Use of plagiarism detection software

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Purpose	This policy relates to the University's use of plagiarism detection software, the limitations of the software and the key issues for both Schools and students.

Version number	Purpose / changes	Document status	Author of changes, role and school / unit	Date
03	Updated for 1 year pending review.	Updated	Administrative Officer	June 2024

UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

POLICY ON PLAGIARISM DETECTION SOFTWARE

1. Introduction

Both within and outwith the University there is still concern about the prevalence of plagiarism. Whilst it is widely accepted that key amongst these ways are (a) effective and timely advice to students about proper forms of academic writing and (b) careful design of assignments to minimise the possibilities for plagiarism, there is nonetheless also wide acceptance of a need to have in place improved means of detection of academic misconduct whenever it does occur. It is in the interests of the students themselves that the standards of the institution are safeguarded and that no students are allowed to profit from academic misconduct.

2. Use of Plagiarism Detection Software

The University uses on-line plagiarism detections systems, which automatically scan submitted coursework and examination submissions for similarity with other material drawn from a very wide range of sources. Additionally staff may make direct use of other similarity detection software, including search engines to check for the originality of submitted material. Using online systems, the checks are not only against what can be found on the web, but also check against other documents in online databases, against earlier years at St Andrews and from other institutions that use the online services. The use of some Internet based similarity detection software requires that the University be clear about how it is to be used in the interests of both staff and students.

3. Educational use of Plagiarism Detection Software

It is important to remember that plagiarism detection software is used in the University not just to detect plagiarism but also as an educational tool for teaching students good academic skills. Use of plagiarism detection software for educational purposes should however be confined to supported contexts, in which students can be instructed about academic writing and advised about appropriate follow-up actions in cases where the writing is deficient. This may include tutorials or workshops devoted to best practice in academic writing that are offered as part of modules. This may also include skills workshops or individual advisory sessions offered by CEED or the University Library. In some cases (such as IEI) it may be integrated into class instruction. Students should receive instructions in academic writing from an early stage in their University education. The use of plagiarism detection software should never be seen as a replacement for this instruction. It does not teach students how to write. Consequently, the University only allows academic and other relevant staff free access to plagiarism detection software. Plagiarism Detection Software is not accessible to students, as the University believes that the results would not provide students with informed feedback but would only teach them how to amend their work until it became "acceptable".

4. Limitations of Plagiarism Detection Software

It is important that staff and students realise that:-

- A negative result (i.e. low % match) from a plagiarism detection software check does not guarantee that academic misconduct has not occurred, because the database cannot be exhaustive and because some forms of academic misconduct may not be detectable by this means.

- A positive result (i.e. high % match) from a plagiarism detection software check does not automatically indicate plagiarism, because the check may highlight a corresponding text that has been properly quoted and referenced.

The interpretation of the results produced by plagiarism detection software must therefore be undertaken by an academic member of staff. It is the responsibility of the academic marking the piece of work to ensure that they have seen and correctly interpreted the plagiarism detection software report where this is available.

5. Key issues for Schools

The following options are available to academic staff for using plagiarism detection software all of which are recognised and permitted by the University.

- Staff may require electronic submission of all student work (with or without an accompanying hard copy) and may upload all such electronically-submitted work themselves for checking by plagiarism detection software.
- Staff may require electronic submission of all student work through MMS or Moodle, which allows an automatic checking of all student work by plagiarism detection software without any separate uploading by staff. This may be with or without an accompanying hard copy.
- Staff may decide to test individual pieces of student work on a suspicion or sample basis, if a procedure for obtaining an electronic copy of the work is in place.
- Staff may decide to test individual pieces of work using search engines other than plagiarism detection software on a suspicion or sample basis.

Students must be clearly informed that work submitted for assessment may be tested on either a comprehensive or sample basis.
Staff are advised of the advantages of making use of the facility automatically to check all student work through the various forms of electronic submission. All relevant Officers in Schools have been trained in this use, as well as in direct on-line submission. The latter however can be very labour-intensive when all assessed work is submitted.

6. Key issues for Students

It is important that students be aware of the potential use of plagiarism detection software for checking their work for plagiarism but also the benefits of plagiarism detection software as a tool for them to receive formative feedback from academic staff.

- Students should be made aware at an early stage of what constitutes good practice in academic writing and what constitutes plagiarism or academic misconduct. This is offered through pre-sessional workshops, University and School publications and/or in module instruction including the Training in Good Academic Practice module.
- Students should also be made aware that the use of detection systems is in the interests of seeking to treat all students fairly.
- Students hold the copyright to their own work. Therefore, when submitting a piece of coursework, some similarity detection systems may ask for permission to make work available to other clients of the similarity detection service. Agreeing to this request is strongly encouraged as it makes it harder for others to copy, re-use, and take credit for the work. Note that all submissions are checked against internal and external sources and similarity reports forwarded to relevant members of staff irrespective of permission. Permission only affects if a third party organization using the same service can see the entire submitted document.

- Schools should also circulate this information to students in a systematic way, reflecting a concern to promote good practice in academic writing and a desire to clarify, where necessary, what constitutes academic misconduct.

7.   Guidance and Support

The Proctor's Office can be contacted at deansoffice@st-andrews.ac.uk for any advice about this policy.

The University's use of plagiarism detection software is fair and lawful, meeting all of the necessary provisions of data protection and copyright legislation. If there are any questions on this, please contact the University's Associate Chief Information Officer (Information Assurance & Governance).

Version number	Purpose / changes	Document status	Author of changes, role and school / unit	Date
01	All references to specific plagiarism software removed	Updated	-	April 2016
02	Minor amendments to extend scope of policy to cover online examinations.	Updated	-	July 2020
03	Updated for 1 year pending review.	Updated	Administrative Officer	June 2024