Plagiarism – a guide for students

This document was produced to support students who are being investigated following an allegation of plagiarism, and is phrased accordingly. It describes what will happen if an allegation is made about a piece of work and what the possible outcomes are. If your work is not being investigated, you may find the document useful if you are supporting a friend who is being investigated, or are involved in some aspect of student support e.g. MSRC, MUMS etc. This document does not contain any guidance about avoiding plagiarism in your own work – the University provides an excellent educational resource covering that at http://www.ldu.leeds.ac.uk/plagiarism/, where you can also find a full and formal description of the procedures. Copies of this document, and other materials specific to the School of Medicine, can be found at http://www.medicine.leeds.ac.uk/plagiarism/

WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?
The University of Leeds defines plagiarism as the act of presenting the work of others as your own. It really is that simple, but there are two important points which are worth pointing out. Firstly, the definition makes no mention of intent. If poor note taking results in you including a significant amount of someone else’s work in your submission – that’s plagiarism. Secondly, if you submit a piece of your own work twice – perhaps you expand some work you did in an IDEALS as part of a RESS project – this is not regarded as plagiarism, as you are not presenting the work of another person. Multiple submission is, however, regarded as serious academic misconduct, albeit under a different section of the regulations (Malpractice).

WHY IS MY WORK BEING INVESTIGATED?
The majority of cases brought to the attention of the School’s investigative team are identified by anti-plagiarism software, such as Turnitin. The VLE has the ability to subject all submitted work for checking. Alternately, a tutor may recognise plagiarised material in submitted work – we have even had tutors recognise the submitted material as being their own work! An investigation of plagiarism is never instigated solely on the result of a Turnitin report as false-positive results may be created by inconsistent document formatting. All suspect documents are therefore examined by an experienced member of staff who will decide whether or not there is cause for concern, and who will decide to start a formal investigation.

WAS MY WORK CHECKED BY A MEMBER OF STAFF?
If you have been informed that an investigation into an allegation of plagiarism has been instituted, then yes.

WHAT HAPPENS NOW?
You will be given a date to meet with the investigative committee, with at least one week’s notice. This meeting take precedence over all teaching commitments, but you may request a rescheduling.
You will also be given a printout of the Turnitin report which will have been run on your work, regardless of how it was detected so you can see which parts of your work caused concern. If you are studying at Leeds on a distance-learning programme, and you are unable to attend the meeting, then the investigation will be conducted in writing.

**TURNITIN SHOWS A MATCH WITH THE WORK OF ANOTHER PERSON BUT I DIDN'T COPY! / TURNITIN SHOWS A MATCH WITH A WEBSITE I'VE NEVER VISITED!**

Turnitin cannot tell who copied from whom; if another student has copied your work then Turnitin will see the match but cannot tell which document is the source. On the internet, many websites ‘scrape’ content from each other, so material taken from one website may be identified as having been found on another.

**WHAT PERCENTAGE MARK ON A TURNITIN REPORT IS SIGNIFICANT?**

There is no “magic number” which represents plagiarism. Some material should match other sources – a properly formatted reference is almost certain to match another piece of work. Similarly, a quote should match its source. In principle, Turnitin can recognise a bibliography and quoted material, but sometimes it does not; this is one of the reasons all suspect pieces of work are checked by an experienced member of academic staff. And sometimes there are only so many ways of saying something; an essay on the anatomy of the wrist will probably include a list of the eight bones and there are only a few logical ways of arranging such a list (alphabetically or anatomically). It is therefore likely that you’ll choose an order used before. A human reader would recognise this; Turnitin cannot.

**WHO WILL BE AT THE MEETING?**

The meeting will be led by a senior member of academic staff with experience of investigating plagiarism on behalf of the School of Medicine. There will also be a representative of your course, ICU or module, and a member of support staff to take minutes. You may bring a supporter but you must remember that, although they are there to support you and you can talk to them during the meeting, they cannot address the panel on your behalf; you must do so yourself.

**WHO SHOULD I ASK TO BE MY SUPPORTER?**

This is your decision, but you could consider approaching another student, a student representative (MSRC or equivalent group), your personal tutor or another member of staff.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN AT THE MEETING?**

The investigating staff member will make sure that you understand the procedure and that you received all the information you needed to prepare for the meeting. You will then be asked to explain how work which appears to have been created by someone else appeared in your submission. The entire process usually takes about 15-20 minutes. You will be asked whether you accept that your actions fulfil the definition of plagiarism as used by the University. You will then be asked to withdraw while the panel consider their decision.
WILL I HEAR THEIR DECISION IMMEDIATELY?
If the source(s) of the plagiarised material lie(s) outside the School of Medicine, then you will usually get an immediate decision. If, however, it appears that the source was another student, usually no decision will be made until all relevant parties have been interviewed. Whenever possible, the interviews will have been organised for the same day so the delay is likely to be short.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE DECISIONS?
The panel will either decide that in their opinion there is sufficient evidence to uphold the allegation of plagiarism or that there is not. There is no “Case not proven” middle decision; if the panel are not fully convinced, the claim will be rejected.

WHAT IF THEY DECIDE I HAVE PLAGIARISED?
The panel will tell you of their decision and, if you have admitted plagiarism, of the penalty. For a first offence, this is usually:
1) return of a fail for the work (grade F for graded MBChB assignments, score zero for scored assignments)
2) requirement to submit a new piece of work, the mark for which is capped (grade D for graded assignments, minimum pass mark – usually 40 or 50 - for scored assignments and modular assessments.)
3) a requirement that you undertake the University’s Plagiarism Awareness Exercise

This verbal explanation will also be sent to you in writing.

If you did not admit plagiarism, your case cannot be settled within the School, but will have to be considered by the Committee on Applications (a University body outside the School). The School panel will decide a penalty which they will recommend to the Committee, but you will not be informed of this penalty. Second offences are not dealt with in the School of Medicine but, as with the rest of the University, are referred directly to the Committee on Application.

WHAT IF THEY DECIDE I HAVE NOT PLAGIARISED?
You will be informed of this at the meeting, and the decision will be confirmed to you in writing within 14 working days. Your work will be marked/graded in the normal way.

CAN I APPEAL?
Yes, you can appeal to the Office of Academic Appeals and Regulation. You will be provided with up-to-date details of how to do this in the letter the panel send to you confirming their decision. At the time of writing this guide, the procedure is explained at http://www.ldu.leeds.ac.uk/plagiarism/penalties.php

If you have agreed that you plagiarised, or if the decision of the panel is that you did not plagiarise, it would be very odd to appeal against the decision, although you can appeal against the penalty if you feel it is inappropriate.
CAN I TALK TO THE INVESTIGATING TEAM PRIOR TO THE MEETING?
No. It is possible that they will approach you before the meeting for some further details, but in the majority of cases all discussion will take place at the formal investigative meeting, and minutes of this will be taken. We regard this as preferable to “off the record” discussions.

CAN I TALK TO THE INVESTIGATING TEAM AFTER THE MEETING?
Yes, but you must appreciate that they cannot reverse their decision. You should therefore take care to prepare yourself for the formal meeting and make sure that all evidence in your favour is presented at that meeting. If further evidence comes to light, you should inform the investigating team, usually via your course tutor, but you must bear in mind that they cannot reverse their decision. That can only be done by the University Office of Academic Appeals and Regulation and you should therefore submit an appeal. If you do appeal with new evidence, you should let the School investigating team know, as they will be approached by the OARR. If, in the light of the new evidence, the School then supports your appeal, it can be often dealt with more quickly.

WHO CAN I TALK TO?
The most appropriate people to approach for support and advice would be your personal tutor and the Academic Sub Dean for your MBChB year or your Programme Manager.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY FUTURE ON THE COURSE?
A record of the investigation will be held in your file for the remainder of your time on the programme, whether it is the MBChB, intercalated or one of the postgraduate programmes, but a single offence, especially in the early years, is unlikely to have any effect on your progression or graduation. A repeat offence, however, may result in suspension or even exclusion from the University.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY FUTURE CAREER?
All offences of malpractice in assessment must be reported to the GMC prior to graduation, but it is unlikely that a single offence would, of itself, prove any barrier to registration.

HOW CAN I AVOID A REPEAT INCIDENT?
The best way to avoid an allegation of plagiarism is by learning good academic practices, which include time management, accurate record keeping and an understanding of the nature of plagiarism. A good starting point is the University guidance page http://www.ldu.leeds.ac.uk/plagiarism/

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