Essay Mills and Contract Cheating

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to urge you to take action against the increasing problem of so-called essay mills, companies that facilitate contract cheating by producing assignments-to-order for students. Essay mills undermine the integrity of UK Higher Education and are unfair to the vast majority of honest, hard-working students. We are confident that you abhor such cheating as much as we do and encourage you to take the necessary steps to curb these practices, steps which must include a legislative ban on operating or advertising an essay mill.

In March 2017, Lord Young of Cookham, representing the Government, told Parliament that, ‘we remain open to legislation in the future should the steps we are taking prove insufficient.’¹ Despite concerted action by the QAA, universities and student unions, new research published last month indicates that contract cheating is becoming more common around the world. This form of cheating is particularly hard to detect and, whilst universities must continue to do their part, it is clear to us the time has come for the Government to give legislative backing to the efforts to shut down these operations.

Legislation will not be a magic bullet; it is, however, a vital part of the broader package of measures. Legislation would, amongst other advantages, shut-down UK-based essay mills; prevent the advertising of their services near campuses and in public places such as the London Underground; enable the removal of essay mills from search engine findings and prevent UK-based companies from hosting online advertisements for essay mills. Most importantly, it will send a clear statement to the global Higher Education sector that the integrity of a UK degree is valued by the government. Any legislation would need to be carefully crafted, in particular to ensure that the law targeted the essay mills themselves, and did not criminalise students or legitimate educational services. There are, however, existing models, including the Bill recently introduced by the Irish government and the draft bill published by Newton and Draper in 2017², either of which provide a starting point for developing legislation for the UK.

We therefore call upon you to:

- Commit to introducing legislation to ban the provision and advertising of essay mills before the end of this Parliament.
- Commission the QAA to develop and publish a draft Bill by or before the beginning of the next Parliamentary Session, building on their existing work with academic and legal experts.
- Give your Department’s full support to efforts by the QAA and OfS to tackle this issue, including supporting the QAA’s proposed initiative to establish a UK Centre for Academic Integrity, with a formal remit to research, analyse and combat academic misconduct.

¹ https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2017-03-13/debates/3918310D-2240-4FF6-B1F7-ECFADA882163/HigherEducationAndResearchBill?highlight=essay%20mills#contribution-5B0DE22F-6151-4980-823C-E1396932AA38
Essay mills have no place in UK Higher Education. With New Zealand, Ireland, Australia and 17 US states all having introduced or introducing a ban, it is time for the UK to also take the necessary action to demonstrate that the UK is not a safe haven for Essay Mills to do business, and so to safeguard the reputation of the UK Higher Education sector.

Yours sincerely,

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Professor Dame Janet Beer
Vice-Chancellor, University of Liverpool

Professor Amanda Blackmore
President and Chief Executive, GSM London

Professor Paul Boyle CBE
Vice-Chancellor, University of Leicester

Dr Tim Bradshaw
Chief Executive, Russell Group

Professor Hugh Brady
Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Bristol

Cath Brown
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Professor Julia Buckingham CBE
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Professor Edward Byrne AC
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Professor Anne Carlisle
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Professor Joy Carter CBE
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Professor Stuart Corbridge
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