PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH CASES OF POOR ACADEMIC PRACTICE AND PLAGIARISM IN TAUGHT DEGREE EXAMINATIONS: GUIDANCE FOR CHAIRS OF EXAMINERS

Introduction

 Procedures have been developed for dealing with the full range of situations in which examiners are presented with submitted work for taught degrees that gives rise to concerns about the standard of scholarly referencing and attribution. These will range from students using the wrong type of referencing style, to knowingly trying to pass off the work of others as their own. The procedures aim to deal with this wide range proportionately and without undue delay. Boards of Examiners have a clearly defined role that is strictly academic in nature. The Proctors will take forward investigation for disciplinary action for plagiarism only when cases are referred to them by Chairs of Examiners, and only then when they are satisfied that such action is warranted.

This guidance does not cover cases of poor academic practice and plagiarism in research degrees, as research degree students are advanced students for whom different procedures are appropriate. Cases of suspected plagiarism in research degrees should continue to be referred to the Proctors.

Level 1: procedures for Examination Boards

If a marker, or a Turnitin report generated in the course of examination procedures, raises concerns about the proper attribution of a passage or piece of submitted work, the matter will be reported to the Chair of Examiners. The Chair will compile and retain any evidence and decide whether or not the case is one which may be dealt with by the Board (poor academic practice) or whether it is one that requires reference to the Proctors for investigation and possible disciplinary action. The Chair may consult the Proctors in cases of doubt.

The following step-by-step guidance is provided in order to assist the Chair with this decision.

Step 1

If the concern has been identified by a high Turnitin score, follow the separate guidance on interpreting Turnitin reports (Annex L) to establish the report’s accuracy.

If the concern has been identified by a marker, examine the source the marker has referred to; or in the case of suspected collusion or copying between students, examine all pieces of work giving rise to this concern.

Step 2

Consider the characteristics of the passages which have given rise to concerns.

Characteristics of cases to be dealt with as poor academic practice

In all cases dealt with wholly by the Examination Board the extent of the material under review must be a relatively small proportion of the whole. Small will be in the context of the length of the work but as a guide it will not exceed 10%.
If the case is then best described by one or more of the criteria below, on balance this is likely to indicate a case of poor academic practice and can be dealt with by the Examination Board.

- The material is widely available factual information or technical description that could not be paraphrased easily.
- The passage(s) draws on a variety of sources, either verbatim or derivative, in patchwork fashion. This is likely to indicate poor English/poor understanding rather than an attempt to deceive.
- Some attempt has been made to provide references, however incomplete (e.g. footnotes but no quotation marks, Harvard-style references at the end of a paragraph, inclusion in bibliography)
- The passage is ‘grey literature’ i.e. a web source with no clear owner
- The student is not known to have previously received a marks deduction for poor academic practice or been referred to the Proctors for suspected plagiarism. (This will only be relevant for Honour Schools examined in Parts, or master’s courses with multiple submission deadlines.)

**Thresholds for reference to the Proctors**

If the passage(s) giving rise to concern meets any of the criteria below, this is likely to indicate that referral to the Proctors is warranted.

- The extent of the material under review is a substantial proportion of the whole.
- The material contains passages of analysis or research data that is clearly the intellectual property of the original author.
- The passage(s) exhibits heavy reliance on one source which may indicate plagiarism of ideas/arguments.
- There is evidence that the student has copied the development of an argument (which may not be verbatim quotation – it could involve paraphrasing a line of argument or sequence of points).
- There is evidence of copying or collusion between students.
- The student has previously received a marks deduction for poor academic practice or has been referred to the Proctors for suspected plagiarism in the same or earlier programme of study.
- The submission clearly infringes rules on resubmitting material (autoplagiarism) for examination.

**Step 3**

Where the Chair finds that the matter can be dealt with by the Board, assessors will mark the work on its academic merits. The Board will then deduct marks for derivative or poorly referenced work according to a pre-determined scale set out in the marking conventions. Boards are free to operate marks deductions of between 1 and 10% (maximum) of the marks available for that particular piece of work. In practice, it will often be difficult to operate very fine-grained distinctions and it is acceptable for examination boards to exercise their judgement within a small range of ‘bands’ e.g. on a 100 point scale a Board might judge cases to fall in one of three bands for which 3, 6, or 10 marks are deducted. Where the consequence of the marks deduction would result in failure of the assessment and of the programme (i.e. no resit opportunity) the case must be referred to the Proctors.
Where the Chair finds that the matter should be dealt with by the Proctors, the Chair should follow the steps outlined in Level 2 below.

**Step 4**

For their academic development, students should be informed that marks have been deducted for poor academic practice if they have further examinations to take during their course (for example if it is a preliminary examination, a part of a FHS examination before the final year, the qualifying examination for MPhil, or early examinations for other master’s courses), and an explanation should be given of where and how in their work this was evidenced. This feedback should be provided via the Chair of Examiners to the Senior Tutor in the case of undergraduates, or the Course Director in the case of graduates. Students should also be reminded of the disciplinary regulations concerning plagiarism.

**Level 2: procedures for the Academic Conduct Panel**

Examination Boards will refer cases to the Proctors’ Office if the Chair has made a decision that a case exceeds the criteria for dealing with Level 1.

**Step 1**

The Chair should first summarise the case for the Proctors indicating the relevant sources, extent, and seriousness of the plagiarism. A report printout from Turnitin is insufficient on its own and will be returned to the Chair for analysis and summary. In cases of students suspected of colluding or copying from each other, the Chair should examine the work of both the students involved, so that the nature of the apparent collusion can be established. All materials should be securely submitted to the Proctors’ Office. Support will be provided by a caseworker in the Proctors’ Office who will ensure that all relevant materials are collated and presented.

**Step 2**

The case will be given initial consideration by one of the Proctors who will determine whether it is a case that should be referred back to the examiners to deal with at Level 1 (in cases where the Chair has asked for advice), a suitable case for the Academic Conduct Panel, or one that is so serious that it should be directed to the SDP. Cases where it is likely that the outcome would result in failure of the whole degree will always be referred to the SDP.

**Step 3**

If it is decided that the case should proceed to the Academic Conduct Panel, the student’s consent will be sought, offering the alternative of referral to the SDP. The Proctors’ Office will as soon as possible notify the student of the referral to the Panel, except when the student is currently undertaking examination. In such cases, steps will normally be taken to delay notification to the student until a time that will not interfere with ongoing exams.

**Step 4**

An interview with the student will be conducted between the Proctor and the student with a note-taker as part of the preparation for the Panel meeting; this may be by telephone, email questions, or other means of telecommunication. If, during the interview, the student admits a breach of the regulations, the Proctor may offer the student the option of the matter being concluded without further meetings. The Proctor will arrange for the Panel to agree a penalty by email correspondence (the Panel may not impose a penalty which is more severe than the Penalty recommended by the Proctor, and the student will have the right of appeal as set out under Appeal process below). Otherwise, paperwork for the Panel, including a note of the interview, will be provided to the student who will be given a minimum of three clear days to submit any further information for inclusion.
Step 5
The Proctors will convene a meeting of the Academic Conduct Panel. The ACP will consist of three people: one of the Proctors; a person who has previously served as Proctor (preferably from the most recent Proctorial team for continuity) or as a member of the SDP; and a member with relevant subject expertise (but not a member of the Examination Board). The Panel will be convened as necessary to deal with plagiarism cases referred to it. The Panel will consider cases within one month of referral by the Examination Board.

The student, supported by a friend or a Senior Member, will be invited to attend the meeting, but the Panel may go ahead in the student’s absence. The Panel may require the student to attend, or be available by telecommunication.

The Panel will have a range of outcomes available to it:

- Finding that plagiarism has not occurred
- Directing that the student has support and training
- Deduction of marks for the piece of work: examiners will conclude examination
- Submission awarded 0% - resubmission required in order to conclude examination but mark not capped
- Submission awarded 0% - resubmission required in order to conclude examination and mark capped
- Serious Academic Misconduct - Referral to the Student Disciplinary Panel

The Panel cannot give a penalty that would result in the student failing the whole degree or other award-bearing course.

Appeal process
The student will be able to appeal a decision of the Academic Conduct Panel by sending a written appeal within fourteen days of receiving the Panel’s written decision. Two members of the Academic Conduct Panel with no previous connection to the case will consider the appeal, and this will normally be a paper-based exercise.

The student will not be able to appeal a referral to the Student Disciplinary Panel but will, in such cases, have the right to apply for permission to appeal to the Student Appeal Panel following the outcome of the Student Disciplinary Panel.

Level 3: Student Disciplinary Panel
The Student Disciplinary Panel will deal with the most serious cases of plagiarism, and those referred to it by the Proctors or the Academic Conduct Panel because the likely outcome would be failure of the whole degree.

The procedures and regulations set out in Statutes and Regulations apply [here](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/352-051a.shtml#_Toc28142346) [here](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/234-062.shtml).

Thresholds
In addition to those cases referred to the Student Disciplinary Panel by the Academic Conduct Panel as described above, the Proctors may refer cases to the Student Disciplinary Panel directly after receipt from the examiners and after their investigation, but will only do so in what appear to be very serious cases. This is likely to include cases of apparent deliberate deception such as purchase of submissions from an essay mill or ghostwriting service, students with a history of plagiarism, or very extensive plagiarism.
Outcomes

The Panel will have a range of outcomes available to it including:

- Submission awarded 0% - no opportunity to re-submit i.e. failure of programme
- Award classification reduced
- Failed award
- Expelled from institution and failed award
- Removal of a degree (in cases of former students)
- Additionally, any of the outcomes available at Level 2