and
 - video presentations.
 - Formal written examinations may also continue to be appropriate in some cases.

- Setting assignments with **regular ‘checkpoints’** for reviewing early drafts and/or to discuss research and findings with individual students may be prudent. This may also enable staff to closely check the progress of a student’s work and become familiar with a student’s style. Any documents submitted as early drafts could be retained by the relevant Taught Programme’s Office (TPO) for comparison with the final submission of the work.
- Whilst a student’s performance may indeed vary during their academic studies and should hopefully improve over time, staff should be alive to unexpected or drastic peaks. As such, although not always possible with large cohorts, staff are encouraged to **become familiar with individual students’ writing styles, aptitudes and their use of grammar**. Furthermore, whilst anonymous marking means that the opportunities to detect contract cheating may be reduced, work may still be identified by candidate number and this can allow assessment comparison in appropriate cases where suspicions have been raised.
- After setting an assignment, it may be helpful to **search online for the assessment title** to see whether students are trying to commission answers and flag up the likelihood of cheating. Usually an essay mill will outsource the production element of a student’s work and copywriters will bid for the work. This particular transaction may well be searchable, (even though the exchange between the student and the essay mill may not).
- When marking an assessment, it is good practice to **consider how closely the work aligns** with:
 - the themes and topics discussed in lectures;
 - the module outline;
 - other materials, such as reading lists.
- If the **assignment** addresses the general area of the assessment brief but **misses the specific focus**, this could indicate a ghost-writer has been involved and may require further scrutiny, such as holding a viva as detailed below.
- Concerns that a third party has written an assignment may also be raised where:
 - sections of the essay have different styles or different voices;
 - where referencing differs throughout the assignment; or
 - where spellings or phrases are included which are not typically used in the UK.
- **All student assessment work at Brunel will be scanned through Turnitin** which is a text-matching service. Turnitin's software takes what a student submits compares it to a massive database of content, including internet, academic, and student paper content, and looks for similarities
- Work should be reviewed to ascertain:
 - whether the student has followed the University’s guidance on citations and referencing;
 - whether taught materials and recommended reading have been properly referenced; and

- whether a student's submissions vary in style or if there are other identifying features.
- **Viva assessment** may be used as a means of checking the authorship of submitted work where suspicions are raised prior to a formal investigation, and/or during the investigation of an allegation of 'contract cheating' (as described at section 4 below). The following procedural safeguards should be adhered to in the preparation and conduct of the viva:
 - The viva should be held as soon as possible to minimise the risk of 'viva coaching'. However, the student should still be given at least 5 working days' notice of the viva and be informed of the purpose of the meeting.
 - The viva should not determine whether the allegation is substantiated but be used to gather evidence. A detailed written note of the viva should be taken.
 - A written record of the viva should be added to the set of evidence that constitutes the case against the student.
 - The viva should be chaired by someone independent of the allegation and be attended by the student (and their permitted representative) and an academic subject expert (normally the person making the allegation).
 - The student should be allowed to present evidence at the viva, such as date-stamped draft copies of their work and the academic subject expert will normally ask questions about the work to ascertain whether the student understands what they submitted.

Remember: The test for considering allegations or suspicions of contract cheating is the balance of probabilities. This means the evidence should demonstrate that it is more likely than not that the student has engaged in contract cheating. It is not necessary to prove beyond reasonable doubt that the student has committed the offence.

4. What should staff do where they believe a student may have engaged in 'Contract cheating'?

The [University's Academic Misconduct Procedure](#) sets out the formal process for considering allegations of 'Contract cheating'.

A concern that a student has committed 'Contract cheating' should be reported to the Deputy Dean (Academic Affairs) of the student's College. The Deputy Dean (Academic Affairs) will then determine whether a formal investigation of the concern is required and if so, will appoint an Investigating Officer to investigate the concern under the process in the Academic Misconduct Procedure.

Once the formal investigation has been concluded the Investigating Officer will provide a report to the Deputy Dean (Academic Affairs) who will decide the next course of action. This may include referring the case to the Secretary to the Fitness to Practise & Misconduct

Board for consideration by the Vice Chancellor's Representative (VCR) or, more usually, an Academic Misconduct Panel. Alternatively, the Deputy Dean (Academic Affairs) may decide that the student's conduct relates to poor academic practice, in which case the concern will be dismissed and the student will be warned about future practice and directed to sources of guidance and information.

The VCR and Academic Misconduct Panel will make a decision on the balance of probabilities as to whether it is more likely than not that the student committed the offence of 'Contract cheating'.

5. What if a student is found to have committed the offence of 'Contract cheating' on the balance of probabilities?

Where it is determined that it is more likely than not that a student has committed 'Contract cheating' on the balance of probabilities, the **indicative penalty** is **expulsion**. However, each case is considered on its own merits and there are a range of possible penalties set out in the [Academic Misconduct Procedure](#).

A student's application to be admitted into a regulated profession may also be put at risk if they are found to have engaged in 'contract cheating'. The [Fitness to Practise Procedure](#) sets out the process to be followed when **fitness to practise concerns** are raised.

6. What does the University do to prevent 'Contract cheating'?

Along with raising awareness of the definitions of academic misconduct, the University takes other preventative action which may, where possible, include:

- removing posters appearing on campus which advertise essay mill websites;
- working with 3rd party vendors to block essay mill websites from contacting students via email and social media; and
- sending 'cease and desist' correspondence to companies selling essay mill services.

Should staff become aware of essay mill websites advertising their services or contacting students, they should email conduct@brunel.ac.uk.

7. Additional support for students

Staff should signpost students to the following services on campus to help them develop skills in studying, academic writing, the use of academic sources, paraphrasing and research.

- The [Brunel Language Centre](#) provides free English Language support to all current Brunel University students who have English as a second language, including for academic writing.
- The [Graduate School](#) provides workshops and seminars for Postgraduate Research (PGR) students on Academic Writing, Technical Writing, Thesis Writing and Writing for Academic Publications.
- All Academic Departments at Brunel have a named [Academic Liaison Librarian \(ALL\)](#). This service is provided via the Library Academic Services Team, which offers tailored support, including citing, referencing and tips for avoiding plagiarism. There is a library guide to referencing: [Referencing overview - Referencing - LibGuides at Brunel](#)

[University Library](#). Advice is also provided about understanding what plagiarism is, and how to avoid it on the [Plagiarism](#) Library webpages and in the [Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism](#) module (which is available on Brightspace too).

- The University's [Academic Skills Team \(ASK\)](#) does not offer a proof-reading service or correct every mistake but can provide students with effective techniques for proofreading. ASK is happy to discuss a student's work and provide support on topics including writing style and structure, presentations, time management and grammar. Brunel students can send ASK a 500 word [sample](#) of their work to academicskills@brunel.ac.uk and obtain feedback. The aim of this is for students to develop good proof-reading skills for themselves. ASK also offers a comprehensive [writing and study skills service](#) including [writing and learning workshops](#) and individual appointments.
- All students have a Personal Tutor who can provide academic support and guidance.
- The [Student Wellbeing Team](#) includes the Counselling and Mental Wellbeing Service and Disability and Dyslexia service and is available to offer support and guidance on a range of disability and mental health issues helping students to overcome certain challenges so that they can achieve their university goals. For students with a disability at Brunel and who have registered with Student Wellbeing, the Assistive Technology Centre (ATC) provides a wide range of assistive technology, including spellchecking and proofreading software. Study skills support, including proof-reading, is also commonly facilitated by DDS for students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia.