

Plagiarism and good academic practice: Notes for Supervisors, Directors of Studies and Tutors

University guidance for staff and students

The University's plagiarism-related policy and guidance is online at: www.cam.ac.uk/plagiarism. This includes:

For staff and examiners

- The General Board's requirements of Faculty Boards and equivalent bodies
- Flowchart of the process for handling suspected cases of plagiarism and collusion
- Procedure for examinations other than Research Degrees if plagiarism or collusion is suspected in work submitted for assessment
- The investigative and disciplinary process: procedure for Chairs of Examiners and Proctors
- University policy on the use of Turnitin text-matching software

Separate procedures apply for Research Degrees.

For students

- University-wide statement on plagiarism
- Discipline-specific guidance issued by faculties and departments
- Proctorial notice on plagiarism
- 'University Discipline' entry in the Student Handbook

The role of Supervisors, Directors of Studies and Tutors

Plagiarism is unacceptable at any stage of a student's career so Supervisors, Directors of Studies and Tutors play a vital role in educating students about good academic practice and how to avoid plagiarism.

Effective induction

Students arrive at Cambridge with a range of understandings of what constitutes plagiarism. It is important to ensure that they all understand what is, and is not, acceptable practice at Cambridge as soon as possible.

The University's plagiarism and good academic practice website (www.cam.ac.uk/plagiarism) features a generic statement on plagiarism, as well as related information. Faculties and departments should also publish supplementary guidance about course or subject-specific referencing conventions and expectations of students. Directors of Studies and Supervisors are advised to familiarise themselves with this guidance and should also refer their students to it.

Directors of Studies are encouraged to discuss plagiarism in the context of good academic practice at initial meetings with students, to correct any misunderstandings, to direct them to further sources of information and guidance as necessary, and to discourage the use of commercial essay banks. This initial guidance should be reinforced at appropriate junctures; for example, it would be timely to reiterate the importance of good note-taking and referencing at dissertation planning meetings.

Supporting students under pressure

Directors of Studies should advise students that it is better to be open about study difficulties than to resort to plagiarism. It is important for students to recognise that supervisions are for their benefit, and that plagiarising wastes a valuable study opportunity and will make it harder for them to perform well in exams.

Independent learning is highly valued at Cambridge so students need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their learning. However, Supervisors play a vital role in ensuring that students have the necessary study skills to enable them to work effectively. They should give practical advice about skills such as time management, especially to those students who seem to have difficulty coping under pressure. Simple measures, such as requiring students to show their working, submit early drafts, or complete timed essays, repay the time and attention involved, by encouraging good academic practice and making it far harder for students to plagiarise.

It may also be useful for Supervisors to reflect upon their own practice in the light of the pressures on students. Without compromising standards, they could consider whether their expectations of students are reasonable. For example, are deadlines feasible and, if reading lists are implausibly long, would it be better to advise the majority of students to engage properly with a sub-section of the list?

Use of web-based sources

Students increasingly use web-based resources, such as Wikipedia, as sources for their work. Supervisors should recognise that students' study habits keep pace with available technologies, and be prepared to offer advice about the reliability of such sources and how to use and reference them appropriately.

Designing plagiarism out of the system

Supervisors are encouraged to vary questions or projects to reduce the likelihood of students reusing work, whether their own or of former students. Setting specific questions and asking students to reflect upon how they tackled the assignment can also help to reduce opportunistic plagiarism by making it harder for students to recycle work.

As above, asking to see early drafts or plans of longer pieces of work and setting timed essays helps to ensure that students have done the work themselves. Supervisors should tell students that their work might be checked if plagiarism is suspected.

Commercial organisations and essay banks

Students may be tempted to write for commercial organisations or to submit their work to essay banks for financial gain. Directors of Studies are encouraged to remind students that this undermines the academic system, and that working on their own degree would be a far better investment than the short term (albeit lucrative) profit gained by selling work to such companies. Students who have serious financial concerns should be directed to alternative sources of support – they should not need to resort to selling their work.

Reporting plagiarism and suspected plagiarism

Proven cases of plagiarism can have serious consequences for a student's academic and subsequent professional career. If Supervisors have suspicions about the originality of a student's work they are advised to discuss their concerns with the student, and then to report the matter to the student's Director of Studies and Tutor, either via supervision reports or directly. The Tutor should liaise with the Senior Tutor to discuss how best to deal with the case. The severity of the disciplinary proceedings will vary according to the type of plagiarism, the stage of the student in their academic career, and the context of the plagiarism.

For non-assessed work an informal warning from the Tutor or Senior Tutor may suffice. However, subsequent cases of plagiarism should be treated more severely; for example, through a written warning or penalty. Suspicions of plagiarism in supervision work must be reported by the Supervisor to the College of the student concerned. Failing to report, and act upon, suspicions gives students a false sense that plagiarism is not a serious matter.

If a Supervisor alerts a Tutor to a case of suspected plagiarism in work submitted for formal assessment by the University, the Tutor should, having discussed the case with the Senior Tutor, convey their concerns in writing to the Secretary of the Board of Examinations and the Proctors. The Proctors may initiate the standard investigative process.

Academic integrity and references

Tutors should make students aware that some prospective employers, especially in professions such as Law, specifically ask academic referees whether the student has committed plagiarism. Even if specific requests of this nature are not made, proven cases of plagiarism in assessed and non-assessed work would be noted on the student's record. Students should therefore be informed that committing plagiarism may have serious professional implications as it casts doubts on the integrity of the individual's character.