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Broadening the scope of QA

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Call for contributions: paper submission form

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Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max):

Ian joined QAA in February 2015. He leads on engagement with universities and services for subscribers, including enhancement, and oversees QAA's stewardship of the Quality Code and associated external quality reference points. He also leads on QAA's innovation and enterprise activity.

Ian came to QAA from the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). He developed TEQSA's regulatory and quality assurance business processes, before being appointed Executive Director, Regulation and Review, a position he held for three years. Prior to this he was Executive Director of the Office of Higher Education for the State Government of Queensland for five years and, in this time, had responsibility for the regulation of vocational education and training and non-state schools.

Proposal

Title: The Role of Quality Assurance in Ensuring Academic Integrity

Abstract (150 words max):

Academic integrity as a concept is not new in higher education, but the manifestation of academic misconduct is increasingly complex, posing a challenge to the maintenance of quality and standards, and to the way in which agencies assure these. This paper looks at various forms of 'cheating' as academic misconduct, and identifies that a holistic approach, involving a range of stakeholders, is needed to tackle it. Quality assurance agencies can take the lead in working with the higher education (HE) sector to address academic misconduct, and the paper outlines some strategies QAA is employing to do this in the UK.



Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

What is academic integrity?

Academic integrity is a code of practice generally adopted and accepted by higher education institutions, systems and stakeholders. It is largely understood worldwide and encompasses a range of values relating to honesty and rigour in academic activities. The International Centre for Academic Integrity in the US, defines academic integrity as 'a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage'¹. Academic misconduct refers to practices that are not in keeping with these values and this commitment. This paper focuses on academic misconduct that can be defined as 'cheating'. It also touches on misconduct throughout the student life cycle from admissions to graduation and beyond.

Why does it matter? Why should quality assurance agencies and institutions care?

Cheating and fraud in higher education assessments is unacceptable. Academic fraud undermines academic standards and poses manifold dangers to students, providers and the wider public.

Cheating in higher education is not a recent phenomenon. In many cases, those involved would not have considered themselves to be participating in 'academic misconduct'. For example, a parent helping their student son or daughter by writing a section of an essay, on a subject in which they have professional expertise - do they consider that they are cheating? In fact, it has been suggested that 'help' from family and friends is likely to be the most common form of academic misconduct.

While academic misconduct has been around for a long time, it is becoming ever easier for students to commit, and commensurately more difficult to detect. Associate Professor Cath Ellis from Australia's University of New South Wales, has described this as an 'arms race', as students who are so inclined find a new way to cheat, universities find a way to prevent or detect the new strategy, then yet another emerges, and so on².

Estimates, informed by various studies around the world, have put the proportion of students who avail themselves of opportunities to cheat at 3.5 per cent³, while a recent study by Prof Phil Newton of Swansea University in the UK showed from 2014 to present the percentage of students admitting to paying someone else to undertake their work was 15.7%⁴. If this is

¹ <https://academicintegrity.org/fundamental-values/>

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzpB-9jTnwo&feature=player_embedded

³ 'How Prevalent is Contract Cheating and to What Extent are Students Repeat Offenders?' Curtis, G.J. & Clare, J. J Acad Ethics (2017) 15: 115. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10805-017-9278-x>

⁴ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2018.00067/full>



considered in the context of the growth in student numbers in many HE systems, in recent years, it represents a significant number of students.

Quality assurance agencies and quality regulators, need to take notice. As Anthony McClaren, CEO of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency in Australia, recently commented - if an institution does not think it has a problem with academic integrity, it just has not detected it yet. One of the key roles of quality assurance is to ensure a quality academic experience for all students, including that there is equitable treatment and that students exit with a qualification that attests to the skills, learning and attributes they have gained from that experience. If undertaking a professional qualification, students need to graduate fit for practice in that profession. They need mobility, requiring recognition of their qualification across their own HE system and beyond it. All this is underpinned by the assurance of standards in our institutions and across our system. Academic misconduct is a threat to these standards.

In addition, there is a significant threat to public safety if professional graduates have not genuinely acquired the skills of their profession, for example, doctors, nurses or engineers. Of course, there are a number of quality and regulatory players involved in professional education and accreditation, but the relevant quality assurance agency, as the guardian of quality and standards across their system, has a critical role to play.

In many HE systems, including the UK, responsibility for the maintenance of quality and standards ultimately rests with institutions themselves. So too, does the responsibility for detecting academic misconduct and putting in place measures to prevent and deter it. Institutions also have a responsibility to apply penalties to academic misconduct, commensurate with the seriousness of the activity. Institutional reputations and success in delivering their missions stand or fall on the quality of their graduates, so clearly, they have an intrinsic stake in addressing academic misconduct as an issue. Quality assurance agencies can, and should, work effectively in partnership with institutions to develop strategies to maintain academic integrity.

What are the common manifestations?

Fake certification and diploma mills - these have been around for more than 20 years. Some of the typical examples are fake or 'dodgy' institutions, often with names similar to reputable institutions, issuing awards for 'life experience' to outright forged certificates and qualifications and so called 'novelty degrees'. These are a challenge to quality and standards when used, for instance, by applicants to gain admission to an institution or by academics for appointment to a teaching position. They are also a threat to an institution and system's reputation for maintaining standards, when used by individuals to underpin professional practice or senior positions in organisations. While much discussion of qualification fraud focuses on the responsibility of employers to screen adequately, there is an inevitable negative reflection on higher education in general.

Inappropriate or fraudulent degree validation - HE providers that have validation arrangements with dubious or even illegal overseas partner institutions. This problem has led to high-profile abolitions of universities in a number of countries.

Admissions fraud - this can include misrepresentation of required credentials, forged recommendation letters, and fraudulent transcripts. These issues can be exacerbated by lax



or inappropriate admissions practices. The role of international recruitment and admissions agents, a longstanding part of the sector, has come under increasing scrutiny, with countries such as Australia having introduced a licensing system some years back. There is some suggestion that the use of agents for domestic admissions is growing, begging the question - are voluntary codes of practice sufficient, or is licensing required?

Exam fraud - this can include fake identity or impersonation, the use of smuggled notes, and using new technologies - for example, hidden cameras and radio earpieces to record or transmit live assessments for sale.

Essay mills - or contract cheating, where a third party is commissioned, or service purchased, to produce an essay which the student subsequently submits as their own work. This type of ghost-writing is, again, nothing new - legislation in the United States to deal with this as a commercial problem dates back to the early 1970s⁵ - but the vast potential of the internet to increase the reach of the mills is being realised, as is the availability of writers via the 'gig economy'.

'Traditional' plagiarism - even taking into account the sector-wide use of text matching software solutions, the presentation of copied ideas and written work as the student's own, continues.

Corruption within HE institutions - interlinked with many of the above issues, officials working for some institutions have been found to accept bribes and/or charge illicit fees to provide qualifications, exam answers, rubber-stamp bogus work and admit students to courses⁶.

The prevalence of these forms of cheating, though inherently hard to gauge, is commonly thought to be widespread and growing, and there is some suggestion of a 'joining up' of fraudulent practices, from admissions to assessment and certification.

How do we address these issues?

Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged and understood that there will be multiple players in any strategy to tackle academic misconduct, and this will vary from system to system. HE quality assurance agencies and regulators can and should take the lead, but will need to work with others to be effective. It is also important to realise that the providers of the means for academic misconduct, such as diploma and essay mills, will often be based outside your system, so any strategy requires an international dimension.

QAA plans for academic integrity

With multiple and multi-layered manifestations, the experience of tackling academic misconduct in the UK has shown that isolated approaches and strategies, aimed at a particular area of concern, will have limited impact. In 2017, QAA produced guidance for institutions in combatting essay mills⁷. This provided strategies on how to increase the

⁵ 'Term Paper Companies and the Constitution', Duke Law Journal, Vol. 1973, No. 6 (Jan,1974), pp. 1275-1317 https://www.jstor.org/stable/1371710?origin=crossref&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

⁶ The scale of alleged corruption can be huge <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rigged-exams-to-mysterious-deaths-of-suspects-what-is-mp-s-vyapam-scam/story-yEFjRpxAUJ1KZFQBbi7PJ.html>

⁷ http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/contracting-to-cheat-in-higher-education.pdf?sfvrsn=f66af681_8



awareness of staff and students of the consequences of essay mill use; guidance on the detection and prevention of essay mills; and advice on the sanctions that institutions could apply. A particular strength of the work is that it involved collaboration with HE providers and students, who all recognise the threat to the maintenance of standards and reputation essay mills represent. Following release of the guidance, QAA conducted a range of workshops and information sessions on academic integrity around the UK through its Quality Enhancement Network. While this has been well received in combatting essay mills, more needs to be done in relation to most of the other areas of cheating and fraud referred to above.

While individual agencies and institutions can take individual action, there is a need for an overarching sector-wide approach. In the UK, there is no body at a national level with a specific remit to research and analyse academic misconduct in its various aspects, or to provide leadership or coordination to the existing efforts being made both inside and outside the HE sector. In addition, while all types of identified activity have an intention to cheat or mislead in common, the methods used (and consequently, the tools to combat) vary, and can have limited impact in combatting different areas of misconduct. For example, traditional plagiarism software has limitations in identifying the use of essay mills, as the essays written are bespoke and do not copy previous work.

The impact of this is compounded by the fact that higher education is a devolved area of policy, with governments in the four nations of the UK having authority over their respective jurisdictions. In addition, each nation has a separate regulatory or funding body. This presents logistical challenges in taking a holistic approach to the protection of academic integrity.

In order to address these issues, in the summer of 2018, QAA set up a new expert advisory group on academic integrity with members including providers, sector agencies, politicians, government representatives and specialist organisations. Its remit includes identifying areas for priority action, as well as monitoring and responding to emerging themes and trends. At the first meeting of the group, a number of key themes, issues and areas of potential activity were identified. Three key priorities were identified:

- Scoping: While guidance and best practice policy relating to essay mills and other areas of concern existed, there was limited evidence about take up and effectiveness. Without understanding the impact of strategies to date, it was difficult to identify appropriate next steps.
- Analysis of the legal framework: a legal solution has gained impetus in the UK, with both a parliamentary petition and a letter to the UK Minister signed by 45 Vice Chancellors and sector leaders calling for new laws to ban essay mills. While remaining open to proposals, the UK Government has indicated that it firstly wants to see the impact of non-legislative approaches. The advisory group will look at the potential to amend the law on fraud, in order to create a new criminal offence targeting academic fraud⁸.

⁸ It is worth noting that in Ireland it is currently being proposed that Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) are given statutory powers to prosecute 'essay mills' and other forms of academic cheating www.marymitchelloconnor.ie/minister-mitchell-oconnor-announces-the-publication-of-the-qualifications-and-quality-assurance-education-and-training-amendment-bill/



- Assessment methodology: Different types of academic assessment have varying vulnerability to academic misconduct. Development of further assessment guidance for institutions, informed by evaluation of the effectiveness of approaches adopted to date, will help them determine how to minimise the potential for cheating.

Other areas of concern, such as the role of admissions policies and practices and the use of recruitment agents, were identified for future action.

To provide a national infrastructure to combat academic misconduct, the QAA has developed proposals for a National Centre for Academic Integrity in higher education, which is gaining support. The centre would focus on developing a research base of national and international evidence and recommendations to implement change to policy and practice, and a direct implementation programme of guidance, policy and support for institutions putting research findings into practice.

Meanwhile, the absence of an overarching, UK-wide approach to the protection of academic integrity, does not prevent individual agencies taking action. The Higher Education Degree Datacheck (who sit on the academic integrity advisory group) offers a centralised system for degree verification and is active in identifying and forcing the removal of bogus websites set up by fake institutions. On another front, QAA brought an action to the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) against an essay mill company, UK Essays. The ASA upheld the complaint, finding that UK Essays' advertising was misleading, resulting in it being withdrawn. In an example of a concerted approach, pressure from government and a number of agencies saw YouTube remove 'vlogger' sites that were promoting the use of essay mill services.

While successes such as these have value, they address individual manifestations of activity. They do not, therefore, represent a viable long-term solution to academic misconduct. Instead, an effective strategy will be predicated on:

- a multi-faceted, multi-agency approach based around the premise that providers of services that undermine academic integrity are primarily financially motivated. The more hostile the environment, the less the attraction as a potential source of income.
- an international approach. Fraud is international, with cheating services being offered across multiple jurisdictions. QAA's work includes international co-operation with a range of quality assurance agencies and networks⁹, with further networking planned.
- horizon scanning. Advances in technology will inevitably bring new manifestations of fraud. Early identification will mean that defence of academic integrity can be proactive and not dependant on responding to existing activity.

What does this mean for quality assurance and how it is defined?

QAA's activity in dealing with and promoting academic integrity represents a broader approach to quality assurance. In addition to functioning as an external quality assurance agency, QAA will move into a more facilitative and collegial role. Producing advice and guidance for the UK sector (which is also accessible and often relevant outside the UK) has long been a feature of QAA activity. Furthermore, QAA has a well-established, enhancement-led approach to quality assurance in Scotland which is founded on collaborative approaches to quality challenges and issues. Nonetheless, this multi-faceted

⁹ including NQAAHE, QBB, TEQSA, CHEA



approach to a particularly critical issue on a UK-wide scale is a 'stepping up' of such activities.

As mentioned above, QAA has established a reference group on academic integrity with a wide range of stakeholders, including several from outside institutional and sector environments. Having voices from parliament and government departments, alongside providers of commercial and technological solutions, significantly broadens the scope of approaches that can be taken to combatting academic misconduct and, more generally, broadens the range of stakeholders the agency works with and could serve as a model for other areas going forward.

There are aspects of QAA's operating environment and remit that are conducive to this approach and broadening of the agency's role, such as having specific responsibilities for the protection of academic standards across the UK. The UK higher education sector is well-established and mature and, from a quality assurance perspective, has embedded practices that enable institutions to take responsibility for their own quality and standards with confidence. In England, these factors underpin the risk-based, outcomes-focused regulatory framework of the Office for Students. They mean that a different kind of relationship with institutions and the sector can be established - one which is more about collaborating to address sector-wide issues and pooling resources from a range of stakeholders. With less of an emphasis on external cyclical quality assessment, this is an effective way for the agency to both discharge its responsibilities for quality and standards and provide value to the UK higher education sector.

Discussion questions:

- 1. In your system, do you see academic misconduct as a problem and, if so, what strategies are being deployed to address it?**
- 2. In your system, is there another organisation in charge of or with a role to play in ensuring academic integrity? If so, how do HEIs and quality assurance agencies collaborate with it?**
- 3. Is it valid for quality assurance agencies to take on this type of facilitative role? Where are the boundaries between agency and institutional responsibilities?**
- 4. Is there a danger an agency could be seen as both 'coach' and 'referee'?**

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to QAForum@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.