

# The seriousness of plagiarism incidents: Making consistent decisions across a university

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**Abstract:** A new plagiarism policy is being developed for Curtin University of Technology. A review of past practices across the university revealed difficulties among staff in deciding the seriousness of a case of alleged plagiarism and subsequently, in applying consistent penalties. These difficulties have arisen, in part, because of previous flexible policy provisions in relation to classifying an incident of plagiarism. The new policy provides a classification framework and proforma with four criteria, each on a continuum from least serious through to most serious, and then an overall classification into three levels. Each level then determines the management process to be followed. The purpose is to allow staff some flexibility to interpret different plagiarism cases but to make more consistent overall decisions. The proforma has been trialled to determine the degree of consistency in the decisions that staff make when using it. In this session, we present some data from the trial and recommendations for future use of the proforma.

**Keywords:** plagiarism; academic integrity, educational integrity

## Background

Student plagiarism<sup>1</sup> is a vexing issue that plagues educational institutions worldwide. It undermines educational and assessment processes and has the potential to devalue the quality or integrity of educational awards and damage the reputation of institutions that are unable to curb or manage it effectively. Electronic storage of information and the Internet is making plagiarism easier for students and arguably has precipitated an increasing emphasis on trying to deal with the problem more effectively.

A true picture about the incidence of plagiarism in universities may never be known because it is difficult to separate research on student plagiarism from research on student cheating in general. Most studies use survey-based, self-reported data that may be inherently unreliable. In addition, plagiarism is not necessarily a subset of

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the term 'student plagiarism' is used. This does not imply that students necessarily commit particular types of plagiarism but rather, it refers to plagiarism committed by students that has the effect of compromising or invalidating the assessment process.

cheating. However, a review of the work of a number of authors (Carroll, 2002; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Park, 2003; Walker, 1998) who have summarised findings from numerous research studies, suggests that:

- Academic dishonesty is widespread and appears to be increasing (results reporting in excess of 50% of students having cheated at some time in their undergraduate years is common); and
- The actual prevalence of plagiarism is likely to be greater than what is reported.

Recent publications supporting such findings, as well as media publicity given to some recent high-profile cases, have prompted Australian universities to investigate their own students' practices, review their academic misconduct policy and procedures and, in many cases, develop new educational programmes for addressing student plagiarism. In particular, there is an increasing imperative for institutions and their staff to reconceptualise plagiarism, first and foremost, as an educational issue rather than an issue of misconduct and to be much more proactive in implementing educative and preventive measures (Carroll, 2002; James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002). Much of the argument to support this comes from a greater consideration of the perspective of the student as a sometimes unwilling inductee into an unfamiliar culture (Ashworth, Freewood, & MacDonald, 2003; Bufton, 2003) or as a learner struggling to develop their writing skills and own "scholarly voice" (Dawson, 2004). However, when students do step over the line, there needs to be effective policy and procedures for dealing with them.

Once plagiarism has been detected, dealing with it in a consistent, fair and open manner is a complex and difficult task. Institutions must have a comprehensive and systematically implemented management plan that is appropriately resourced and supported by institutional management (Carroll, 2002; Park, 2004). Staff must also have common understandings of the concept and manifestations of student plagiarism, and know and carry out their responsibilities with due diligence.

### **Issues in reporting and classifying plagiarism**

The responsibility for detecting and reporting plagiarism usually rests with staff members marking students' work. However, it has been reported that staff may ignore instances of student plagiarism for various reasons: if it is thought to be unintentional or due to personal stress (Paterson, Taylor, & Usick, 2003); if the staff member holds idiosyncratic views about what is, and what is not plagiarism (Pincus & Schmelkin, 2003); or if the official process to be followed is arduous or too time-consuming (Sutherland-Smith, 2003).

The notion that there is a dimension of 'seriousness' to plagiarism, where a given act falls somewhere between least serious through to most serious, is clearly part of the thinking of academics (Pincus & Schmelkin, 2003). However, Pincus and Schmelkin found little consensus about some of the more moderate examples of plagiarism, with some academics even encouraging behaviours that others viewed as plagiarism. Hence, if staff are to agree and be consistent in classifying the degree of seriousness of an act of plagiarism, there is need for a framework to promote common understandings and support consistent decisions.

While consistency of decisions made by staff about plagiarism incidents is essential for both staff and student confidence that due process is being followed, establishing and monitoring consistency is complex (Park, 2004).

## **Curtin University of Technology**

At Curtin, we have embarked on a revision of institutional procedures for managing plagiarism. The first stage has been to reconceptualise plagiarism as a breach of academic integrity and set it more into an educational framework. Plagiarism should be addressed and managed initially through proactive means: explicit educative programmes, information and support for students, and course and assessment design that limits student opportunities for plagiarism. Coupled with this are to be more robust procedures for detecting, acting on and recording details of plagiarism incidents. These procedures will require

- definitions and processes agreed to by all staff, and which staff understand equally;
- that the degree of seriousness of a case/incident be classified consistently; and that
- appropriate and equivalent penalties are applied for equivalent acts of plagiarism.

This paper deals specifically with the second of these three issues.

### **Classifying the seriousness of an act of plagiarism**

Classifying the seriousness of an act of plagiarism has, in the past, been problematic for staff in this university. Taking into account many aspects of an incident without explicit guidance has resulted in variable decisions and staff insecurity about their judgment.

A review of policies in other universities led to the following list of criteria often used to judge the seriousness of an act of plagiarism or to determine a fitting penalty:

1. Experience of the student
2. Nature the plagiarism
3. Extent or amount of the work that is plagiarised
4. Intention of the student to plagiarise or to cheat by way of plagiarism
5. Specific instructions for completion of the assessment task
6. Mitigating factors related to culture etc
7. Previous incidents of plagiarism involving the student
8. Degree of premeditation
9. Degree of remorse shown
10. Offence committed under duress
11. Role played by offender where others are involved
12. For HDR students—the stage in the journey of completing their thesis.

Making a decision on how serious a given case is inevitably involves a degree of subjectivity on the relevant criteria, and possibly the need to give more weight to one or more of the criteria. It seems necessary that for procedural consistency and transparency, there should be a classification scheme to support systematic decision-making and to enable subsequent scrutiny of the decision-making process. However, if a classification scheme is too complex or a proforma (if provided) takes too long to complete, staff may not use it properly or may choose not to report the plagiarism to avoid the lengthy paperwork process. On the other hand, if the classification scheme is too simple or uni-dimensional, it may not enable relevant details of the case to be considered.

This study has used the newly-developed classification scheme proforma that is being incorporated into Curtin University procedures (see Fig 1 and Appendix). It was designed to assist staff to make decisions that are comparable both from one plagiarism case to the next and across different schools and the university, and also to ensure that the decision-making process is documented for future reference. The degree of seriousness of a plagiarism incident is estimated on four dimensions or criteria (Table 1). Each criterion has an implicit scale from least to most serious (see Appendix for further elaboration). Note that under this scheme

- intentionality is not a factor in determining whether or not plagiarism has occurred, only in determining how serious it is, and
- the number of previous plagiarism transgressions of a student is not a factor in determining if plagiarism has occurred, only in consideration of a penalty.

All the remaining criteria listed above are considered to mitigate or aggravate the incident and may be considered in apportioning blame and/or imposing penalties.

**Table 1. Details of each criterion used in the scheme and proforma for classifying the seriousness of an incident of plagiarism.**

Criteria	Description	Scale
Experience of the student (EXPERIENCE)	Relates to staff expectations that the student should be aware of the seriousness of their actions.	Ranges from new or inexperienced students through to those nearing completion of their course or thesis.
Nature the act of plagiarism (NATURE)	Nature of the breach of academic scholarship.	Ranges from poor paraphrasing, citation and referencing skills through to wholesale copying or appropriation of others' works (Park, 2004; Walker, 1998).
Extent of the plagiarism (EXTENT)	Amount or proportion of the assessment item or work that is not the student's own. Extent to which the assessment process is compromised.	Ranges from a few elements (having little impact on overall assessment) through to a significant proportion (greater than 10% and/or having the effect of significantly compromising assessment)
Intention of the student to plagiarise (INTENT)	Intentionality of the act of plagiarism. Intent to cheat by way of plagiarism.	Ranges from unintentional or careless acts through to deliberate intent to commit fraud.

There are also three overall 'levels' of plagiarism (see below). Once established, the level of plagiarism determines the subsequent management procedure within the university.

**Level I plagiarism** is inadequate or misleading citing, referencing or paraphrasing, arising mainly from a student's limited knowledge about plagiarism, or how to conform to academic conventions, or from carelessness or neglect rather than intention to deceive. Level I plagiarism is not considered academic misconduct, and although it is a breach of academic integrity, will not be treated as punishable. A student will be offered remedial advice and allowed to correct and re-submit their work.

**Level II plagiarism** is more serious than Level I plagiarism and includes misleading or fraudulent acts or work arising from a student's ignorance of academic integrity or academic conventions (where adequate knowledge would have been expected), and where intention to deceive an assessor or cheat by way of plagiarism is apparent, but where the overall effect or consequence of the plagiarism does not significantly compromise the assessment process. Level II plagiarism is considered academic misconduct.

**Level III plagiarism** is more serious than Level II plagiarism, and includes misleading or fraudulent acts arising from clear intention to deceive an assessor or premeditated cheating by way of plagiarism. The effect of the plagiarism is to seriously compromise the assessment process. Level III plagiarism is considered academic misconduct.

### **What is consistency in decision-making?**

For the purpose of this study, a consistent decision occurs when staff members independently make the same decision. In this example of the use of a proforma for classifying the seriousness of a plagiarism incident, staff were asked to judge hypothetical plagiarism incidents on the four criteria and then mark a point along a continuum for each criterion. There was no scale on each continuum, but for the purpose of subsequent analysis, a scale from 1-9 was superimposed. Staff were then asked to decide a final plagiarism Level (I, II or III) based on their own judgment of the incident and their decisions on the four criteria. No specific instructions were provided for this step. Whether any decision arrived at by staff is the *correct* decision or not is a moot point; one might argue that the correct decision is the one agreed to by the majority. Consistency is thus akin to measurement *precision* as distinct from measurement accuracy.

Three useful measures of consistency are the *range* (lowest to highest points), *inter-quartile range* (50% of points lie within this range) or the *standard deviation* (68% of points lie within the mean  $\pm$  the standard deviation). The smaller each of them is, the more consistent the decision. A box and whisker plot provides a useful visual indication of consistency because it shows the range, interquartile range and evidence of the distribution of points within the range.

## **Method**

The question that we address in this paper is: Can staff make consistent decisions on different cases of plagiarism using the classification scheme?

### **Instrument**

Nine hypothetical cases (involving 12 'students') were generated and distributed to participating staff. Real incidents are seldom clear-cut and so in most of the hypothetical cases there was insufficient detail to allow a completely unequivocal, tick-the-box response on every criterion. Each survey package consisted of four or five cases. Package A contained Cases 1-5, package B contained Cases 6-9, package C contained Cases 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9, and so on. This was done to reduce the chance of systematic bias in the responses. Accompanying the package of cases was a sample completed proforma to assist staff to complete each one (see Fig. 1). An example of the proforma and one of the hypothetical cases is included in the Appendix. For this part of the research project, staff

were asked to complete the task on their own. In the actual procedures, two staff members would be required to agree on the decisions in each case.

**EXAMPLE**

NAME OF STUDENT: \_\_\_\_\_ UNIT: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Nature of alleged plagiarism: \_\_\_\_\_

**Description of the 'offence' is provided.** ← **Read the case**

Staff member (complainant): \_\_\_\_\_ Unit Coordinator: \_\_\_\_\_

Criteria	LOW LEVEL	MEDIUM LEVEL	HIGH LEVEL
<b>EXPERIENCE OF THE STUDENT</b> Relates to your expectation that the student should be aware of the seriousness of their actions.	For example: First year student or first semester of course Cultural considerations/mitigating circumstances e.g. no prior instruction or unclear instructions given HDR students: in pre-candidacy draft	For example: Student after first semester of course but before final year Alter completion of known instruction in avoiding plagiarism HDR students: in candidacy or early thesis drafts	For example: Final year, experienced student Where student is expected to fully understand and exhibit academic integrity HDR students: in mid-course or final thesis drafts or submitted theses
<b>NATURE OF PLAGIARISM</b> Nature of the breach of academic scholarship.	For example: Referencing or attribution of work is not clear or adequate, or has numerous errors Inappropriate paraphrasing	For example: Failure to reference and/or cite adequately Copying segments of other students' assessment work False indication of contribution to group work Copying fragments of material from websites, book or other publications Recycling parts of previous assignments	For example: Fabricated references or citations Whole works copied (from students or other sources) Purchased assignment Stealing others' work
<b>EXTENT OF PLAGIARISM</b> Amount or proportion of assessment item or work that is not the student's own. Extent to which the assessment process is compromised.	For example: Few sentences, one paragraph, one (minor) graphic Few elements of computer source code	For example: Two or three paragraphs or a segment of the work Segments of computer source code	
<b>INTENT OF STUDENT TO CHEAT BY WAY OF PLAGIARISM</b> Intentionality of the act of plagiarism and intent to cheat by way of plagiarism.	For example: Plagiarism appears unintentional or due to lack of knowledge Intent to cheat is unlikely or doubtful	For example: Plagiarism appears intentional or the result of negligence Intent to cheat is probable but cannot be clearly substantiated Two or more students involved	
<b>DECISION REFER TO SCHEDULES B AND C ONCE LIKELY LEVEL OF SERIOUSNESS HAS BEEN DETERMINED.</b>	LEVEL I offence	LEVEL II offence	LEVEL III offence
<b>Determination of level of seriousness, LEVEL I, II, III (please circle after completing the table)</b> Comment: _____			

**Place letters on each where you estimate that offence is located. Use different letter to denote student - G for student G, H Student H**

**Estimate an overall level seriousness  
If more than one student, separate estimate for each**

**Figure 1: Instruction page given to staff to assist them to complete the same proforma for the four or five hypothetical cases they were given.**

Demographic data collected included teaching division, sex and years of teaching experience in higher education. Also included were multiple response items asking participants perceptions about the realism of the cases, the adequacy of detail in the cases and the participant's degree of confidence in making decisions using the four criteria on the proforma.

### Participants

Staff from across the university were invited to participate. Members from each division's teaching and learning committee were personally invited to complete the survey and to seek other participants from their respective schools. Approximately 100 surveys were distributed and 52 returned, and thus 25-30 surveys were returned for each hypothetical case.

### Summary of cases

Not all cases were designed to be equally complex and a range of situations was devised. See Table 2. The most straight-forward cases were Cases 1, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9. The more complex cases, involving two or more students who played different roles, or involving equivocal evidence, were Cases 2, 3 and, in particular 6.

**Table 2. Brief outline of the hypothetical cases included in the surveys.**

Case	Student/s involved	Brief outline of the hypothetical case
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1	A	Research project. Student A copied lit review segments and produced questionable conclusions
2	B and C (different roles)	Student B allowed student C access to a completed assignment. Student C copied student B's assignment and submitted as own.
3	D	Student D submitted a possibly purchased assignment for which the standard was inexplicably high.
4	F and G (equal roles)	Student F collaborated with student G, and both handed in identical copied or shared work.
5	H	Student H exhibited very poor writing and referencing skills despite explicit instruction.
6	K, L & M (different roles)	Student K was reluctantly complicit in providing false information—voluntarily admitted fault. Student L coerced others into providing false information (to help M). Student M acceded to pressure to provide false information.
7	N	Non-English speaking HDR student N copied many segments of a literature review to compensate for poor writing, paraphrasing and referencing skills.
8	O and P (equal roles)	Students O and P colluded to reduce workload by dividing and sharing elements of the task and copying each other's work for their journals.
9	Q	Student Q copied graphics and included them without attribution.

## Data and results

Staff reported that the scenarios were realistic (mean 3.6 out of 4) but there was less agreement that enough detail was provided about each case (mean 2.7 out of 4). In general, staff felt that they were confident in being able to make judgments about the various cases using the criteria and continua (column 2, Table 3). They expressed least confidence in making judgments about the intention of students to commit plagiarism (criterion 4). This is reflected in the mean standard deviation for the use of each criterion scale (column 3, Table 2). There tended to be a smaller spread of scores on criteria that staff expressed a greater degree of confidence in using to make decisions.

**Table 3. Staff degree of confidence in using the criteria to make judgments.**

Criterion	Degree of confidence in making judgments (mean out of 4)	Mean standard deviation for the score on each criterion*
1. Experience of the student (EXPERIENCE)	3.3	1.49
2. Nature the plagiarism (NATURE)	3.1	1.46
3. Extent or amount of the work that is plagiarised (EXTENT)	3.0	1.58
4. Intention of the student to plagiarise or to	2.7	1.62

### cheat by way of plagiarism (INTENT)

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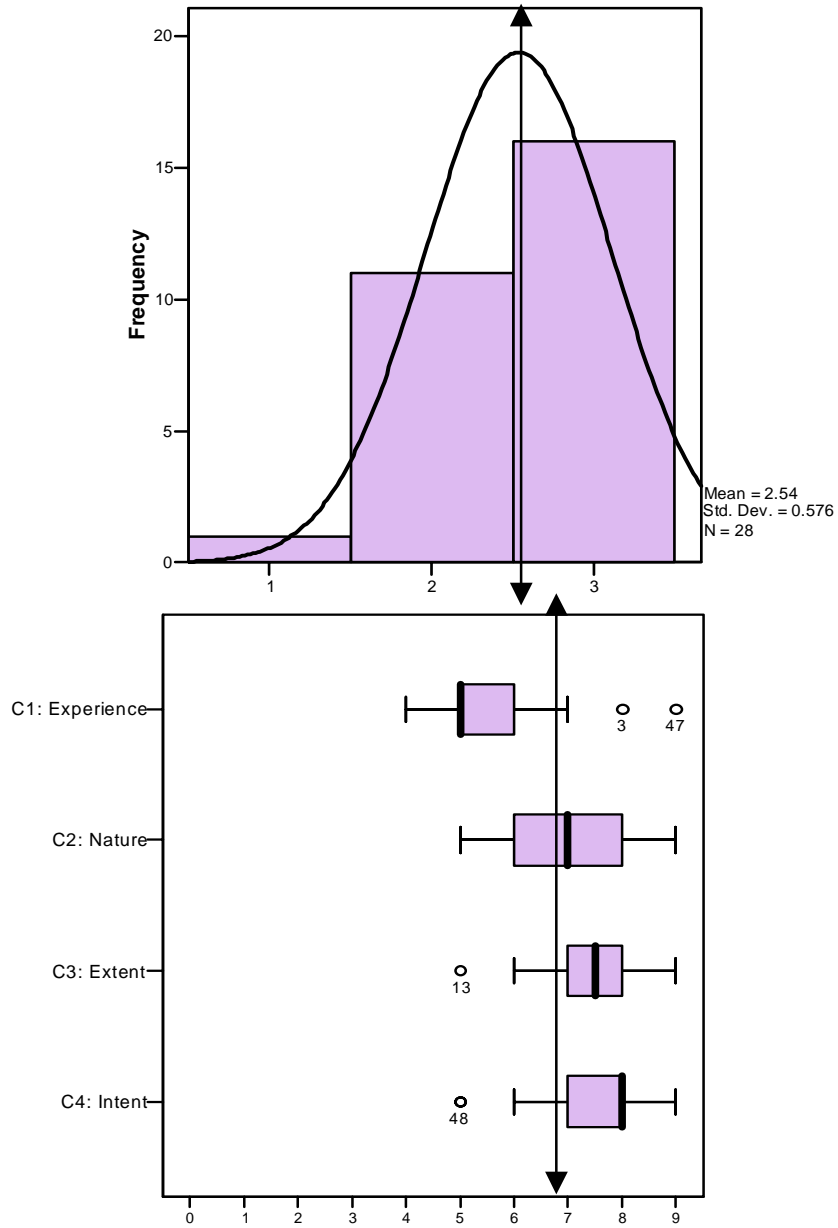
\*The lower this value, the smaller the spread of scores and thus more consistent the decisions

Figures 2 and 3 show one way in which data about each case has been analysed. The four criteria are represented in the lower section, each on a scale from 1-9 (scale located at the bottom). Staff responses are shown using box and whisker plots. The vertical line shows the mean score of all four scales together, on the scale of 1 to 9. The histogram in the upper section shows the nominated *overall* level of seriousness, on a scale of 1 to 3. The solid vertical line shows the mean score. Level 1 plagiarism in the upper section coincides with the range 1-3 on the criteria scales below, Level 2 plagiarism corresponds with the range 3-6 on the criteria scales below and Level 3 plagiarism corresponds with the range 6-9 on the criteria scales below.

Case 8 (Fig. 2) shows that the most consistent decisions were made on criteria 1, 3 and 4. Criterion 2 was more problematic in that staff did not agree on the seriousness of the particular act of students sharing workload and agreeing to copy one another's work for submission.

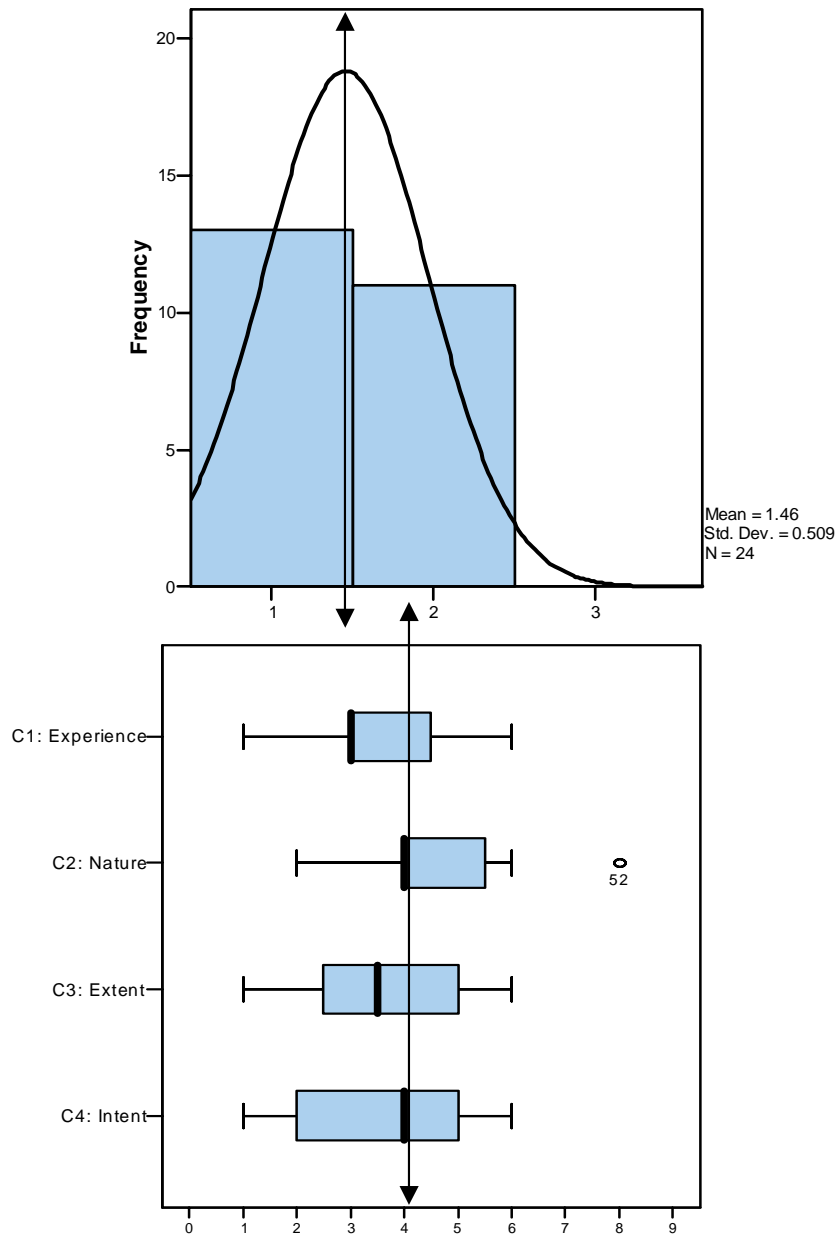
Case 5 (Fig. 3) shows that staff were least consistent in making a decision on the intent of the student to plagiarise (criterion 4). There was also not quite enough information given to enable a more precise estimation of the amount of material that was plagiarized, and this is reflected in the spread of decisions.

**Case 8: 2nd year students collude to share and copy some of each other's journal entries about site visits**



**Figure 2. Results of Case 8. Students O and P colluded to reduce their workload by dividing and sharing elements of the task and copying each other's work for their journals.**

**Case 5: First year exhibits very poor referencing (incl. copied sentences) and writing skills despite explicit instruction.**



**Figure 3. Results of Case 5. Student H exhibited very poor referencing skills despite explicit instruction.**

Similar analyses for all cases showed that cases for which criteria were more effective (i.e. for which more consistent decisions were made) were Cases 3 (student D), 8 (student O), 2 (student C) and 9 (student Q). Cases for which the criteria were least effective (i.e. for which less consistent decisions were made) were Cases 6 (all students K, L and M) and 1 (student A). Case 6 was the most complex, involving three students with different roles engaged in an act that some staff members may not previously have acknowledged as plagiarism (misrepresenting the relative contributions of students to a group assessment task).

Where decision-making was not really consistent, in most cases it can be attributed to unclear information, or lack of detail provided in the case. It is thus expected that, given access to more complete evidence or given the ability to ask for clarification, staff will be able to use the proforma to make reasonably precise estimates or judgments on each criterion.

Ideally, the two means (lower and upper sections) should line up. That is, if staff make a choice of overall level based only the four criteria, with no implicit weighting given to one or more scales and taking no 'extra' information into account, they should choose the level consistent with their mean score on the four criteria. In all instances however, staff tended to be more conservative in choosing an overall level. In Case 8 (Fig. 2) some staff opted for Level 2 (i.e. Level II) instead of Level 3 (III). In this case, the experience of the students (second years) may have resulted in this scale being given an implicit weighting over the other three. This also occurred in other cases where one scale was given a much lower rating than the others. In Case 5 (Fig. 3) where all four criteria suggested that the student should have been given an overall Level 2 (II), many staff chose Level 1 (i.e. Level I), possibly because they found it more difficult to make a tight judgment on two of the criteria (3 and 4), perhaps giving the student the benefit of the doubt. Thus, although staff *can* use the four criteria in a consistent manner, the decision on overall level for a given case is possibly influenced by:

- an implicit weighting given to one criterion;
- their confidence in making decisions using the criteria; or
- on a number of factors outside these.

It may also be an inherent issue related to scales (being more conservative in choice on the upper scale has a greater effect in lowering the mean).

## **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to determine if staff could use the University's proposed new plagiarism classification scheme and proforma to make consistent decisions about the level of seriousness of a number of hypothetical incidents of plagiarism. The conclusions that we have reached so far are that:

- Staff could use each criterion scale consistently provided they were in receipt of sufficient evidence or information.
- Staff were least confident in making judgments about the intention of students to commit plagiarism.
- Staff tended to make a more conservative overall judgment, particularly in relation to experience of the student or where one criterion score was lower than the others.

Further analysis will be conducted to explore other implicit criteria that staff employ in making decisions, ascertain if consistency in decision-making is improved if two staff members collaboratively make judgments using the provided criteria, and examine the consistency of decision-making across disciplines and in relation to other factors such as gender, staff experience, campus location etc. We will also investigate the criteria staff use in making decisions about overall level of seriousness given their decisions on the four contributing criteria.

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## Appendix: determining the seriousness of plagiarism

# Case 5

Name of student: \_\_\_\_\_ Unit: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Nature of alleged plagiarism:

**Student H handed in a first-year assignment essay that was poorly constructed, consisting of multiple quotations, some text with in-text citations and some obviously copied sentences without any acknowledgement at all. The student clearly has few skills in paraphrasing and in synthesising ideas, as the whole essay was a series of mostly unconnected paragraphs. The references were also badly formatted and the list incomplete. The class had been given specific instruction in paraphrasing, citing and referencing.**

Staff member (complainant): \_\_\_\_\_ Unit Coordinator: \_\_\_\_\_

Criteria	LOW LEVEL	MEDIUM LEVEL	HIGH LEVEL
<b>Experience of the student</b> Relates to your expectation that the student should be aware of the seriousness of their actions.	<i>For example:</i> First year student or first semester of course Cultural considerations/mitigating circumstances e.g. no prior instruction or unclear instructions given HDR students: in pre-candidacy draft	<i>For example:</i> Students after first semester of course but before final year After completion of known instruction in avoiding plagiarism HDR students: in candidacy or early thesis drafts	<i>For example:</i> Final year, experienced student Where student is expected to fully understand and exhibit academic integrity HDR students: in mid-course or final thesis drafts or submitted thesis
<b>Nature of plagiarism</b> Nature of the breach of academic scholarship.	<i>For example:</i> Referencing or attribution of work is not clear or adequate, or has numerous errors Inappropriate paraphrasing	<i>For example:</i> Failure to reference and/or cite adequately Copying segments of other students' assignment work False indication of contribution to group work Copying fragments of material from websites, book or other publications Recycling parts of previous assignments	<i>For example:</i> Fabricated references or citations Whole works copied (from students or other sources) Purchased assignment Stealing others' work
<b>Extent of plagiarism</b> Amount or proportion of assessment item or work that is not the student's own. Extent to which the assessment process is compromised.	<i>For example:</i> Few sentences, one paragraph, one (minor) graphic Few elements of computer source code	<i>For example:</i> Two or three paragraphs or a segment of the work Segments of computer source code	<i>For example:</i> More than 10% of the work is copied Significant appropriation of ideas or artistic work Multiple pages or sections of text or graphics copied
<b>Intent of student to cheat by way of plagiarism</b> Intentionality of the act of plagiarism and intent to cheat by way of plagiarism.	<i>For example:</i> Plagiarism appears unintentional or due to lack of knowledge Intent to cheat is unlikely or doubtful	<i>For example:</i> Plagiarism appears intentional or the result of negligence Intent to cheat is probable but cannot be clearly substantiated Two or more students involved	<i>For example:</i> Plagiarism appears deliberate and planned Actions contravene clear instructions Intent to cheat is evident and can be substantiated
<b>Decision</b>	LEVEL I offence	LEVEL II offence	LEVEL III offence

Determination of level of seriousness: LEVEL I II III (please circle after completing the table)