

## Write Now Mini-Project

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### **TITLE OF PROJECT:**

**Investigating student and tutor experiences of the implementation of Turnitin at Edge Hill University**

**INSTITUTION:** Edge Hill University

**PROJECT LEADERS:** Claire Penketh, Chris Beaumont

**DISCIPLINE/DEPARTMENT:** Business School

**YEAR/LEVEL OF STUDENTS:** Year 2 (Level 5)

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### **CONTEXT**

Turnitin was introduced to the university in 2008 after a number of pilot projects and was 'rolled out' for use by Year 1 students across all programmes from September of that year. This project aimed to explore the experiences of students and tutors with a particular emphasis on the ways in which Turnitin was adopted as a tool for writing development.

Turnitin is described as plagiarism detection software yet from the outset the aim was to encourage implementation with a dual use for students and tutors, for plagiarism detection but also as a means of encouraging students to revisit and revise their work by drawing on the originality report, the artefact which provides a visual breakdown of similarity in student work to a range of sources. In early sessions tutors were introduced to Turnitin as a formative and developmental tool with potential for use in developing students understanding of good practice in relation to writing for assessment. It was envisaged that this would sit alongside other student support mechanisms that exist via centralized provision as well as within faculties and departments. It was acknowledged that tutors would need to work directly with students regarding the use of the software particularly to support their understanding and use of the originality report. Responsibility for this academic development for tutors lay with Teaching and Learning Development since this was perceived as complementing existing work that had been undertaken to promote approaches to writing development within the university.

### **PROJECT OBJECTIVES**

- To explore the experiences of students and tutors with a particular emphasis on the ways in which Turnitin was adopted as a tool for writing development.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

This was a qualitative enquiry designed to explore perceptions and experiences of using this software for a group of tutors and students from within one department. Two focus groups took place with the involvement of six tutors from one department, the first at the beginning of use in the department and the second at a later stage after Turnitin had been used over a period of approximately six months. A questionnaire, informed by the findings from the initial tutor focus group, was issued to one teaching group from the department including 25 students. This was supplemented with a group interview which gathered in-depth qualitative responses from three students in order to interrogate the principal findings that had emerged from the questionnaire.

## DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

Tutors in one department had an initial introduction to the tool at a departmental 'away day' where they were given a demonstration and introductory explanation of the main features of Turnitin including an outline of the process for submission and an explanation of the originality report.

Tutors were advised to attend a further two hour training session which included:

- How to set up the Turnitin assignment area in Blackboard
- How to submit an assignment
- Understanding the originality report
- Key points to support the introduction of Turnitin to students, which included guidance on promoting early submission of work with the potential for re-drafting and re-submitting.

The aim was to explore the experiences of tutors and students in order to:

- Consider how Turnitin had been employed, with a specific focus on the ways in which it was supporting writing development. Tutors were responsible for introducing the software to their students, including the technological use and interpretation of the originality report.
- Identify the effectiveness of the academic development sessions and the ways that this work had been translated to the student experience.

This report has a particular focus on student experiences of the implementation of Turnitin.

## ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT OF PROJECT

Students from one programme completed a questionnaire in order to establish extent of use and initial experiences (n = 25). Turnitin had been used by students in this group between one and eight times and it appeared to be becoming established as part of the submission processes for the department. 10 students had used it four times for submitting their assignments. Nine students did report having some degree of difficulty with uploading their work due to technical difficulties. The main purpose of using Turnitin related to plagiarism detection, supported by 20 out of 26 students who responded to a question about perceptions of the main use of Turnitin on the questionnaire. The other responses to this question suggested that students related use to a form of electronic submission. A clear majority of the students responding (16) had access to the originality report and 15 of those acknowledged that they had been able to discuss this with their tutor. 15 students reported that Turnitin had been useful in supporting their learning. Of these, seven students suggested that using Turnitin had provided an easier way to submit their work, eight students suggested that using Turnitin had made them aware of plagiarism and of their use of referencing. Eight students responded that it had not supported their learning.

The questionnaire responses revealed that students viewed Turnitin as a plagiarism detection tool. Although the aim had been to promote developmental use, student perceptions of use were based on plagiarism detection rather than on supporting their writing for assessment.

*When we were told that we had to use Turnitin for this piece of coursework, I think everyone was a bit annoyed because we thought well why should we? We're not cheats and what if it gives an inaccurate result and you know you have not plagiarised anything? Why should you have to reword it just because this piece of software says that you should? It's like being accused of cheating to be honest I thought. It is though isn't it?*

Students shared a lack of understanding about the implications of the originality report, convinced that the identification of similarity equated with evidence of plagiarism.

*It did flag up too much on my work which I hadn't plagiarised....it just flags up similarities which was a pain as you have to rewrite it then when you hadn't actually plagiarised in the first place*

*I can't even remember what percentage mine said, but I remember things like, my contents table was flagged up as plagiarised, my quotes were flagged up as plagiarised even though they were referenced properly.*

This is problematic for a number of reasons since it reflects a misunderstanding of the way in which similarity is reported rather than plagiarism. This confusion is acknowledged but also evident in Gannon-Leary et al (2009). Of equal importance is a sense of subservience to the software where students appeared to have an uncritical response to the information in the originality report. When asked whether the use of Turnitin encouraged redrafting one student responded:

*I think it did but not always for the better I think because I would change something that I was quite happy with because Turnitin said it wasn't happy with it.*

Providing access to the originality report as a means of enabling and promoting student responsibility for writing appeared to be unsuccessful with Turnitin becoming a regulatory voice for this student.

Students also suggested that Turnitin was of limited use in giving them formative feedback on their work since this was already available to them in a range of formal and informal ways. The originality report was not viewed as particularly useful in this respect:

**A:** *No, not in the redrafting process, because I get other people to do - I get my girlfriend to read through- because someone else is going to pick up your grammatical errors and stuff. Other people can see them easier can't they? So I just print it off and get someone to look through and do it that way personally*

**B:** *I just send a draft into my tutor and let them look through it.*

**I:** *But are you confident you are going to get something back from your tutors?*

**B:** *They always...they never say you can't submit a draft whenever I ask, even in the lectures or the seminars, 9 times of out 10 they'll come over and look at it for you.*

**C:** *I just get someone else to read it through for me*

**A:** *It didn't effect the way you wrote because you are going to try to do it properly anyway*

**B:** *Unless you actually are out there to try and plagiarise*

**C:** *Unless you are cheating*

As well as having other ways of gaining formative feedback on work, one student identified that the types of information gained from the originality report would not be useful in developing writing, since students were more likely to need help with how to structure their argument:

*I don't see how it helps your writing development. It caused me more problems than it did help me. It's more about how you structure it and what order you write things in. It's not necessarily about how you've written, it's what order you set it out and that doesn't do any of that. That just flags up things that it thinks you've nicked from somewhere. Which it doesn't help you in the slightest if you know you've not done that - there's no point using it at all.*

The following extract illustrated students' lack of trust and doubt that the software was being used in any other way than as a tool for scrutiny. It may also indicate some sense of devolved responsibility on the part of students, as Turnitin appears to be thinking for them. A key challenge in engaging students in the writing process is to encourage them to take responsibility for reviewing their own work and to see making substantial changes at a redrafting stage as an advanced skill (Bean, 2001:29). Students acknowledged throughout the interview that drafting was an aspect of developing writing for assessment but they struggled to make connections between this and the ways in which Turnitin could be used, as evidenced in this conversation between two of the students:

*A: I don't understand how the draft works.*

*B: If it's to get you to look at your work to improve it and make it better. Then it flags up to say you've plagiarised.*

*A: I don't understand how that works. Is that the real concept?*

*B: No it's not. It's a lie.*

*I think the main thing is the Big Brother feeling and you are checking up on us and you don't trust us...I think there's that sort of feeling...even if it's wrong...I think people take it personally don't they? Which is human nature.*

Davis (2007) offers a useful example of how Turnitin can be used as a starting point for formative feedback with students, which focuses on early submission of assignments and a tutorial summarised in a three-stage booklet. The significant 'teaching point' comes from the space for dialogue about student writing rather than the originality report. The most effective aspect of this approach is the time allowed for dialogue with students about their writing (Lillis, 2006). It may be argued that the students' seemingly negative experiences occurred because this process was not clearly structured within the department. The students interviewed identified such formative opportunities, but did not understand the connection between these and ways in which Turnitin might be employed.

The implementation of Turnitin has created a focus for the discussion of student writing development, student responsibility for writing, opportunities for formative feedback and the ways in which we think and act to communicate the relationship between malpractice and writing development. In these respects it is useful to consider the implementation of Turnitin as a change artefact, since it provided an opportunity to question established habits of practice and approaches to departmental processes in respect of writing for assessment. The institutional support for implementation and inclusion in the Teaching and Learning Strategy have provided an impetus for a large number of academic development sessions which questioned existing habits of practice and offered some principles for writing development. However, in this study, encouraging the development of student writing via the introduction of Turnitin is problematic, since Turnitin is viewed as a tool associated with final submission as well as being associated clearly with issues of malpractice.

The ways in which students are positioned by use of plagiarism software and the ways in which students are positioned in individualising methods for learner support create particular types of learners. These environments are not necessarily the most conducive to engaging students in developmental approaches to writing. Writing confidence and the development of brave writers and thinkers, who can engage in discourses in their discipline, are difficult to promote in conditions dominated by mistrust and malpractice. Gannon-Leary et al (2009:438) make reference to the 'big-brother' culture and surveillance society in relation to the implementation of Turnitin but suggest that transparent policies and procedures can counteract this. Although they warn against the dangers of the effect that this might have on staff/student relationships, the impact on the affective dimension and conditions for writing and learning is not discussed.

Integrated use, where students and tutors access the software, may go some way to alleviate mistrust. However there must also be an awareness that the use of software designed for plagiarism detection situates and reinforces a particular type of student/tutor relationship based on regulation. I would argue that this is unsympathetic to the development of the types of pedagogic relationships which encourage resilient, thinking writers and learners.

Enclaves of good practice emerged across the Business School with different levels of engagement with the Turnitin initiative and with a range of different practices emerging within the small group of staff who took part in the focus group. Such differing practice was of concern to some tutors who

were aware of potential problems with student perceptions of inconsistency. This highlights a further challenge as well as an opportunity for educational developers in addition to the complexity of the issues under discussion and the challenges for implementing change. Such enclaves of practice offer the potential for individuals to develop practices which may then be shared with colleagues. However, it may be unrealistic to assume that such practices would be shared naturally without formal intervention and purposeful opportunities designed to promote this type of discussion. Such enclaves can offer live and situated examples of practice more easily understood by colleagues than generic examples or decontextualised and discrete development sessions.

What is also significant is the way in which students appeared to respond uncritically to the information presented to them by Turnitin, which they felt appeared to be 'telling' them what was or was not acceptable. It is possible that Turnitin's potential as a change artefact could be undermined if existing practices regarding writing for assessment are merely replaced by another set of unquestioned practices, which might appear to have additional weight by dint of their association with the authoritative and disembodied voice of technology.

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#### **DISSEMINATION:**

The work was presented at Writing Development in Higher Education conference 2010 hosted by the Write Now CETL and the Centre for Learning and Teaching Research (CLTR) conference at Edge Hill University.

#### **AVAILABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES**

For further information contact [penkethc@edgehill.ac.uk](mailto:penkethc@edgehill.ac.uk)

#### **FUTURE PLANS FOR PROMOTING PROJECT WORK/OUTCOMES:**

Further work is being carried out institutionally regarding the implementation of Turnitin and student perceptions of use. Recent changes to Turnitin and the integration of grading, comments and the similarity index may provide a more integrated approach for supporting writing development. This is currently forming the focus of a further small scale project within the Sport Department and may offer the potential for a comparative study.

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