



# Turnitin: a magic bullet?

---

**Target audience:** Subject/program coordinators, teachers, academic integrity breach investigation officers

**Key issue being addressed:** The use of software programs to manage plagiarism

**Purpose of the case:** To illustrate how the misuse or misunderstandings about text-matching software programs like Turnitin to manage plagiarism can impact on cultures of academic integrity

**Materials and preparation needed to answer case:**

- Remind participants to find and access appropriate policy and academic integrity resources at own institution prior to coming to session.
- Copy of university academic integrity policy and procedures.
- Separate PowerPoint for facilitator based on 1 or 2 hour session.
- Rees M and Emerson L (2009) 'The impact that Turnitin has had on text-based assessment practice', *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 5(1) 20-29
- Shaw C (2012) 'Use of Turnitin software does not deter cheating, study finds' *Times Higher Education Supplement*. 19<sup>th</sup> January  
[www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=418740](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=418740)
- Devlin M (2006) 'Policy, preparation and prevention: Proactive minimisation of student plagiarism' *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 28(1) 45-58

## The case

### *Abstract*

*Despite the university's recommendation that Turnitin be used in an educative way, the software is used inconsistently across faculties. This creates poor assessment practice and confusion and anxiety for students.*

Florence<sup>1</sup> teaches a communications and academic writing program in a business studies faculty. This faculty has a policy that students must attach a Turnitin report to all of their assessment tasks, except exams. The rest of the university has access to Turnitin, but there isn't a university-wide policy about its use, only recommendations that it be used for educative and not punitive purposes.

During orientation in the business faculty, students are given information about this policy and are quickly introduced to Turnitin as a text-matching software program that detects correlation between a student's writing and online research sources, or previously submitted versions of the same assignment from other students or other years of delivery of

---

<sup>1</sup> All characters in the case are pseudonyms

the subject. At the orientation session, the students are advised that 'the closest to zero they get in their Turnitin report, the better'.

Students often come to Florence in distress about their Turnitin reports, saying that they keep removing quotes and paraphrases to try to strip the report down to a zero result. This doesn't make sense to Florence, who knows that Turnitin can be used as a useful tool to indicate overlaps in research, but will often highlight writing that has actually been appropriately referenced. Florence advises students that they shouldn't focus too much on the Turnitin scores, but should focus on writing well in response to the question and assignment instructions, make sure that they acknowledge their sources. She tells them that of course the teachers who are marking their assignments in other subjects will double-check the Turnitin report, most likely to ensure that no outrageous plagiarism has occurred, but that their grades have no correlation with the Turnitin scores.

However, Florence later comes across a memo from the sub-dean of the Faculty to new sessional teaching staff with instructions about how to use Turnitin. This is accompanied with a table that matches a range of Turnitin scores with recommended assignment grade scores, with zero percent from Turnitin in the high distinction bracket.

When she discusses this with other staff in the faculty, she is told that everyone really appreciates Turnitin because it has cut down on their workload: not only does it help streamline marking, it also means that subject coordinators don't have to rewrite assignment questions for essays and reports, which they would normally do to avoid students copying from previous year's work.

### Questions for discussion

1. Does your university policy say anything about the use of text-matching software programs like Turnitin?
2. If it does, is the program presented as a plagiarism detection tool or an academic integrity educative tool?
3. How might text-matching software programs like Turnitin be used to help students avoid plagiarism and aid teaching staff in educating students about the value of academic integrity?

*Support for this project/activity has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.*



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Australia License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/au/).