



An examination of how successful essay mills and contract cheating services have been in integrating within different academic disciplines

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Essay mills, services that are helping students to cheat by completing essays and other assessed work for them, have begun to change their modus operandi by targeting their marketing towards specific academic disciplines. This means that a history student is likely to come across what appears to be a site focusing on history essays, although in actuality, this may use exactly the same writers as any other disciplines based site.

This presentation will examine how essay mills and other contract cheating services are marketing to specific disciplines, using examples of sites, their advertised services and linked social media promotion. Previous studies that identify the disciplines on which most contract cheating has been observed will be discussed. For example, Table 1 shows the three discipline groups from which most requests for contract cheating were made, as identified in a previous study of a site where such requests were visible to investigators (Lancaster and Clarke, 2012).

Rank	Discipline Group
1	Business and Administrative Studies
2	Social Studies
3	Historical and Philosophical Studies

Table 1. Discipline groups from which most contract cheating requests have been observed

The presentation will also explore other data that is available which indicates how far essay mills have infiltrated academic disciplines. This will include discussion of a small scale study of how visible essay mills are in the Google search engine results, which was conducted in November 2018. The study was undertaken using the UK academic discipline groups, as identified by the HESA and using the Google UK search engine, so the results are most relevant in a UK context, but are expected to share features with advertising in other parts of the world.

Searches of Google for 19 essay terms, each related to one of the corresponding HESA discipline groups, were undertaken. The search terms were determined as ones that a student looking for help or information about a subject, rather than one explicitly looking to cheat, might use. For example, for the Mathematical Science discipline group, the search term *maths essay* was used. In each case, the first page of 10 organic search engine results, those most likely to be seen by a student, was examined to determine the placement of essay mill sites within the search results.

75 out of the 190 organic search engine results were held by essay mills, between 2 and 9 results per subject group. In addition, 20 paid advertisements for essay mills were observed across those pages, across 10 out of the 19 discipline groups.

A high level analysis of the discipline groups was undertaken using a traffic light priority system. This aimed to identify those academic areas for which essay mills were already firmly embedded in the search engine results and those which essay mills could begin to exploit.

Three criteria were identified on which the discipline groups were clustered:

- The number of organic results held by essay mills from a Google search for essays in that discipline area
- The number of paid advertisements from essay mills from a Google search for essays in that discipline area
- The relative number of search engine results for that discipline area compared to the number of UK students (as a measure of competition for essay mills)

Three discipline groups scored highly on all three criteria, an indicator that those areas are already exploited by essay mills. Only one area scored low on all three criteria, indicating that it is an area that essay mills are likely to exploit in the future. Those areas are indicated in Table 2; the order of the discipline groups in the table is not indicative.

Category	Discipline Groups
Currently exploited by essay mills	Architecture, Building and Planning Computer Science Law
At risk of being exploited by essay mills	Creative Arts and Design

Table 2. Discipline groups

It is also worth noting that the analysis shows that two of the Discipline Groups from Table 1 (1. Social Studies and 2. Business and Administrative Studies) also appear to be at risk of further exploitation. This is of particular concern as they are already two of the three areas from which most contract cheating requests by students have been observed.

The presentation is intended to motivate the need for continued work on understanding contract cheating at a discipline level, as well as for further investigations as to the particular nuances as to how discipline specific contract cheating providers and essay mills operate. It will also raise the question of whether academic integrity principles are being taught successfully and appropriately to both staff and students in different disciplines.

Keywords: essay mills, contract cheating, academic integrity, search engines, marketing.

References

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