

## Irish College of Humanities and Applied Sciences

### CASE STUDY 2

**Title:** Correctional Scaling as a response to Similarity Reportage

**Theme:** Arising from deliberations on reported similarity in two students' work at the Autumn Examination Board 2022, the issue was further referred for discussion to Programme Board where a need was identified for clarification on correctional scaling when assessing possible plagiarism.

**Keywords:** Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, Similarity Reporting, Correctional Scaling

**Context:** The College uses text matching software as one means of detecting "similarity" in student assessment. Specifically, the commercially available program *Turnitin*<sup>®</sup> is used to scan for and highlight "similarity" prior to final assignment submission. The generated report, which includes linkage to the external sources from which the "similarity" samples have been derived, affords students the opportunity to address any issues that might arise while also providing data for the assessor to consider and review to effectively assure academic integrity. In the context of internal QAE, *Turnitin*<sup>®</sup> is therefore employed as a supportive tool for assessor decision-making around potential plagiarism, self-plagiarism and collusion. While it is not and should not be used as a substitute for assessor decision-making, it has emerged in the literature that assessor decision-making can be undermined by "misunderstandings" associated with the mode of similarity reportage (Mphahlelea and McKenna, 2019, p. 1079). For the purposes of this Case Study, discussion is limited to correctional proportionality which in turn highlights shared understanding of what constitutes plagiarism.

**Case Description:** When considering proportionate correctional scaling in this context two factors emerged as significant. Firstly, Academic Integrity implies a values as opposed to a punitory approach whereby emphasis is placed on creating a culture of integrity rather than detecting and punishing indiscretion (Fishman, 2016)<sup>1</sup>. Further, breaches of academic integrity tend to be variant both in terms of intentionality and extent with the result internal QAE offers a scaled approach to penalties for breaches. It emerged at Programme Board that while Faculty were clear on both the types of breach and the scaling of "possible penalties", that the absence of direct equivalence between breach and penalty was problematic especially in the case of "plagiarism". In designing procedures on Academic Integrity, the absence of rigid equivalence was intentional to avoid an overly prescriptive or directive approach. However, it emerged that greater guidance was required to ensure a consistent and fair corrective approach was to be maintained.

The sub-group (QAE Officer, Registrar, Director of Studies, Programme Directors) formed through the Programme Board to explore possible solutions found that the "misunderstandings" described above are commonplace, and third level institutions have devised a variety of strategies to respond to these issues with varying success. It was also found that while there was consensus on definitional understanding of plagiarism, variance seemed to emerge in interpreting the matches produced through the *Turnitin*<sup>®</sup> report. The University of South Australia usefully distinguish these match types as "Block Match", "Scattered Word Match", "Checkerboard Match", "Bibliography Match" and "Trivial Match". The sub-group also discovered that correctional and proportionate scaling is a common response to these types of similarity dilemmas and that the range of corrective responses as outlined in Table 1 are entirely consistent with sectoral norms. Student intentionality,

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<sup>1</sup> Fishman, T. (2016). "Academic Integrity as an Educational Concept, concern, and Movement in US Institutions of Higher Learning." *Handbook of Academic Integrity*, 7–21. Singapore: SpringerNature.

level of academic experience, prior cultural awareness and frequency of breach determined the corrective response. Once an identified remedial intervention had been applied, corrective responses comparable to those on Table 1 were relied upon most often based on the assessor’s appraisal of intent and extent. However, while most of the QAE frameworks reviewed do not include equivalence in their formulation of corrective response, TCD’s *Matrix of Levels and Consequences* was noted as especially useful in this respect. The Matrix details “characteristics of offence” which are directly aligned with “a range of penalties”.

**Table 1 - Current corrective actions proposed in QAE documentation.**

A remedial action plan may be agreed with the student.
An appropriately reduced mark, other than zero, may be awarded.
A mark of 0% may be awarded for the assignment under investigation
The student may be required to repeat the relevant module.
The student may be offered the opportunity to repeat the assignment under the conditions of the relevant policy on repeat assessment.
Temporary or permanent record of the offence can be placed on the students file (may be applied in conjunction with other penalties).
Suspension from the programme.
Expulsion from the College.
Additionally, penalties for breaches of academic integrity in an examination’s context, may include: Setting aside all or part of the overall examination while permitting the candidate to take the examination again at the next available opportunity or in the following year.
In the case of contract cheating concerns will be reported to Quality Qualifications Ireland who are responsible for bring prosecutions under section Section 43A of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019

**Case Outcome:** The sub-group is scheduled to report to the Programme Board in Spring 2023 and will recommend training for all assessors on how scaling of breaches can be most fairly and consistently aligned to the range of penalties currently outlined in existing QAE. It recommends that this scaling is not formalised procedurally until the outcome of this training has been reviewed but does not discount the viability of redesigning policies and procedures on plagiarism that offer more aligned connections between breach and outcome.