Assessment and Feedback

Guidance on using Turnitin

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Purpose of Policy
This guidance outlines the University of Strathclyde's position on the use of Turnitin in the identification and investigation of suspected academic misconduct in submissions by Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students.

Scope of Policy
This guidance should be read by students and by staff involved in the marking of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught students' submitted work and the return of marks and feedback to students following submission. This guidance should also be read by Boards of Examiners.

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Introduction

1. This guidance outlines the University of Strathclyde's (hereafter 'the University') position on, and recommendations for, effective practice for the use of Turnitin in the identification and investigation of suspected academic misconduct in submissions by Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students.

2. This guidance on using Turnitin should be used alongside the University's [Assessment and Feedback Policy](#), [Guidance on Maintaining Academic Integrity,](#) and the [Student Discipline Procedure: Academic Misconduct](#)

Scope

3. This guidance applies to all summative assessment submissions made by students via Myplace on Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught programmes and modules, for which a Turnitin similarity check is deemed as practical and pedagogically appropriate by the module or programme leader.

Using Turnitin

4. Turnitin is a text-matching service that allows the University to check whether work submitted by a student matches in part or whole any text which is published or stored online and/or within Turnitin's database.

5. Turnitin operates via Myplace as a configurable option within the Assignment Activity submission function. When the Assignment Activity is configured to enable Turnitin submissions, staff can access a Similarity Score and link to the corresponding Similarity Report provided by Turnitin, alongside the other standard submission details for each student.

6. This Similarity Report means that Turnitin can be used alongside other tools, practices, and procedures the University employs to discourage, detect, and investigate student academic misconduct, particularly plagiarism and collusion.

7. Turnitin Similarity Reports cannot be used to identify, initiate, investigate, or evidence allegations relating to the misuse of Generative-AI (Gen-AI). Moreover, the University does not endorse or permit the use of

Turnitin AI Checker (or any other tools or services claiming to detect the use of Gen-AI) and prohibits the submission of students' submitted work to these tools or services. More information can be found in the [Guidance on Gen-AI and Academic Integrity/Misconduct](.).

8. The University expects that all assessments submitted through Myplace will be passed through Turnitin at the point of final submission unless there is a pedagogical or practical reason for not doing so.

9. Providing access to Similarity Reports can support students to understand good academic practice, particularly in the early part of their programme. Programme teams may decide to withhold these reports so that students have the opportunity to demonstrate an appreciation of good academic practice, without advance insight of Turnitin. Where a Programme team decides to withhold similarity reports from students, this should be communicated in writing to students in advance through the normal channels with a clear justification offered.

10. Guidance on setting up and using Turnitin features is available via the [University's Myplace support pages for Turnitin](.).

11. Markers should not use Turnitin's Feedback Studio to provide marks and feedback comments or summaries on student submissions. This is because technical issues with Turnitin's Feedback Studio can only be resolved by Turnitin, and the feedback data generated through that tool is stored outwith the University's systems and is therefore not readily recoverable where issues arise. The feedback functions and tools provided through Myplace should be used instead.

12. More information about the use of Turnitin at the University of Strathclyde, including system requirements and licence agreements, is available on the [University website](.).

Using Turnitin Similarity Reports

13. Using Turnitin to identify and investigate academic misconduct necessarily depends on subject specialist interpretation of the Similarity Report.

14. The Similarity Report presents the results of a comparison of the text submitted by the student(s) with the contents of specified search targets selected for the assessment. The search targets could include:
    a. the work of others which has been submitted to Turnitin;
    b. active and archived sources online; and,
    c. published academic work in periodicals, journals, and other publications.

15. The Similarity Report highlights for staff the specific passages of text which match text from other sources and provides a reference or link to the source. The Similarity Report also contains a Similarity Score, which is displayed as a percentage. This number indicates the proportion of the text in the submission which matches text found elsewhere.

16. Without further investigation, the Similarity Report and associated Similarity Score must not be considered as evidence that plagiarism or collusion has or has not taken place. Turnitin does not check for plagiarism, instead it checks for similarities between the submission and other text held on the Turnitin database.

17. The most effective way of interpreting a Similarity Report and Score will vary depending on the academic context and the specific arrangements for the assessment. Staff should rely on their experience and academic judgement when deciding whether a particular Similarity Report and Score merits a disciplinary investigation in line with the Student Discipline Procedure - Academic Misconduct.

18. The Similarity Score must not be taken as immediate or definitive evidence of academic misconduct. Reports and Scores which are concerning or anomalous in a given context should be investigated first by the staff member responsible for marking the work. There may be reasonable explanations for high or low Similarity Scores (for example, high scores as a result of the use of a mandatory template or a low score in a submission consisting of personal reflections).

19. Where a submission presents an extremely low score, such as zero, an investigation is advised into whether means of deliberately circumventing Turnitin have been deployed. This could include, but need not be limited to:
    a. uploading an image of text rather than the text itself;
    b. using synonyms to disguise plagiarised text; and/or,
    c. inserting white letters or numbers in between the plagiarised text which merge with the background and render the submission as a single word when it is processed.

20. Programme leaders should ensure that staff involved in marking submissions are aware of Department approaches to interpreting and investigating Similarity Reports.

21. Turnitin provide detailed guidance and tips on how to approach the interpretation of Similarity Reports on their website.

Factors to consider when using Turnitin Similarity Reports

22. The nature of the Similarity Report and its value in the detection and investigation of academic misconduct is dependent on more than the content of the text a student passes through the software. There are other

factors that markers and Department Academic Misconduct Officers should bear in mind when reviewing Similarity Reports and Scores. For example:

a. The nature of the assessment may have an impact on the Similarity Report and Score. For example, submissions for an assessment which has been set several times before, with previous cohorts of students, may lead to more matches and relatively high Similarity Scores.

b. The length of the submission could be relevant. For example, finding that 10% of a 12,000-word undergraduate dissertation matches an existing source may be different to finding that 10% of a 300-word short answer matches another text. While a single poorly referenced or formatted sentence might lead to a score of 10% in the latter, this is unlikely to be the case in the former.

c. The stage of a student's development and expected levels of competency in academic conventions and practices (such as referencing) at the time of submission could be relevant. Poor scholarship which results in a concerning Similarity Score in the work of a first-year student or a student who is new to UK academic culture may be viewed differently to a concerning Similarity Score in the submission of a fourth-year student completing their final project.

d. Assessments which consist of the same or similar questions and tasks which have been completed by previous cohorts of students are more likely to lead to higher Similarity Scores. This issue might also be apparent in subjects where assessments are designed to closely align with the requirements of Accrediting or Professional, Statutory, and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs).

e. Text which has been copied from sources in languages other than English may not lead to a match on Turnitin, particularly where the text has never been translated into English and published or where a translation leads to a different phrasing or arrangement of the text.

f. Dealing with a concerning Similarity Report for a piece of assessed group work will require a clear and consistent approach which is fair to all students involved in the submission.

g. Despite the increase in availability and use of online and digital resources, most students are still likely to engage with some hard copy or print-only resources in completing some assessments. These sources are likely to produce fewer matches on Turnitin.

h. Similarity Reports might include so-called 'false positives' (for example, technical phrases that are not only common but often essential in particular work or within disciplines). Filters and exclusions can be applied to assignments to ensure that these phrases are not included in Similarity Reports and Scores. Filters and exclusions should be set up when an assignment is created.

i. Some specialised content included in a submission will not be checked by Turnitin. This includes, but may not be limited to, images, graphics, diagrams, graphs, charts, maps, handwritten content, mathematical notation, and software coding.

j. Submissions which have been procured from a third-party, such as an 'essay mill,' created using Gen-AI tools, or altered using third-party software, such as automated or manual synonymising software, may not result in a concerning Similarity Report or Score.

k. Assessment briefings given to students should flag any formatting conventions which are required by the assessment and the configuration of Turnitin. For example, Turnitin may only recognise direct quotes when they are presented in double quotation marks (""), so if the practices of a student, or the demands of an assessment, mean that single quotation marks ('') or indented text are used to indicate quoted text, these passages will not be recognised as direct quotes.

l. During inductions and prior to assessment submissions, students may benefit from staff demonstrating how Turnitin operates and an explanation of how staff use it to detect and investigate academic misconduct. It is advised that such opportunities are also used to remind students that submissions are also manually checked for signs of academic misconduct as part of the marking process.

m. Programme Leaders may insist that markers sample 10% of all submissions to Turnitin for more detailed, manual checks, which could include but should not be limited to submissions recording higher Similarity Scores. This mirrors the approach to sampling set out in the University's Policy on Moderation and Double Marking.

n. Guidance on managing the settings on Turnitin in Myplace is available from the University's Myplace support pages for Turnitin.

Further support on the use of Turnitin

23. Please see the support section of 'Myplace' for guidance on using Turnitin or contact the Library and IT helpdesk

24. For further guidance on matters of academic integrity or the Student Discipline Procedure: Academic Misconduct, please contact the Senate Office (senate-discipline@strath.ac.uk).