# Documentary: exploring the essay mill industry

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| **Student focused learning outcomes:**  By the end of the session, you will be better able to:   * understand the literal meaning of colloquial phrases * identify the opinions and supporting reasons in a spoken text * respond to a spoken text through listening strategies * discuss a spoken text |

You are going to watch a short documentary, titled *‘Reading Between the Lines: Exploring the Essay Mill Industry.*’ In this, different people involved in Higher Education talk about the use of essay mills. The documentary describes an essay mill as **‘***a business that allows customers to commission an original piece of writing on a particular topic so that they may commit academic fraud’****.*** Essay mills are controversial because students may use them for ‘contract cheating’, which is a form of academic malpractice.

## Task 1

What is your opinion on essay mills? Use the following prompts to help you.

* Why is it considered ‘cheating’ to use an essay mill?
* Why do some students resort to using an essay mill?

## Task 2

Expressions 1-12 are used in the documentary. Match them with their meanings, a-l.

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| **Expressions** | **Meanings** |
| 1. **to read between the lines f** | 1. **to make sure rules are being followed** |
| 1. to prey on vulnerability k | 1. **to make money quickly in an unfair way** |
| 1. to make a fast buck b | 1. **to endanger someone / something** |
| 1. to put (someone / something) at risk | **c** | 1. **to do something in an easy way, not in the way it should be done** |
| 1. to police (someone / something) a | 1. to take money (especially in an unfair or **dishonest way)** |
| 1. contract cheating j | 1. **to understand meanings not explicitly stated in someone’s speech or writing** |
| 1. to hinder (someone / something) i | 1. a set of rules relating to the legal use of material created by someone else |
| 1. to demonise (someone / something) h | 1. to make someone or something appear bad |
| 1. fair use policy g | 1. to cause delay or difficulty |
| 1. a duty of care l | 1. **the action of paying someone else to do your assignment** |
| 1. to pocket money e | 1. **to exploit weakness in someone** |
| 1. to cut corners d | 1. **responsibility towards someone** |

## Task 3

Below is a list of the speakers you will hear. Do you think they will be for or against essay mills?

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| --- | --- |
| **Speaker** | **For (F) or Against (A)?** |
| Politician |  |
| Academic Expert |  |
| Chief Operating Officer for an essay mill company |  |
| Senior Student Advisor |  |
| Advertising Standards Authority Officer |  |
| Senior Psychology Lecturer |  |

# Task 4

Now watch the documentary and make notes.

**How do the speakers feel about essay mills and what are their reasons?**

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| 1. Lord Michael Storey (Liberal Democrat Politician) |
| 1. Doctor Thomas Lancaster (Academic Expert) |
| 1. Daniel Dennehy (Chief Operating Officer for essay mill company) |
| 1. Josephine Spanswick (Senior Student Advisor) |
| 1. Miles Lockwood (Advertising Standards Authority officer) |
| 1. Doctor Mark Sergeant (Senior Psychology Lecturer)   Against  He analysed the reason why students are attempt to using this kind of tech. The shallow reason is that the want to submit their homework in time and get good grades. The deeper reason is that they are facing huge pressure from their family, himself and the society.  But this is kind of cheating and they ( the school ) will trace it and find it out. |

### DOCUMENTARY TRANSCRIPT

*“I think they are the leeches of academia and* *they prey on young students’ vulnerability to make a fast buck and shame on them.”*

**(Lord Michael Storey CBE, Liberal Democrat Peer)**

*“It’s students getting an award they don’t deserve; it’s the reputation of the university being* *put at risk and it’s also* *damaging to other students that might graduate from that university.”*

**(Dr Thomas Lancaster, Academic Integrity Expert, Imperial College, London)**

*“They believe that every student that purchases the model answer will simply hand it in and they* *can’t police that and that is what they are scared of.”*

**(Daniel Dennehy, Chief Operating Officer, UK Essays, Nottingham)**

Graduation for many is a day full of celebrations, happiness and achievement, all the hard work has finally paid off but at what cost? How would you feel if your degree had lost its integrity because despite putting in your own time, effort and hard work, someone else had paid their way to success?

**An ‘Essay Mill’ is a business that allows customers to commission an original piece of writing on a particular topic so that they may commit academic fraud.**

There are hundreds of online essay mill services for students to choose from. Dr Thomas Lancaster is an academic expert at Imperial College, London. “Contract cheating is what determines essay mills so students will often go to an essay mill to get a piece of work completed for them. Along with my colleague Robert Clark we came up with term contract teaching to describe a wider range of behaviour. All kinds of students use contract cheating services, we know home student use them, we know international students use them, but the advertising from many sites now is incredibly targeted.”

‘UK Essays’ is a sub company within ‘All Answers Ltd’, which is based in Nottingham. It is one of the largest essay mills in the country and have served over 75,000 students.

**Daniel Dennehy, Chief Operating Officer, UK Essays, Nottingham:**

“We are an educational support service ranging from different educational support products and services from proof reading, marking, essay writing service, model answers from essays, dissertations as well. Our aim is and always will be to help students as much as we possibly can in terms of understanding their course and their particular subject area. We can put you in contact with an approved academic that has already achieved the qualification that you’re looking to acquire, receive a model answer can help everybody. Services such as UK Essays believe they are a greater support to student than universities themselves.”

So, are they really helpful? Or are they hindering the integrity of a student’s education?

**Lord Michael Storey CBE, Liberal Democrat Peer:**

“The issue of what’s called an essay mill, companies who provide essays for you, or contract cheating where someone actually writes your essay for you, were once seen as a very minor problem. But it was clearly growing and growing and growing. We’re not just talking about students in their first degree or masters, we are also talking about people doing PHDs. Imagine you go to your doctor and your doctor has got his/her qualification because they have used contract cheating.”

So, how detrimental can these services be? To the students that are caught? To students [who] now find that their degrees are devalued? And to the suffering reputation of universities?

Josephine Spanswick, Senior Advisor, Nottingham Trent Student Union:

“It’s what the integrity of what higher institution education is, so even if someone is struggling or makes a mistake and gets something wrong with an element of plagiarism or an aspect of their work, that is their attempting to do something themselves, this is literally like I’ll just buy it.”

Many CV services is a threat to higher education, but there are a number of components which have created this escalating issue.

**STUDENTS:**

**Dr Thomas Lancaster, Academic Integrity Expert, Imperial College, London:**

“Problem of cheating has been a long time round now, is nothing new. But no matter what we try the message doesn’t seem get firmly out there. Students do know what they are doing when they are buying a piece of work, they might think they will do it once and they might it’s work they can do anyway, but this is still damaging to them.”

**ACADEMIC WRITERS:**

**Lord Michael Storey CBE, Liberal Democrat Peer:**

“There are retired academic staff, retired professors who are writing these essays for students, somebody has to write them so shame on them to do that, they should know better. The notion that a professor in history who is retired is busy writing [a] thesis for a student so he/she can cheat is just plainly wrong.”

**Dr Thomas Lancaster, Academic Integrity Expert, Imperial College, London:**

“We know that students have left UK universities’ courses and then they have become a specialist in that course, they know what the lecturers want to see, they know the content of the course and they set themselves up in business supplying students work of their course. Some are based in UK; some are based internationally and it’s frustrating to me on one hand that this is the only work that they feel they can get and it’s frustrating to me that they feel this is the work they have to take on.”

**UNIVERSITIES:**

**Daniel Dennehy, Chief Operating Officer, UK Essays, Nottingham:**

“You can regulate this industry, but the lead has to come from the universities. We know the industry very, very well, hence the reason why we always said and why we are very vocal and passionate about the service that we provide because it can be regulated, it can be used in a correct way, but universities will look to demonise it for no reason other than they can’t control it, so they are scared of it.”

**Dr Thomas Lancaster, Academic Integrity Expert, Imperial College, London:**

“I don’t know why universities aren’t doing more, I think sometimes they are worried about what the results will be if they make these changes, could it mean that more students will not be successful in their course, it’s just one of the number of challenges that universities have and it’s not one that has made quite at the top of the list.”

**ESSAY MILLS:**

**Josephine Spanswick, Senior Advisor, Nottingham Trent Student Union:**

“I think the reality is, they are selling work and they are selling the potential to submit that work as a student, there isn’t an expectation as I mentioned previously if you get anything below 2:1 then that’s it, it’s not worth having your degree and they are selling on that level of higher marks when you’ve got somebody who potentially on a cusp of something or a grade boundary, that we can guarantee you’re going to get this mark that is so much an incentive.”

Essay Mills sites [say] that they are a model answer service which students should use as a support to produce their own original work.

**UK Essays advert says:**

The final and most important part of adhering to the Fair Use Policy is making sure that the work you submit to your university is 100% your own, as tempting as it maybe to submit a custom written piece of work, this is not how our service is designed to be used. UK Essays does not condone a student passing off a writer’s work as their own in any circumstances.

We took part in an online chat on the UK Essays website, going through the process of purchasing a piece of written work. We posed as a final year student who wanted an essay on diversity within a workplace, we asked multiple questions regarding the price, how long it would take and the overall grade we were looking for. After 10 minutes, the fair use policy has still not been mentioned and it took our prompted question on plagiarism for us to be told that this work could not be submitted. Daniel was adamant that their ‘fair use policy’ is visibly clear.

**Daniel Dennehy, Chief Operating Officer, UK Essays, Nottingham**

“The website itself has numerous different web pages talking about the ‘fair use policy’, how to use the work correctly. Our homepage again it has a video on numerous website pages it has a video, when you go to place an order you agree to the ‘fair use policy’ as well. We will always try to stipulate to ensure you are aware how to use the service correctly. Now our website speaks for hundreds and thousands of visitors every single day, unfortunately we can’t speak to them all verbally or via the online chat service to really push that message home.”

Miles Lockwood from the Advertising Standards Authority says whilst these companies are not illegal, they do have a duty of care to their customers. “They should be clear what is the legitimate use of their services and they should be thinking should we be going further by also explaining the risks to students who are vulnerable of them trying to submit that work as their own and that information should be clear in upfront.”

Despite companies promoting a ‘Fair Use Policy’, they are still widely criticised.

**Dr Thomas Lancaster, Academic Integrity Expert, Imperial College, London:**

“It’s really frustrating to me to see these firms pocketing money from students, a student would have worked really hard for that money, they would spend their loan, they may have really little to show for it at the end other than the assignment that they could have written by themselves.”

**Lord Michael Storey CBE, Liberal Democrat Peer:**

“Behind that sort of smiling face, we are here to support students, but actually there is a business that does help students to cheat and has been shown to happen. They’re not going to lose this profitable business, are they?”

UK Essays states they are loved by students and have the world’s best writers, so how much does the world’s best work actually cost?

**Daniel Dennehy, Chief Operating Officer, UK Essays, Nottingham**

“It could range anything from £124 for 1000 words for an undergraduate for a grade of 2:2 varying up to £140 for 1000 words for a 2:1 level, the average order value is around about £200-£300 for an essay that we provide.”

For a variety of reasons, students feel that there is no option but to submit work which is not their own. Mark Sergeant is a psychologist who specialises in the field of contract cheating and why students cheat.

**Dr Mark Sergeant, Senior Psychology Lecturer, Nottingham Trent**

“Half of the time the students have a bit of a **panic**, they think they’ve got to get their work submitted, they’ve got really unfortunate personal circumstances or maybe they haven’t got all the work done in time, it’s to do with family pressure and kind of self-pressure. It’s basically people who want to do well and don’t have the skills to do that and then try and cut some corners in order to actually succeed. With contract cheating it seems like “my lecturers don’t care about me, the assessment is pointless, I’ve got too many things on, therefore I am justified in using one of these contract cheating websites. A lot of students fundamentally, they don’t necessarily have the skills to be able to do the assessments and it’s quicker and easier to buy a piece of work than it is to actually go through skill development training, doing badly on assessment because unfortunately these days education is about the grades you get, not about the skills you’ve developed.”

So, is it sleepless nights or just a 5-minute bank transfer? Was there feelings of guilt or just pure relief? Was using an essay mill a small price to pay for a bright future?

*“We know these sites are there, we know they are advertising to you, we’ve seen them hanging around campus, do think twice before you use these?”*

**(Dr Thomas Lancaster, Academic Integrity Expert, Imperial College, London)**

“What’s required is good teaching, good resources, good understanding for the students and that’s it”. **(Josephine Spanswick, Senior Advisor, Nottingham Trent Student Union)**

*“If it’s a model answer service and it’s regulated correctly and used correctly and all the parties within the journey understand how it needs to be used, then it is a very strong academic resource tool.”* **(Daniel Dennehy, Chief Operating Officer, UK Essays, Nottingham)**

*“It’s making sure that you provide support, training and context of the work, but at the same time making it clear it’s not tolerated and we will catch it.* **(Dr Mark Sergeant, Senior Psychology Lecturer, Nottingham Trent)**

Source: Nottingham Trent University (2020). *Reading Between the Lines: Exploring the Essay Mill Industry* [YouTube]. <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=r_8QajLHp-k&t=1s> (Accessed: 10 June 2024).