

Academic Integrity

Notes on managing allegations of ghosting

Ghosting includes the following:

Submission of work presented as the student's own which has been purchased, commissioned or otherwise acquired from another person (including internet sellers) whether or not specifically produced for that student or "off the shelf".

Tutors have found it very difficult to manage these allegations and identify the best way to approach students where ghosting is suspected.

The following scenario is based on a case brought against a postgraduate student during the 2009/10 session (expanded to include further suggestions on what actions could be taken).

The student had submitted a research proposal which was completely at odds with other interactions between the student and tutors leading to doubts over its authenticity as a piece of work created entirely by the student. Particular discrepancies included:

- Highly fluent expression in English compared to contributions during seminars in very limited and broken English
- Clear articulation of complex academic concepts which had not been demonstrated in other areas of the student's work

Before deciding whether or not to submit a formal allegation the tutor and moderator held a meeting with the student to discuss the work to try to get a feel for its authenticity. The student was invited to bring a friend along with her if she wanted and was asked to bring any notes or background work with her. The meeting was held along the lines of an informal tutorial but the student was told in advance that the purpose of the meeting was to determine her understanding of the work in question in light of concerns that the work may not be entirely the student's own work.

At the meeting, the tutors attempted to clarify with the student:

- What had led her to choose this particular topic
- Her understanding of the research methodology that had been used in this assignment
- Questions about the actual content of the work
- What types of sources she had used and how she had identified them
- The extent to which she had discussed or shared her work with another party

It was also noted that the student had not taken up any offers for tutorials or formative feedback when completing the assignment which was different to previous assignments when drafts had been submitted for feedback.

The questions were first asked in a style that would be deemed appropriate for a postgraduate student who had recently conducted a piece of research. When it became apparent that the student did not understand the questions, the same issues were covered in more basic language – again the student could not respond.

The tutors reached the conclusion that an allegation of ghosting should be brought based on:

- Lack of understanding regarding the texts which had been used
- Lack of knowledge regarding the assignment content

- Concerns over the student's ability to express herself in English a) in this subject area and b) at the same level evidenced in the assignment.

A report was submitted by the tutors to the (D)AIO. The student was advised of the allegation in the normal manner and was invited to a meeting with the (D)AIO where the same ground was covered that had previously been discussed with the tutor but this time it was in the context of a formal academic integrity hearing.

At this meeting, the (D)AIO compared the assignment in question with a range of other assignments submitted by the student and explored with the student issues around her style of writing and the significant improvement in the language, the structure and the analysis in the assignment. The student did not recognise any differences and had no satisfactory explanation why her previous submissions achieved a narrow pass mark and were written in a completely different style.

The student refuted the allegation. However, the (D)AIO concluded that ghosting had taken place and the case was referred to the Academic Integrity Committee.

The Academic Integrity Committee received all of the evidence (including copies of other assignments by the student).

The Committee's questions focussed on:

- The student's own assessment of her spoken and written English and any IELTS scores
- Concerns raised by the staff at earlier points in the session regarding the student's English ability
- Clarification of how the student went about writing assignments in general and this one in particular
- Her use of translation software and whether the assessment had been written in English or in her native language and subsequently translated through software
- Involvement of a third party as a proof-reader and the extent to or areas in which changes had been suggested by this person (the student was asked to provide any documentation that supported her claims in this respect)
- The lack of any earlier versions and how the student had approached the assignment without now being able to provide evidence of research undertaken
- The student's view on having been unable to explain the work or the methodologies adopted when questioned at School level

The Committee upheld the allegation and cited the following grounds for doing so:

- The very articulate and professional style and tone of the written submissions compared to the student's extreme difficulty in following and contributing to the Committee's discussions which required repeated clarification and rephrasing
- The lack of available evidence in terms of draft versions or examples of marked up proof read texts
- The lack of evidence in terms of any statement provided by the proof reader in support of the case or any evidence regarding the type of amendments arising from a proof-reading exercise
- The student's inability to explain her work and the methodologies adopted when completing the assignment

A summary of points to consider in cases of ghosting – some points are specific to cases where the student's first language is not English:

- English ability demonstrated elsewhere on the course/in assignments
- Student's own style of writing and structuring an essay – if anything prompted a particular change with respect to this assignment
- Student's approach to this particular assignment
- Student's general academic ability as demonstrated in previous assessments
- Extent to which a third party may have been involved in the assignment in terms of proof reading:
 - Statements from the proof reader
 - Indication of typical changes/amendments made
 - Draft versions of the assessment annotated by the proof reader
 - The possible use of translation software
- Student's understanding during discussions with tutor/(D)AIO
 - Key concepts in the assessment
 - Range of sources quoted in the assessment
 - Research methodology employed
- Formative feedback:
 - Did the student approach tutors for feedback on drafts
 - Similarity of the final piece compared to earlier versions seen by tutors
 - Comparison of the extent to which the student usually seeks formative feedback compared specifically to the feedback sought for this assignment
- Availability of draft versions of the assignment to show progress and development of the ideas – or other research notes that relate directly to the final submission