Interim approach to dealing with plagiarism

The purpose of this document is to explain an interim approach to dealing with plagiarism at SU. An interim approach is needed until SU has in place a comprehensive approach and policy regarding plagiarism.

1. Background

1.1 The number of cases of plagiarism at universities worldwide has increased sharply in the past few years, on the one hand because the availability of electronic information has made it so much easier to commit plagiarism, and on the other because of the extensive use of electronic instruments (e.g. Turnitin) to identify plagiarism.

1.2 Various faculties/departments at SU have already begun to use the Turnitin program to detect plagiarism. In 2005, 77 cases of plagiarism were reported at SU. Most of these were dealt with administratively by the administrative officer who provides support to the Central Disciplinary Committee (CDC). They did not receive any attention from the CDC. It is most likely that there are other cases that were dealt with at departmental level.

1.3 At present, however, there is a problem with regard to the processes and mechanisms employed when cases of plagiarism have been identified. Currently SU rules and policy documents require that such cases be referred to the CDC without providing for alternative means of settling the case at departmental level. Naturally, great numbers of such cases will be too burdensome for SU’s systems. Furthermore, SU’s developmental aims (see 1.4) would not be served by such a situation. SU is presently at risk when cases of plagiarism are handled at any level other than by the CDC.

1.4 The most successful approaches to dealing with student instances of plagiarism allow for a ‘developmental approach’, which implies that cases of plagiarism – with the exception of serious cases – be used as opportunities to instruct the guilty persons as to what is expected and how to handle information. In addition, such a student could be directed to redo the assignment.

1.5 To formulate a policy regarding plagiarism, a thorough process of consultation must be followed. It could take up a great deal of time; the process would continue until the end of the first semester, at the least. In the meantime, it would be necessary to institute interim measures to ensure that plagiarism is eliminated as far as possible and that cases that do occur are dealt with in such a manner that students are encouraged to be more responsible in utilising sources. This is the so-called developmental approach. It is vital that the required adjustments be made to the arrangements of faculties and departments to ensure that the interim approach has preference.

1.6 The draft interim approach has been submitted to all the faculty boards, the Students’ Representative Council, and the Rector’s Management Team, and these bodies have been asked to provide input on this issue. (It was necessary to consult the faculty boards, since this is a matter that concerns examining.) All the input was considered, and most of it could be included in this document. (See 5.3 for matters that were raised.)

1.7 The interim approach discussed below links up with the approaches of a large number of renowned universities, both in South Africa and abroad. (Naturally there are still marked differences in the approaches of different universities.)

1.8 The concept ‘plagiarism’ covers a broad field: from serious offences (e.g. where a student steals someone else’s entire piece of work) to neglecting to acknowledge text or sources belonging to other authors, to negligence regarding the technical mechanisms
of quotations and the acknowledgement of sources. In judging how to apply the appropriate sanctions, these wide-ranging actions will have to be taken into account (see 2.3.).

1.9 The intention is that the interim approach will be in force until a formal policy regarding dealing with plagiarism has been approved by all relevant bodies at SU. It is anticipated that the interim approach will cover the period 1 March 2006 to 30 June 2006 at the least.

2. Plagiarism description and broad categories

2.1 The framework within which SU’s approach to plagiarism must be understood

Academic work at a university entails that the student be exposed to the ideas, written material and other intellectual and creative material of others. The intention with academic studies is precisely that the ideas of both the lecturers and the students will be shaped and polished by others. At the same time, students ought to go further than what was devised, written and created by others; he or she should critically evaluate it, provide new and original input or syntheses, and apply these to contemporary and local studies of problems. This is where academic activity becomes satisfying at university level.

Naturally, lecturers can only evaluate the contribution of their students if the contributions of others are clearly distinguished. This takes place through acknowledged systems or the process of acknowledgement and referencing. If these conventions are not adhered to and the required recognition is not given, the basis of the academic work at a university is undermined. Plagiarism is committed when someone else’s work (words, ideas, creations) are taken over and passed off as the writer’s own.

The University aims to ensure that mechanisms are in place that will enable lecturers to promote academic integrity and to eliminate plagiarism – therefore the need for SU to have in place a policy regarding plagiarism.

(For a more comprehensive explanation of this dimension of academic work, see the relevant web pages of Princeton University:

http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/index.html)

2.2 Description:

Plagiarism is regarded as the theft or use of the ideas, written material and intellectual or artistic products of others that are passed off as one’s own.

All cases of plagiarism amount to a serious offence that could have dire consequences for a student. It could lead to criminal or civil action or suspension from the University.

2.3 Categories

In terms of the way in which SU handles cases of plagiarism, three broad categories are distinguished:

Category 1: Blatant cases, where the department is of the opinion that the case should be referred to the CDC (e.g. where an assignment or written material has been blatantly stolen from another person). (Second offences Category 2 can also be treated as Category 1 cases and be referred to the CDC; third offences must be treated as Category 1 cases.)

Category 2: Less serious cases, where sources have been handled injudiciously – in terms of plagiarism – but that by nature still constitute plagiarism. (Repeated offences of this nature can also be treated as Category 1 cases.)
Category 3: Offences that can be regarded as resulting from negligence or inaccuracy in working with and acknowledging sources, but that can still be regarded as plagiarism.

(When judging the category of offence involved, the level of study involved and what is expected of students at that level must be taken into account. For example: at postgraduate level students are expected to be conversant with techniques to acknowledge sources properly.)

3. Interim approach

The University’s approach makes provision for a developmental dimension. This does not mean that SU is compliant in its approach to dealing with plagiarism; on the contrary, it creates a basis for a firm and sustainable future approach.

The approach amounts to the following:

3.1 The University creates the opportunity for dealing with offences related to plagiarism in diverse ways, for dealing with particular cases at departmental level, and for taking a developmental approach to plagiarism. The lastmentioned consideration implies that in the case of a first offence, a lecturer will be able to apply certain sanctions rather than refer the case to the CDC. (“First offence” here refers to an offence at SU per person and not per subject/module, and mechanisms are created to ensure as far as possible that a student’s offence in other subjects/modules will be taken into account in this process.)

3.2 The process will be handled in the following way:

a) Where it is found that a student has committed plagiarism, the matter will be further dealt with by the departmental chairperson and the lecturer involved. (If the lecturer who detected the plagiarism is also the chairperson, another lecturer in the relevant department will be involved in the matter.)

b) The chairperson enquires from the Division of the Registrar to determine whether a previous offence with regard to plagiarism has been reported against the relevant student. This information is taken into account in the further handling of the case. (See (c) and (d) below.)

c) In the case of a first offence:

i) Based on the nature of the offence (see the different categories (Point 2 above) the chairperson decides whether the matter can be dealt with at departmental level, or whether it must be referred to the CDC.

ii) If the department decides that the case can be handled internally, the student is informed verbally that he/she has committed an offence and that, according to the rules of the University, the case can be referred to the CDC, that the process before the CDC is formal by nature and that the student has, amongst others, the “right to legal representation” (in accordance with the Rules for Students). The student’s attention is drawn to the fact that the penalties the CDC can impose include the following: suspension or expulsion from the University; forfeiture of a degree or diploma; and forfeiture of a class mark or other forms of credit that have been attained thus far. Details of the offence and penalty, together with the student’s name, can be made public on notice boards on campus. Seeing that it is a first offence, the matter can be handled at departmental level. The student must, however, make an informed choice about the possibility that the matter be handled internally at departmental level, in which case there could be certain sanctions (e.g. that a mark of nil be awarded, that the
assignment be redone, that a new assignment be done on a different topic; it is possible that a lower mark may simply be awarded).

The student is therefore informed of the intended action and of his/her right to demand that the matter be referred to the CDC as an alternative. The student is also informed that in the case of action at departmental level, his/her ‘right to legal representation’ lapses.

A formal information document describing these options is handed to the student.

iii) Should the department decide that the matter can be handled internally, and if the student chooses to have it further handled internally by the department, he/she forfeits the right to have a process conducted before the CDC. This decision must be put in writing.

d) In the case of a second or further offence:

The matter is handled according to the severity of the offence (see Point 2.3 above).

e) The decision of the department concerning action against the student is also put in writing. Should the case be referred to the CDC, the necessary documentary evidence is attached; if the case is dealt with internally, the documentary evidence of how it was handled (or a copy thereof) is kept for a period of at least three years.

f) The Division of the Registrar is informed in writing of the manner in which the matter was handled and on the sanctions that were applied.

3.3 The above-mentioned arrangements are disseminated as widely as possible among lecturers and students.

3.4 Departments must strive towards ensuring the greatest measure of consistency in implementing the approach to plagiarism so that the highest degree of fairness is guaranteed for all students.

3.5 These arrangements take precedence over any other arrangements of faculties with regard to the handling of plagiarism, and the necessary adjustments to such present arrangements of departments and faculties must be made to ensure that they correspond with the interim approach proposed above.

4. Matters regarding implementation

4.1 The responsibility for support to lecturers in handling plagiarism is assigned to an appropriate support services division.

4.2 As from 2006, SU will have an institutional licence to use Turnitin.

4.3 Training and other support in the use of Turnitin will be provided at central level from the appointed point of responsibility (see 4.1).

4.4 The approved arrangements with regard to the language of teaching/communication for a particular module or degree must remain valid, and adjustments must not be made specifically in view of the use of a program such as Turnitin. (For instance, students may not be required henceforth to submit assignments in a module/degree that is otherwise presented in Afrikaans or according to the T specification in English because Turnitin is being used.)

4.5 The Division of the Registrar keeps a record of all cases of plagiarism: where offences are referred to the CDC, the CDC reports the outcome of the case to the Division of the Registrar; if the case has been dealt with at departmental level, the outcome is reported by the department. Based on this information, the chairpersons in departments where
decisions must be made regarding the handling of cases will be able to ascertain whether a student has previously committed offences with regard to plagiarism (see 3.2 (b)).

4.6 The CDC is free to refer back a case, which has been referred to the CDC for handling, to the department on the grounds that it would be dealt with more effectively at that level.

5. **Further information of interest regarding the choice of the approach followed at SU**

5.1 This interim approach is followed on the grounds of advice from the Dean of the Faculty of Law and the Interim Head: Legal Services.

5.2 The following route was followed at SU in making decisions on the matter of plagiarism:

1. Faculty boards (seeing that it involves a matter that affects examining, on which faculty boards have to advise Senate). (The APC was also consulted.)
2. Students’ Representative Council (seeing that it involves an interim arrangement affecting a matter contained in the Rules for Students and that presently has to be handled differently for a period until the Rules for Students are revised in accordance with the to-be-established policy regarding plagiarism).
3. EC(S), for recommendation to the Senate (since it deals with examining).
4. EC(C), for recommendation to the Board.
5. Council. (The EC(C) is able to finalise the matter on behalf of the Council.)

5.3 The following points of concern regarding the approach in the draft have been identified from comments of faculty boards and the Students' Representative Council:

a) The University is compliant with regard to plagiarism by not referring all cases to the CDC and in certain cases by giving the student the opportunity for a first offence without serious action.

b) A definition of plagiarism is required.

c) The possibility exists that students will not be fully and consistently informed of their options and that they can choose to have cases handled internally on the grounds of limited information.

d) There is a great risk that students will not be treated equally.

e) The approach allows for too much leeway if there is an opportunity for students for a first offence in each subject. The concept “first offence” (see 3.2 (c)) should apply per student rather than per subject.

Most of these points could be included in the approach submitted to the EC(S) with a view to recommendation to the Senate.

5.4 Definitions of plagiarism

The following are some of the existing definitions of plagiarism:

a) “... to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one’s own; use (another’s production) without crediting the source” – *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, [http://www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)

b) “... the use of any source, published or unpublished, without proper acknowledgment” – Princeton University, [http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/pages/acknowledge.html](http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/pages/acknowledge.html)
c) “What is plagiarism?
You commit plagiarism if you present someone else’s ideas – published or unpublished – as if they were your own. People’s ideas may be contained in:

written text
- articles, books, dissertations, theses, newspapers, magazines, notes, course material, co-students’ projects, e-mail messages, data, computer code, everything on the Internet, etc.

visual text
- books, fine art, graphics, photographs, etc.

multimedia products
- websites, video productions, films, CDs, design projects, etc.

music
- compositions, lyrics, CDs, music or sound bites on the Internet, etc.

spoken text
- speeches, audio recordings, lectures, interviews, etc.”

(University of Pretoria:
Afrikaans: http://upetd.up.ac.za/authors/create/plagiarism/definitionA.htm
English: http://upetd.up.ac.za/authors/create/plagiarism/definition.htm)
(as on 9 February 2006).

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