

## Concurrent Session 1 | Room 2

# WRITING IN PLAIN SIGHT: PROFILING EMPLOYEES OF A UK-BASED ESSAY MILL ON LINKEDIN

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### Background

The commercial contract cheating industry runs in a spectrum from individual entrepreneurs through freelancers to essay mills established as registered companies (Amigud & Lancaster, 2020a; Draper, Lancaster, Dann, Crockett & Glendinning, 2021). Research has identified contract writers at the individual end of this spectrum as writers from the global south offering cheap services motivated by unemployment to work in the gig economy or in an entrepreneurial fashion (Sivasubramaniam, S., Kostelidou, K. & Ramachandran, S., 2016. Lancaster, 2019; Lancaster, 2020;) Research on essay mills has highlighted their unscrupulous and sophisticated business practices (Medway, Roper & Gilooly, 2017; Rowland, Slade, Wong & Whiting, 2018; Lancaster 2020b) but so far has not considered the background and motivation of the writers themselves. This research

addresses that gap by profiling contract writers working for a leading UK-based essay mill.

Because essay mills are legal in the UK means, the companies, their workers and their vacancies are openly listed on public professional networking websites. At the same time, the contested ethics of academic contract writing may impact the way this information is presented. This research analysed 50 contract writer LinkedIn profiles to answer the following questions:

- Who are the contract writers in terms of demographic and educational background?
- What is their employment status and situation?
- How do they present themselves? Is the presentation deceptive?

### Method

The LinkedIn employee profiles of a leading UK-based essay mill were qualitatively analysed along with 52 employee profiles and a selection of job adverts. The information below was coded and used to identify a typology of writers.

- Location (country)
- Education qualification level (4-8)

- University group (e.g. Russell)
- Subject discipline
- Employment status
- Self-presentation (free writing in About section)
- Job description (vacancy presentation vs. self-presentation)

### Key Findings

Two-thirds of the contract writer profiles described education to Masters level, from research-intensive 'Russell Group' universities

(see <https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/> for list) or other established universities (i.e. over 50 years old). The vast

majority of the writers (75%+) were from the UK. Unlike the freelancers and gig economy workers identified in previous research, these writers tended to be moonlighting i.e. doing the writing as a second job or side job, with most employed by the essay mill for the past 2+ years.

There are obvious signs of enhancement in the profile presentation. In general, writers position themselves as subject experts and their writing as relevant experience for their preferred job. In addition, there are features of self-presentation that are arguably misleading:

- Despite job adverts describing the position as 'academic writer', the profiles preferred to describe themselves as 'researchers'.
- Writers describe their outputs as documents or projects rather than essays or assignments.
- Writers refer to their audience as clients, customers or academics rather than students.

## Discussion

At the business end of the contract cheating spectrum, essay mills are employing educated graduates with career aspirations who feel that commercial essay writing is valid and relevant work experience. The range of the typology – blogger, translator, researcher, consultant – indicates that commercial essay writing is a

Content analysis of the profiles identified four types of contract writer, listed below with defining characteristics:

Writer Type 1: Content creator

- Digital marketing/Entrepreneur
- Aspiring Blogger
- Good bachelor's degree
- Still looking for work in their field

Writer Type 2: Researcher

- Technical/Professional writing
- Specialism
- Client-focused
- Analytical

Writer Type 3: Academic consultant

- Contract writing is primary job
- Work for multiple companies and open about their work
- Professional attitude
- Lifelong learner

Writer Type 4: The linguist

- Multilingual
- Translator
- Postgraduate
- Current affairs

flexible employment option that appeals to a wide range of writing talent. However, despite this regular appearance, there are misleading elements (such as not mentioning students and obscuring of the higher education focus of their writing) which go beyond CV embellishments to borderline deceptive practices.

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