

News story: Government pledge to 'beat the cheats' at university

Online giants, including PayPal, have been called out by the Education Secretary to stop promoting and facilitating access to essay writing services, as the government signals its intention to 'beat the cheats' at university today (20 March).

In the first of a series of interventions across the higher education sector, Damian Hinds has challenged PayPal to stop processing payments for 'essay mills' as part of an accelerated drive to preserve and champion the quality of the UK's world-leading higher education system.

Technology giants such as Google and YouTube have responded to these calls and are taking steps 'beat the cheats' by removing hundreds of advertisements for essay writing services and promotional content from their sites. Other platforms that have not acknowledged this issue are being told to follow suit.

As part of a range of action being taken by the department and the sector, the Education Secretary is also calling on universities to crackdown on those found cheating at university and is calling on higher education providers to consider 'honour codes', which would see students sign a pledge not to use essay writing services for their own assignments.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

Sadly there have always been some people who opt for the easy way and the internet has seen a black market in essay writing services spring up. However, no matter how easy it is to access these services now, it doesn't change the fact that this is cheating, and students must understand it is unacceptable.

It is simply unethical for these companies to profit from this dishonest business which is exploiting young people and it is time to stamp them out of our world-class higher education sector.

I am determined to beat the cheats who threaten the integrity of our system and am calling on online giants, such as PayPal, to block payments or end the advertisement of these services – it is their moral duty to do so.

There has been some positive progress made by some in the tech sector but it is vital that we all unite to clamp down on this practice and the companies that are feeding on it.

In 2016 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) [found](#) there are approximately 17,000 instances of academic offences per year in the UK, however the number

of students using essay writing services is thought to be much higher as plagiarised essays often go undetected. A [study](#) by Swansea University of students internationally, found the number of students outside the UK who admitted to paying for assignments since 2014 equates to one in seven.

Work is already underway across the sector to tackle the issue, with companies like Turnitin developing more sophisticated software to detect plagiarism. There are currently 10 universities globally that are trialling new software developed by Turnitin to identify cheating of this kind.

Universities Minister Chris Skidmore said:

Developing your knowledge and applying it at a high standard is at the very core of a university education, but these essay writing companies and the students paying for these services are undermining the foundations that our HE system is built upon.

Students work incredibly hard to get a place at university and those who choose to cheat risk throwing it all away for the sake of a shortcut. It is right that those who have the ability to limit access to these services, including online platforms, do everything within their power to do so – not only for students but our world-class reputation.

In January Mr Hinds announced that the department will be publishing an Education Technology strategy this spring to help the industry tackle some of the key challenges facing the education sector. This will include encouraging tech companies to identify how anti-cheating software can tackle the growth of essay mills and stay one step ahead of the cheats.

The Education Secretary also wants universities to improve inductions to make it clear to students from day one that using essay writing services is unacceptable and make sure that students are assessed in a variety of ways to not overly rely on essays.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

When I was at university I was struck by American friends who talked about the honour code system.

They wouldn't consider even low-level plagiarism because it broke this code – an agreement as they saw it between themselves and the university, and their peers.

I also expect universities to do everything in their power to prevent students being tempted by these companies by introducing initiatives such as honour codes and making sure their students are aware of the severe consequences they face if they are caught

cheating. Students should know that they face being thrown off their course if they are found to be cheating.

The Department for Education has worked with the QAA, Universities UK (UUK) and the National Union of Students to publish [guidance](#) for all universities on how best to tackle the use of essay mills. This includes educating students about the risks of using essay writing services and blocking advertisements of these services on campus.

The QAA, which campaigns against essay mills and contract cheating on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, wrote to online platforms in November last year to ask them to join the drive to stop promoting these services. Google has since taken down hundreds of adverts and positive steps have also been taken by YouTube to remove promotional material on channels.

The Office for Students is responsible for taking action against universities if they are found to be complicit in cheating. The regulator has strong powers to take action where it finds providers are not working in students' interests including placing conditions on registration, financial penalties and ultimately deregistration in the most serious cases.

QAA Chief Executive Douglas Blackstock said:

The UK has a world-leading reputation for the standards and quality of its higher education and we are not going to let these companies undermine it. Companies that try to entice students to buy so-called plagiarism free essays pose a real threat to the academic integrity of our higher education. These unscrupulous operators, increasingly and falsely marketing themselves as providing legitimate study aids, must be stopped in their tracks.

Students need to understand that if they get caught their professional careers and personal reputations are at risk. More worryingly, we have recently heard stories of essay companies attempting to blackmail students by threatening to expose them unless they hand over greater sums of money.

Hundreds of essay companies across the world use online platforms to promote or transact their services to students. We applaud the government for putting pressure on these powerful platforms to stop doing business with essay cheat companies, making it increasingly difficult for them to find an audience for the unscrupulous services that damage reputations and lives.