



Education Briefing: Plagiarism

This Education Briefing is designed to provide an introduction into how CUSU can help you in your role as a student rep in either a College or Department/Faculty; it contains some information on CUSU itself and an explanation of a key academic issue from CUSU's current education policy and activity. For many College officers, an 'academic' or 'education' remit may not be in your job title or it may be a responsibility shared with another role such as welfare: if you feel that there would be someone in your Common Room/SU who would be better placed to receive this information or if you're no longer in office as a rep, please pass it on to the relevant person and let me know so I can keep my records up-to-date.

CUSU does not exist to prescribe policy to College Common Rooms or to Faculty Reps. While it does have a role in shaping policy at a University level, it is up to you how much you take on the Union's advice and information and whether or not to use it to inform any campaigns that you might have. The most important thing to remember about CUSU is that it is available to help you should you want it: you should feel free to make use of the contacts for the 'Education Team' on the back page of this document.

CUSU exists to serve both undergraduate and graduate students and the information in this Briefing is designed to be interesting and, hopefully, relevant to you and the students you represent. If you would like to talk about anything written here or to comment on how I could communicate better with you, please get in touch.

Ant Bagshaw
Education Officer

PS. Also enclosed in some information on tax which you may like to read and/or share with others.

Further sources of information:

- **CUSU website:** www.cusu.cam.ac.uk
 - The website hosts a wealth of information on a broad range of student matters. In addition to pages on the make-up of the Union itself and our policies, the website is designed to be a useful tool for students trying to find out information on welfare and educational concerns.
- **CamExams:** www.camexams.com
 - This section of the CUSU website holds important information on how students can appeal exam results as well as more general welfare advice on exam preparation.
- **NUS Officer Online:** www.officeronline.co.uk
 - The National Union of Students prepares briefings on a large number of educational topics.

Plagiarism

What is plagiarism?

The University has recently developed a new definition of plagiarism as part of the work of the Plagiarism Steering Group (PSG):

Plagiarism is defined as submitting as one's own work that which derives in part or in its entirety from the work of others without due acknowledgement. It is both poor scholarship and a breach of academic integrity.¹

Is plagiarism a problem at Cambridge?

While instances of plagiarism do not seem to be widespread in Cambridge, there is increasing worry about both the numbers of students deliberately plagiarising in order to cheat and those who copy work, accidentally, without proper attribution. Instances of plagiarism accusations most often occur in specific groups of students; particularly amongst international students whose previous education has been outside the UK and one-year MPhil students.

What is the University's stance on plagiarism?

The University, through its 'Learning and Teaching Strategy' (LTS) is committed to improving the level of education it provides to students with regard to plagiarism avoidance:

The University encourages Faculties and Departments to adopt assessment methods which are appropriate to the learning outcomes of the course, and has a policy to this effect. Mindful that some assessment methods are more open to plagiarism than others, and resisting the imperative to change assessment methods for that reason alone, the University will explore better ways of alerting students to the danger of plagiarism, and provide guidance and support to enable students to resist plagiarism.²

It is also making greater use of 'Plagiarism Detection Equipment' (PDE) in the form of the software package 'Turnitin'. Only a small number of Departments have, so far, applied to use the software to test their students' work but the PSG is seeking to encourage other subjects to make use of the software.

How does PDE work?

PDE works by scanning a document and comparing it against both online sources (like a search engine) and work which has been previously submitted to the particular software. The scan takes a few minutes to complete and generates a report from which the user can identify areas where the wording is similar and take appropriate action such as checking the accuracy of references or initiating a disciplinary process.



See www.scanmyessay.com for an example of PDE in action.

¹ <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/plagiarism/students/statement.html>

² <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/strategy/strategy2006.pdf> 4.1.5.c

What is CUSU's stance on plagiarism?

CUSU takes an active role in the development of University-wide plagiarism policy through a seat on the PSG and at higher-level committees. The focus of CUSU policy³ and action is on aiming to ensure that the policies are fair to all students and that the focus of resources is on teaching students about how to avoid plagiarism through better skills training at Department and College level and not on punishing them. Furthermore, CUSU's policy is that Turnitin should not be used solely to identify and punish students but also to educate them: in many Higher Education Institutions, students can submit their own work to PDE prior to submitting it for assessment allowing them to correct referencing errors.

CUSU also has policy in opposition to 'bespoke' essay writing services, commonly known as 'essay mills', such as Oxbridge Essays or Academic Answers. CUSU encourages students not to write essays for these companies nor to purchase from them; while the essays are, allegedly, only for the purpose of 'research', the focus that these companies place on untraceability strongly suggests that they are complicit in students submitting the work fraudulently as their own. With large sums of money on offer, students will always be tempted to work for these companies but, hopefully, will realise that working on their own degree, rather than someone else's, will be more profitable in the long-run.

What can student reps in Departments, Faculties and Colleges do on the subject of plagiarism?

One way to get involved in the discussions on plagiarism is to question your institution as to what it is doing to further the aims of the University's LTS in promoting plagiarism avoidance education:

- Does your institution have a policy on plagiarism and, if so, does it, in your opinion, treat students fairly?
- Is your institution doing enough to make students aware of the dangers of plagiarism and the penalties for cheating?
- Should you conduct a survey (formally or informally) of your peers to determine whether students are currently aware of what plagiarism is and how they should go about avoiding it?
- Will your institution support using Turnitin as a teaching tool and not just as a way of identifying suspected cases of plagiarism?

Further sources of information:

- **The University:** www.cam.ac.uk/plagiarism
 - This section of the University's website is a central resource for information on Cambridge's policies on plagiarism and has tips on how to encourage good academic practice.
- **JISCPAS:** www.plagiarismadvice.org
 - The Government's central plagiarism advice service.
- **NUS:** resource.nusonline.co.uk/media/resource/plagiarismfinal.pdf
 - NUS Education Briefing on Plagiarism from April 2008.

³ <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/union/policy/CUSUPolicyJuly2008.pdf>

The CUSU Education Team

The Officers of the CUSU Executive are split into teams which work collaboratively on projects in addition to any work relating to each Officer's specific portfolio.

The Education Team is lead by the Education Officer who is one of the six sabbatical (full-time) Officers.

Ant Bagshaw

Education Officer

education@cusu.cam.ac.uk

01223 761693

Sam Wakeford (Archaeology & Anthropology/Trinity Hall)

Undergraduate Faculty Academic Officer

ug-faculties@cusu.cam.ac.uk

vacant

Graduate Faculty Academic Officer

grad-faculties@cusu.cam.ac.uk

Nina Walters (Philosophy/Pembroke)

Undergraduate College Academic Officer

ug-colleges@cusu.cam.ac.uk

Helena Rubinstein (SPS/Lucy Cavendish)

Mature/Part-Time Students Academic Officer

mature-students@cusu.cam.ac.uk