

# Global Academic Integrity Network

## Terms of Reference

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

#### What is academic integrity?

Academic integrity can be defined as compliance with ethical and professional principles, standards, practices and a consistent system of values that serves as guidance for making decisions and taking actions in education, research and scholarship<sup>1</sup>; or the expectation that teachers, students, researchers and all members of the academic community act with honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility<sup>2,3</sup>.

Breaching academic integrity is also known as ‘academic misconduct’ or ‘academic dishonesty’<sup>4</sup>.

#### What is contract cheating?

Contract cheating is a form of academic misconduct whe[re] a person uses an undeclared and/or unauthorised third party, online or directly, to assist them to produce work for academic credit or progression whether or not payment or other favour is involved<sup>5</sup>;

Commercial contract cheating occurs when money or [...] equivalent services are expected to change hands during the contract cheating process<sup>6</sup>.

Commercial contract cheating is a global billion-dollar industry that, along with other types of academic fraud<sup>7</sup>, has the potential to cause significant reputational harm to education providers, learners and professionals, as

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. European Network for Academic Integrity (2018). Glossary for Academic Integrity, pp. 8-9. [EN-Glossary\\_revised\\_final\\_24.02.23.pdf \(academicintegrity.eu\)](#) [accessed 27.02.23]; QQI (2021), National Academic Integrity Network Academic Integrity National Principles and Lexicon of Common Terms, p. 10. [academic-integrity-national-principles-and-lexicon-of-common-terms.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#) [accessed 09.12.2022].

<sup>2</sup> TEQSA. What Is Academic Integrity? [What is academic integrity? | Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency \(teqsa.gov.au\)](#) [accessed 27.03.23].

<sup>3</sup> A further definition is provided by the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) Working Group on Fundamental Values: “Academic Integrity designates the duty of the academic community to comply with ethical and professional principles, standards, decision-making practices in learning, teaching, research, governance, outreach and any other tasks related to the various missions of higher education institutions”.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. QQI (2021), National Academic Integrity Network Academic Integrity National Principles and Lexicon of Common Terms, p. 14. [academic-integrity-national-principles-and-lexicon-of-common-terms.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#) [accessed 09.12.2022].

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Lancaster, T. Commercial contract cheating provision through micro-outsourcing web sites. *Int J Educ Integr* 16, 4 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-020-00053-7> [accessed 09.12.2022].

<sup>7</sup> “Actions that are intended to deceive for unfair advantage by violating academic regulations”. QQI (2021), National Academic Integrity Network Academic Integrity National Principles and Lexicon of Common Terms, p. 9. [academic-integrity-national-principles-and-lexicon-of-common-terms.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#) [accessed 09.12.2022].

well as to legitimate organisations that unintentionally facilitate the provision of such services. If allowed to flourish, this industry, which operates across international boundaries, could cause a significant loss of trust in our national qualifications systems among employers and the public.

Commercial contract cheating services<sup>8</sup> have leveraged the increase in digital learning and online activity to expand the availability and appeal of their services. The tactics that they use to reach learners are increasingly sophisticated and frequently predatory. These service providers have been known to extort and blackmail students, meaning that engaging in contract cheating can have far-reaching repercussions for learners, extending far beyond third-level education, into their careers.

### A global solution for a global problem

Internationally, quality assurance agencies, regulators and other similar organisations along with education providers are working together within several jurisdictions to combat the threat posed by global commercial cheating services. Education providers have been working to inform learners, staff and other stakeholders and to maintain and enhance institutional cultures of academic integrity. Quality assurance agencies, regulators and other similar organisations have developed regulatory approaches and frameworks to tackle the provision of cheating services. Some have contributed to the development and implementation of legislation that establishes penalties for the facilitation and advertisement of contract cheating; others are moving towards this goal.

However, action at national level has limitations when set against the global nature of commercial contract cheating, and the global nature of this issue requires a global solution. Regulatory agencies<sup>9</sup>, quality assurance and qualifications bodies and other similar organisations with an interest in maintaining academic integrity must build on progress made and act collaboratively to take action against the global cheating industry, thereby protecting our national qualifications systems, as well as institutions, their learners and staff.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of the Global Academic Integrity Network is to provide an international platform and coordinating structure for discussion, collaboration and information-sharing in relation to commercial contract cheating services and other threats to integrity.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Recommendation CM/Rec (2022)18 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on countering education fraud, Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 13 July 2022, [https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result\\_details.aspx?objectid=0900001680a73b90](https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectid=0900001680a73b90)

The recommendation provides the following definition: “Essay mill (otherwise referred to as a provider of contract cheating services) is an organisation or an individual, usually with a web presence, which enters into contracts with students or their representatives to complete, in full or in part, one or more assignments (including student work such as essays, projects, theses and dissertations) for financial gain, whether or not the content is plagiarised, leading to a form of academic misconduct. For the avoidance of doubt, an essay mill does not include providers of private tutoring services lawfully operating within national legislation or regulations”.

<sup>9</sup> Both agencies involved in developing and implementing academic integrity legislation and agencies that are not, but that are willing to work collaboratively to tackle cheating services.

## OBJECTIVES

Members of the network will:

- share information and data with regard to commercial contract cheating.
- explore overarching approaches to disrupting and preventing the facilitation of commercial contract cheating as well as the advertisement of commercial contract cheating services and the publication of such advertisements.
- share information on emerging threats to academic integrity (e.g. new technologies, business models, etc.) and consider approaches to combat these threats.
- highlight the reputational risk posed by cheating services to:
  - legitimate organisations who may facilitate the activities of commercial contract cheating services (e.g. payment platforms, digital intermediary service providers).
  - education providers.
  - students and alumni.
  - academics.
  - professional and regulatory bodies.
  - employers and industry.
  - (government) sponsors.
- agree and publish joint/collective statements on the prevention of commercial contract cheating and other threats to integrity, the protection of learners and the quality, integrity and reputation of higher education systems. A collective statement will normally state a shared position or set out a call to action to stakeholders, or a particular group of stakeholders, to work with the network to support the achievement of its objectives. Any such collective statements are intended to supplement and give effect to any memoranda of understanding that already exist between member organisations; collective statements are not intended to amend existing memoranda of understanding unless this is expressly stated.
- agree and implement a shared communications strategy aimed at:
  - exposing the predatory tactics employed by commercial contract cheating services.
  - de-legitimising such services.
  - promoting a culture of academic integrity within each jurisdiction's qualifications system.
- collaborate as a network to secure the agreement of providers of digital intermediary services (including internet service providers, social media platforms and advertising platforms) to work with the network in a coordinated fashion to:
  - remove/refuse to publish advertisements for commercial contract cheating services.
  - refuse to host services that facilitate commercial contract cheating.
- disrupt commercial contract cheating services' business models by securing the cooperation of payment service providers.
- share and publicise positive engagements with organisations that are responsive to requests to comply with legislation/the principles of academic integrity.
- undertake any other action deemed necessary by the members of this network to address commercial contract cheating services.
- explore and discuss any matters that may threaten the integrity of national education/qualifications systems (such as the production and provision of fraudulent qualifications, fraudulent verification of qualifications etc)

## MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA

Membership is open to:

- Organisations and ministries that have contributed to or supported the drafting/enactment of legislation aimed at tackling contract cheating services.
- National quality assurance agencies, regulators and similar organisations<sup>10</sup> involved in the promotion of academic integrity and in the implementation of legislation aimed at combatting commercial contract cheating and other forms of academic fraud.
- Other organisations with an established legal basis, which are formally recognised by the competent public authority, that have responsibility for
  - external quality assurance
  - regulation **AND/OR** accreditation **AND/OR** qualifications systems
  - or qualifications recognition across tertiary (higher and vocational/further) education

Membership from the following entities will not be approved under these Terms of Reference:

- Solely for-profit entity
- Entity unable to evidence a legitimate interest or role in academic integrity and related matters
- Individual institution of higher education
- Individual applicants, or
- Networks of education providers.

The current list of members of the network is available [at this link](#).

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

It is acknowledged that members of the network have diverse remits with regard to academic integrity and that the extent to which each member organisation is in a position to engage with an activity may vary depending on that organisation's remit and responsibilities.

## MEMBERS

- There will be no membership fee for organisations joining the network.
- Network members will be asked to endorse the terms of reference and agree to the appearance of their names, and, where applicable, logos on the network webpage.
- Network members will be asked to confirm membership of the network on their own websites.
- Member organisations are encouraged to use the GAIN logo and to indicate that they are members of the network on their website and other relevant platforms and publications.

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<sup>10</sup> For example, national qualifications authorities, national academic recognition and information centres (NARIC), European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (ENIC), and the like.

- Members will be required to nominate a principal contact for their organisation, who must have the capacity and authority to vote on behalf of the organisation on matters such as the publication of collective statements.
  - Members may also nominate additional members to attend meetings, but should notify the secretariat in advance.
  - Should the principal contact be unavailable to participate in network activities for an extended period of time, their vote may be delegated to a nominated representative following advice to GAIN.
- Members are expected to participate in all voting activities.
- Members are expected to have representation at meetings wherever possible, ideally at least 50% attendance over the year.
- New members attending their first meeting will be asked to present a short (5 minute) overview of their organisation for the benefit of existing members to introduce themselves to the membership.
- The role of chair of network meetings will rotate among member organisations. The chair for each network meeting will be agreed as a standard agenda item at the meeting that precedes it. The chair will be responsible for ensuring that each GAIN meeting follows the agenda and keeps to time.
- Artificial Intelligence systems used to capture meeting transcripts, summaries, attendance or for other purposes are strictly forbidden from entering meetings and will be removed in all cases.
- Where necessary to progress any projects or defined tasks, the network may identify working groups with voluntary representation from among the network's members.
- Any working groups established will report back to network members at scheduled network meetings. Updates from working groups may also be provided to network members through a digital platform for members.
- The sharing of information between and among network members will take place within national legal constraints.
- Where appropriate, network members will be responsible for providing updates to their respective organisations and constituents.

## COLLECTIVE STATEMENTS

- From time to time, as outlined above, the network may develop collective statements.
- Any decisions regarding the agreement and publication of collective statements must meet **two** requirements:
  - a two-thirds majority vote among members who cast a vote, **and**
  - at least 50% of GAIN members to have voted in favour of the statement.
- Where a member or members abstain or vote against the publication of a collective statement that is otherwise supported by the required majority, that member may request that their organisation's name is included within the collective statement as a dissenting voice.
- Where a member or members fail to cast a vote, they will not be explicitly noted as a dissenting or abstaining voice.

## SECRETARIAT

- QQI and TEQSA will act as joint secretariat to the network. Responsibility for providing secretariat for network meetings will rotate between QQI and TEQSA. This will include:
  - circulating a draft agenda to the network meeting chair for agreement and (subsequently) circulating the final agenda to all network members. A draft network meeting agenda, setting out standing items for consideration at each meeting, is appended to these terms of reference.
  - drafting and circulating a high-level note and actions, where applicable, following each network meeting.
  - tracking progress on network workplans and actions agreed during network meetings.
- A webpage for the network will be established by QQI and TEQSA and maintained and updated jointly and as necessary by QQI and TEQSA. Any collective statement subscribed to by members will be published on the website, alongside a current list of members and endorsing organisations.
- A digital platform, accessible only by member organisations, may be established by QQI or TEQSA and maintained jointly by QQI and TEQSA. The purpose of such a platform would be to facilitate the sharing of information among network members.

## ENDORSEMENT OF THE NETWORK

Organisations not eligible for membership, but which play an important role in supporting members and providers of education to take action against contract cheating, may be asked to endorse the network, its purpose and objectives, for example:

- Professional standards bodies (also known as professional accreditation/statutory/regulatory bodies)
- International or national academic integrity networks
- Student unions
- International policy bodies with an interest in academic integrity.

Organisations that endorse the network will be asked to sign a statement confirming that they support the work of the network and will be asked for their permission to publish their names and, where applicable, logos on the network webpage. Endorsing organisations may be invited to join network meetings (or parts thereof) on occasion to provide and receive relevant updates.

Endorsing organisations may publish the GAIN logo on their websites accompanied by the statement: 'X is an endorsing organisation of the Global Academic Integrity Network (GAIN)'.

The current list of organisations that endorse the network is available [at this link](#).

## CAPTURING AND MONITORING THE NETWORK'S EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPACT

The network's impact will be evaluated periodically by TEQSA and QQI, considering:

- Overall membership i.e. growth of network's membership, number of membership applications approved/diverted/declined, etc.

- Increased awareness and understanding of commercial contract cheating, the operating models of commercial contract cheating services and ways to combat the challenges presented within member jurisdictions.
- The publication and impact of collective statements by the network.
- Growth of the network's engagement
  - Where one or more representatives of a membership organisation attends a GAIN meeting, that organisation will be marked as attended at that meeting. This attendance procedure will occur for all GAIN meetings and will be made available to the membership after the final meeting of the year.

## SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS

The network will meet quarterly. A forward schedule of meetings will be agreed at the beginning of each year. Any working groups established to progress the objectives of the network will meet as required.

## Review of Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference for the network are reviewed every two years in light of objectives for the coming twelve months. Evaluation of the activities and impact of the network may be considered when reviewing the terms of reference. The calendar year for the Terms of Reference is May – May.

## Appendix 1

### Global Academic Integrity Network Draft Meeting Agenda

**Meeting chair:** [Name], [Organisation]

**Meeting secretary:** [Name], [Organisation]

1. Agreement of last network meeting note
2. Follow-up on actions agreed at previous meeting(s)
3. Introduction of new members
4. Update on the contract cheating regulatory landscape
  - a. Planned/newly enacted legislation
  - b. Instances of litigation/prosecution (and lessons learnt)...
5. Update on contract cheating trends identified
  - a. New research/data
  - b. New types of provision
  - c. Trends in advertising...
6. Update from [member organisation]/[endorsing organisation]/[expert]
7. Agreement of chair for next network meeting