

Guidance for Investigating Suspected Breaches of Academic Conduct in Group Work Assessments

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This guidance describes the process to be followed by Academic Conduct Officers and other staff in relation to suspected breaches of academic conduct in group work assessments (i.e., assessments that require two or more students to work together to complete the assessment).
- 1.2 Unless an assessment has been designed to allow the establishment of specific contributions made by individual students, identification of the student or students responsible for suspected breaches of academic conduct can be difficult. As described in section 2, it may not be possible to proceed with an academic conduct investigation if the contributions of individual group members cannot be established easily.
- 1.3 It is therefore strongly recommended that the balance between appropriate/authentic assessment for group tasks, and security of assessment for academic conduct, is carefully considered when designing group work assessments.

2. Investigation Process

- 2.1 If the Academic Conduct Officer (usually in consultation with the marker) has evidence to indicate that a suspected breach was committed by one or more specific group members, the process described in the [Regulations Governing Academic Responsibility and Conduct](#) (“the Regulations”) should be followed solely in relation to the identified group member(s).

- 2.2 Informal investigation of possible academic conduct issues (e.g. via meetings, emails or messages) between University staff and group members should not take place owing to the risk of potentially disadvantaging students and prejudicing any subsequent academic conduct investigation process specified within the Regulations.
- 2.3 If the evidence for a suspected breach cannot be linked to one or more specific group members, the Academic Conduct Officer should carefully consider the practical implications of investigating that suspected breach.
- 2.4 In making this consideration, the Academic Conduct Officer should weigh the nature, severity and impact of the suspected breach against the likely complexity of the investigation and the potential distress that would be caused to group members found not to have breached academic conduct. Any relevant professional standards and statutory body expectations should also be considered.
- 2.5 In assessing the impact of the suspected breach, the Academic Conduct Officer should consider (1) the proportional contribution of the affected material to the group's mark, and (2) the contribution of the piece of work to the students' progression and/or overall degree classification.
- 2.6 If, on balance, the Academic Conduct Officer decides the disadvantages of investigating the suspected breach outweigh the advantages, and there are no relevant professional standards and statutory body expectations that require the suspected breach to be investigated, the investigation should not proceed. The Academic Conduct Officer may wish to consult with the relevant Director of Programmes, Deputy Head of School (Education), and/or the Faculty Academic Conduct Officer in making this decision.
- 2.7 Where a decision is made that an investigation should not proceed, the relevant issues identified in the submission in question should be indicated to the members of the group within the normal marking and feedback process. Signposting may be provided to Additional Learning (as described in the Regulations) if it is believed that it would be

beneficial to the group members. It should be remembered that no breach of academic conduct will have been confirmed, and that no penalty will be applied to the work.

- 2.8 Where a decision is made that an investigation should proceed, and unless there are exceptional circumstances (e.g., a conflict of interest), a single Academic Conduct Officer should, whenever possible, be responsible for investigating the actions of all relevant members of a group to ensure the fullest possible understanding of all relevant issues.
- 2.9 If an investigation requires more than one Academic Conduct Panel be held (i.e., to investigate a suspected breach, or breaches, by more than one group member), whenever possible, those Academic Conduct Panels should be composed of the same panel members to ensure the fullest possible understanding of all relevant issues.
- 2.10 In accordance with the Regulations, where two or more Academic Conduct Meetings/Panel hearings are required, they should be held separately with each group member. Students are entitled to support as specified within the Regulations, but they would not be permitted to choose another member of the group as their companion.
- 2.11 When making any decision on whether a breach has occurred, the decision must be made on the balance of probabilities as to whether the specified group member has committed a breach, not simply whether a breach has occurred.

3. Marks and Feedback

- 3.1 Where possible, feedback should not be provided to any group members until investigation of the suspected breach has concluded.
- 3.2 On conclusion of the investigation, an academic conduct breach may be recorded, and penalty applied, in relation to the contribution of one or more specified group members in line with section 2.11.
- 3.3 The individual responsible for the assessment (usually the module lead) should ensure that the mark received by the specified group member(s) is consistent with their identified contribution and the applied penalty.

- 3.4 Other members of the group will not have an Academic Conduct breach recorded or penalty applied. It may, however, be necessary to adjust their marks in line with the process described below.
- 3.5 For penalties other than a written warning, it will be necessary for the individual responsible for the assessment to consider the impact on the overall assessment of the material affected by a breach. It may be deemed that advantage was:
- a) **not gained** within the marking process (i.e. the material affected by the breach was of a standard that was similar to, or lower than, the rest of the work). The group work should be marked as submitted (i.e. without excluding any material), and marks and feedback returned to those group members who had not breached academic conduct within the normal academic feedback process. Feedback given should explain the nature of the identified academic conduct breach, and make clear that those students' marks were not reduced.
 - b) **gained** within the marking process (i.e. the material affected by the breach was of a standard that was higher than the rest of the work). The individual responsible for the assessment should award marks to those group members who had not breached academic conduct as appropriate to their identified contributions to the assessment. Feedback should explain the nature of the identified academic conduct breach and the rationale for the award of marks given that identified material had been affected by the breach.
- 3.6 If it is not possible to determine the individual contributions of the remaining group members in section 3.5(b), marks may be awarded based on the overall standard of the parts of the work that were unaffected by the breach.
- 3.7 If marks had already been returned to students prior to the conclusion of the academic conduct investigation, and it was deemed that advantage was gained by the members of the group who had not breached academic conduct, the module lead should raise the proposed adjustment of marks at the appropriate Board of Examiners. Updated

feedback should be provided to students if the proposed adjustment is consequently implemented.

Document Information	
Author	Academic Integrity Network
Owner (committee)	AQSS
Approved Date	October 2022, September 2022
Last Revision	August 2024
Type of Document	Guidance