

Using Turnitin at QMUL: Guidance and Policy v2.3

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Using Turnitin at QMUL: Summary

A summary of the key details from the Turnitin policy. Please read the guidance in full for further information.

What is Turnitin?

Turnitin is a web-based tool that identifies where text in student work matches external sources. It is widely used at QMUL to assist in detecting plagiarism compares.

General Principles

Turnitin can be used to both deter and detect plagiarism and the following principles outline the manner in which it should be used at QMUL.

- Students should be well informed about how Turnitin is used.
- Students should be supported in their formative use of Turnitin.
- Turnitin should only be used by staff in an appropriate role.
- Its use should be appropriate and fair.

Staff Roles

To ensure the most effective use of Turnitin, it is essential that staff members engage with the system appropriately as follows.

- Each School should nominate a Turnitin contact to support and help to standardise its Turnitin activity.
- The decision on whether there is a plagiarism case to answer must be taken by an academic member of staff.
- Administrative staff within a school can take part in all aspects of managing and processing Turnitin data and submissions, but should not interpret an originality report for plagiarism.

Supporting Students

Schools should provide an opportunity for students to see an originality report at some stage before summative work is submitted to Turnitin.

Schools should provide at least one opportunity for students to use Turnitin formatively early in their programme.

Guidance on understanding and interpreting an originality report should be made available to students alongside plagiarism and referencing support.

Usage

Setting a threshold similarity index, above which Turnitin reports are reviewed, is not advised. Schools should reserve the right to review every originality report and should not use thresholds set at the school level to manage workload.

Turnitin is not appropriate for all types of assignment and a blanket 'universal use' policy is not advised.

For any iteration of an assignment, Turnitin must be used on either all submissions or none at all and should not be used only in suspicious cases.

Academic Offences Panels

Originality reports must not be submitted to academic offences panels on the strength of the similarity index alone. The report must be interpreted and any extraneous information removed before submission to a panel.

Student Data and Turnitin

Students cannot opt out of having their work checked by an external software tool. However, they may request that their file is subsequently deleted from the Turnitin repository on certain grounds.

Requests for assignments from Turnitin's Repository

When requests for access to QMUL student work are received via Turnitin, the email should be forwarded to the school's Turnitin contact who should follow the correct procedure.

Further Information

Further guidance and useful information is available at:
<http://www.elearning.capd.qmul.ac.uk/learning-applications/turnitin/> and in section 6 of this policy.

Using Turnitin at QMUL: Guidance and Policy

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

- 1.1.1. Turnitin is a text-matching tool that identifies where text in student work matches external sources. It is widely used at QMUL to assist in detecting plagiarism.
- 1.1.2. This document sets out the general principles under which Turnitin should be used so that its benefits are maximised for QMUL. It provides guidance to ensure that those using the system within the college are aware of its limitations and are using it in appropriate contexts. This policy should be used by schools to develop Turnitin Statements targeted at students which should not conflict with the guidance here.

1.2 How to use this document and the supporting materials

- 1.2.1 Individual teaching or support staff making use of Turnitin should read this document alongside any school-level policies and in conjunction with the practical guidance for staff and students using Turnitin available centrally (see section 6).
- 1.2.2 Links to resources and QMUL case studies are included throughout. These provide materials and practical suggestions which may be employed to fulfil some of the requirements outlined in this policy.

2 About Turnitin

2.1 What is Turnitin?

- 2.1.1 Turnitin is a web-based tool that compares submitted work with a number of sources in its database to identify where text matches occur with:
 - the current and archived web;
 - previously submitted work;
 - books and journals.
- 2.1.2 The system generates a detailed originality report which indicates those external sources that contain text from the submitted work. Turnitin does not determine whether plagiarism has occurred – this can only be determined by an academic member of staff after interpreting the report.
- 2.1.3 Turnitin can be used either by setting up a Turnitin assignment in QMplus, or by using Turnitin's own website www.submit.ac.uk.
- 2.1.4 The following guides will be useful for staff who are unfamiliar with Turnitin.
 - [What is Turnitin?](#)
 - [How is Turnitin used at Queen Mary](#)
 - [Setting up a Turnitin Assignment](#)
 - [Assignments – QMplus versus Turnitin](#)
- 2.1.5 Further guidance and useful information is available at <http://www.elearning.capd.qmul.ac.uk/application/turnitin/> and within section 6 of this policy.

2.2 Benefits

2.2.1 There are a number of benefits associated with using Turnitin that account for its wide use in QMUL and the HE sector more generally.

- It is a quick and effective way to check student work against multiple sources.
- It is particularly effective at identifying 'cut and paste' offences and will enable schools to pick up more cases of this kind of plagiarism.
- It can identify instances of collusion or copying within a cohort, or between current and previous submissions, which can be very difficult for a marker to spot alone.
- The originality report identifies the source of matched text and is a straightforward way to generate the evidence needed to support plagiarism cases at an assessment offences panel.
- It can be an effective deterrent to those who might be tempted to plagiarise as it increases the chance they will be caught.
- It can be used as a tool to educate students on the issues surrounding plagiarism and improve their academic writing.

2.3 Limitations

2.3.1 There are a number of caveats to the benefits above that those using Turnitin should be cognisant of.

- Turnitin does not have access to every word ever written. Its database is large and growing but it does not have agreements with all publishers for their content and so will miss instances of matched text. The company does not disclose which content it has access to.
- Turnitin cannot detect all instances of plagiarism – such as original work that is not the work of the student. It therefore cannot replace traditional methods of detecting plagiarism and can end up adding to workload rather than easing it.
- The report requires interpretation. Where reports are judged solely on percentage thresholds, false negatives and false positives will be identified and the system will not be effective.

These limitations are straightforward for individuals to overcome once they are familiar with interpreting a Turnitin report.

3 Using Turnitin at QMUL

3.1 General Principles

3.1.1 Turnitin can be used to both deter and detect plagiarism and the following principles outline the manner in which it should be used at QMUL.

- Students should be well informed about how Turnitin is used.
- Students should be supported in their formative use of Turnitin.
- Turnitin should only be used by staff in an appropriate role.
- Its use should be appropriate and fair.

3.1.2 It is important that schools consider how to resource any increased use of the system which puts pressure on both academic and administrative staff members, and as a minimum, should nominate a Turnitin contact for the school.

3.1.3 A clear message should be available in the form of a School Turnitin Statement which outlines how Turnitin is used and encapsulates these principles. A template statement for schools to adapt is included in section 7.

3.2 Staff Roles

3.2.1 To ensure the most effective use of Turnitin, it is essential that staff members engage with the system appropriately as follows.

3.2.2 Turnitin Contact

Each School should nominate a Turnitin contact to support and help to standardise its Turnitin activity. This person may be an academic or administrative member of staff and should understand the detail of this policy as well as how Turnitin works. If the Turnitin contact is an academic and resources allow, they may also help to provide consistent judgement within a school on what is and isn't plagiarism and advise on which cases should be referred on to the Head of School.

3.2.3 Academic Staff

The decision on whether there is a plagiarism case to answer must be taken by an academic member of staff. This is often the module lead themselves or a dedicated academic offences officer. Whilst administrative staff can help in the initial scanning to identify those reports that need closer consideration, any meaningful interpretation of a report requires subject knowledge and academic judgement.

3.2.4 Administrative Staff

Administrative staff within a school can take part in all aspects of managing and processing Turnitin data and submissions, but should not interpret an originality report for plagiarism. A report may be scanned initially by a member of administrative staff to determine whether matched text is restricted to references, quotations and known data tables. If after this initial scan there is minimal matched text, then there may be no need for further interpretation by an academic.

3.2.5 Markers

Whatever policies are adopted for managing Turnitin within a school, markers must remain aware that their role in identifying potential plagiarism as they read student work is unchanged.

3.2.6 Resources and Case Studies

- [Understanding and interpreting an originality report](#) (for staff)
- [Advice from Academic Offences Panels: Do not set a threshold](#)
- Student Conduct Team: improving consistency in plagiarism detection

3.3 Supporting Students

3.3.1 When used appropriately Turnitin can be a helpful deterrent, but only against intentional plagiarism. Many plagiarism cases, particularly early in a student's programme, are caused in part by a lack of understanding about what plagiarism is and how to write at university level. Whether accurate or not, a common complaint put to assessment offences panels is that students were not provided with any guidance on avoiding plagiarism. The use of Turnitin at QMUL comes with a responsibility to help students with their understanding of the tool itself and how to use it to their advantage to avoid unintentional plagiarism.

3.3.2 Visibility of the Turnitin report

3.3.3 Students can gain significant benefit from seeing the originality report on their work and schools should provide an opportunity for students to see the report at some stage before summative work is submitted to Turnitin.

3.3.4 This practice does concern some who suspect that access to this information may encourage students to attempt to 'cheat' the system, thus diminishing its value as a detection tool. However, with support students can use a Turnitin report to see where improvements might be made in their work which can be a powerful way to highlight potential problems that may otherwise remain hidden until work is assessed.

3.3.5 Since each Turnitin report must be interpreted, access to originality reports alone is not helpful for students. As a minimum, guidance on understanding and interpreting an originality report should be made available to students. This should sit alongside plagiarism and referencing support to avoid any suggestion that achieving a low Turnitin match is synonymous with avoiding plagiarism. Students should note that changing individual words in an unreferenced paragraph is still plagiarism and will likely be picked up by either Turnitin or a marker.

3.3.6 Draft Submissions

3.3.7 Provided that students have an understanding of how to interpret the Turnitin report, it can be a valuable learning process to amend their work based on it before final submission. Schools should provide at least one opportunity for students to use Turnitin formatively early in their programme. This may be achieved by allowing resubmission, or by running an early 'dummy' assignment which is similar to later credit-bearing assignments.

3.3.8 Students must be aware that not everything the report highlights will be considered an issue, and not all issues identified by their lecturer will be picked up by Turnitin. They will need to use their academic judgement to evaluate the quality of their own work and must understand that a low similarity index on a draft does not mean there is no plagiarism in their final work.

3.3.9 A step further than simply allowing visibility of an originality report, there is some concern that rather than make thoughtful improvements to their writing, students will focus on making minimal changes to reduce their score. Whilst there are features within the system to prevent this kind of practice – for instance, it is not possible to see a report on a second draft for 24 hours – it is worth noting that Turnitin run a paid-for service that any individual may use to gain originality reports on their work.

3.3.10 Resources and case studies

- [Understanding and interpreting an originality report \(for students\)](#)
- [Referencing standards](#)
- [Plagiarism definition](#)
- [Supporting Students Using Turnitin](#)
- [One-to-one tutorials](#)
- [Draft submissions and revision assignments](#)

3.4 Threshold Similarity Index

3.4.1 The use of Turnitin can generate additional work within a School as potential cases of plagiarism are highlighted for investigation. This is particularly likely where plagiarism support is not well utilised and students continue to engage in poor referencing practices which are flagged by Turnitin.

3.4.2 In order to manage workload, many schools are tempted to set a threshold similarity index above which Turnitin reports are reviewed. However, this is not advised as there are no hard and fast rules on what this threshold should be and the ideal level will vary with the length and characteristics of each assignment. For instance, original work with lots of data tables and references will have a higher similarity score than a reflective essay. Furthermore, a similarity index of 5% may suggest a negligible proportion of matched text, but if it is contained within a single paragraph of a 3,000 word report it may present cause for concern.

3.4.3 Schools should reserve the right to review every originality report and should not use thresholds set at the school level to manage workload. A better way to manage workload is for administrative staff to perform an initial review of Turnitin reports to remove obvious extraneous matches before passing to academic staff. Alternatively, a threshold may helpfully be set for each assignment but not across the school.

3.4.4 Resources and Case Studies

- [Setting a threshold](#)
- Managing Turnitin workload

3.5 Usage level

3.5.1 Turnitin is not appropriate for all types of assignment. For instance, with very short pieces or work with a high proportion of graphs, images or data tables, Turnitin is of little benefit. A blanket 'universal use' policy is not advised.

3.5.2 It should be clear to all students the kinds of assignments on which Turnitin will be used within a school, and these should reflect those instances where Turnitin adds value.

3.5.3 For any iteration of an assignment, Turnitin must be used on either all submissions or none at all. It should not be used only in suspicious cases as this removes the potential for Turnitin to identify collusion within a cohort and may be seen as unfair.

3.5.4 Resources and Case Studies

- Managing a universal Turnitin policy

3.6 Submitting Originality Reports to Assessment Offences Panels

3.6.1 The Turnitin originality report can provide valuable evidence in potential plagiarism cases considered by an assessment offences panel. However, it is important that the report is interpreted before it is submitted to the panel and any extraneous information removed. Schools should pay particular attention to the following.

- Originality reports must not be submitted on the strength of the similarity index alone.
- Large sections of matched texts due to reference lists and data tables should be removed from the report.
- Common discipline-specific phrases should be highlighted – these would not be considered plagiarism but are difficult for an academic outside the subject to spot.

3.7 Training

3.7.1 Staff use of Turnitin is relatively straightforward and mandatory training is not necessary. However, it is important that those interpreting or acting on the content of an originality report are aware of Turnitin's limitations and how to overcome them.

3.7.2 The following resources are recommended:

- [Interpreting the Turnitin Originality Report](#)
- Detecting and Detering Plagiarism (workshop offered by the CAPD book at www.esdcourses.org.uk)

4 Student data and Turnitin

4.1 What information does Turnitin hold?

4.1.1 The majority of work submitted to Turnitin is stored in its repository, against which future submissions are checked. This enables lecturers to identify where text matches occur between their students' submissions and previously submitted work both within and outside of the institution.

4.1.2 This also means that work submitted by QMUL students is held indefinitely by an external organisation – iParadigms Europe, the European arm of the US company that runs the Turnitin service. However, the iParadigms website¹ makes clear that copyright and intellectual property rights are retained by the original owner. At QMUL, this is usually the student submitting the work.

4.2 Data Protection

4.2.1 Turnitin holds the name and email address of anyone (student or staff) who makes use of the system. Turnitin's Privacy Pledge² confirms that this information will not be passed to external institutions or individuals except for the purpose of running the service. For instance, Turnitin will send the details of one user to another where a request to view a matched paper has been submitted (see 4.5).

¹ http://submit.ac.uk/en_gb/privacy-center/overview

² http://submit.ac.uk/en_gb/about-us/privacy-center/privacy-pledge

4.2.2 Turnitin has enrolled in the *Safe Harbour* framework and as such is deemed to meet the EU's Data Protection directive.

4.3 Can students opt out?

4.3.1 Under normal circumstances, it is not possible for students to opt out of having their work checked by an external software tool. It is possible to configure Turnitin so that submissions are not stored in its repository – this should be done for all assignments used for training or demonstration purposes.

4.3.2 The value of Turnitin increases with use as its bank of previous submissions grows. As a result, it is expected that all final assignments making use of Turnitin should allow the work to be stored in the repository unless there are particular circumstances that mean this is inadvisable.

4.4 Can submissions be deleted?

4.4.1 Whilst students cannot prevent their work being checked by Turnitin, they can request that their file is subsequently deleted from the repository on certain grounds. Such requests must come from the staff member in charge of the assignment and should be submitted to their school's Turnitin contact. This applies to instances where Turnitin is accessed via the online learning environment QMplus: deleting a submission from QMplus will not delete the corresponding paper from the Turnitin repository and a request should still be submitted.

4.4.2 Valid grounds for a request for deletion include, but are not limited to:

- An incorrect file was uploaded
- The work contains commercially sensitive content

4.4.3 Note that a concern about intellectual property is not a valid reason to request that work is deleted – the copy in Turnitin does not alter the ownership of the original work.

4.4.4 Resources

- [How to request that a submission is deleted](#)

4.5 Requests for assignments from Turnitin's Repository

4.5.1 When using Turnitin, a lecturer will find that an originality report identifies matches with text in another student's paper – either within or outside of QMUL. Where matches are identified between submissions to the same assignment or between assignments owned by the same staff member, then the source text is available immediately. Where matches are identified with a student submission to another assignment within QMUL or at another institution, then a request can be made via the system for access to the particular work.

4.5.2 From time to time, staff using Turnitin will receive emails requesting access to student work because a match has been found. When these requests are received, the email should be forwarded to the Turnitin contact and the procedure below will be followed. It is anticipated that fewer than five requests from outside QMUL will be received by a school in any one academic year.

- 4.5.3 For requests originating from QMUL
These will be granted once any details identifying the student have been removed.
- 4.5.4 For requests from outside of QMUL
Any identifying information will be removed.

Permission will only be granted once written confirmation has been received from the requester that:

- the paper is only required to help investigate a case of potential plagiarism at their institution; and that
- the paper will be destroyed once the investigation is complete.

5 School Statement on Turnitin Use

- 5.1 A good deal of anxiety is experienced by students around plagiarism detection software. A particular concern is that an IT system rather than a human will make judgements about their work. Much of this anxiety can be relieved by clear information and a sensible approach to Turnitin use.
- 5.2 Each school or institute should develop a Turnitin Statement which clarifies for students how the system is being used and assures them that the guidelines in this policy are followed.
- 5.3 Where schools do not make general use of Turnitin, this should be captured in the Turnitin Statement.
- 5.4 The template at the end of this document should be amended by each school and published for students.

6 Further information

- The resources and case-studies referred to within this document can all be accessed from: www.elearning.capd.qmul.ac.uk/learning-applications/turnitin.
- [Support and FAQs for staff and students using Turnitin](#)
- [Advice and guidance on referencing and avoiding plagiarism](#)
- [Academic Regulations](#)

7 Template Turnitin Statement

Turnitin Statement for {INSERT SCHOOL/INSTITUTE NAME HERE}

Introduction {Suggested text: can be edited as appropriate by Schools}

Turnitin is a web-based plagiarism prevention system used by most universities in the UK. This document describes how Turnitin is used within the school and the data it creates about your work.

{OR}

Turnitin is a web-based plagiarism prevention system used by most universities in the UK. The tool is not generally used on assignments in the school because {summarise the reasons that Turnitin is not used within the school and end the statement there}

1 How Turnitin works

- 1.1 A Turnitin assignment is set up by a member of staff, either on QMplus or directly on Turnitin's own website (www.submit.ac.uk) {Delete as appropriate}. You then access this assignment online and upload your work before the due date. Turnitin will analyse the submitted work to identify text matches with other sources and will compare the work against:
 - the current and archived web;
 - previously submitted work;
 - books and journals.
- 1.2 For each piece of submitted work Turnitin provides two things:
 - A **similarity index**, which indicates the percentage of the submitted paper that Turnitin has identified as matching other sources.
 - An **originality report**, which shows each of these matches in more detail, including the source(s) that Turnitin has found.

2 How Turnitin is used within the school

- 2.1 {amend as appropriate. It may be more appropriate to list where Turnitin is used within your school} Turnitin is used on the majority of undergraduate and post-graduate assignments that contribute towards your final grade. Turnitin will not normally be used on the following assignments:
 - short assignments (under 500 words)
 - contributions to online discussions
 - exercises submitted on paper
 - exams
 - computer programs
- 2.2 For those assignments where Turnitin is used, all submissions to that assignment will be submitted to Turnitin.
- 2.3 **How we use the information provided by Turnitin**
 - 2.3.1 Only academic staff will make a judgement on whether plagiarism has occurred in a piece of work. An academic may interpret the originality report to help but Turnitin itself does not make this judgement.
 - 2.3.2 We do not use a threshold percentage to identify whether plagiarism has

occurred and may review any originality report in detail.

- 2.3.3 Turnitin will highlight matching text such as references, quotations, common phrases and data tables within work that has no plagiarism issues at all. Those interpreting Turnitin reports will discount such matches and so initial percentages are often irrelevant.
- 2.3.4 Where it is suspected that plagiarism has occurred in a piece of work, the originality report may be submitted to the Head of School and possibly to an Assessment Offences Panel for further investigation.

2.4 How you can use the information provided by Turnitin

- 2.4.1 There will be an opportunity for you to see a Turnitin report on your work before Turnitin is used on your assessed work. You will ... {outline when students will see a Turnitin report}.
- 2.4.2 No other student will be able to see an originality report on your work.
- 2.4.3 To help you understand what the report is telling you, please ensure you have followed the guidance on the E-Learning Unit's website (LINK). {add or replace with any local guidance or events available to help students understand the originality report}
- 2.4.4 {delete/amend as appropriate} You may find it helpful to resubmit your work after reviewing the originality report and you will generally be given one opportunity to do this. Where this is the case, the idea is to use the report to help you identify any potential issues you may not have spotted before, and not to change individual words to avoid a match. Be aware of the referencing and plagiarism guidance available at... {insert the school's preferred resources on plagiarism and referencing}.
- 2.4.5 If you have a question about your originality report that is not answered by the material linked to in 2.4.3 above, please direct these to your module convenor in the first instance {amend as needed}.

2.5 Other things you should know

- 2.5.1 Turnitin stores a copy of most work submitted to it in its repository. This does not affect the ownership of or any copyright in the original work.
- 2.5.2 Staff may configure a Turnitin assignment such that copies of submissions are not stored in its database. This will be done for all test-runs or any 'dummy' assignments used for training or demonstration purposes.
- 2.5.3 Staff on your course will ensure that no commercially or otherwise sensitive documents are stored in Turnitin's repository.
- 2.5.4 You cannot opt out of having your work scanned by Turnitin, but if you believe that your work should be deleted after it is scanned you should contact your lecturer.