Efficacy of Turnitin in Support of an Institutional Plagiarism Policy.

A report for plagiarismadvice.org on research conducted at Canterbury Christ Church University.

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# Executive Summary

**Introduction**

Our plagiarism policy commits to an educate-first, detect-and-punish second, approach. The policy allows Turnitin to be used at the discretion of module and programme leaders but sets out minimum requirements for use designed to encourage this educational approach.

During academic year 2010/11 students and teaching staff were surveyed on their understanding, perceptions and experiences of Turnitin with the aim of investigating its efficacy in support of the plagiarism policy. 367 students responded, of which 166 had used Turnitin. 62 staff responded, of which 39 had used Turnitin. 34 students responded to a follow-up e-mail ‘interview’ using an extended questionnaire, of which 21 had used Turnitin. 26 staff were interviewed, of which 15 were teaching staff and the others in various related academic and professional service roles.

**Findings**

* Turnitin is widely used for originality checking; a third or more of our students now use it
* The majority of staff and students fully understand the University’s approach to Turnitin
* Policy relating to Turnitin is being implemented; minimum requirements for use are met
* It appears Turnitin contributes to a significant minority of alleged cases of plagiarism
* There is ongoing educational use in almost half of programmes
* Over 95% staff and students have positive/neutral experiences; non-users are willing to adopt
* Over half of students interviewed say Turnitin helps them avoid plagiarism[[1]](#footnote-1) and has some impact on referencing and writing generally; supported by staff views
  + no evidence at this time that *ongoing* educational use itself increases impact[[2]](#footnote-2) but students say they would welcome more
* Students want more help/reassurance in understanding originality reports

We conclude that Turnitin is effective in supporting the plagiarism policy.

The educate-first, detect-and-punish second, approach of the policy is generally understood. However, there is room for further awareness raising. This educate-first approach is being implemented through use of Turnitin and is working. It is having a demonstrable impact on avoiding plagiarism as well as detection and punishment. Students want more ongoing educational use, beyond an initial formative experience, and this is growing. There is a need for more advice and guidance for students in interpreting originality reports.

**Outcomes**

1. a revised plagiarism policy was proposed to University Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee to make use of Turnitin mandatory for all ‘submittable’ summative coursework
2. Committee agreed to recommend this for Academic Board approval by end 2010/11
3. Work in progress on:
   * enhanced guidance for staff and students on interpreting originality reports
   * support for tutors in giving feedback to students on their originality reports

Consideration might also be given to further research into the impact of ongoing educational use of Turnitin compared with just one initial formative experience followed by ongoing use for detection.

# Introduction

This report describes research conducted during 2010/11 at Canterbury Christ Church University to evaluate how effective Turnitin is in supporting our plagiarism policy.

Canterbury Christ Church University is a medium sized, post-92 university and the largest centre of higher education in Kent for the public services including teaching, nursing, policing, health and social care[[3]](#footnote-3).

We believe that, although deliberate plagiarism exists, much is accidental and there is a need for educating learners to avoid plagiarism. As such, our plagiarism policy – established in 2007/8 - commits to an educate-first, detect-and-punish-second, approach (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2007). In support of this approach, the policy allows Turnitin to be used at the discretion of module and programme leaders but requires that:

1. students must be advised of the use of Turnitin in advance i.e. no retrospective use
2. all students must submit for any coursework checked i.e. no singling out individuals
3. students must have a formative experience of Turnitin before summative use

Use of Turnitin has grown steadily. There were almost 20000 student papers submitted in the 12 months to Jan 2011, representing a third or more of our students. This was a good time to evaluate. We wanted to know how Turnitin was being used across the whole institution and whether it was helping to deliver the educate-first approach.

Our primary aim for the research was to develop our own policy and practice through establishing:

* extent of use of Turnitin
* perceptions of the plagiarism policy and how Turnitin relates to it
* strategies for using Turnitin
* level of staff and student satisfaction
* impact of Turnitin on education to avoid plagiarism
* impact of Turnitin on detection and procedures for dealing with alleged plagiarism

A further aim was contribute to the sector’s body of knowledge. Prevention of plagiarism through education is a theme identified by Badge (2009) who concludes an area lacking in research is “investigation of the impact of these tools on staff teaching practices”. Although a number of recent studies have considered educational use of Turnitin (Davis & Carroll, 2009; McCarthy & Rogerson, 2009; Wiggins, 2010; Flynn, 2010), they focus on individual programmes or subject areas rather than institutions as a whole and the relationship with policy.

The research was conducted during the Autumn and Spring terms 2010/11 by a small team comprising a learning technologist from our central Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit (LTEU) and a principal research fellow from our Faculty of Education. The research project team worked in close partnership with the Student Union (SU) which took an active role in the research including survey design and delivery, dissemination of outcomes and input into subsequent development of policy and practice.

# Method

The research employed a number of quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods as follows.

### Staff Survey

All academic (teaching) staff were invited via our staff intranet and by faculty/department e-mail shots to participate in an anonymous, online survey using Bristol Online Surveys[[4]](#footnote-4) (BOS). The survey was designed to establish the range and extent of Turnitin use for originality checking, to understand staff perceptions of Turnitin and links with education and the procedures for dealing with alleged plagiarism. Respondents were also asked if they would be willing to be interviewed. The survey was open for three weeks around the middle of the Autumn Term 2010/11 so as to be available after the start of term rush.

62 academic staff responded to the survey of which 39 had used Turnitin - a response rate of 12%[[5]](#footnote-5). All Faculties were represented with most responses from Education (21/62) and least from Arts and Humanities (6/62). All roles were represented with most responses from Senior Lecturer/Lecturer Module Leader roles.

### Staff Interviews

Interviews were conducted with a range of academic staff and stakeholders in other roles. These included the Assistant Registrar (responsible for plagiarism panels), Faculty Quality Officers (responsible for academic planning and review), the Director of Learning and Teaching, Student Support Services, programme administrators and the Student Union Student Representation Coordinator and Advice Caseworker. Interviews were designed to understand the relationship of staff roles to plagiarism, their knowledge and perceptions of university plagiarism policy and their understanding of Turnitin. Academic staff who use Turnitin were also asked about their approach and experiences in detail.

26 staff were interviewed of which 15 were academic staff. Most of these had used Turnitin. The remaining staff interviewed were stakeholders with other roles (see Method).

### Student Survey

All students were invited to participate in a similar survey which was constructed in partnership with the Student Union (SU). The survey was designed to understand students’ perceptions of Turnitin and its links with the university's plagiarism policy. The survey also asked if Respondents would be willing to complete a follow-up questionnaire via e-mail. Students were invited to respond via the SU web site, e-mail bulletins, posters in the SU building and via their programme tutors. The survey was open for two months from the beginning of Autumn Term 2010/11 so as to be available to new students around early plagiarism briefings and to existing students settling down after the start of term rush. On the advice of the SU, students were further encouraged by a prize draw for a £100 high street voucher and a video camera as well as a stand in the SU building where meal vouchers were given for taking the survey on the spot.

367 students responded to the survey of which 166 had used Turnitin. This represents a response rate of 2%[[6]](#footnote-6) of all students. All Faculties were represented with most responses from Social and Applied Sciences (128/367) and least from Business and Management (34/367). All levels of study were represented with most responses from Level 4 (126/367) and least from Level 8/Doctoral (27/367).

### Student Follow-up Questionnaire via E-mail

Resource constraints prevented physical interviews with students. However, further data was gathered in the form of a detailed questionnaire. Students were selected as a representative sample from survey Respondents who volunteered to be interviewed. These were e-mailed a Microsoft Word template in which to write about their knowledge and perceptions of university plagiarism policy as well as education/support they have received to avoid plagiarism. Those students who had used Turnitin were also asked about their experiences in detail. The research project team asked further follow-up questions/points for clarification via e-mail. On the advice of the SU, £10 amazon.co.uk vouchers were offered for participation.

34 students completed a follow-up questionnaire of which 21 had used Turnitin.

### Turnitin Submission Statistics

Turnitin maintains statistics of numbers of staff and student users and numbers of papers submitted by institution and by individual course areas in our Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Statistics were gathered for the period 26/04/04 – 17/01/11 to help assess extent of use.

### Learning Technology Team Records

Although we do not formally monitor use of Turnitin, the central learning technology team provide advice and guidance on its use and so maintain a record of programmes they have supported.

These were updated and correlated to help assess the extent of use and to suggest further interview candidates.

# Findings

### Extent of Use of Turnitin

Turnitin is in use by 5000+ students in around 40 programmes in 17 or more of the 23 teaching departments across all five faculties. There is planned use for around 1500 more students in at least a further 10 programmes, including a further three teaching departments.

These numbers are consistent with central learning technology team records and Turnitin submission statistics which show a total of 26271 originality reports produced to date with the majority - 19563 – in the 12 months to 18/01/11.

### Perceptions of the Plagiarism Policy and How Turnitin Relates to It

All (62/62) staff, and almost all (344/367) students, surveyed report they are aware of the plagiarism policy, however only around half of each feel they fully understand it.

Around two thirds of students interviewed describe the university’s approach to plagiarism as being mainly about standards, definitions and rigour as opposed to actively helping them to avoid it.

*My understanding is that the University take a very strong stance when plagiarism is concerned, this can lead to movement through the disciplinary hierach [sic], removal of work from submission and of the student from the program.*

*I think it is really good that they take it very seriously; some of the talks we had are a bit scary, but students need that so that they don't just ‘copy and paste' articles and quotes.*

Around a third describe the approach as more educative.

*It teaches me how to avoid it. It encourages me to read more and support my ideas with empirical evidence.*

However, when asked almost all students were aware that the university’s approach combined education with detection and punishment.

Less than half the staff interviewed felt they understood the plagiarism policy. Staff talk more about the procedures for dealing with alleged plagiarism than about the policy itself. Although they understand the essence of the policy – that the university does not condone plagiarism, but seeks to educate rather than punish – it is clear many, if not most, are not aware of a separate policy document or perhaps see the procedures as more important for their day to day work. It seemed that staff do not become involved with the policy until they are involved in a plagiarism panel. Most interviewed understand the university’s increasingly educational approach to dealing with plagiarism and are supportive of this. A small number do not and feel the new approach is too lenient and that allowing students who may have plagiarised resubmissions without penalty is unfair to other students.

**Turnitin**

Most students (266/367), and almost all staff (61/62), surveyed have heard of Turnitin. Around three quarters or more of students (121/166) and staff (31/39) using Turnitin report they fully understand the educate-first approach to using it. Almost all the remainder are at least partly aware.

Asked about their perceived aims for using Turnitin, students surveyed who use it see it as being more about detection (79%) and deterrence (54%) than education to avoid plagiarism (45%) and helping improve academic skills (33%). However, perceptions vary across levels of study, particularly at Level 4. Fewer Level 4 students perceive it to be about detection (65%) than other levels (83%-88%) and more about education to avoid plagiarism (55%) compared with other levels (32%-46%). Interviews indicate students who use Turnitin welcome education as well as detection and deterrence. The education aspect of the plagiarism policy stands out as a stronger message for students interviewed who have used it.

Around half of staff surveyed who use Turnitin see it as mainly educational, around half mainly for detection/deterrence, but often recognising both aims. Interviews indicate there is a general agreement amongst staff with the policy of formative use early on in programmes. Staff interviewed who were using Turnitin in their programmes tend to view the education of students about plagiarism and the use of Turnitin as very important, introducing it early in programmes as an important element of study skills. A number of staff said that education about plagiarism can be an issue for students even at Masters and Doctoral level. However, there were indications that a few lecturers see Turnitin as a tool that works in isolation, rather than something that they can use within/to support their teaching.

### Strategies for Using Turnitin

All data indicates the requirements of the plagiarism policy are being fulfilled:

* all students taking a given assignment are being asked to submit, not just individual students
* briefings are given up front, almost always in lectures with supporting handbook information in around a third of cases.
* students are getting formative experiences; over half of students are able to submit a draft for their formative experience; around a third are shown an example originality report by their tutors.

Although the policy requires only an initial formative experience as a minimum, there is evidence of *ongoing* educational use of Turnitin. Students surveyed indicate around a third (54/166) were able to see their originality report for final submissions on an ongoing basis.

However, the survey is unclear on ongoing ability to submit drafts. Over half (13/21) of students interviewed who use Turnitin reported ongoing educational use, representing almost half (8/18) of the programmes covered. This breaks down as:

* students on at least 7/18 of the programmes covered being able to view their originality report for their final submissions.
* students on at least 3/18 programmes covered being able to submit a draft for every assignment

Staff interviews indicate a similar level of ongoing educational use. Where not already established, there is consideration/planning on several programmes for allowing draft submissions beyond the initial formative experience.

### Level of Satisfaction - Students

The majority (109/156) of students surveyed who use Turnitin are either very positive or more positive than negative, with most of the remainder (39/156) neutral. Very few (8/156) are very negative or more negative than positive. The majority of (163/196) of students who do not use Turnitin are either fully willing, or willing with some reservations, to do so.

Both surveys and interviews indicate a small but significant proportion of students can be anxious about Turnitin matching properly referenced quotations, common knowledge and phrases, technical language etc. and want more guidance on interpreting originality reports.

*It's useful in detecting plagiarism, but is to broad; work could look plagiarised from simple sentences/words that more than one person may use.*

*When writing on a limited subject area, or for example if a problme [sic] question was given where everyone was writing about the same thing, it detected a lot of sentences as plagiarised as all the other students were using the same words or phrases.*

*Its a good program, but it is additional stress to add, such as - 'is my originality report less ten 20%' although i always reference correctly, you still panic, especcially [sic] with so many students doing the same piece of work, you have to get in submitting your work before others as the title will be the same, and will be picked up through turnitin and will add to the report percentage.*

There is a wider demand for ongoing educational use. However the overall level of demand is difficult to gauge as the survey and interview questions did not ask this directly. What we do know is that, of students surveyed who volunteered a comment, around a quarter (8/33) of students who use Turnitin, and a fifth (14/66) of who do not, say they value it for their own education.

*It has been fine to use and pretty clear in its use. In our first year we were are able to send drafts for originalty [sic] reports, however I believe our second and third years we are not allowed. It would be nice to continue to be able to do so as it was useful learning aid and would continue to be so in the future.*

*it would be helpful if we actually got to see the reports that are run on our submitted work. Then it will actually be a learning experience as opposed to a hoop we have to jump through.*

*Anyway to improve the quality of my essay is a good thing.*

*It will help me to learn more about the style of writing, how to reference properly and to avoid using too many quotations; so I believe it will improve my work.*

*Sounds like a good idea. Often worry if i accidentaly [sic] forget to reference a quote.*

This is supported by most students (10/13) interviewed who do not use Turnitin who would welcome its use.

*Yes, of course, it would tell me if I used expressions/sentences/ideas that have already ben [sic] said by someone else.*

*If I understand it correctly, the programme aims to help students to avoid plagiarism, so it must be a positive help.*

### Level of Satisfaction - Staff

The majority (33/39) of staff survey respondents who have used Turnitin are either very positive, or more positive than negative, about their experience, with some (5/39) neutral and only one Respondent more negative than positive. Almost all (20/23) staff who have not used Turnitin would be either fully willing, or willing with some reservations, to use it.

In use for detection, staff value Turnitin enabling them to detect plagiarism more quickly than having to use Google. However, a small number commented on the amount of effort needed to set up Turnitin and to monitor/read originality reports as being a waste of time.

*It is very useful in confirming suspicions or the reverse, although of course it can’t show whether the ‘plagiarism’ was intentional or not, that can be followed up by the lecturer.*

*Turnitin is an obvious time-saver for markers and discourages plagiarism simply by being there.*

Some staff interviewed commented on the need for greater consistency in use from programme to framework to even university level. This includes whether used or not as well as *how* used e.g. enable drafts, see originality reports for final submissions. Most agreed with the increasingly formative approach. Several commented on the potential for ongoing drafts.

### Impact of Using Turnitin on Education to Avoid Plagiarism

Over half (12/21) of students interviewed who use Turnitin say it has helped them avoid plagiarism. Furthermore, almost half (9/21) report that it has helped improve their referencing and almost a third (6/21) that it improved their writing generally. All (6/6) of the students who regard themselves less confident about avoiding plagiarism report that Turnitin helped them.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is no correlation between ongoing educational use of Turnitin and students reporting it has helped them to avoid plagiarism. Students were as likely to report Turnitin has helped them avoid plagiarism for programmes that have an initial formative experience only as for programmes which provide ongoing access to originality reports or draft opportunities.

The student survey did not ask directly about the impact of using Turnitin. However, a quarter (8/33) of students surveyed who use Turnitin, and who commented on the survey, explicitly referred to the value of Turnitin to help them to avoid plagiarism.

*It was helpful to see if there were any issues with my work that i needed to rephrase, reference or delete.*

*at first it made me panic ut [sic] now i understand that it is a great tool to improve your academic writing.*

Around half of staff surveyed who use Turnitin (39/62) perceive it to have directly contributed to:

* reduced plagiarism
* improved referencing
* improved writing generally

in roughly equal measures.

*Over the last three years it has reduced the amount of plagiarism being dealt with. Students fear it at first but also have clearer ideas of what they can and cannot do.*

In the interviews a small number of staff felt that some students deliberately referred to more obscure journals or conference papers that are not part of the Turnitin database to avoid detection.

*Sometimes I fear that it may encourage a ‘cleverer’ type of plagiarism for those students who want to cheat and realise that all they need to do is find more obscure textbooks that are not online.*

### Impact of Turnitin on Detection and Procedures for Dealing with Alleged Plagiarism

To date, there has been no formal recording mechanism for the involvement of Turnitin in alleged cases of plagiarism.

Around half (20/39) of teaching staff who responded to the survey, and who have used Turnitin, had direct experience of Turnitin leading to an alleged case of plagiarism. This is consistent with staff interviews. Over half staff surveyed (24/39) thought that it had increased detection by tutors of possible plagiarism.

The Student Union maintains records of plagiarism cases referred to the Student Representation Coordinator and Advice Worker. Records from 08/09 and 09/10 show 27% of cases (14 of 51) have involved Turnitin. However, note that these only represent plagiarism cases where students have requested help from the SU.

Staff interviewed comment that Turnitin aids the procedures for dealing with alleged plagiarism by cutting down on the leg-work (e.g. Googling) of detection and providing documentary evidence for plagiarism panels.

*...it has been useful in identifying substantial plagiarism in a piece of work. The student is denying they plagiarised so this provides clear evidence and a basis for the initial discussion with the student.*

*Helped to spot all the minor plagiarism in a report with large chunks of copied material. Better evidence. It’s unlikely that the case would have been brought to my attention without Turnitin.*

# Conclusions

We conclude that Turnitin is effective in supporting the plagiarism policy.

Turnitinis used in most teaching departments by a significant, growing minority of students. Most activity has been in the last calendar year and use is growing.

Staff understand that the university’s approach to plagiarism is educate-first, detect-and-punish second. However, they typically confuse the plagiarism policy itself with the more specific, detailed procedures for dealing with alleged plagiarism. We suggest their understanding of the approach comes through advice and guidance on using Turnitin, not through familiarity with the policy document.

Students understand that the university’s approach to plagiarism combines education with detection. However, they perceive detection more strongly and are not familiar with the plagiarism policy itself.

Plagiarism policy relating to Turnitin is being implemented by staff. The minimum requirements for use of Turnitin within the policy are being fulfilled, including whole group submission, no retrospective use and providing an initial formative experience. Moreover, these requirements are being exceeded with *ongoing* educational use in almost half of programmes using Turnitin and growing.

Staff and students who use Turnitin perceive it used for education as well as detection and value it for both. Staff perceive a roughly equal balance, students more for detection. However, Level 4 students’ perception leans more towards education than at other levels. We suggest this is a consequence of their formative experience/s.

More than 95% of staff and students who use Turnitin have a positive or neutral experience of it. Most current non-users are willing to use it.

On an education level, Turnitin is widely valued by students and we suggest may help up to half to avoid plagiarising, particularly those less confident. There is some demand from students for more ongoing educational use of Turnitin, particularly amongst those less confident about plagiarism. The level of demand is hard to gauge without further research, but we suggest it is a significant minority of students. However, there is currently no evidence that ongoing educational approaches increase impact – but note the small interview sample size.

Students would welcome more explanation of originality reports and reassurance over matches of ‘fair’ material.

On a detection level, Turnitin appears to have been a factor in detecting plagiarism in a significant minority of alleged cases.

Finally, this research has raised some questions. What is the level of demand for ongoing educational use of Turnitin? We suggest a significant minority but we did not directly ask this. Is there a difference in impact on avoiding plagiarism for ongoing educational use of Turnitin compared with just the minimum requirement of an initial formative experience? Our data suggest not, but this is based on a small sample size and we did not design the research to assess this explicitly. Other data show the numbers of plagiarism panels are rising but we conclude Turnitin helps reduce plagiarism. How is this? Are we detecting more of a reduced amount of plagiarism?

**Note:**

These conclusions should be considered in the context of survey response rates (62 teaching staff=12%, 367 students=2%) and interview sample sizes (26 teaching staff=5%, 34 students=0.2%). Although these represented all Faculties, levels of study and a wide range of staff roles, they cannot be considered significant in the context of a statistical analysis. However, in the context of educational development in a higher education institution, experience suggests this is as good a response as one might hope for.

# Recommendations

As a result of this research, we have recommended to our Learning & Teaching Committee:

1. review the plagiarism policy with respect to the use of Turnitin with a view to extending use, particularly ongoing educational use
2. further raise awareness of the educate-first approach of the policy and the educational potential of Turnitin, particularly amongst students
3. provide enhanced guidance in interpreting originality reports for staff and students

Consideration might also be given to further research into the impact of ongoing educational use of Turnitin compared with just one initial formative experience followed by ongoing use for detection.

# Progress

**As of May 2011:**

A proposal was made to University Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee to broaden educational use of Turnitin:

* to be used for all ‘submittable’ summative coursework for Levels 4-7, unless there is a strong pedagogic or administrative reason not to
* students to have an opportunity to self-check their work at least once for each summative submission
* some form of feedback to be given by tutors on originality reports in the early stages of students’ studies

This was incorporated into a revised plagiarism policy which Committee agreed to recommend for Academic Board approval by end 2010/11.

Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit (LTEU) are working on enhanced guidance for staff and students on interpreting originality reports for students. This will include ‘bite sized’ videos as suggested by the Student Union.

LTEU are working with the Student Study Support Unit to develop support for programmes in providing feedback to students on their originality reports.

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1. Note small student interview sample size, although larger survey response supports this finding. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Research not designed to evaluate impact of *ongoing* educational use of Turnitin specifically. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Canterbury Christ Church University web site: <http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/About/> [Accessed: 16 May 2011] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bristol Online Surveys: [www.survey.bris.ac.uk](http://www.survey.bris.ac.uk) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Estimate based on proportion of 525 FTE academic department staff reported in University Annual Review 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Estimate based on proportion of 16755 students reported in University Annual Review 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)