Coursework Authenticity:

A Guide for Teachers and Lecturers

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Context and introduction

This document will give you an overview of the area of authenticity, plagiarism and collusion, and how it applies to coursework that is submitted to SQA for marking. It provides advice on how you can help candidates to understand what is required of them. It is a guide only, and is not intended to be prescriptive or directional.

The number of identified cases of plagiarism and collusion in our external assessments is very low in comparison with overall candidate numbers. However, given the ever-increasing range of information available from a variety of resources (particularly the internet, essay banks, etc), we would like to do all we can to help you help our candidates avoid the pitfalls of poor research and writing techniques.

SQA publishes regulations and leaflets about authenticity of candidates' work, but candidates need on-going support and guidance in this area. From as early a stage as possible in their academic lives — not just when compiling their coursework materials — they need to learn about good practice when researching topics and referencing information within their materials, and to understand completely what constitutes plagiarism and collusion. Too often in our investigations, we discover that a candidate has 'broken the rules' unintentionally — either because they didn't fully understand at the time that they were doing something wrong, or they didn't realise a particular piece of writing they were working on might eventually be submitted to SQA for marking.

As their teacher or lecturer, you are the person who is best placed to help candidates avoid these pitfalls. We hope this guide will provide you with some useful information about how to prevent plagiarism and collusion in the first place, what to watch out for, and how to identify instances where candidates could be breaking the rules.

Plagiarism and collusion — what are they?

SQA defines plagiarism as 'Failing to acknowledge sources properly and/or submitting another person's work as if it were your own.'

Collusion means 'copying work from another candidate and/or working collaboratively with other candidates on an **individual** task.'

Why candidates plagiarise

There are many reasons why candidates might resort to plagiarism:

1 Lack of understanding about what plagiarism really is.

2 Time-management issues — not being aware of how much research and effort should go into coursework; not realising that extensions can occasionally be granted due to extenuating circumstances (eg accidents, illness etc).

3 Wanting to achieve high marks in their coursework, (hopefully) to get a better result for the whole subject.

4 Poor advice/guidance and inappropriate teaching practices.

5 Cultural differences — in some cultures it is considered disrespectful not to copy the words of others *verbatim*.

6 An out-and-out desire simply to beat the system.

Often, plagiarism occurs because of a lack of understanding by the candidate about acceptable practices. Broadly speaking, plagiarism can be categorised as intentional or unintentional.

Intentional plagiarism

Most candidates know that the following activities are cheating:

♦ buying an essay from an internet site (also known as an 'essay bank' or a 'paper mill')
♦ getting someone else to do the work for them
♦ giving false information about a source used in coursework

Unintentional plagiarism

They may not be aware that the following activities are also classified as cheating:

♦ copying and pasting from the internet without citing the source
♦ copying directly from a textbook without citing the source
♦ omitting quotation marks from quotations
♦ paraphrasing without including reference to the source of the paraphrase
♦ copying sections from a friend
♦ having a friend or relative dictate something to them
♦ copying pieces produced in earlier academic years — not realising these could be included in their final coursework submission

Ways to prevent plagiarism

The most effective way to help candidates avoid being accused of plagiarism is to spend as much time as possible discussing the issue (including the risks and pitfalls), and by teaching basic writing and research skills. This shouldn't be a one-off lesson — it should be an on-going and iterative development.

The principal rules for compiling and submitting coursework

The main rules on plagiarism and collusion that candidates really need to understand are:

1 Candidates' coursework should be in their own words, unless they are quoting from a referenced source. If they are asked to explain what they mean by a certain phrase or paragraph, they should be able to do so.

2 Candidates should always credit work that is not their own, regardless of where the ideas came from.

3 Candidates should not let anyone other than their teacher/lecturer see their coursework. In real life, it may be considered good practice to share information, but in coursework assignments this is not acceptable. It can lead to candidates being accused of collusion, which could mean that a penalty is applied to their award.

4 If a candidate asks for help, other candidates, friends, family, or teachers/lecturers should only help them to understand. They should not tell them what to write, or show them their own work (or the work of someone else).

5 Candidates should be advised of the risks associated with using essay banks, essay-writing services etc — these are services that are available from the internet and offer to provide candidates with coursework materials for a fee.

6 Setting expectations is an important step in helping candidates to understand the academic standards required. It is important that candidates understand that, when they sign the authentication statement on the flyleaf, that they are confirming that the work is their own and that any ideas or words belonging to someone else are correctly acknowledged.

7 Candidates should have read the SQA booklet *Your Coursework* (issued annually to centres) and be fully conversant with the penalties for plagiarism and collusion.

Designing plagiarism and collusion opportunities out of coursework

Where you have the ability to set the topics used in the coursework, the following approaches could be helpful in minimising the risks:

♦ Change the topics and/or questions from year to year. This means that there is less likelihood that candidates will be able to 'borrow' an essay from someone who has already written on the same subject in previous years.

♦ If this is permitted by the specification, encourage the candidates to select their own individual coursework topics — setting one topic for the whole class makes it easier for candidates to copy or collude.

♦ If it is appropriate, asking candidates to relate the assessment to their own personal experience can help to make the work as unique as possible.

♦ Specify components to be included in the coursework. For example:

— Use of one or more sources written within the past year. A requirement like this will quickly outdate most paper mill or essay bank products.

— Use of one or more specific articles or books you name or provide. The articles could be available online (from the internet or one of your proprietary databases) to save the effort of photocopying and distribution.

Encouraging authentic work

Before submitting coursework materials to SQA for marking, you need to be as confident as possible that your candidates have completed the work themselves. If you are not confident that a piece of work is authentic, you should not submit it for marking. It is essential that you develop confidence in the authenticity of the candidate's work *before* the finished piece is handed in, as it may be much more difficult at the point of hand-in.

These techniques can help to provide evidence of the authenticity of a candidate's work before hand-in.

♦ Ask candidates to provide an annotated bibliography. (Writing a sentence or two on how useful the source was can help jog their memories when citing where the information came from.)

♦ Make sure that the candidates know *exactly* what is required in their coursework. Ensure that they know that secondary sources are required.

♦ Ensure that candidates come to see you with work in progress or, alternatively, that sections of coursework are submitted by an agreed date. Ask them to bring (preferably) annotated copies of research or background materials.

♦ Get the candidates to do an oral presentation on their coursework.

Strategies for verifying the authenticity of candidates' work

There are a number of signs you can look for that may show that the work submitted is not the candidate's own.

1 Changes in writing style

Everyone has their own unique style of writing, which develops over time, and with experience. Where the writing style of a single piece of work varies, this may indicate a candidate is using text from several different authors.

US spellings and phraseology may simply indicate that a candidate has used the default US spelling check on a word-processing programme — but it could also signify that work has been downloaded from a US website without acknowledgement.

2 Document layout and style

Where a document has a variety of different physical characteristics (such as changes in font styles and sizes, indentation and line spacing) this may also indicate that work is not the candidate's own and has been cut and pasted from a range of different sources. Apparently random and unattributed hyperlinks/URLs in the document should be investigated further.

3 Sources not easily accessible or available locally

Where obscure sources that are not readily available have been listed by a candidate, this may indicate that references have been copied from elsewhere to embellish a bibliography.

4 Out of date sources

Most disciplines or subject areas (especially Science and Technology) require the candidates to be up to date with the most recent research in the area, so not only will out of date sources in a bibliography or reference list often mean the candidate may not achieve high marks — it may also indicate that the work is not the candidate's own. (In some subjects it may be appropriate to draw on historical texts: a candidate studying Psychology may be expected to draw on the work of Freud, whose key texts date back to the early 1900s, so caution is required here.)

5 Use of non-UK examples

Again, this depends on the topic in question. For example, in a project on the US economy using non-UK sources and examples is entirely justified. However, where examples appear to be unrelated geographically to the question in hand, this may indicate potentially inauthentic work.

6 Failure to answer the question

It may look as if an introductory and/or concluding paragraph directly answers the question, whilst the main body of the essay is made up of vague and unrelated

text. If you are in any doubt, ask the candidate about what they have written. If the work is their own, then they should find it easy to justify their arguments, use of sources, and approach.

7 Check phrases using a search engine

Using the advanced search in an internet search engine and enclosing suspect phrases in double quotation marks ("") will ensure that pages with this particular sequence of words is returned. Try to identify short phrases from the candidate's work which you suspect may not be their own.

8 Check coursework using plagiarism detection software

Using search engines to identify sources of phrases can sometimes be laborious. Plagiarism detection software can compare a candidate's piece of work with a wide range of electronic sources often in a matter of minutes.

Plagiarism detection software compares a candidate's work with publicly available material available via the internet, other candidates' work, and often a range of published sources, such as electronic journals. A report is usually returned very quickly, highlighting areas where any matching text has been found. Most detection tools are non-judgemental, so whilst they can highlight matching sources within a candidate's work, they do not determine whether plagiarism has occurred, and in all cases this is a matter for your judgement.

These tools are also widely used by UK Awarding Bodies as a part of the quality assurance process and as a mechanism for upholding standards and identifying potential malpractice.

9 Compiling coursework materials for submission

Whilst on-going monitoring of a candidate's work as they generate their coursework materials is a key step in helping to identify potential plagiarism, the compilation of the coursework is the final step in the process. It is unrealistic to expect teachers or lecturers to be able to identify all potential instances of plagiarism, and this is why final responsibility rests with the candidate to confirm that their pieces are genuinely their own work. Having the candidate present at the time of compilation is therefore a key step in the authentication process.

The pieces to be contained in the coursework should be selected by the candidate, in consultation with the class teacher/lecturer and, once agreement on this has been reached, the candidate should be asked to sign the flyleaf declaration, confirming that:

a   They agree that these pieces should be submitted for marking.
b   They have read and understood the *Your Coursework* leaflet.
c   They understand the meaning of plagiarism and the potential consequences of submitting any work that is not their own.
d   All of the work is entirely their own.

The coursework should contain only pieces which the candidate regards as finished work.

Ideally, the coursework should normally consist of items completed in the latter part of the Course. If pieces from earlier in the Course are to be used, it may be prudent to double-check them. Often candidates claim that pieces which were produced earlier in the year were generated before they fully understood the meaning of plagiarism — and that they didn't realise could be submitted to SQA for marking.

What to do if you suspect plagiarism

Where suspicions of plagiarism arise before materials are submitted to SQA for marking, there is no need to contact us. If you are not confident of the authenticity of a piece of work, do not submit it.

Penalties for plagiarism

Our document *Candidate Malpractice in Externally Assessed Examinations and Assessments: Information for Centres* gives information on the procedure that will be followed if one of our Markers identifies a potential concern with the content of any work submitted to us for marking. It also details the penalties that can be applied should plagiarism or collusion be confirmed.

SQA has a responsibility to maintain the integrity of its awards — but applying a penalty to a candidate's award is a very serious matter and not something we do lightly. We would rather do all we can to highlight the potential issues surrounding plagiarism and collusion and provide guidance and support to you, to help you minimise opportunities for malpractice and ensure that candidates fully understand the rules of engagement.