

# **Proposed revision to the Common Awards policy on Academic Misconduct / Assessment Irregularities**

## **Introduction**

As we in the Common Awards team consider questions of equality, diversity, and inclusion, we are scrutinising our policies and processes to identify barriers to the inclusion of people from under-represented and marginalised groups.

One message we have heard from both staff and students is that our [policy on Academic Misconduct / Assessment Irregularities](#), especially as it relates to plagiarism, might be a barrier for those who do not feel at home in an academic environment. Some find themselves presented with unfamiliar and complex rules, with an expectation that they will grasp them correctly right from the start, under the threat that even inadvertent failures will lead to them being called before a panel for disciplinary action. Even when panels judge that there has been no offence, the process is widely experienced as punitive and humiliating.

We have anecdotal evidence that this has a negative effect on the capacity of some students to believe that they belong in a higher education context, that some abandon their studies because of it, and that others – having heard about these experiences from friends – are put off from applying.

We are therefore considering a revision to our policy in this area. We believe that such a revision could be good for all students.

## **Context**

Because we follow wider Durham policy in this area, changing our approach will require the agreement of the university. We are consulting TEIs, therefore, on a proposal that (if there is sufficient backing from TEIs) we will take to the relevant university committees. We obviously cannot guarantee that such a proposal will be approved, but it will be taken seriously.

It is also worth noting that this is an area in which university policy comes under the scrutiny of external bodies, such as the Office for Students. It may be that developments at a national level end up pushing in a different direction from any proposal that we make.

## Principles

We want a system that respects the following principles:

- that the avoidance of assessment irregularities such as plagiarism is a vital factor in assessment, because it ensures that we are assessing a student's own work, and therefore their own achievement of the relevant learning outcomes;
- that no student should receive credit for work that is not their own;
- that all students should be held to the same standards, and that all students can be expected to learn and implement appropriately the practices required to avoid assessment irregularities;
- that students nevertheless enter Common Awards programmes with very different levels of familiarity with academic conventions, including those surrounding the proper citation of sources;
- that, to ensure equality of opportunity, we should be providing students with the training and support they need to learn good practice in this area;
- that learning good practice takes time; and
- that being told about good practice, and trying it out in artificial settings, is insufficient because good training requires real-life practice and the possibility of learning from one's mistakes.

One other factor feeds into the proposal below. The most lenient of the current available penalties is 'mark only the student's own contribution to the work'. This is the typical outcome at present for first-time offences that are not extensive. Yet, precisely when dealing with the problems most likely to trigger this response – essays with a scatter of poorly referenced quotes – this outcome proves very difficult to interpret and implement, and tends to lead to an arbitrary deduction of marks.

## Existing freedom

The core of the proposal below is that we allow, within a certain time period at the start of a student's studies, minor cases to be handled more informally.

TEIs should note that this builds on some flexibility *already* built into the Academic Misconduct policy. The current process involves the Chair of the Board of Examiners making an assessment of whether there is evidence of an offence. That means making a judgment call about whether the irregularity rises to meet any of the definitions set out at the start of the policy. In the case of plagiarism specifically, that means making a judgment about whether the student has done something 'amounting to the presentation of other person's

writings or thoughts as [the student's] own'. This is not a matter of intent, but of effect: the Chair is determining whether the irregular work has the effect of passing off another person's thoughts or writings as the student's own. In some cases, it will be clear that proper citation practice has not been followed, but the answer to the above question will clearly be 'No'. Such minor cases do not then trigger the rest of the formal Academic Misconduct process.

Our current proposal is to clarify and extend this provision for handling minor cases differently, for a period at the start of a student's studies.

## **Proposal**

Our suggestion is that, for undergraduate programmes only, we allow a different approach to cases of suspected assessment irregularity for all assessments undertaken during an initial period. For instance, we might say that this initial period lasts for six months for full-time students and a year for part-time students, if their programmes begin at Level 4.

In outline, we suggest that, for any assessment that has a submission date during this initial period, TEIs would follow this process:

- Where a marker identifies suspect academic misconduct, a judgment is made by the Chair of the TEI's Board of Examiners as to whether this can plausibly be seen as a case of poor academic practice, rather than of attempted cheating. (This would exclude, for instance, instances of the wholesale copying of substantial chunks of work, which would be handled by our existing Academic Misconduct process.)
- Where the judgment is made that this is plausibly a case of poor academic practice, the piece of work would be discussed in detail with the student by a tutor, to help them understand what they have done wrong and how to put it right, and to help them understand what will happen if they make the same mistakes after this initial period.
- The student would then be asked to resubmit the work with these specific problems corrected, thus gaining experience in good academic practice. No other changes to the work would be permitted. The revised work would be treated as a first submission.
- No further penalty would be imposed, and there would be no requirement for reporting such incidents to Durham as they occur.

We would review the impact of the policy after two years, which should be long enough to see whether there has been any marked impact on the overall number of plagiarism cases.

We would ask TEIs to keep records of what they have done in cases addressed under this policy, and when we review the impact of the policy we will ask for student feedback on their experience of the process.

### **Questions for consultation**

We are asking TEI Management Committees for their feedback on this proposal, indicating their thoughts on the following questions:

- a) Does it seem like an appropriate approach?
- b) Do you think it will be practically workable for your TEI? (*please provide relevant details of how you deliver your modules*)
- c) How long should this grace period be – and should the answer to that question differ from programme to programme?
- d) Do you have any other suggestions for how our policy could be improved?

We would be grateful if such feedback could include opinions from student as well as staff members of the Committees.

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January 2023