Imperial College London

Plagiarism Issues in Theses

Guidance from the Graduate School and the Registry

1.   Introduction

1.1   It is important that students learn to properly attribute and acknowledge the work, data and ideas of others because plagiarism is research misconduct. Where research degree examiners suspect that a thesis contains minor plagiarism, this will be explored with the student during the viva. However, where research degree examiners suspect that a thesis contains major plagiarism, the viva will be postponed until an investigation under the Procedures for the Investigation of Research Misconduct is concluded. The outcome of that investigation will determine the next steps for the student.

Research misconduct | Research and Innovation | Imperial College London

1.2   When it comes to research degree theses (PhD, EngD, MPhil and MD[Res]) there are considerable grey areas, that require academic judgement. This document is intended to provide guidelines for students, supervisors and examiners on such matters.

2.   College requirements

2.1   The College requires all research students to complete mandatory plagiarism awareness training by the Early Stage Assessment. The training provided to students, although taken in the early part of their research programme, remains accessible through Blackboard as a resource which can be referred to at any time. The course is available at:

Online courses | Study | Imperial College London

2.2   In addition to the mandatory training, the College also requires all Early Stage Assessments to be submitted through Turnitin, the College's preferred text matching software. Guidelines for departments on how to implement the use of Turnitin for ESA submissions are available at:

Turnitin Guidance | Study | Imperial College London

2.3   It is important to state up front that Turnitin originality reports should not be the sole means to determine the originality of student work. Instead, Turnitin originality reports should be used as a tool to help inform the academic judgement of ESA assessors.

3.   Common issues

Materials and Methods

3.1   There are certain sections of a thesis that can show high similarity when put through Turnitin, for example, Material and Methods sections from the same discipline. This may be because of the limited number of ways in which a particular method can be accurately described. However, when interpreting the Turnitin similarity report, assessors should be able to determine whether the student has simply copied or edited another writer's text, or whether the student has written their own text that happens to share similarities with other descriptions in the field.

Plagiarism is misappropriation of another person's original ideas, thoughts, data **or writing.** It is therefore not acceptable simply to copy and paste methods into a thesis, nor to edit text to avoid similarity with another publication.

Re-using one's own work

3.2   A common query is whether students can re-use their own work (for example material from a previous publication that they have written) as part of their thesis submission.   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.

3.3   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.

The College's academic regulations state:

[A series of papers, whether published or otherwise, is not acceptable for submission as a thesis.

Research work already published, or submitted for publication, at the time of submission of the thesis, either by the candidate alone or jointly with others, may be included in the thesis. The published papers themselves may not be included in the body of the thesis, but may be adapted to form an integral part of the thesis and thereby make a relevant contribution to the main theme of the thesis.

Publications derived from the work in the thesis may be attached as supplementary material to the thesis.]

3.4   It is also 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 however 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.

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 ***."

3.4   Students should also be mindful that the reproduction of published work may also infringe copyright, as discussed in: http://www.imperial.ac.uk/research-and-innovation/support-for-staff/scholarly-communication/open-access/theses/

Approved by
QAACJune 2012

Re-approved by QAEC – June 2021

Document title:		Plagiarism Issues in Theses	
Version:	2	**Date:**	June 2021
Location and filename:		R:\7.Quality Assurance\3. Policy Framework\4. Examination & Assessment\Plagiarism Issues in Theses	
Approved:		QAEC	
Effective from:		June 2021	
Originator:		Students Records and Data	
Contact for queries:		Director of Strategy and Operations, Graduate School	
Cross References:			
Notes and latest changes:		Formatting changes made on 13 April 2016 Updated links and amended paragraph structure (4 and 5) on 23 June 2016 Updates and clarification of common issues May 2021	