

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY, BLENDED LEARNING AND VIRTUAL DELIVERY– SECTOR RESPONSES IN THE CONTEXT OF AN INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDY

Michael Draper¹, Alison Perry¹, Joanne Berry¹

¹*Swansea University, United Kingdom*

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Abstract

This presentation will consider how Higher Education providers within the UK managed the move to virtual delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic as a framework for an Institutional case study relating to changes in assessment policy and practices. The transition to blended learning was rapid, mostly effective but not universally welcomed by students or academic staff. Assessment is essential to a successful student learning journey encompassing student engagement, assuring academic standards and facilitating the development and demonstration of the knowledge and skills of students.

With the move to online assessment programmes validated by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies frequently required remote proctoring of those assessments to ensure the academic integrity of the assessment and as a precaution against cheating practices. Remote proctoring was also adopted outside of PSRB validated programmes (QAA 2020). A high profile experience of proctoring led to the production of an Independent review of the UK Bar Standards Board's management of remote proctoring of centralised examination (Huxley-Binns et al, 2021)

A blog piece entitled 'SU Officers are Waging war against Essay Mills' (2021) identified different reasons why students during the transition to virtual education due to the COVID-19 pandemic have been prone to participating in academic misconduct.

Firstly, it is asserted that this is due to the "assumption of student knowledge in having study skills" (Lomas et al, 2021). Secondly because of, a "lack of investment in academic skills leading to lack of confidence" (para. 8). Thirdly, the authors identified over-assessment as an issue as students may be overwhelmed by the number of assessments on top of additional responsibilities including family care and working. In addition a final reason given is a, "lack of student knowledge regarding consequences".

The marketing strategies of Essay Mills are also a threat because they target students in social media, without necessarily highlighting the negative implications of their services.

As online learning and assessment has evolved so have services for other forms of academic misconduct. With the transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, services now offer "attending classes,

completing assignments, and sitting exams” (Liu, 2021, para. 1). Hence, some Essay Mills also offer attendance at Zoom lessons as well as the more traditional completion of coursework.

Central to the presentation will be an Institutional case study following the development of a principled and values-based approach to an Institutional assessment policy, consequential changes to assessment practices and the impact of those changes on grade enhancement (inflation) and academic misconduct within a particular School setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. That case study will address the management of academics and students in that School of the change to assessment and delivery and the collegiate approach to assessment design and criteria undertaken by all stakeholders including the Institutional management response. In a 2022 QAA report more than half of respondents thought the shift to digital teaching and learning

had affected students final grades, with 38% believing the shift had promoted an uplift in student grades and 16% reporting that it had lowered them. Is there a correlation between grade enhancement (inflation) and academic misconduct? Our case study will address data for academic misconduct across the two years of the pandemic as well as impact on degree classifications in the context of pre-pandemic data and provide an analysis of emerging patterns and trends.

Consequently, recommendations will be made for enhancing the student experience of online delivery and assessment and maintaining a focus on academic integrity in the context of the move away from in person learning and teaching and invigilated examinations. In short, we need to engage with and adopt principles of academic integrity as a core component of learning teaching and assessment, not something which is simply linked to misconduct.

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