

9 “Every Writer is Checked for Plagiarism”: Occluded Authorship in Academic Writing

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1. Introduction

Building on insights provided by Bhatia (2004), and Hyland (2000, 2002, 2005) this chapter investigates the generic features of the advertising discourse of “essay writing services”, primarily in English-speaking countries. As an emerging genre that is specific to computer-mediated communication, essay writing promotion appears to be gaining not only in verbal and visual sophistication, but also in argumentative and persuasive force. This type of communication uses the electronic medium to promote services that are easily distributed in a semi-clandestine manner thanks to the intrinsic features of the web-mediated environment. These services appear to be playing an ever-expanding role not only in undergraduate but also in postgraduate writing, with serious implications for the quality of higher education and the authenticity of the qualifications awarded by universities. An admixture of far-reaching technological innovation, wide-ranging social changes associated with globalisation, and the rapid growth of higher education appears to have led to the expansion of this form of academic malpractice. The study highlights the discordance between the definition in institutional discourse of various forms of plagiarism in academic writing, and the description of these practices in the advertising discourse of online “essay writing services” that attempt to construct an image of legitimate, reputable and trustworthy companies. An analysis of the generic norms of this semi-occluded discourse community provides evidence that practices once on the margins of the academy appear to be moving towards the mainstream, with the practitioners making strident claims to legitimacy. Reference is made to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s essay “Defining Deviancy Down” (Moynihan 1993), in which he argues, in a Durkheimian perspective, that as social pathologies become more common, they tend to be reclassified and no longer seen as deviancy, and this process also seems to be pertinent to the academic malpractice under investigation. Attention is paid to “secondary plagiarism” in which the providers of “essay writing services” who are paid to

produce “original work” surreptitiously draw on existing repertoires of material, infringing not only the norms laid down in institutional discourse, but also the implicit “code of conduct” of the practitioners of the art of occluded authorship. Finally, mention is made of attempts in the institutional discourse to “define deviancy up again” in response to this proliferation of plagiarism.

2. Institutional definitions of plagiarism

Why does plagiarism matter? Before examining the advertising discourse used by the practitioners of plagiarism, it may be useful to briefly review the institutional definitions. Undergraduate and post-graduate students at Oxford, for example, are provided with the following guidance:

Plagiarism is the copying or paraphrasing of other people’s work or ideas into your own work without full acknowledgement. All published and unpublished material, whether in manuscript, printed or electronic form, is covered under this definition.

Collusion is another form of plagiarism involving the unauthorised collaboration of students (or others) in a piece of work.

Cases of suspected plagiarism in assessed work are investigated under the disciplinary regulations concerning conduct in examinations. Intentional or reckless plagiarism may incur severe penalties, including failure of your degree or expulsion from the university.

(<<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism>>)¹

Plagiarism risks undermining not only personal integrity, but also that of the institution:

It would be wrong to describe plagiarism as only a minor form of cheating, or as merely a matter of academic etiquette. On the contrary, it is important to understand that plagiarism is a breach of academic integrity. It is a principle of intellectual honesty that all members of the academic community should acknowledge their debt to the originators of the ideas, words, and data which form the basis for their own work. Passing off another’s work as your own is not only poor scholarship, but also means that you have failed to complete the learning process. Deliberate plagiarism is unethical and can have serious consequences for your future career; it also undermines the standards of your institu-

¹ This and all subsequent websites last accessed 10 November 2010 unless otherwise stated.

tion and of the degrees it issues. (<<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism>>).

The institutional discourse specifies that plagiarism takes many forms, including:

- Verbatim quotation of other people's intellectual work without clear acknowledgement. Quotations must always be identified as such by the use of either quotation marks or indentation, with adequate citation. [...]
- Paraphrasing the work of others by altering a few words and changing their order, or by closely following the structure of their argument, is plagiarism because you are deriving your words and ideas from their work without giving due acknowledgement. Even if you include a reference to the original author in your own text you are still creating a misleading impression that the paraphrased wording is entirely your own. [...]
- Cutting and pasting from the Internet. Information derived from the Internet must be adequately referenced and included in the bibliography. [...]
- Collusion. This can involve unauthorised collaboration between students, failure to attribute assistance received, or failure to follow precisely regulations on group work projects. [...]
- Inaccurate citation. It is important to cite correctly, according to the conventions of your discipline. Additionally, you should not include anything in a footnote or bibliography that you have not actually consulted. [...]
- Failure to acknowledge. You must clearly acknowledge all assistance which has contributed to the production of your work [...] This need not apply to the assistance provided by your tutor or supervisor, nor to ordinary proofreading. (<<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism>>).

For the purposes of the present study, the following guideline is particularly significant, and indicative of the fact that the academic authorities are concerned about the role played by essay writing services:

- Professional agencies. You should neither make use of professional agencies in the production of your work nor submit material which has been written for you. It is vital to your intellectual training and development that you should undertake the research process unaided. (<<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism>>)

The choice of the term “professional agencies” would appear to be an act of considerable generosity, since “essay writing services”, “essay mills” or “paper mills”, are not characterised by any of the traditional criteria and values that distinguish professional practice, such as official accreditation, the unequivocal identification and accountability of the practitioner and, at least in the case of the leading professions, membership of a professional body with disciplinary powers. The official discourse also highlights the implications of plagiarism by students for their subsequent professional life: for example, a correlation has been established between plagiarism at the undergraduate level, concerning not just coursework but also applications for postgraduate places, and professional malpractice in later life, leading to disciplinary proceedings by state medical boards:

Plagiarism in Residency Applications for Harvard Medical School

These findings raise serious questions of physicians’ ethical behavior in an atmosphere of increasing public scrutiny. In addition, other authors have correlated lapses of professionalism during medical training with prediction of future disciplinary action by state medical boards. As such, we endorse a national level effort to detect and deter plagiarism among physicians seeking post-graduate specialty training. (Gelfand 2010)

The idea that plagiarism should not be perceived as a purely disciplinary matter has been put forward by Pennycook (1996).² His research is aimed at gaining insight into the learning styles and motivation of English as a second language of students copying the work of recognized authorities without citation:

It is not enough, however, to focus only on Western writing practices as a ‘cultural syllabus’ (Sherman, 1992, p. 197). Also needed is an attempt to understand the other side of the coin—our students’ textual and language learning worlds. (Pennycook 1996: 227)

The focus of the present study, however, is on the discourse of essay writing services as they seek to establish legitimacy for their illicit business operations.

² I am grateful to Prof. Christopher Candlin for drawing my attention to Alastair Pennycook’s thought-provoking research into plagiarism in cross-cultural settings.

2. Diachronic perspectives on plagiarism in academic discourse

The methodological problems arising from any study of plagiarism are substantial though not insuperable: students engaging in forms of malpractice that are explicitly prohibited by the academic authorities, and subject to severe sanctions, clearly have no incentive to provide the researcher with an accurate account of their illicit activities. However, inferences can be drawn from indicators in the public domain, such as the fact that Oxford University warns its students not to buy essays from “professional agencies”, and from the exponential growth in plagiarism studies (see the Fourth International Conference on Plagiarism at Newcastle Business School, June 2010).³ Appendix 1 contains a list of 40 “essay writing services”: due to the web-based nature of these operations, the identity of the country they operate from is extremely difficult to ascertain but at the time of writing they had been operating continuously for six months or more: over the six-month monitoring period, only one website closed down. This kind of survey does not provide statistical evidence, but it appears to be significant in itself, and at the same time deeply disturbing. The available indicators are mainly qualitative rather than quantitative, but the evidence suggests that there has been a proliferation of essay writing plagiarism and its practitioners, and a transformation of the way they operate. Table 1 provides an overview of the salient features of this shift:

Timeframe:	PRE INTERNET	POST INTERNET
Relationship:	Personal	Impersonal
Source:	Local	Global
Evidence:	Anecdotal	Documentary
Transaction:	Semi-commercial	Commercial
Medium:	Print	Digital
Incidence:	Marginal	Mainstream
Marketing:	Covert	Overt
Claim to legitimacy:	Implicit	Explicit

Table 1. The transformation of essay writing plagiarism with the advent of the Internet.

³ Cf. <<http://www.plagiarismadvice.org/conference/previous-plagiarism>>.

The claims in Table 1 are clearly based on inference from the available data, including anecdotal evidence. A typical anecdote from the pre-internet era might be as follows:

My sister was teaching full-time when she got married and had a baby. She had taken all her exams but had no time to write her dissertation, so I wrote it for her. (Italian high school teacher, personal communication on condition of anonymity, 1988)

All the elements listed in Table 1 are present: the relationship was personal, the evidence is anecdotal, the medium was print, the incidence marginal, the marketing covert, and the claim to legitimacy implicit (helping family). However, in terms of the official definition in Section 2 above, this was an act of false attribution of the work of others, and a criminal offence under an Italian law of 1925.⁴

Further light is cast on essay writing plagiarism in the pre-Internet era in the following anecdote about *paper mills* in California in the 1970s, in which the commercial element comes to the fore, though face-to-face communication is still present:

Essay mills have been around since at least 1971, said one professor who asked for anonymity. He knows because during that year he had worked for one for two months while working on his doctorate. He said one day he was flipping through the classifieds and saw an ad asking for experienced academic writers. "I called the place and a guy who was running the office by himself had me come in and he looked at a couple of my writing samples." [...] While he was working at the paper mill, the professor said he never met any of the other writers because all work was done away from the office and brought in upon completion." They were paying me about five bucks per page, and were turning around and selling it for 15 or 20," he said. (Foster 2006)

With the advent of Internet and the proliferation of online essay writing services, there is no personal contact between the student commissioning the essay and the agency / writer providing it: the text is sourced not locally but globally. Written evidence of the transaction remains, albeit of dubious value in a court of law. Such commercial transactions in the digital medium risk becoming mainstream practice. The marketing is overt and in many cases highly sophisticated, and the claim to legitimacy explicit and strident. It is to this

⁴ RD no. 475/1925 *Repressione della falsa attribuzione di lavori altrui da parte di aspiranti al conferimento di lauree, diplomi, uffici, titoli e dignità pubbliche.*

marketing material that we now turn, with a focus on advertising discourse.

4. Plagiarism and its practitioners

The advertising discourse of the “essay writing services” listed in Appendix 1 displays many of the rhetorical features in the move structure identified in promotional material by Bhatia (2004: 93-94): “Establishing credentials, by referring to the needs of the customers / Introducing the product / Establishing credentials: detailing the product, indicating value of the product / Offering incentives / Soliciting response” (Bhatia 2004: 93-94). However, whereas in promotional letters this move structure is sequential, the medium of the promotional material under examination is the essay writing website: as a result the various elements are presented on the screen all at the same time rather than sequentially. In this connection the three spatial dimensions of visual texts identified by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) come into play: left/right, top/bottom, and centre/margin. With this proviso, the promotional material will now be examined, adopting Bhatia’s moves for the lower-order headings below (4.1 to 4.5).

4.1. *Establishing credentials by referring to the needs of the customers*

A recurrent theme in the promotional material of essay writing services is the need to reassure the sceptical customer that the entire process is free of plagiarism. In the official discourse, plagiarism can take a number of forms, including the use of “professional essay services”. However, the promotional materials tend to sidestep this issue entirely, using “plagiarism” only to refer to essays that have been copied from a repertoire or database of existing essays, a practice that might be termed “secondary plagiarism” as it infringes the implicit code of practice of essay writing services. A range of lexicogrammatical resources are adopted to reassure their customers that the material provided is original. The starting point is usually the difficulty that students have in meeting all their commitments, particularly as life is complicated with *reading books* and *writing assignments*. In some cases students even risk being *forced into libraries*:

- (1) Student life is not always as careless as it may seem at the first glance. Life of students is complicated with reading books and writing assignments. As the result, students are forced into libraries. It is not the best place to spend the day when friends are planning the party, is it? [Grammatical errors in the original] (<<http://editing-services.org/essay-writing.php>>)

In many cases there are references to ‘plagiarism’ but the term appears to be used in a deliberately ambiguous manner to assure the student not only that the material is original, but also that the entire transaction is legitimate (or at least, confidential, and not liable to detection). References to “plagiarism-detection software” provide a further veneer of respectability, as they imply that the whole process is governed by scientific criteria, as in Example 2:

- (2) Most term paper services steal information from online sources. EssayTown is different. If you order one of our *custom research* paper services, a professional, qualified expert will write a one-of-a-kind, original essay, term paper, book report, or research paper that is based on the exact specifications YOU provide. We also scan every *custom research* paper order with our plagiarism-detection software to further ensure that all text is original and all sources are properly cited throughout the paper and on a bibliography, works cited, and/or references page. Our paper will be completely unique, providing you with a solid foundation of research. (<www.essaytown.com>)

In Example 2, there is a clear case of genre-mixing, with the adoption of standard business terminology (*order / custom services / professional qualified expert / specifications*) interspersed with a reassuring array of academic terms (*term paper / research paper / original essay / book report / all sources properly cited / bibliography and/or references page / solid foundation of research*).

A further attempt to establish credentials is by means of the construction of a corporate identity for the essay writing services based on geographical location. At times toll-free numbers are given for the US, the UK and Australia (or all three). In addition, graphic devices are used, such as the Union Jack or the US flag, photos of graduation ceremonies, iconic buildings such as Tower Bridge, famous institutions of higher education in the UK, such as Christ Church, Oxford, and Ivy League colleges in the US, all of which are intended to suggest that the essay writing services are closely connected, or at least in close proximity, to ancient seats of learning. To project an image

of solidity and respectability, reference may also be made to “corporate offices”:

- (3) EssayTown is an American company with corporate offices in both California and New Jersey. However, our experienced, doctoral-level essay writers complete orders for students in the UK and all other countries, from Australia to Zaire. All of our prices are in American dollars (USD). (<www.essaytown.com>)

In addition to prestigious geographical locations (authentic or otherwise), reference is made to financial intermediaries and financial institutions to suggest that the service has some kind of official or institutional status:

- (4) We are officially registered in Los Angeles, USA.
We only deal with trusted Internet financial intermediaries and financial institutions such as SWREG, Inc. and Barclays Bank.
If you buy essay or buy coursework from us, you automatically fall within the guidelines of our 100% Satisfaction or Money Back Guarantee Policy.
We provide you with US phone number to assist you with any of your queries on the custom essay you purchased from EssaysProfessors.com.
[Grammar errors in the original.] (<www.EssaysProfessors.com>)

The establishment of credentials is also reinforced by claims that the business is a long established reputable service, presumably with many satisfied customers:

- (5) If there is one thing we have learned *in our many years of business* it is that quality is not cheap. Far too often the reason these companies can offer such low prices are [sic] because they outsource to people who are not qualified to write academic papers, nor is English their first language. [emphasis added] (<www.rushessay.com/reasons.php>)

4.2. Introducing the offer

In offering the service there is a need not only to reassure the customer that the process is free from plagiarism, but also that the writers hired to write the essay are properly qualified:

- (6) The high school term paper, the undergraduate and postgraduate research papers, the PhD thesis and all forms of academic coursework is [*sic*] our area of expertise. Through our set of connections [*sic*] of native English speaking writers who are very qualified and experienced in their field of research, we are able to provide you with papers and coursework which defy plagiarism. (<www.masterpapers.com/a_good_research_paper.php>)

In addition, the nationality of the writers is specified in an attempt to reassure customers that they possess the necessary skills and knowledge:

- (7) EssaysProfessors is the perfect custom essay writing service: you can order and buy term papers, buy essays, buy custom writing essays online or buy research papers
If you buy essay from our essay service, you can sleep tight because we guarantee prompt delivery of our professional college term papers while providing variety of free samples to you. Your custom online essays is composed by the American and British writers who always use up-to-date sources found in libraries and on the Internet. Also, every custom written essays is proof-read by a professional editor before being dispatched to you. Finally, we use the latest plagiarism detection software to check every custom essay for improper usage of sources. [Grammatical errors in the original] (<www.EssaysProfessors.com>)

4.3. Establishing credentials: detailing the product, indicating value of the product

A common practice in offering the product or service is to use what advertising agencies refer to as “knocking copy”, expressing disdain for rival companies, and warning students that such companies are not to be trusted, as their products are *infested with errors*:

- (8) Avoid flashy sites that charge \$4.99 to \$39.95/month for a database of old, recycled term papers. Those term papers are plagiarized, infested with errors, and sold repeatedly to millions of students. You should also avoid sites that provide only 225 words per page. We write 300 words on every page! We sell *new* papers *individually*, so our premium essays and term papers are unique, original, and up-to-date! [emphasis in the original] (<www.essaytown.com>)

Knocking copy may be used to express contempt not only for rival companies, but also for the writers they employ:

- (9) Unlike other sites, we will NOT randomly assign your custom research order to an unskilled, foreign, low-paid ESL amateur who can't write a coherent sentence in the English language. [emphasis in the original] (<www.essaytown.com>)

A contrast is set up between an online company that the customer can trust, and rival companies that write *terrible papers*:

- (10) *Safety and Trust* Even if you don't choose EssayTown, we must [warn you] about sites that scam students. Never buy from "monthly access" sites with a database of old, plagiarized essays. Avoid sites that sell "custom writing" for less than \$16/page. Those FOREIGN sites deceive students by selling the exact same, low-quality papers repeatedly to millions of students. To increase profits, they hire cheap, foreign writers who write terrible papers. The choice is yours, but we suggest that you order now from EssayTown—an American company. (<www.essaytown.com>)

The claim to legitimacy is advanced by offering constant reassurances about plagiarism, in this case combined with knocking copy:

- (11) Plagiarism check. We are happy to provide you with a plagiarism scan that is available on request. Other companies give you little more than [sic] bold claims and no plagiarism check. (<www.rushessay.com>)

Whereas in Bhatia's material *celebrity endorsement* was a significant feature (Bhatia 2004: 102), in the material in the present study, none was identified, but a substitute was the *official endorsement* associated with references to institutional sources (though without proper citation, as in the following example):

- (12) "A paper . . . from EssayTown.com was passed through Turnitin undetected." - Report, *California State University* (<www.essaytown.com>)

The reference to Turnitin is significant, as students are well aware that universities use this software to identify plagiarism in essays and dissertations, and students themselves are encouraged to use it to avoid "inadvertent plagiarism" (<turnitin.com/static/index.html>). If even Turnitin fails to detect the plagiarism, this is a strong selling point.

4.4. *Offering incentives*

As in the case of the promotional material in the analysis by Bhatia (2004), online essay writing services offer incentives, including discounts for first orders and returning customers (though the implication is that none of the customers pay the full price):

- (13) 100% original, quality custom *essay writing service*. Get *essays*, research papers for any subject. Discounts for first orders and returning customers! (<www.bestessays.com>)

Further incentives include a range of free services that *we* offer, whereas *they* (unscrupulous rival firms seeking to make a profit) charge for each service:

- (14) We offer: Free formatting / Free delivery / Free revision / Free Title page / Free bibliography.
They charge extra fees for revisions, formatting and sometimes even delivery! (<www.rushessay.com/reasons.php>)

4.5. *Soliciting response*

A commonly used device for soliciting a response is to provide a long and detailed description of the procedure to follow, adopting standard business terms to project an image of a legitimate business transaction that the client can expect to be carried out in a professional manner. The client will first fill in an *order form*, then be given an *account*, as in the case of banking and email services, and then receive an *order confirmation* and to round off the process will be expected to fill in a *customer satisfaction survey*:

- (15) Our process
1. Go to the order form and submit assignment requirements
 2. Proceed with payment
 3. Check your e-mail for the order confirmation and save it for future reference
 4. Log-in to your account to communicate with writer/support
 5. Download your order from the link in the e-mail we send
 6. Fill in our Customer Satisfaction Survey to let us know how we did. (<www.rushessay.com/reasons.php>)

In soliciting a response, a six-point procedure would appear to be more than sufficient, but some essay writing services insist on an eight-point procedure, again to establish their credentials. In Example 16 below, the advertising discourse sets out an elaborate process for placing an order, and is characterised by genre mixing, with lexical items from business interspersed with academic terminology:

(16) When you choose us for writing assistance, the process is as follows:

1. You will find an order form on our site. Please complete this form as fully as possible, because your writer will need every detail possible in order to fulfill your need perfectly.
2. Once your order is submitted, we post it to our professional writers. These writers know that, in order to bid on a project, they must possess the correct degree and have experience writing at the academic level of the customer and in the specific content field. For example, in order to write a high school research paper on an aspect of the Civil War, the writer must possess at least a bachelor's degree in history and have written previous research papers in U.S. history. To write for a graduate student, the professional must possess a Ph.D. in the content field and have experience in the specific area of research.
3. Once writers have expressed their interest, we select the one best suited for the customer's specific need.
4. You are notified that we have a writer and asked for payment. Once you complete the payment, the work begins.
5. You and your writer will communicate directly as the work progresses. You will have the opportunity to review the work's progress and to request revisions at any time.
6. The completed work is sent to our editing department. Here it is reviewed for structure, coherency, grammar, mechanics, etc. It is then scanned for plagiarism, using our premier software. We insist that every delivered work is 100% original!
7. The final product is delivered to you, print ready, via email attachment.
8. We ask that you complete a brief survey to evaluate your experience with us. This is vital to our continued improvement, so please help us by completing it. (<www.essaysprofessors.com>)

5. Defining deviancy down

The advertising discourse and genre mixing identified in the websites under investigation reveal an intention to “define deviancy down”:

an attempt is made to redefine an activity that in the institutional discourse is explicitly prohibited, so that it becomes legitimate and accepted as the norm. The concept of defining deviancy down comes from a 1993 essay by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who refers to a 1965 study by Kai T. Erikson on crime rates in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, entitled *Wayward Puritans*, to argue that actions that were once considered deviant tend to be accepted as the norm once they achieve critical mass. The capacity to detect deviancies is also an important factor:

the number of deviancies which come to a community's attention are [*sic*] limited by the kinds of equipment it uses to detect and handle them, and to that extent the rate of deviation found in a community is at least in part a function of the size and complexity of its social control. (Moynihan 1993: no page numbering)

The fact that the purchase of essays (and even dissertations) online is increasingly perceived as the norm in some student circles is shown not just by the discourse considered above, but also by comments in the press, revealing a shift (see Table 1 above) from the margins to the mainstream. An article in *The Age* in Melbourne, Australia, (Morton 2006) was headlined: “Are made-to-order essays a waste of money?” (<www.theage.com.au>), with the journalist considering the issue in purely instrumental, cost-benefit terms, rather than in ethical terms, sidestepping the fact that the plagiarising of essays and dissertations can be harmful not just to the intellectual development of the student, and to the reputation of the institution, but also to other students, as it constitutes unfair competition. A similar approach is to be found also in the mainstream press in Italy, as shown by an article in the highly respected *Corriere della Sera* entitled “Il laureando cerca la bella vita. E online la trova” (Graduates are looking for the good life. And they find it online) (my translation) (Margiocco 2003).⁵ These references in the mainstream press are recycled in the advertising discourse of online essay writing services as an imprimatur of quality in order to enhance reputation and recognition:

⁵ <archiviostorico.corriere.it/2003/marzo/17/laureando_cerca_bella_vita_online_ce_o_030317047.shtml> *Cepù dà allo studente consulenza per 4000 euro.*

- (17) *Il Corriere della Sera* [...] *ha recensito la nostra attività sottolineandone l'eccezionale competenza, i tempi rapidi e il miglior rapporto qualità-prezzo presente sul mercato italiano.* (<www.elaborazionetesi.it>)
 The *Corriere della Sera* has published a review of our services, highlighting the exceptional competence, rapid delivery times, and the best value for money on the Italian market. [my translation]

Further evidence in support of the claim that there has been a shift from the margins to the mainstream is shown by the fact that these services are not just listed in the Yellow Pages, but they are even classified under Institutes of Higher Education and Independent Schools:

- (18) *Siamo presenti sulle PagineGialle insieme alle Università italiane, nella categoria "Università ed Istituti Superiori e Liberi".* (<www.elaborazionetesi.it>)
 We are listed in the Yellow Pages together with Italian Universities, under the heading, Institutes of Higher Education and Independent Schools. [my translation]

6. Defining deviancy back up again

6.1. *Essay scam websites*

A critical response to the rising tide of essay writing plagiarism has come not just from the institutional authorities, but also from students. Essay scam websites have been set up for students to post criticisms of “essay writing services.” The identity of those posting comments is not easily verifiable, and in some cases the authors appear to be working for essay writing services, posting knocking copy about their rivals, with a view to attracting custom for their own services. However, some of the comments appear to be genuine:

- (19) The CustomEssays.co.uk home page advertises the following, “corporate” address: 124 Blair Athol Road SHEFFIELD S11 7GD. Well, that’s funny, considering that the address actually belongs to the following companies: Rubber Carbon Limited; Invest Corporation UK Limited; Atianas Collections Limited.
 The CustomEssays.co.uk home page also advertises that the site is “a company registered in the United Kingdom” [sic] (morons) Really? If that’s true, why not post the “company” name and registration number so that consumers may verify? (<www.essayscam.org/Forum/9/customessays-co-uk-830>)

The “registered offices” appear on Google Street View to be housed in a tiny terraced property in Sheffield, of the kind typically rented out to students. Except for this instance, street addresses are almost entirely absent from the advertising discourse of essay writing websites, underlining the spurious nature of most of their claims.

“Essay scam” websites are used not just to highlight the fact that many essay writing websites fail to live up to their bold claims and have a strong tendency to defraud their hapless clients, but also to criticise the behaviour of students seeking a short-cut to success:

- (20) Bebi, do you feel proud that you cheated and plagiarised to get your qualification? What was the problem? Were you too thick and illiterate to write your essays yourself? In which case, you do not deserve your FAKE degree, do you? Many writers write essays JUST FOR THE MONEY and HATE helping morons and retards get their degrees based on their purchase of essays. They DISRESPECT cheaters like you more than I could say. Just how many graduates are now unqualified because they bought their degrees – what you did, Bebi cheater! And what if your doctor is one of them eh? <www.essayscam.com> ⁶

The fraudulent practices of many essay writing services have multiple ramifications. A number of websites report cases of writers being defrauded by essay writing services, based not in the US or the UK but in the Ukraine (<www.complaintsboard.com/complaints/essay-writersnet-c95-141.html>). In the current economic climate, university graduates are easily recruited as freelance writers by fraudulent operators to write assignments and are then denied payment (<www.helium.com/items/1379988-writing-school-papers-for-money>). However, there is a growing awareness that these writers are colluding with plagiarism, and as their work is never signed, they will never receive credit for it, regardless of the quality of the text produced.

6.2. *The Plagiarism Tariff*

A coordinated attempt has been made to define deviancy back up again by means of the *Academic Misconduct Benchmarking Research* (Amber) project, presented by Peter Tennant and Gill Rowell at the Fourth International Plagiarism Conference in Newcastle in June

⁶ Last accessed 10 May 2010, no longer available.

2010.⁷ The outcome of this project was the Plagiarism Tariff, a points-based system intended to standardize institutional responses to cases of plagiarism. The Plagiarism Tariff takes account of the history (first, second or third time), the amount or extent (from below 5%, up to 50% or more) and the level or stage (levels one and two, and level three/postgraduate). The related sanctions are calculated on a sliding scale, from 280 up to 560+, with penalties ranging from a formal warning to expulsion from the institution with credits withdrawn.⁸ In relation to the present study of essay writing services, what is particularly significant is that with regard to amount or extent, the severest penalty is for: *Submission purchased from essay mill or ghostwriting service* (225 points)

Although the main focus in this study has been on essay writing services, cases have been recorded even at the postgraduate level, as in the following case at Thames Valley University:

Times Higher Education, Jon Baggott, 28 July 2009

I would like to follow up the issue of commissioning a bespoke essay. Today I caught a part-time Postgraduate student who had lifted a sample essay from 'Dissertation Creation', a website that offers to refund their clients' money in full if the work fails a plagiarism test. You can even select how much to pay to ensure the work achieves a specific grade! A 15,000 word Masters' dissertation will cost you £1800 if you can wait 15 days for it. The cost-benefit for a desperate student is clear; we charge £1280 for a stand-alone dissertation module, so paying £1800, perhaps to avoid a future retake, or to save the wrath of a sponsoring employer in a competitive job market, would seem worth it.

Baggott concludes with a suggestion that would seem to be a fitting conclusion also for the present study, which has attempted to highlight the salient features of the essay writing promotion genre as a form of web-mediated communication: "Perhaps we should [...] revert to more examinations, albeit more creatively constructed than the standard unseen essay questions, if we are to maintain the credibility of our awards."⁹

⁷ Cf. <www.plagiarismadvice.org/BTariff.pdf>.

⁸ For an excellent overview of the Plagiarism Tariff see article by Rebecca Atwood at <www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/06/17/plagiarism>.

⁹ <www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=407301>.

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Appendix

Online “essay writing services” (Total = 40)

First accessed: 10 May 2010. Last accessed: 10 November 2010.

Claims about geographical location are not verifiable: as a result, no locations can be specified.

<custom-essay-writing-service.org>	<www.essayontime.com>
<custom-writing.org>	<www.essay-paper.net>
<editing-services.org>	<www.essaysprofessors.com>
<essaywritingservices.org>	<www.essaytown.com>
<fastessays.co.uk>	<www.essaywriting.org>
<gpalabs.com>	<www.essaywritingservice.com>
<overnightessay.com>	<www.exclusivepapers.com>
<paramountessays.com>	<www.masterpapers.com>
<theessay.co.uk>	<www.mindrelief.net>
<uk.bestessays.com>	<www.primewritings.com>
<www.bestessays.com>	<www.professays.com>
<www.bestwritingservice.com>	<www.pureessays.com>
<www.custom-essay.net>	<www.reaessaywriting.com>
<www.customessaymeister.com>	<www.research-service.com>
<www.customessays.co.uk>	<www.rushessay.com>
<www.customwritings.com>	<www.standoutessay.com>
<www.essay.com>	<www.superiorpapers.com>
<www.essay-911.com>	<www.supremeessays.com>
<www.essaydom.co.uk>	<www.ukessays.com>
<www.essayempire.com>	<www.writemyessay.co.uk>