

Student Guide

Understanding and Avoiding Collusion



1. Purpose and Summary

Collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork are essential aspects of good academic practice, and key skills for life. They are not only acceptable activities to engage in as a student, but they are also strongly encouraged. You are expected to collaborate with other students in all sorts of ways, for example when working in study groups or groups in labs, when undertaking group assignments, and when contributing to discussions in class. However, in certain situations you are expected to work individually. Many assessments, for example, will require you to study on your own and develop your own answers. Working with other students in an inappropriate way is called 'collusion' and is a form of academic misconduct. This guide is designed to help you to understand and avoid collusion in your studies.

2. What is Collusion?

Collusion occurs where students work together to complete an assessment, in whole or in part, that should have been completed independently. Submissions should present a student's own personal skills and understanding and not seek to take credit for the contributions or knowledge of another student.

Collusion may be found in cases where the student works too closely with one or more individuals to help solve and/or answer an assessed task or question and produce a joint answer or solution (intentionally or not) to gain an unfair advantage for their own personal benefit. A student can be guilty of collusion by receiving inappropriate help from one or more other students, or by providing inappropriate help to one or more other students.

3. How can I tell the difference between collusion and collaboration?

While collusion is unethical and inappropriate, collaboration, where permitted, is a very positive activity. If collaboration is encouraged, and collusion is a form of academic misconduct, how can you tell the difference?

Most of the time, the difference between collaboration and collusion is clear.

- Two students who work together for an assignment that is supposed to be their own individual work, and whose submissions are very similar, are likely to be guilty of collusion. A student who lets another student copy their submission and hand it in as their own work, is also likely to be guilty of collusion.
- On the other hand, students who work together in a study group to discuss lecture notes and course readings are not likely to be guilty of collusion. Students who discuss general aspects of assignments (deadlines, word counts etc.) are also not likely to be guilty of collusion.

While the boundary between acceptable collaboration and inappropriate collusion is normally clear, it will sometimes depend on context, and on the nature of the assessment. You should pay particular attention to the specific instructions from the lecturer. In group work, for example, there may be parts of the assessment that should be done collaboratively, and other parts that should be done individually. The difference between the individual and group elements should be clear in the assessment information. In cases where it isn't completely clear how much collaboration is acceptable; it is very important to ask. Talk to your lecturer if you aren't sure what is expected for the task in terms of collaborative and individual work.

It is also important not to be put off working with other students. Discussing course content with other students, sharing your ideas about the course topics, getting other perspectives: these are all important aspects of your university education. When it comes to assessments, however, you need to be sure that you understand what the limits of acceptable collaboration are. **And if in doubt, always ask!**

4. What are some typical cases of collusion?

Collusion can take many forms, but these are some typical examples:

Example	Collusion or collaboration?
Several students form a study group but end up working together to develop answers to an assessment that is not a group activity.	Collusion: The students have gone beyond discussing concepts from the course and have worked together on coursework that should be completed individually.
Students work together to gather data in a lab experiment. Instead of analysing the results individually as instructed, they submit the same report.	Collusion: The group activity ended after the experiments were completed. The report was an individual exercise where each student can show their own understanding of the results.
A student has been unwell and hasn't had time to work on an essay. A friend shares their essay as a helpful example, however sharing work has not been explicitly permitted by the lecturer.	Collusion: The unwell student should have used the Mitigating Circumstances process or spoken to the lecturer. The friend has shared their essay with another student, and peer feedback was not part of the coursework exercise, so they have colluded, and both students are guilty of breach of academic integrity.
A class is working in pairs on a group assessment. Two of those pairs choose to work together to complete the task, sharing their answers with each other.	Collusion: This was a group task; however, groups were supposed to produce their own work. By sharing their answers, the two groups are colluding.
Students meet as a study group to discuss particular ideas from the course and to share their thoughts about the course reading.	Collaboration: The students are discussing ideas and readings, rather than the specific content of assignment submissions.
When working on a group assignment, some students discuss their answers and work together to write the final submission.	Collaboration: The students are working together, but this collaboration is explicitly permitted (and required) by the assessment instructions, so if in doubt ask your lecturer.
Some students are revising for an exam, and share with each other some textbooks, references, and websites that they have found useful.	Collaboration: By sharing resources that they have found useful, the students are helping each other to learn more about the topic, but without inappropriately colluding on their specific answers.

5. How can I avoid collusion?

Students can avoid collusion by ensuring that they don't share their specific written assessment submissions (whether that is text, artwork, design, data, analysis, code, or other information). They should also avoid discussing the specific content of these submissions unless they have been given specific permission or instructions to do so by the course team. For example, sharing may be permitted in group work, or where students are specifically instructed to provide peer feedback as part of a course. If you are in doubt, it is essential to check with the person teaching the course. If you feel that collusion may have arisen in your work, it is best to self-refer yourself to the relevant academic or your Personal Tutor for guidance.

If impacted by circumstances that affect your ability to do your academic work, it may feel quicker to ask a friend (either in HWU or other institutions) to share their academic work and gain guidance that way, or a

friend may offer to share their academic work as guidance, with all the best intentions of helping. However, that approach is likely to end up with a collusion case for both of you as there are often similarities that appear in that shared academic work. The impact of that collusion case on academic progression could be extensive.

Instead, it is better to use the [Mitigating Circumstances](#) process, providing evidence as much as possible, of any issues such health (doctor or counsellor certificates or letters), IT issues (confirmation from IT providers/University, although IT issues are not always accepted depending on circumstances), or any other difficulties – see the [Mitigating Circumstances guidance](#). If in doubt, ask your [Personal Tutor](#) or the [Advice Hub](#).

6. What happens if collusion is discovered in students' work?

Collusion is considered a serious academic misconduct allegation, and suspected cases of collusion will be dealt with through the University's academic misconduct process.

If you submit work that is subject to a collusion allegation, your work will first be subject to preliminary review by your School's Discipline Committee. If the Committee determine that there may be a case to answer, the Student Conduct Office will provide you with the details of the allegation and a copy of the case evidence under review, and you will be asked to provide a written statement for the Committee's consideration. You may also be invited to attend an academic misconduct hearing (via Microsoft Teams or in person) to discuss the allegation. The Committee will determine the outcome of the case based on the balance of probability, the evidence available, and your response to the allegation, and you will be notified of the outcome of the Committee's decision on the case.

The tariff of penalties in the [Student Academic Misconduct Policy](#) provides examples of penalties that may be imposed where it is found that collusion (which is a form of [plagiarism](#)) has occurred. Penalties can range from a formal warning, to voiding the course in question plus another course already successfully passed to heavier penalties in severe cases or where there have been repeated offences.

The University recognises that being advised of an academic misconduct allegation is often very distressing for students. The University's [Student Wellbeing Services](#) can provide free, confidential support to students during the investigation process. The [Student Union Advice Hub](#) can also provide free, impartial, confidential advice and support, including assisting students with writing a statement.