UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Archived Legislation

This is an archived version of the legislation current for the Session 2007-08. It is no longer current. Current legislation can be found at www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation.

Please use documents found there rather than archived documents.

Code of Practice on Plagiarism

The following principles and procedures will be observed by the University when dealing with an allegation of plagiarism at undergraduate and postgraduate level (both taught and research programmes).

1 Principles
2 Guidance
3 Methods for Detecting Plagiarism
4 Determining Whether Plagiarism has Taken Place
5 Categorisation of Plagiarism and Available Penalties
6 The University Investigating Committee

References within the Code to "School" should be taken to include Department, Institute, Centre or other related designation within the academic organisation of the University.

References to "assignment" should be taken to include any piece of work submitted for assessment, including an examination script.

1 Principles

1.1 These procedures are concerned with how the University deals with student plagiarism, that is the un-attributed (or incorrectly attributed) use of existing source material in academic work submitted for assessment. More detailed information on what constitutes plagiarism and why it is so damaging to a University is contained in the separate document "Guidance for Students on Plagiarism"

1.2 Plagiarism may arise in a number of differing ways within an academic context, including the copying of the work of another student, the reproduction of course materials, notes or data, the cutting and pasting of material from the Web and the direct transcription of the contents of a textbook or journal. In each of these examples, and in general with plagiarism, the problem will lie with the lack of proper referencing to the source material being used

1.3 Plagiarism will, in most instances, be dealt with at School level. A School may do one of the following:

- counsel the student and warn as to their future conduct;
- require the work to be resubmitted for a capped mark;
- adjust the mark for the work to an appropriate level (including 0);
- adjust the mark for the relevant module to an appropriate level (including 0);
- refer the case for consideration by a Pro-Vice-Chancellor (see 1.5 below).

1.4 Each School will have in place a nominated member of staff (the Plagiarism Contact) who will serve as a source of advice on plagiarism for staff and as a means whereby information on this topic may be disseminated effectively.

1.5 In the most severe cases (including instances of serial plagiarism), the School may decide to refer an allegation of plagiarism via the Academic Registrar to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Academic Quality and Students, who will determine whether the case should go to an Investigating Committee (see section 6).

1.6 At all stages of the above processes, the University will observe the principles of natural justice.

1.7 The University will provide guidance drawing attention to the responsibility of each individual student to ensure that the referencing conventions applicable to study at Birmingham are understood and acted upon at all times.

1.8 The University will ensure that students have access to the appropriate levels of support, counselling and advice and that staff receive regular briefings and support.

2 Guidance

2.1 Each School should distribute written guidance to students on what constitutes plagiarism, particularly within a subject-specific context, and on how to reference work properly. This will normally consist of the University document "Guidance for Students on Plagiarism",

supplemented by subject or programme-specific information. Ideally, local guidance should be provided as paper copy so that students may retain this for easy reference, but Schools may place this guidance on their web site provided it is emphasised to students that they must regularly consult this when preparing assignments.

2.2 Particular emphasis must be placed on the provision of guidance during the induction process. This should then be reinforced during the year as appropriate.

2.3 The University has adopted a standard referencing convention based on the Harvard system. Where a School wishes to make use of an alternative referencing system it may do so, but must ensure that all students submitting assignments for the relevant modules are made aware of the local referencing standard.

2.4 Schools should seek to develop students' referencing skills throughout the duration of their studies.

2.5 Use of Learning Agreements by Schools is generally considered to be good practice as these provide a mutually beneficially framework for staff and for students. Where a School makes use of a formal Learning Agreement on the avoidance of plagiarism, students should be advised specifically of the requirements relating to this, prior to signature.

2.6 Schools may also consider the routine use of assignment cover sheets within which students certify that their submitted work has not been plagiarised. These can provide a useful reinforcement of the University's position with regard to proper referencing.

2.7 Where a programme makes use of group-based work or study, any methodology to be used for the purposes of ultimately disaggregating the individual and the collective inputs for assessment purposes must be specified in advance. This should be done in respect of each participant by the relevant member of staff. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring that all students involved understand the boundaries between legitimate collaboration and plagiarism

3 Methods for detecting plagiarism

3.1 The University reserves the right to use all means at its disposal to detect plagiarism where it arises. All submitted work will be liable to scrutiny in order to identify any plagiarised element

3.2 Where a School uses plagiarism detection software, it will advise the students concerned in advance as to how this process will be undertaken and to the particular submission requirements (if any) involved.

3.3 Where a system of software detection selected by a School indicates that individual student permission should be obtained, the School will normally be expected to seek this. Permission may be both requested and granted by electronic means.

3.4 Where, in relation to 3.3 above, a student withholds their permission, the reasons for their objection should be set down in writing for consideration by the School.

3.5 Schools must ensure that the appropriate procedures are in place to review, monitor and quality-assure reports generated by any software detection system prior to any related referral for further action.

4 Determining whether plagiarism has taken place

4.1 Where a member of staff considers that a student's work contains plagiarised material, they will first determine the level of seriousness. A number of factors will be taken into account in this initial assessment, including:

- the proportion of the assignment affected;
- the academic level;
- any previous recorded instance of plagiarism.

Advice should be sought where necessary from the School's nominated Plagiarism Contact (see 1.4 above) and staff are encouraged to discuss suspected cases with the contact.

4.2 Staff are expected normally to deal sympathetically with low-level plagiarism (see 5.1 (i)), particularly during the first year of an undergraduate programme. The provision of specific guidance at tutorial level and without punitive sanction may be considered to be a possible response to most first offence plagiarism. Nevertheless, plagiarism may be dealt with punitively at any time where it is considered to have been either:

- deliberate, on the balance of probabilities, and therefore an attempt to deceive;

  OR

- at a point where it is reasonable to expect the student to have learnt the appropriate referencing skills;

  OR

- when the student has received earlier guidance with regard to the attribution of source material.

4.3 Where a member of academic staff considers that the instance of plagiarism is such that it is likely to be dealt with punitively, they should consult with the School's Plagiarism Contact and a joint decision reached on any further action. The following steps should be taken as soon as possible if the joint decision is that further action is necessary:

i. the student should be informed in writing (with a copy sent to the student's University email address where appropriate) of the allegation of plagiarism that has arisen. The letter to the student should clearly indicate that an instance of proven, extensive plagiarism is a potentially serious matter that could ultimately affect their position as a student at the University. In addition, the letter should invite the student to lodge a response to the allegation within five working days of receipt (although an appropriate adjustment will be necessary if the latter is being sent abroad). The letter should ensure that the student is aware that their response may include a written explanation and that the response must indicate whether the student agrees to attend for interview. Any interview to be held should then normally take place within ten working days of the date of the original notification letter;

ii. where a student does not wish to, or is unable, to attend an interview, the School must use an appropriate means of communicating with the student, in lieu of an interview, in order to obtain a detailed response concerning the allegation of plagiarism. For example, email and written correspondence are both suitable methods as these provide a permanent record of the points raised by both sides. Schools should not discuss the allegation by telephone with the student concerned;

iii. any interview should be conducted jointly by two members of staff. This may include the Plagiarism Contact, the member of staff who identified the instance of suspected plagiarism or another member of staff with experience in this area. One person should take the notes of the meeting. During the interview, the reasons for suspecting that plagiarism has taken place should be given and the student invited to explain their position and, if necessary, to refute the allegation. The student may be accompanied by a "friend" if they wish (i.e. another member of the University, including the Guild of Students);

iv. if the student, at the conclusion of the interview conducted under the terms of 4.3 (iii) maintains that no offence has taken place, the assignment in question should be referred for review to a further member of staff, who will have access to all documentation involved in the case, and who shall confer with the Plagiarism Contact and the member of staff who identified the instance of suspected plagiarism;

v. if the result of this review determines that no significant plagiarism has occurred, then no further action should be taken. If the review confirms that, based on the academic judgement of the balance of probabilities involved, plagiarism has taken place, the School should then proceed to place the case in the appropriate category (as laid out at 5.1);

vi. the notes of any interview should be retained on file by the School and a copy of these forwarded to the student;

vii. in those cases where the student indicates they wish to attend an interview but when the suspected plagiarism arises at a point where the student is unable, for good reason, to attend – this is likely to be late in the Summer term or during the Summer vacation - then any decision on progression or degree outcome must be suspended until the student is available to be interviewed and a position reached as to whether there is a case to answer;

viii. where an allegation of plagiarism involves group-based work or study (see also 2.6 7 above), any interview should normally be conducted with all members of the group present if it has not been possible in advance to identify the individual student(s) concerning whom there are particular concerns. Having investigated the circumstances, the School would expect then to be in a position to be able to differentiate between members of the Group and to be able to avoid the imposition of a group penalty;

ix. if a student fails, or refuses, to respond in writing to a letter sent under 4.3 (i) within five working days of receipt (or pro rata reasonable adjustment if abroad) or fails to attend an interview arranged under 4.3 (i), the assignment in question should be referred for review to a further member of staff, who will have access to all documentation involved in the case, and who shall confer with the Plagiarism Contact and the member of staff who identified the instance of suspected plagiarism;

5 Categorisation of plagiarism and available penalties

5.1 If, after having considered the student's response or the result of any review conducted in respect of 4.3 (iv) or 4.3 (ix), the School decides that plagiarism has occurred, it must place the case in one of the following categories based on the exercise of academic judgement and experience in the School:

i. Low-level plagiarism: this category would normally be restricted to Level C studies or to the early stages of a postgraduate programme and would include any first offence (unless the extent of the plagiarism is such that categorisation at a higher level is required) amounting to inadequate referencing, inclusion of a small amount of paraphrasing or very small amounts of un-attributed or incorrectly attributed copying;
(Categorisation of the offence at this level would not result in the use of direct punitive marking, although capped resubmission - see 5.2 below - may be appropriate where it is considered desirable to reinforce proper citation methods).

ii. Mid-level plagiarism: this category would normally include any general second offence (unless the extent of the plagiarism is such that categorisation at the Serious level is required), first use of limited "copy and paste" from the Web, first instance of limited, colluded peer copying, auto plagiarism (submission of an assignment identical or closely related to one submitted at an earlier point and for which a mark has been received) or a moderate inclusion of un-attributed or incorrectly attributed copying.
(Categorisation of the offence at this level would result in the use of direct punitive marking. Normally, this would involve a reduction of the mark to 0% for either the assignment or for the relevant module respectively).
It should be noted that repetition of plagiarism would normally increase the respective level of seriousness. It is therefore essential that Schools record all instances of plagiarism once it has been agreed that action is required (see 4.3 (ivv) above).

iii. Serious plagiarism: this category would include any serial offending not appropriate to being dealt with as Mid-level plagiarism (regardless of its extent), as well as any occurrence of extensive and significant quantities of un-attributed or incorrectly attributed copying. It would also include any use of essay sites that involve a commercial transaction and the production of academic work by a third party for gain, in both cases regardless of actual extent. There is also an expectation that plagiarism located within the research element eg the dissertation, project or thesis of a postgraduate programme (both taught and research) would be placed within this category, unless the extent of the plagiarism was considered to be minimal.
(Automatic reference to the Academic Registrar: see 5.3 below)
NB Fabrication of data is not dealt with as a plagiarism-related offence, but is covered by the Examination Irregularity regulations.

5.2 Where the case has been categorised as Low-level or Mid-level, an appropriate penalty (where the School wishes to apply a sanction) should be determined for eventual submission to, and approval by, the Board of Examiners. The following penalties are available to Schools in respect of plagiarism:

- resubmission of the assignment in question, with the resultant mark being capped at the lowest possible grade that would signify a minimum Pass within the relevant assessment structure. For a number of courses, for example, this would be equal to a mark of 40%;
- the downward adjustment of the final mark for the piece of work involved to an appropriate level, including 0, but excluding the use of a negative mark;
- the downward adjustment of the final mark for the relevant module to an appropriate level, including 0, but excluding the use of a negative mark.

5.3 Where a School has determined within the categories listed at 5.1 that the offence should be designated as Serious plagiarism, the Head of School will refer the case to the Academic Registrar, who will prepare the evidence for consideration by the relevant Pro-Vice-Chancellor. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor will, in turn, then decide whether an Investigating Committee should be convened. For students on Fitness to Practise programmes, the role of the Investigating Committee will be undertaken by the School Fitness to Practise Committee.

5.4 The initial reference to the Academic Registrar must be confirmed in writing to the student by the School. This letter should also provide information on the support and counselling services available to students both within the University and from the Guild of Students.

5.5 If the Pro-Vice-Chancellor decides that there is insufficient evidence to allow the case to proceed to an Investigating Committee hearing, no further action may be taken by the School in respect of the allegation of plagiarism that it has brought. The School will communicate this outcome to the student.

6 The University Investigating Committee

6.1 A student whose case has been referred to an Investigating Committee will be advised in writing of the details of the hearing at least ten working days in advance and invited to attend, although attendance is not compulsory. Full documentation relating to the allegation of plagiarism will also be provided at least ten working days in advance.

6.2 The student will be invited to submit a written response to the allegation brought against them by their School. This will be circulated to the members of the Investigating Committee at least five working days in advance of the hearing.

6.3 University regulation 4.7.10 deals with the convening and functioning of an Investigating Committee held to consider an allegation of serious plagiarism and this should be consulted for full details:

http://www.ppd.bham.ac.uk/policy/regs/currentregs/4.7.htm

6.4 Students who have been referred to an Investigating Committee will be provided with clear guidance in writing by the Committee Secretary as to the functioning of the Committee, the powers available to it and how the business of the hearing will be conducted.

6.5 The Investigating Committee, having carefully considered the evidence before it, will determine the appropriate penalty (if any) to be levied in the case of the allegation of serious plagiarism being proven in full or in part.

6.6 The student will be notified in writing of the decision of the Investigating Committee and, where relevant, of any appeal opportunity available to them following on from this.