

ETHICAL AND PRIVACY CONSIDERATIONS OF THE MARKETING TACTICS USED BY SOME ACADEMIC ASSIGNMENT PROVIDERS: A CASE-STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

In May-June 2019, Nabanita Das, a journalist writing for Nottingham Trent University and the Leicester Mercury newspaper in the UK, reported on the self-styled ‘UK’s Best Assignment Service at Affordable Prices’ namely the academic assignment provider (‘essay mill’) help4assignment.co.uk (Das, 2019ab). Those articles highlighted help4assignment’s marketing practice of posing as young women when contacting students in attempts to secure their (i.e. students’) custom. Despite the ‘.co.uk’ website address, help4assignment is based in India.

In a statement on their landing page, help4assignment (2021) states under the heading ‘We value privacy’, and note the questionable grammar and use of English, that pervade the website:

‘The best thing with help4assignment is that we are good at keeping all our customer’s basic information confidential. As our privacy policy, we never disclose any single information or data without your approval, unless it required or permitted to do so by law such as to fulfill with a call, email, SMS or similar legal process.’

However, social-media messages from help4assignment provided to the authors by student recipients and Students Union representatives at the University of Northampton during January-March 2021 indicate that, in practice, privacy is far from being at the top of help4assignment’s priorities. We outline the major concerns and will illustrate these in our presentation with appropriately redacted versions of marketing materials sent to students by help4assignment.

MARKETING MATERIALS

The students were contacted via social media by employees of, or agents/facilitators/influencers working on behalf of, help4assignment with a modus operandi unchanged from that described in the 2019 newspaper articles. Posing as students they access student social media groups (figure 1a), only revealing their true nature once accepted (figure 1b). Genuine

recipient information has been redacted. There is no current or former University of Northampton student with the name ‘Chhavi Gupta’ and, therefore, this is a fabricated ID.

Thus, even within the deceptive ‘industry’ of providing ghost-written assignments for students, there is the further deception of the initial posing as

current students to gain access to bona-fide student social media groups. When challenged by one of the students who contacted us, help4assignment responded:

‘Yes we know [it’s illegal], Universities don’t allow [...] takes disciplinary action against students in this matter.

But still it safe using our service as we don’t disclose identity of our clients and provide solution with plagiarism below 5%.’

Statements such as this are probably familiar to colleagues working to promote academic integrity, whether those statements are made on provider websites or via social media, but what followed is highly alarming and of major concern of all of us.

Not content to let go of communication with a student who’d clearly indicated their intention not to

commission assignments, help4assignment persisted and on two occasions has sent marketing materials that, due to cursory redaction, makes identification of previous student customers relatively easy. An example implicating a previous Northampton student is shown in Figure 2 (further redacted to protect students’ IDs).

Current Northampton students have also received screenshot ‘testimonials’ as provided to help4assignment by (former) students at other UK universities, identical to those reported in the Nottingham Trent University article (Das, 2019a). This indicates that help4assignment has been using such ‘testimonials’, many of which contain significant unredacted information, without regard to the confidentiality of either individuals or institutions over an extended period.

CONCLUSIONS: ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

It is unlikely that help4assignment is the only provider that is negligent in its marketing materials and (potentially) identifying previous student customers, but it is the one currently being reported by students at the University of Northampton and presenting us with this case-study.

Very little can be done to prevent providers from contacting students via social media. In our experience, the majority of students ignore such approaches, regarding them as a tiresome consequence of otherwise beneficial social media usage. Institutions can warn their students but it’s not an aspect of the global contract-cheating industry that can be addressed by measures such as IP blocking or spam-filtering on institutional networks. This type of marketing activity raises major policy questions for institutions. For example:

- How should institutions respond to students who admit essay-mill agents posing as students to social media groups? → Support and advice, or disciplinary action if other students’ privacy is compromised?
- How should institutions regard staff who admit essay-mill agents posing as students to institutionally approved/organised social media groups? → Disciplinary action, noting staff should be

aware of GDPR (in UK/EU) etc. considerations and institutional privacy/confidentiality policies, or support and advice?

- How should institutions regard students who otherwise provide online and social media contact details of their fellow students? → Disciplinary action? Support and advice?
- How should institutions deal with students who’ve previously commissioned work and who are then exposed at a later point via negligent and duplicitous marketing materials? → Penalty and/or rehabilitation if, indeed, rehabilitation is possible in any given individual circumstances?
- With regard to the wider community of HE institutions, how to communicate with another institution implicated by marketing materials sent to one of your institution’s students. → Is there need for a formal inter-university policy, national or international, possibly with a staffed ‘clearing house’, or should this be left informal and, by implication, discretionary?

Our presentation will address such questions with illustrations from recent policy revisions introduced at the University of Northampton. We intend to make a fuller presentation/article available in due course as the investigation develops.

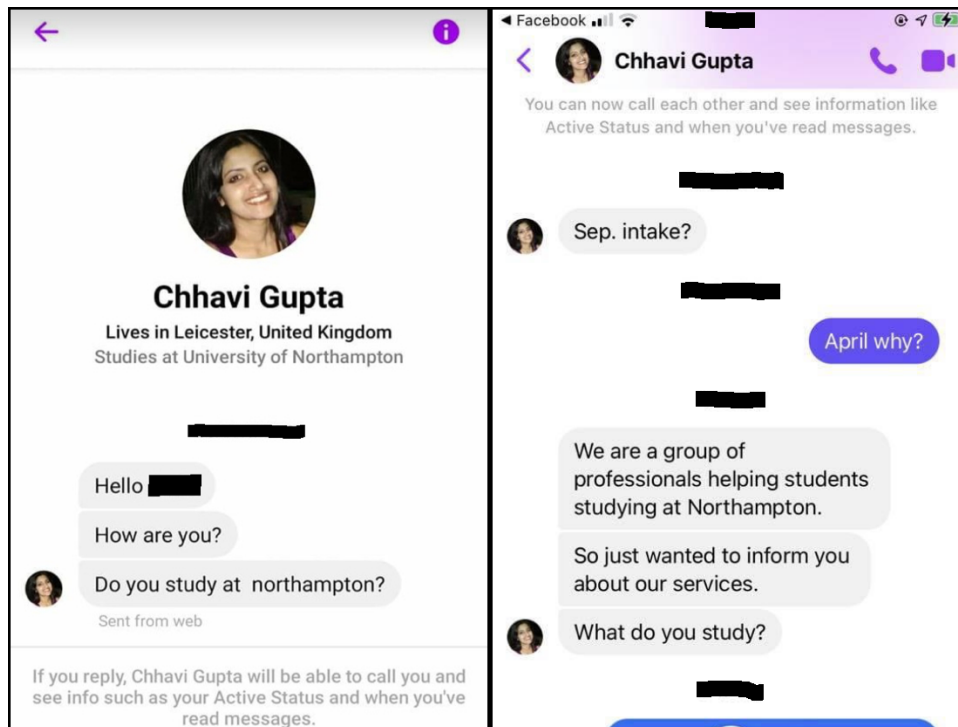


Fig. 1: Typical initial messaging when gaining admission to social media group (1a, left) and typical next-stage messaging following admission to social media group (1b, right).

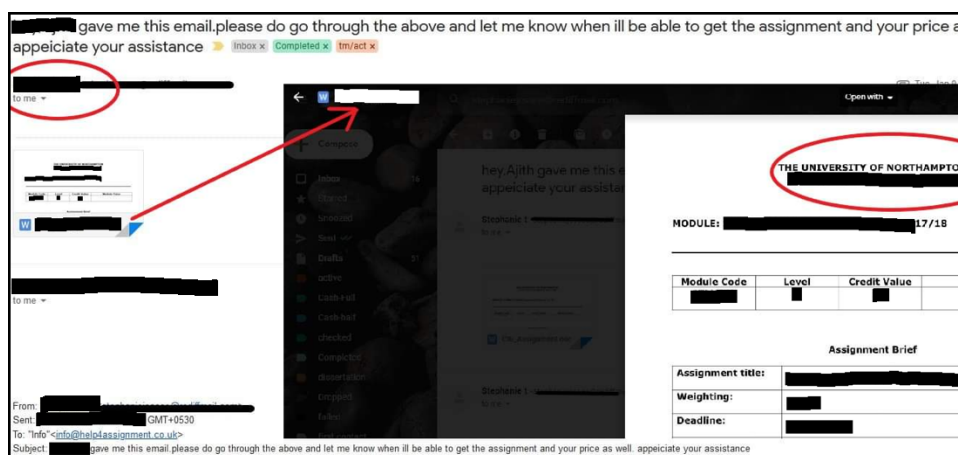


Fig. 2: Screenshot image sent to a current University of Northampton student, showing a former student's commissioning of an assignment in a previous academic year.

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