

Plagiarism Issues in Theses

A note by the Director of the Graduate School and the Academic Registrar

1. It is important that students learn about how to properly attribute and acknowledge the work, data and ideas of others. Plagiarism is scientific misconduct, and students whose thesis can be shown to contain plagiarism are subject to penalties as outlined in the College's Cheating Offences Policy and Procedures (Appendix 3 of the Examination Regulations) which can be found at this URL:
<http://www.imperial.ac.uk/about/governance/academic-governance/regulations/>
2. However, in the case of PhD theses there are issues as to what should count as plagiarism. In particular, is a student permitted to re-use their own work (for example material from a previous publication that they have written)? There are considerable grey areas, that require academic judgement, but this document is intended to provide guidelines for students, supervisors and examiners.
3. The students should note that reproduction of published work may infringe copyright, as discussed in <http://www.imperial.ac.uk/research-and-innovation/support-for-staff/scholarly-communication/open-access/theses/>
4. It is not acceptable to reproduce material that has been submitted for an examination at Imperial or another university (for example from the student's Master's thesis). It is acceptable for students to reproduce text and figures that they have previously written and submitted as part of their early or late stage assessment and/or other reports to funders or other bodies. Any documents that are publicly accessible should be appropriately referenced.
5. In general it is acceptable academic practice for a PhD student to include in their thesis material that has been previously written and published by themselves (including figures and text): they should make it clear that they themselves have published this previously and reference appropriately. However, they must not include material written by others (including their supervisor) without proper attribution, even if they are authors on the publication.
6. It must be remembered that a thesis is more than a collection of publications. There may be considerable similarity between sections of a thesis and a publication, however, the level of detail and the nature of the discussion in a thesis is different than that in a journal publication.
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8. It is good practice to indicate that parts of the thesis have been previously published, for example by including a statement like “Some of the work described in this thesis has been previously published in **** and ***.”
9. There are some sections of a thesis that frequently show high similarity when put through Turnitin or similar programmes. For example, the Material and Methods of theses from the same discipline often show similarity. This may be because there are only a limited number of ways in which a particular method can be accurately described. While it is not good practice to simply cut and paste methods into a thesis, students should not contort their text simply to avoid similarity with another publication. Plagiarism is misappropriation of another person’s original ideas, thoughts or data. While it is important to cite those that have developed the methodologies used in a thesis, similarity in describing those methodologies is usually acceptable.

Approved by QAAC
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