Annex 2 of the agreement between the University of Bremen and PlagScan GmbH on privacy and data protection in their client-contractor relationship

Usage and privacy plan for the PlagScan plagiarism detection software at the University of Bremen

Preamble

The University of Bremen endeavours to support its faculty and students in preventing academic misconduct. From the start, students learn subject-specific and interdisciplinary principles of good academic practice and are continuously supported by teaching staff throughout the course of their studies to write academic work correctly.

The principles for ensuring good academic practice and responding to academic misconduct are set out in the Good Academic Practice Regulations for the University of Bremen (Ordnung zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis), dated 5 July 2017. Students, as members of the university community, are also subject to these regulations.

Teaching staff at the University of Bremen are required to follow up on any suspicion of plagiarism and document any proven instances of plagiarism. To support them, the University of Bremen offers the option of scanning students’ and candidates’ academic work with the PlagScan plagiarism detection software.

According to the General Provisions (Allgemeiner Teil, AT) of the University of Bremen Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree Regulations (BPO and MPO respectively), ‘erroneous or missing information about sources used’ must be seen as plagiarism. (Section 18.2). The Doctoral Degree Regulations also contain clear provisions regarding the definition of and formal response to plagiarism. Even if plagiarism has not occurred intentionally in the specific case, it is nevertheless a major violation of the rules of good academic practice.

Process for the plagiarism scan

0) Declaration of consent

Students give their consent to having their work scanned with the plagiarism detection software on submission of an extensive student work or thesis. Students may withdraw their consent at any time.

1) Plagiarism is suspected

Suspect passages of text stand out when examining a written work (per Section 8 AT BPO/MPO) or thesis.
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2) Plagiarism scan using the software

The faculty member has the option of scanning individual, suspect passages or, in particularly serious instances, scanning the entire work. Teaching staff are compelled to use the software sparingly as the annual charges are based on the number of words scanned.

Personal information must be removed from the scanned documents beforehand (e.g. name, address, student registration number etc.).

Plagiarism checks are carried out confidentially. Teaching staff are bound to confidentiality through their professional obligations as well as Section 7 of the Good Academic Practice Regulations.

3) Response to scan results

The plagiarism report delivered by the PlagScan software provides information about matches with texts from sources available in the database, even if the text has been modified slightly, and highlights incorrect citations. Matches do not necessarily indicate plagiarism. References to literature, common expressions and similar are also recognised as matches by the software. It is also possible that correct citations are not recognised as such, causing the software to highlight them incorrectly as plagiarised. Plagiarism can only be identified if the original documents are available in the database\(^1\). The software is unable to identify translated plagiarism. As a result, it is always possible that plagiarism remains undetected by the software.

It is the assessor’s job to judge whether plagiarism as defined above has actually occurred and whether academic fraud has been attempted. It may also be relevant to consider as part of this whether any fraud was intentional and how significant it is for the academic quality of the assessed work. If fraud is intentional and significant, assessment pieces will receive a fail grade based on a corresponding decision of the relevant examination committee (Section 18.1 AT BPO/MPO). Inaccuracies, incorrect citation etc. can be penalised by lowering grades, including down to a fail grade. It is up to the specific, individual assessor to determine the final grade for pieces of assessment. The sections of the Doctoral Degree Regulations concerning invalidity of doctoral work and award and revocation of the doctorate also include provisions on responding to plagiarism and on committees taking such decisions.

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\(^1\) PlagScan’s plagiarism check is based on four types of sources: (1) Online: All online sources indexed by Bing (Microsoft) are available. Additional indexing of academic sites is particularly appealing. (2) Own archive/collusion check: documents from an organisation itself that are fed into the database. (3) Cooperating publishers: over 20,000 publisher databases are available. (4) Plagiarism prevention pool (optional): an organisation’s own documents can be added to the overall pool (without full text access) and made available to all software users as material for their plagiarism checks (customers receive a credit for this).
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4) Further options

Two trusted persons are available to contact in connection with suspected cases of academic misconduct, in accordance with Section 4 of the Good Academic Practice Regulations dated 5 July 2017.

Technical implementation

Consent and length of storage

With the declaration of consent, students are requested to give their consent to the addition of their written work to the University of Bremen’s local database. Consent is voluntary. It contributes to the improvement of text matching sources for future plagiarism checks. The assessed passages of text are archived on the server to make them a permanent source in the database. If authors withdraw their consent, the relevant documents must be deleted immediately. To withdraw consent, students contact the members of teaching staff to whom they submitted the work.

Server security

The data belonging to the University of Bremen remains on its own server; this type of software use is called ‘PlagScan in a box’. PlagScan uses encrypted document transmission (256-bit SSL via https) for maximum security. Documents are sent using a secure https protocol when uploading. The uploaded documents cannot be viewed online at any time and cannot be found via a search engine. Deleted documents are permanently erased and cannot be restored.

Admission control

The University of Bremen’s PlagScan server is located in the Green IT Housing Centre, belonging to the Zentrum für Netze (ZfN) at the University of Bremen. The building is appropriately secured with an admission control system. Further details regarding admission control can be found in the Green IT Housing Centre’s documentation.

Access control

Data is kept in a central database on a password-protected server.

Usage control

(1) Database level

At database level, all stored data can be viewed, modified and combined without limitations. The system administrators operating the PlagScan server have access to this level.
Annex 2 of the agreement between the University of Bremen and PlagScan GmbH on privacy and data protection in their client-contractor relationship

(2) User level

Teaching staff receive personalised access to the PlagScan portal. The portal is administered centrally by the Teaching and Studies Unit, 13-6. In accordance with the terms and conditions of usage set out above, only teaching staff who are principally employed at the University of Bremen and acting independently are authorised to upload student work to the portal for scanning. There are limits to the number of words that can be scanned, so all users are requested to use the plagiarism detection software exclusively where they have reason to suspect plagiarism.

Authorised users can log in with their ZFN access information (Shibboleth, as used for Stud.IP and the employee portal).

Disclosure control

Data stored in the PlagScan database is not disclosed to third parties. At no time do other people have access to the documents except for the teaching staff who themselves have uploaded the documents. It is also not possible to access work stored in the database for future text matching. Only individual passages from such work are displayed in the plagiarism reports for other uploaded work. At no time can the displayed text be linked with the name of the work’s author, which means that confidentiality is ensured.

Further aspects of privacy and data protection are explained in detail in the Agreement Between the University of Bremen and PlagScan GmbH on Privacy and Data Protection in Their Client-Contractor Relationship, dated 7 November 2018.