Dawson, Phillip 2015, Policing won’t be enough to prevent pay-for-plagiarism, *The Conversation*, June 12.

The published version is available online at THE CONVERSATION:


©2015, Conversation Media Group

Reproduced by Deakin University under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution NoDerivatives Licence

Available from Deakin Research Online:

[http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30073999](http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30073999)
Buying and selling high-stakes assessments is bad for education. It undermines community confidence because we can’t be sure if a grade was earned or bought. Plagiarism hurts plagiarists too, because they miss out on the learning opportunities that the assessment was supposed to provide. Tensions around plagiarism may be part of a culture of distrust between teachers and students.

Recently, it was revealed that high school students in NSW are buying essays made-to-order online for little more than A$100. University assignments can be more expensive, costing up to $1000 from
the controversial (and now-defunct) MyMaster website.

With the recent media attention, we could be fooled into thinking pay-for plagiarism is a modern, high-tech invention. However, the internet merely supports the logistics. Pay-for plagiarism is much older than computers – many of your favorite books were “ghostwritten”.

**The difficulties in policing**

The problem is that pay-for plagiarism is very difficult to police. Unlike “copy-paste” plagiarism or using an assignment that a previous student submitted, each pay-for assignment is made-to-order. We can’t just compare student work against a database of sources because each assignment is a bespoke creation.

Identifying exactly who wrote a particular piece of text is a hard problem. Disputes about authorship date back to biblical times – even the bible itself has books with disputed authorship. New technology may help discern if a student wrote a particular piece, but it is far from perfect, and far from application in a mass education context.

As anti-plagiarism enforcement gets smarter, so do the plagiarists. While we may be able to spot a ghostwritten university-level essay submitted by a struggling high school student, this is a rookie pay-for plagiarism mistake. Smart plagiarists rework the essays they pay for, or even employ techniques like “back-translation” by running plagiarised text through tools like Google Translate.

Some high-end services will even produce a tailored assignment just for you, based on analysis of your previous writing style. Techniques like these make it difficult to detect plagiarised work.

**The possible way forward**

Policing pay-for plagiarism may work to some extent, but it won’t completely solve the problem. So, what are our alternatives? How can we complement an enforcement approach?

NSW Teachers Federation president Maurie Mulheron favours requiring students to complete all assessments in class. Students can’t pay for someone else to do their work for them if the teacher is watching.

However, this approach creates further problems. The classroom environment is not an “authentic” environment for some of the tasks teachers set students. Consider an in-class essay versus a take-home essay assignment. Even in disciplines like history where an essay might be a true representation of what professional practitioners do, a stressful classroom and time limit can lead to students producing different work.

Mulheron’s approach would tell us much about what students are capable of within a classroom environment, but surely we want to know what they can do in the real world too.

Clever assessment design may be another part of the solution. Assessment that builds on the student’s
own experiences, classwork, prior drafts and feedback is more challenging to ghostwrite. We can also build sequences of tasks that have a small mandatory supervised component. This is commonly implemented at universities as an exam that needs to be passed to pass a unit.

Above all else, we should examine the root causes of pay-for plagiarism. One study into the reasons higher education students plagiarise – the study was not restricted to pay-for plagiarism – found a variety of factors that we can learn from. One of these factors was pressure: time pressure, stress, pressure from family, and pressure from society.

This may be a factor for students paying for HSC assignments as well. For example, students at one school were apparently told they would be kicked out if their work was not good enough. Perceptions that poor performance will be punished, rather than addressed with support, may make pay-for plagiarism an attractive option.

Other issues in the study included teaching and learning issues (ranging from workload to bad teaching), laziness or convenience, and – my favourite – “pride in plagiarising”. Better detection of ghostwriting will not completely address these issues.

Solving the pay-for plagiarism problem requires us to understand why paying $1000 seems like a better choice than completing a particular assignment. Cheating students are definitely in the wrong, but when placed in a high-stakes, high-stress environment, they may feel like they have few other options. We need to change this.

---

**Tags**: Assessment, Plagiarism, School assessment, Cheating, Academic dishonesty in Australia