

Specialist Paper 13

Plagiarism: Guide for External Examiners and Centres

What is plagiarism?

There are many definitions of what constitutes plagiarism. All of them agree that plagiarism is a form of academic misconduct or, put more simply, a form of cheating. Plagiarism is a form of fraud and is therefore dishonest. Plagiarism is much more than simple copying from another student, or from books, or from the internet and can be taken to include paraphrasing, sub-contracting the work to someone else, submitting the same piece of work for two different purposes, and so forth.

Plagiarism is attempting to pass off other people's work and ideas as your own.

Why is plagiarism wrong?

- it is fundamentally dishonest
- students who commit plagiarism are seeking an unfair advantage over other students
- students who commit plagiarism are devaluing the value of the qualification they seek
- it is disrespectful to their tutors, and a betrayal of their trust

What are the undesirable consequences of plagiarism?

- students who commit plagiarism learn far less than those who do not
- assessment procedures are compromised if the work submitted is not the student's own
- tutors are unable to form correct decisions on the progress of individual students
- it may result in legal action due to infringement of copyright laws
- one day, not too far in the future, one student will sue another for stealing their work
- it may be penalised by failure in one or more components of a course
- it will lead to more examinations and fewer assignments, to assure integrity and security
- it could be unfairly interpreted as professional incompetence on the part of the tutor.

Why does plagiarism happen?

There are many reasons. The most commonly cited reason is widespread access to the internet, which has made plagiarism easier to do and harder to detect. This may explain why the practice has become so widespread, and why we should be so concerned, but it does not explain why students decide to take the risky option of plagiarism in the first place. Students may:

- not understand what is meant by plagiarism, because it has never been explained to them
- not believe plagiarism to be wrong: they download music, video clips and games all the time
- not understand the concept of individual ownership of ideas and words
- entertain misconceptions about the ownership of electronic material
- struggle to differentiate between intellectual property rights and common knowledge
- regard the conventions of academic documentation as unimportant, and irrelevant to them
- lack referencing skills, and therefore be unable to record and cite sources correctly
- lack the study skills, research skills and writing skills needed to produce the work required
- not know how to adapt published literature sources so that they do not require citation
- have poor time-management skills and believe they have no option but to plagiarise
- regard plagiarism as a short cut to success; with success being all-important today
- be under pressure from parents and employers to succeed, and to do so quickly and well
- have tutors who are themselves under enormous pressure to achieve 'challenging' targets
- fear failure, or fear taking risks in their work.

What can tutors do to help reduce and/or eliminate plagiarism?

The most important thing a tutor can do is contribute to a culture in which students do not consider plagiarism an option, either because they believe it to be both wrong and unhelpful, or because they fear detection and the penalties that go with being found out. Individual centres and tutors should:

- develop clear policies and procedures re plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct
- explain at induction what is meant by 'plagiarism' and how it will be monitored and policed
- explain, at an early stage of the course, the concepts of individual ownership of ideas and words, the ownership of electronic material and the difference between 'intellectual property' and 'common knowledge'
- provide instruction in study skills, research skills, writing skills, time-management skills and the use of a suitable referencing system to record and cite sources correctly
- insist upon the use a standard referencing system and a comprehensive bibliography from day one
- act as a team, with every tutor rigorously applying centre policies on referencing and bibliographies
- develop realistic and credible scenarios for each assignment

- avoid the use of highly generic assignments and, instead, produce contextualised tasks that require the student to research in depth and individually analyse and evaluate their findings
- avoid the unhelpful practice of recycling assignments year after year
- set individual assignments for individual students (but note how time-consuming this can be)
- include an authenticity statement with every assignment brief: students must sign and date the authenticity statement to acknowledge that the work produced is their own and that they understand the penalties that will be imposed on students who do submit plagiarised work
- provide students with opportunities to discuss any problems they may encounter, support them at each step and provide them with the resources they need to do the work properly
- ensure that students are not overloaded by providing them with an assessment schedule, agreed by all of the course team, and then ensure that the team adheres to the schedule.

How can tutors identify plagiarism?

The expertise of individual tutors is by far and away the best safeguard against plagiarism, supported by appropriate technology where available. Tutors should check student work for:

- the use of unfamiliar words
- grammar and syntax of a standard far higher than that demonstrated previously
- a discontinuous rise in the quality and accuracy of the student's work
- the use of texts familiar to the teacher, but without appropriate referencing
- the use of American spellings and unfamiliar product names.

Tutors might also:

- build an oral element into the assessment process, wherever appropriate, to check on understanding
- use the tutorial provision to ask students to elaborate on suspect passages within their work
- type a few selected phrases into a search engine such as Google: simple but effective
- employ a sophisticated electronic plagiarism detection device such as Turnitin
- discourage the use of unregulated websites such as Wikipedia
- familiarise themselves with the more widely-used 'essay banks' to be found on the internet
- pay especial attention to those students who perform well in coursework but much less well in examinations and tests
- share their concerns with colleagues: if everyone has the same suspicions about a particular student, it would seem appropriate to apply rigorous checks to all of his or her work.

What kind of policies and procedures are needed to address plagiarism issues?

Whatever tutors may try to do to convince students that plagiarism helps no-one in the long run, least of all the students themselves, it is highly probable that it will persist as a problem for the foreseeable future. Centres will need to have policies and procedures in place to help tutors address this thorny issue. These policies and procedures should include:

- A precise definition of plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct
- A statement of why plagiarism, and all other forms of academic misconduct, are wrong
- The actions that will be taken by the centre to address the culture of plagiarism
- The techniques that will be used to monitor students' assessed work and detect plagiarism
- The procedures that will be employed to investigate allegations of plagiarism
- A tariff of penalties that will be applied to students found guilty of plagiarism
- Details of the appeals system for students to use when appealing against decisions made.

Useful references

- www.jiscpas.as.uk - The Plagiarism Advisory Service *(at 27 July 2008)*
- www.plagiarism.org - this has links to Turnitin *(at 27 July 2008)*
- www.plagiarized.com *(at 27 July 2008)*
- www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/4_resource/plagiarism.html *(at 27 July 2008)*