Student Guidance on Avoiding Plagiarism in Research Postgraduate Programmes

Introduction

The University’s research postgraduate degrees and awards are given in recognition of a student’s own personal achievement. Plagiarism, at whatever stage of a student’s programme, whether discovered before or after graduation\(^1\), is therefore viewed extremely seriously, and will be investigated and dealt with appropriately by the University.

Study at research postgraduate level is different from study at undergraduate level. You may be expected to do more in terms of acknowledging your sources and developing your own ideas than was required in your undergraduate programme. This guide is intended to provide some general guidance about what plagiarism is, and how to avoid it when preparing your thesis/dissertation report, and give you details about where to go for further support, or if you have questions about the preparation of your work.

Definition

**Plagiarism is the act of copying or including in one’s own work, without adequate acknowledgement, intentionally or unintentionally, the work of another, for one’s own benefit.**

Plagiarism is a form of cheating and is contrary to the principles of academic study.

You may be familiar with the following examples of plagiarism:

1. Including in one’s own work extracts from another person’s work without the use of quotation marks and the acknowledgement of the source (which may be a book, a research paper, a web source, another student’s work, a member of staff’s comments or notes, data, lab work or pictures etc.).
2. Summarising another person’s work without acknowledgement.
3. Using the ideas or help of another person without acknowledgement of the source (Help can include, for example, the provision of materials or assistance with statistics or data processing, and external collaborations).
4. Copying the work of another student, with or without their knowledge or agreement.
5. Collaborating with students or others on a piece of assessed work that should be completed and submitted individually\(^2\).

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\(^1\) Suspected plagiarism in the work of a graduate will be investigated by the College Academic Misconduct Officer, following procedures as close as possible to those outlined below. Cases of plagiarism will be referred to the Appeal Committee, the relevant Board of Examiners, and the University Secretary, where necessary. The full procedures for suspected graduate plagiarism are detailed in the assessment regulations (please see below).

\(^2\) This type of plagiarism is called collusion. This may be defined as the unauthorised and unattributed collaboration of students or others in a piece of assessed work.
6. Cutting and pasting from electronic sources without explicit acknowledgement of the URL / author, and without explicitly marking the pasted text in inverted commas, or labelling the source of the diagram or illustration. The inclusion of large amounts of such pasted material, even if acknowledged, always raises doubts about how much of the work presented should be credited to the student. The same applies to over-quotiation from a traditional, printed source.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Students on postgraduate research programmes can avoid plagiaristic activity by ensuring that:

- All assistance provided during the preparation of a thesis is acknowledged using recognised conventions;
- All collaborative work is properly acknowledged and appropriate credit given;
- Each individual piece of work in a thesis that has been done by another person is explicitly acknowledged;
- The work is properly referenced using citations in the recognised reference system for the subject area

Guidance should be obtained from supervisors in the first instance, on the practices that apply in the relevant subject area and discipline.
The University’s Procedures for Dealing with Plagiarism Cases in Research Postgraduate Programmes

Suspected plagiarism at any stage of a student’s programme, whether discovered before or after graduation, is investigated and dealt with appropriately by the University.

Plagiarism Detection Software

In order to assist with the detection of plagiarism, a number of Schools now routinely use Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) plagiarism detection software when marking assessed, student work. The plagiarism detection service is an online service hosted at www.submit.ac.uk that enables institutions and staff to carry out electronic comparison of students' work against electronic sources including other students' work. The service is managed by The University of Northumbria on behalf of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and is available to all UK tertiary education institutions by subscription.

The plagiarism detection service works by executing searches of the world wide web and extensive databases of reference material, as well as content previously submitted by other users. Each new submission is compared with all the existing information. The software makes no decisions as to whether a student has plagiarised, it simply highlights sections of text that are duplicated in other sources. All work will continue to be reviewed by the course tutor. As such, the software is simply used as a tool to highlight any instance where there is a possibly case of plagiarism. Passages copied directly or very closely from existing sources will be identified by the software, and both the original and the potential copy will be displayed for the tutor to view. Where any direct quotations are relevant and appropriately referenced, the course tutor will be able to see this and will continue to consider the next highlighted case.

Once work has been submitted to the system it becomes part of the ever growing database of material against which subsequent submissions are checked. The copyright in each work submitted remains with the original author, but a non-exclusive, non-transferable, licence is granted to permit use of the material for plagiarism detection purposes.

There is an on-line demonstration of the system available at http://www.submit.ac.uk/

Procedures

If an internal or external examiner suspects plagiarism, they will consider the nature and extent of the plagiarism before taking action.

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Cases that do not need to be formally investigated

If the internal and external examiners consider that there is plagiarism in the work for assessment, but it is the result of poor scholarship (e.g. inadequate citation of a paper or picture), and can be considered small in terms of its contribution to the overall work, the instance will be highlighted as a correction.

Cases that do need to be formally investigated

If the internal and external examiners consider that the plagiarism does need to be formally investigated, the following procedure will occur:

Each College has an ‘Academic Misconduct Panel’ with one or more designated College Academic Misconduct Officers, who are members of the academic teaching staff. This panel, together with the internal and external examiners, and the Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee, is responsible for investigating suspected cases of plagiarism, referring cases to the relevant Board of Examiners (i.e. for research degrees the College Postgraduate Studies Committee) or, if necessary, for disciplinary hearings.

Cases that are suspected before the oral examination

1. The internal and external examiner will inform the Convener of the relevant Board of Examiners (i.e. for research degrees, the Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee). Evidence of the suspected plagiarism will be collected together by the internal examiner, and a report made to the Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee.
2. On the basis of the internal examiner’s report, the Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee will decide whether the cheating is minor or significant. They may seek advice from the internal and external examiners and the College Academic Misconduct Officer in making this decision.
   2a If the plagiarism is considered to be minor the oral examination will be allowed to take place as planned. The examiners will be advised to take the minor plagiarism into account when determining the academic quality of the work.
   2b If the plagiarism is considered to be significant the oral examination will not be allowed to take place, and the report will be referred to a nominated College Academic Misconduct Officer for further investigation.

Cases that are suspected during an oral examination

3. If plagiarism is suspected during an oral examination, the examiners present will decide whether the evidence suggests a minor or significant case. This decision will be taken in the absence of the student, and the supervisor (if present), who will be asked to leave the room while the discussion takes place. The examiners will then take one of the following courses of action (in the event of any disagreement between the examiners, the external examiner’s views will normally take precedent):
   3a If the evidence is of minor plagiarism, the oral examination will continue and the examiners will make a face value recommendation about the award of the degree. The internal examiner will make a report for the Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee, as outlined in section 1 above. This report will include the face value recommendation about the award of the
degree. The Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee will then make a decision about whether the evidence is of minor or significant plagiarism, as outlined in section 2 above. If the plagiarism is considered to be minor then the procedure will follow that outlined in section 2a as closely as possible, for example, the Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee will liaise with the internal and external examiners to confirm the basis of the face value recommendation and the way in which the minor plagiarism has been taken into account in determining the academic quality of the work. If the plagiarism is considered to be significant then the procedure will follow that outlined in section 2b and the Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee will refer the report to a nominated College Academic Misconduct Officer.

3b If the evidence is of significant plagiarism that is too blatant and extensive to allow the examination to continue, then the oral examination will be suspended. The internal examiner will prepare a report for the Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee as outlined in sections 1 and 3a. The Convener will then make a decision about the significance of the case as outlined in sections 2 and 3a above, and will refer the case to a nominated College Academic Misconduct Officer for further investigation as necessary.

All significant cases

4 In significant cases, as outlined in sections 2b, 3a and 3b, the Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee and the College Academic Misconduct Officer will interview the student to find out about the suspected plagiarism, and any special circumstances, in order to consider a way forward.

   i) The student will receive written invitation to the interview, with a reasonable amount of notice, and will be sent a copy of the report prepared for the Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee and referred to the College Academic Misconduct Officer.

   ii) The student has the opportunity to be accompanied to the interview by another member of the University community, for example, a Students’ association advisor.

5 After the interview, the College Academic Misconduct Officer will complete a report. The report will include: the evidence of the suspected plagiarism; the report of the interview with the student; information given to students on the programme about the avoidance of plagiarism; and any further information which the student wishes to be taken into account. It will not include the action recommended by the College Academic Misconduct Officer.

6 The College Academic Misconduct Officer will then decide whether the case should be referred back to the Board of Examiners (i.e. for research degrees, the College Postgraduate Studies Committee), or whether it should be handled as a disciplinary case.

6a Significant cases which are referred back to the Board of Examiners

The College Academic Misconduct Officer, in consultation with the Convener of the College Postgraduate Committee, will impose a penalty, which will be applied by the Board of Examiners (i.e. the College Postgraduate Studies Committee). This committee has the power to apply one of the following penalties:

   i) Fail the thesis
ii) Require that the thesis be re-examined with the material in question excluded, with whatever consequences follow from such action, including failure or award of a lesser degree.

iii) Require that the thesis be re-submitted with the inappropriate material removed and sufficient editing done to make the thesis comprehensible. In this case, the student will be advised of the time allowed for the re-submission. This penalty may also include the consequence that the resubmitted thesis is no longer sufficiently substantial for the original degree and can only be resubmitted for a lesser degree.

6b **Significant cases that are referred for discipline**

The College Academic Misconduct Officer will make a report in preparation for a disciplinary interview. A College Authorised Officer, who will not be the same person as the College Academic Misconduct Officer who investigated the case, will conduct the interview. This interview will be arranged under the Code of Student Discipline (the URL for the Code of Student Discipline is included in the ‘Links’ section below). The student will be advised that the outcome of the interview could include referral to the Discipline Committee, which has the power to fail the thesis, suspend the student from the University, or expel the student from the University.

**Notes for Students**

If you are suspected of plagiarism, you should:

- Co-operate fully with the investigation carried out. It is in your interests to be open and honest.
- Speak to the advisory staff at EUSA for further guidance on how the plagiarism procedures work. Please see the Contacts section below for details of The Advice Place.
- Be patient. The investigation will be carried out as a priority, but the College Academic Misconduct Officer and others involved in the enquiry must have the opportunity to investigate the case thoroughly. The length of the investigation will depend in part on the seriousness of the case, so it is not possible to give exact time-scales. The College Academic Misconduct Officer or Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee will advise you of the likely timescales for investigation in your case, and will also advise you if these timings change.

Please consult the full details of the University’s policy on and procedures for dealing with plagiarism, which can be found within the Assessment Regulations: http://www.acaffairs.ed.ac.uk/Regulations/Assessment/Home.htm

**Contacts**

**EUSA: The Advice Place**

Full details of The Advice Place opening hours can be found at: http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/advice/

The addresses and phone numbers of each of the 3 Advice Places are also provided below:
Central
Bristo Square, Edinburgh
0131 650 9225
E-mail: Potterow.Advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk

Kings Buildings
KB House, West Mains Road, Edinburgh
0131 650 5822
E-mail: KB.Advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk

Holyrood
Paterson’s Land, 37 Holyrood Road, Edinburgh
0131 651 6060
E-mail: Holyrood.Advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk

Schools/Colleges

The University of Edinburgh School and College web sites, with contact details for key members of staff, can be accessed through:
http://www.ed.ac.uk/misc/academic.html

College Academic Misconduct Officers
(link from full list for Senate information)

Links

Code of Student Discipline
http://www.acaffairs.ed.ac.uk/Regulations/Discipline/index.htm

Assessment regulations, including plagiarism and cheating
http://www.acaffairs.ed.ac.uk/Regulations/Assessment/Home.htm

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http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/4_resource/plagiarism.html
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whose resources have been drawn on substantially in the preparation of this document.
The University would also like to thank Edinburgh College of Art for references to a number of useful plagiarism prevention web sites.
Frequently Asked Questions

The following is a list of answers to questions likely to be frequently asked about these procedures:

AVOIDANCE
- I learnt about plagiarism during my undergraduate studies, and never had any problems referencing pieces of work correctly. Can I just carry on in the same way?
  You may not be able to use exactly the same academic practices when completing your thesis/dissertation report, as you did in completing pieces of work for assessment during undergraduate study. You are at a different stage of your academic career, and may also be studying in a slightly different subject area. Both of these factors mean that you should discuss appropriate referencing conventions for your current programme, with your supervisor. It is likely that the practices and expectations about the way in which you prepare your work, may be different at research postgraduate level.

ADVICE
- Who can give me more advice and information about plagiarism?
  Your supervisor can provide information specific to your thesis/dissertation report preparation. If you have been accused of plagiarism and would like advice and information about the University’s plagiarism procedures, you should consult EUSA at The Advice Place. The numbers, addresses and e-mail addresses are provided in the Contacts section above.

PROCEDURES
- What kind of factors are considered when deciding whether a case is minor or significant?
  The Convener of the College Postgraduate Studies Committee’s decision may include consideration of the following factors:
  - The extent of the plagiarism
  - The views of the internal and external examiners
  - The student’s stage in their academic career, including their previous experience and familiarity with UK conventions
  - Whether it is a repeat offence (either at the University of Edinburgh, or, if the information is available, at other stages in the student’s academic career)
  - Any evidence of the intentional or unintentional nature of the incident
  - Information given to students on the course about the avoidance of plagiarism
  - The practices of the discipline
  - Any other lines of enquiry considered to be relevant

- What happens in an interview with the College Academic Misconduct Officer? What will they ask me?
  The format of the interview will vary, depending on the College Academic Misconduct Officer involved, and, to some extent, the nature of the incident that is being investigated. The purpose of the interview is to find out more information about what has happened, in order to decide on a way forward. You should therefore be prepared to answer a range of questions about your study skills, how
you prepared the thesis/dissertation report and how you account for the evidence of suspected plagiarism. You are entitled to be accompanied to the interview by a member of the University community, such as a EUSA advisor. Advisors from EUSA can also give you advice on preparing for your interview and what to expect at different stages of the University’s plagiarism procedures. Numbers and addresses for EUSA at The Advice Place are provided in the Contacts section above.