

# HOW MANY ESSAY MILLS ARE TARGETING OUR STUDENTS? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY TO COUNT SUCH SERVICES IN THE UAE

Zeenath Reza Khan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Wollongong in Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Abstract

Essay mills and ghost/contract writers have existed long before the pandemic. This global menace suddenly caught world's attention after 16 universities had to investigate nearly 1000-students for using one essay mill (Visentin, 2015). This led to subsequent law making such services illegal in Australia (TEQSA, 2021).

This phenomenon, known as contract cheating where students submit work done by someone else, as their own for assessment, is hard to detect and whole lot more sinister, brings disrepute to the universities, and makes it near-impossible to assess student capacity and knowledge.

Internationally, on average 15.7% of students admitted to paying someone to undertake their work (Newton, 2018). In Australia, this figure was 2 – 4% through self-reporting; however, a recent study has shown that 1 in 10 students may contract cheat (Curtis et al., 2021). In 2018, an interview-based-study in the UAE showed 86% of the students were aware of a friend or classmate who had requested someone to complete their assignment, positing such levels of awareness due to focus group technique that led to high level of confidence from participants (Khan et al., 2019). It shed light on why students contract cheated and how they were approached, eg. *"companies seem to know exactly who we are, where we study, and contact us on a regular basis"* (Khan et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, as universities moved to adopt emergency distance learning during COVID19, contract-cheating services also mushroomed creatively marketing and positioning themselves as services, targeting unsuspecting students

online, taking advantage of their vulnerability (McKie, 2020). These services went beyond academic misconduct to also blackmail students for more money after delivering services (Draper et al., 2021).

It is therefore important to understand the extent of existence and number of such websites that target students in the UAE. It is believed that the results, which have been presented as white paper talks to ADEK Higher Education Excellence forum in 2021 and at the QS Higher Ed Summit as a featured talk in 2022, will contribute as first steps to recognising contract cheating as a menace to usher in dialogue on policy and legislation on legitimacy of such services.

To address this question, the study used Boolean search technique along with two search engines, two browsers and terminologies "essay-writing", "ghost-writing" and "assignment-writing" were used to count unique and organic (U&O) websites that manifested. Shelton (2017) has suggested that optimization ranks all user searches on the first page for as high as 95% organic traffic clicks, so we counted results from the first page of each find. Another condition used to narrow down search was the word "UAE" in website SEOs. Coded analysis was used to collate the websites and count the total number of searches.

A total of 34 U&O websites, with the exception for five, showed a z score higher than the mean value 2.94, at standard deviation of 1.89, suggesting that the probability of appearance of these 29 websites across different search engines, different browsers and across separate

search keywords was significant (see table 1 and 2).

The data obtained from this study helps to highlight how a significant number of U&O websites exist within the first page of search. As posited by Shelton (2017), this indicates either aggressive marketing tactics or high clicks by users to these sites. We believe this is a position paper that highlights the significant existence of such services that are intentionally targeting higher education students in the UAE and we

use this study and its findings to call for proper in-service training of faculty to help them identify and detect contract cheating, redesign assessments to design out contract cheating and most importantly, following in the footsteps of countries such as Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and many states in the USA (Hare, 2019), to look to delegitimise and censor website services that offer to write assignments for students with or without a fee in the UAE.

Table 1 – Coded results

Essay Writing and UAE				
GOOGLE	Results found	Chrome	Actual U&O sites	Chrome
	6890000	6890000	9	9
			A1	A1
			A2	A2
			A3	A3
			A4	A4
			A5	A5
			A6	A6
			A7	A5
			A8	A8
			A9	A9

Assignment Writing and UAE				
GOOGLE	Results found	Chrome	Actual U&O sites	Chrome
	2940000	3250000	10	11
			A1	A1
			A2	A2
			A5	A5
			A7	A7
			B1	B1
			B2	B2
			B3	B3
			B4	B3
			B5	B4
			B6	B5
				B6

Ghostwriting and UAE				
GOOGLE	Results found	Chrome	Actual U&O sites	Chrome
	824000	1210000	12	14
			C1	C1
			C2	C2
			C3	C3
			C4	C4
			C5	C5
			A5	A5
			C6	C6
			C7	C7
			C8	C8
			C9	C9
			C10	C10
			C11	C11
				C12
				C13

Essay Writing and UAE				
BING	Results found	Chrome	Actual U&O sites	Chrome
	9390000	9410000	7	8
			A1	A1
			A10	A10
			A2	A11
			A3	A2
			A4	A3
			A5	A4
			A7	A5
				A7

Assignment Writing and UAE				
BING	Results found	Chrome	Actual U&O sites	Chrome
	6690000	6690000	5	5
			A7	A3
			B1	A7
			B3	B1
			B7	B7
			B8	B9

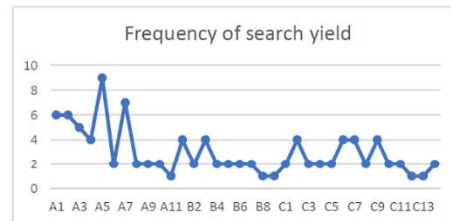
Ghostwriting and UAE				
BING	Results found	Chrome	Actual U&O sites	Chrome
	1190000	1190000	5	5
			C14	C14
			C2	C2
			C6	C6
			C7	C7
			C9	C9

Table 2 – Frequency of U&O sites with analysis

Sr#	U&O Website	frequency of search yield	%Frequency	Z Score
1	A1	6	17.65	4.44
2	A2	6	17.65	4.44
3	A3	5	14.71	3.44
4	A4	4	11.76	2.44
5	A5	9	26.47	7.44
6	A6	2	5.88	0.44
7	A7	7	20.59	5.44
8	A8	2	5.88	0.44
9	A9	2	5.88	0.44
10	A10	2	5.88	0.44
11	A11	1	2.94	-0.56
12	B1	4	11.76	2.44
13	B2	2	5.88	0.44
14	B3	4	11.76	2.44
15	B4	2	5.88	0.44
16	B5	2	5.88	0.44
17	B6	2	5.88	0.44
18	B7	2	5.88	0.44
19	B8	1	2.94	-0.56
20	B9	1	2.94	-0.56
21	C1	2	5.88	0.44
22	C2	4	11.76	2.44
23	C3	2	5.88	0.44
24	C4	2	5.88	0.44
25	C5	2	5.88	0.44
26	C6	4	11.76	2.44
27	C7	4	11.76	2.44
28	C8	2	5.88	0.44
29	C9	4	11.76	2.44
30	C10	2	5.88	0.44
31	C11	2	5.88	0.44
32	C12	1	2.94	-0.56
33	C13	1	2.94	-0.56
34	C14	2	5.88	0.44

MEAN of Frequency	Standard Deviaton
2.94	1.89

Average # U&O sites (Bing)	Average # U&O sites (Google)
5.83	10.83



## References

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