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Academic dishonesty, essay mills, and Artificial Intelligence: rethinking assessment strategies

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Abstract

This paper considers how universities should respond to the threat from academic dishonesty, including essay mills, and Artificial Intelligence undermining assessment processes, and institutional credibility. The article describes steps taken to combat the use of essay mills, but also tools like ChatGPT, apparently able to generate essays that appear credible, and sufficient to offer a solution to an imminent deadline. The paper argues for reconsideration of the traditional essay, which may already be of questionable value. We should look to alternatives. The paper discusses whether universities should ban ChatGPT and similar tools, or accept them and design assessment processes that are more difficult to fake. The paper proposes a modified version of the essay, namely a reflective report, and explains why this is a more creative and idiosyncratic approach, better suited to today's learners, and better aligned with employers' expectations regarding employability and the skills graduates need.

Keywords: *Academic dishonesty; essay mills; artificial intelligence (AI); assessment; reflective statement, employability.*

1. Introduction

This paper is based on experience of teaching a postgraduate module, International Political Economy and Business (IPEB), a long-established, popular, and successful module within a suite of international business (IB)-related degree programmes. It has relied on a 2,500-word essay as its standard form of assessment. Results used to be consistently excellent but growth in cohort size, following expansion of the university's postgraduate intake, coincided with higher failure rates and some evidence of increasing academic dishonesty (AD) among successive cohorts.

Academic dishonesty (AD) is a 'deceitful or unfair act intended to produce a more desirable outcome on an exam, paper, homework assignment, or other assessment of learning' (Miller, et al., 2017:121). AD takes many forms, but in recent months alarm has focused on the threat from Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the risk that students would resort to chatbots to help with essay writing (Moser, et al., 2022, Sparrow, 2022). This paper discusses different forms of AD and measures to reduce its incidence. AI is a new challenge and has prompted a change in the assessment – perhaps not before time given the limitations of the standard essay as a form of assessment, and its questionable contribution to graduate employability.

The paper is intended as a contribution to a live debate in higher education (HE), one of vital importance given the challenge that AD and now AI presents to the integrity of universities' assessment strategies and awards standards.

2. Essay mills and how to reduce their use

The problem of essay mills was first raised in our School in 2016 by student representatives in a postgraduate staff-student liaison committee meeting. The reps told us that use of essay mills was a growing problem, especially among students whose first language was not English. My university, like many others, offers master's courses overwhelmingly comprised of high fee paying international students, some with rather poor English language competence.

It is not only overseas students who resort to buying essays online, an apparently more 'secure' form of cheating than old-fashioned plagiarism via copy and paste. The latter will usually be caught by plagiarism detection software like Turnitin, but a one-off essay commissioned from an essay mill is harder to spot (Ross, 2021).

Our response to the essay mill threat was first to take down the posters in the students' first language that were on Department notice boards advertising 'help with your essays' and 'academic tutoring services'. We also stepped up publicity regarding in-house study skills and writing support, and ensured the university provided more resources. In addition, we worked harder to alert students to the risks from essay milling, which at the very least could

mean failing a course, but also students being blackmailed to re-use a service they had fallen prey to (Draper, et al., 2021; Yorke, et al., 2022). In the most unscrupulous cases, once a student provides their contact details, they are exposed to threats, and extortion.

Local providers targeting our students were evident, but essay mill services are widely advertised online, even alongside universities' official promotion of their courses. Essay mills are beyond national jurisdiction, so even where they are banned by law, this has no effect (HM Government, 2021).

My unsophisticated detection system for spotting milled essays relies on judgement and experience, but this is not foolproof. Nevertheless one strategy did reduce the incidence of milling. The assignment brief was amended to say that all references cited must be to authors on the module reading list or in the course book, an edited collection written by various experts (Baylis, et al., 2020). International organisations (UN, IMF, WTO, WHO, EU, etc) are also legitimate sources. This proved an effective deterrent. It is presumably harder for essay mill writers to use the named sources, and if they tried, clear anomalies were easily identified, such as random placement of references with no relation to what the original author actually wrote. We also reinforced the formative assessment process, emphasizing the need to focus on presenting argument supported by sources from module readings.

With large cohorts, and to be frank, too many students with poor English and a basic lack of competence, many students are tempted to engage in AD. The closed reading list reduced the incidence of essay milling, saving students money, but the weakest students still failed to write a passable essay. Some would engage in the random referencing trick, which is especially unwise when the marking team knows the reading list well.

So, the essay mill may be the cheating instrument of choice after copy and paste, but it has limitations, and carries severe risk. Our task is to become more adept at identifying AD, and appropriate action is needed to protect the assessment process and the integrity of awards.

3. Assessment – rethinking what we ask students to do

There are many ways to assess students' learning, from the traditional combination of closed examination and essays, to group work, literature review, project report, multiple choice questions, long answers, short answers, open questions, twenty-four hour open book examination, presentation, videos and podcasts, group work, role-playing, reflective statements, and more besides (Pugh, et al., n.d.). Viva voce is a long-established form of assessment and standard for doctoral candidates. If conducted properly, it can be very effective but it is quite unsuited to large cohorts, and out of favour where students operate in an increasingly litigious and customer-focused marketized system, such as now applies in the United Kingdom (Nixon, et al., 2016; Molesworth, et al., 2009).

Examinations and essays are still the commonest forms of assessment in many institutions. In Britain, reliance on examinations and essays stems from the grammar and private school educational models of the 1950s and 1960s, consolidated at the university level, especially in arts, humanities, and social science disciplines. Assumptions regarding formal academic writing became established in elite institutions, Oxford, Cambridge, the Ivy League in the United States, Les Grandes Écoles in France, and the *crème de la crème* elsewhere.

We should escape from formulaic essays shaped by a formative assessment based on ‘an essay outline’. This consists of planning an essay structure and adding some indicative references. But students are often not very good at this, so we end up doing it for them. The submissions that follow are often underwhelming, although some are excellent. The weakest suggest that today’s students are not ideally equipped to write traditional academic essays, especially overseas postgraduates adjusting to very different expectations from their experience at home, both in school and university. Writing in a foreign language compounds the challenge.

The traditional essay may suit training for future academics, and perhaps journalists, but it far less helpful for careers in business, or in specific sectors such as games development, an actuary office in an insurance company, banking, or research in a pharmaceutical company. Essays are not much use in sport, food production and processing, nor in tourism and hospitality. We should find better ways to demonstrate employability, namely the skills that employers say graduates need (Swain, 2022; NACE, 2023).

Employers look for graduates with core competences around communication, various software, IT, and data handling, and teamworking, even project management. They also want evidence of creativity, and critical and analytical thinking.

Instead of the formal academic essay, students need something more open-ended and better attuned to individual idiosyncrasy. Assessment should provide more scope for analysis and critical thinking than essays typically reveal. Moreover, assessment needs to accommodate changing learning styles shaped by technological innovation and social media.

A student, perhaps stressed and tired after working shifts in a part-time job to support their studies, and approaching a submission deadline, might try to complete an assignment dishonestly, perhaps through traditional plagiarism via copy and paste, or submitting an entire essay found on the Internet with a changed title and some course sources added as references. Or they might contact an essay mill offering ‘help with your assignment’, masquerading as honest tutoring (Stokel-Walker, 2022). Or, they might seek help from AI, the latest threat to academic integrity.

4. Artificial Intelligence tools

The supposed threat to HE from AI has been headline news in recent months. According to some, chatbots like ChatGPT or GPT-3 can answer a wide range of challenges that risk undermining much of the teaching and learning process (Sparrow, 2022). ChatGPT, or its Google rival Bard, can provide seemingly plausible answers to almost any problem (Kleinman, 2023). But they turn up misinformation, and invent quotes from sources, adding apparent veracity (Delouya, 2022). So while chatbots utilize algorithms that synthesise data from a huge number of sources to produce answers to problems, they are unable to distinguish truth from fiction. They are not concerned with truth. Chatbots may generate grammatically well-formed answers to questions, which with the addition of a few plausible-looking references may be enough to avoid detection even by an experienced marking team.

A student website reports that ChatGPT cannot yet deliver an entire essay of 2,000 words, but it can provide answers to targeted questions, text that can be assembled into a reasonable looking essay once intext references are added, so might get a pass (Snepvangers, 2023). Alarmingly, the article constitutes advice on how to use ChatGPT to gain a modest pass.

AI is developing and is likely to get better at solving complex problems, and it is already an integral part of the graduate workplace (Tomlinson, 2022). AI is used in finance, banking and insurance, leisure and tourism, retail, and research and development of new products and services, including in manufacturing and in the IT sector. It has been used to influence political campaigns and to predict the future. It is therefore unlikely, and unrealistic, that universities should ban its use. We cannot bar students from using the Internet, and equally we cannot prevent them using AI. Australian universities have led the way in warning students about using AI-generated text, and have opted for a return to examinations and pen and paper (Cassidy, 2023). But another strategy is to accept AI as something we have to live with. This has important implications for assessment.

Of course, we use a range of assessments in a degree programme. Some modules are better suited to assessment by essay than others. But I have progressively lost confidence in the formal essay, and am adapting it to focus on the learning process, and on ways of thinking. Perhaps this will help combat the essay mill and chatbots too, by encouraging freedom of expression in assessment. If we step away from demanding conformity to imposed frameworks this may reduce anxiety and lessen the temptation to engage in AD.

AI instruments are readily accessible. They may become as integral to the student experience as any favoured search engine. Universities cannot shut out something already present and available. They will have to accommodate this reality, this rapidly developing and adaptable technology (Gold Penguin, 2023).

5. The reflective report – a variation on the traditional essay

My proposal is to retain the module focus on key readings that assist understanding of current challenges around international relations, climate change, finding a balance between economic imperatives and environmental sustainability, and discussing alternative forms of governance. This reflects the importance of geopolitics as a focal area for management and business studies education (Mollan and Sweeney, 2022). But assessment must take account of how students study, different learning styles and previous educational experience, the multiplicity of sources they may use, and the limitless nature of the internet including Artificial Intelligence. So the assessment will become a reflective essay, as follows:

Assignment: International political economy and business: a reflection on what I have learned from the module (2,000 words).

Consider what you have learned from the module. Identify ideas that have changed your thinking, or provided new insights about the international political economy and business.

Refer to *at least five key readings*, explaining how they have shaped your learning.

Provide a critical and reflective assessment of your learning. What has been the most rewarding aspect of the module? What has changed or reinforced your thinking? Is there anything you will think about more deeply, and for more time, in the future?

Use Harvard referencing for all sources mentioned in your report.

You must demonstrate learning from the module, and from module sources, including the course book.

You may write in an informal style, using first person pronouns (I/we).

You may use Internet sources but *you must reference these, and provide a critical commentary* on any material you use.

While reflective essays have become a fairly commonplace form of assessment in recent years, the origins of the approach are centuries old and credited to the French thinker Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) (Halpin, 2014). We anticipate that reflection along the lines suggested above will give students an open opportunity to draw on any aspect of the module, to demonstrate learning, and importantly, to give personal responses to the module and issues raised. This allows for creative and thoughtful reflection, and will ensure individual, unimitable, idiosyncratic responses. The reflective statement recasts the essay by focusing on process, how insight is gained, and how thinking develops (Tomlinson, 2022).

We also anticipate less or even no recourse to essay mills. The assignment brief is designed to make the assessment almost unrealizable though recourse to AI. But if students do use

internet-enabled assistance, the assignment brief indicates that this must be referenced, commented upon and critically appraised.

While the assignment insists on evidence of engagement with module reading, it does not preclude Internet searches. Students are instructed to comment critically on what they find.

6. Conclusion

This paper has described a response to the threat from essay mills and other forms of academic dishonesty (AD). The article recognizes the risk that students may resort to artificial intelligence (AI) to compose essays and other written submissions. The paper recognizes that most universities use a wide range of assessment methods, but examination and formal essays are still favoured methods of assessment in many institutions especially in humanities and social science disciplines.

Weaknesses in the traditional essay approach are highlighted, including the view that essays are not the best way to develop the skills and competences identified as contributing to graduate employability. A different kind of written assignment, involving personal response to module content and reflection on the learning process can allow a more creative, idiosyncratic and relevant task, better matched to contemporary learning styles and new technologies. A reflective statement can better identify core take-aways from a module. It constitutes an easier, more relevant and more creative form of assessment.

Finally the paper maintains that it is more fruitful and realistic for universities to embrace emergent technologies such as AI, rather than prohibit their use. The essence is to ensure students' critical engagement with material encountered during their studies, and making this central to the assessment process. This will better prepare graduates for entry into fulltime employment.

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