



# **Good Practice Guide on the Use of Turnitin Software for Postgraduate Research Students**

## **Introduction**

Turnitin is a commercial service endorsed by Jisc (HEFCE IT) and is currently used by Universities across the UK to check for similarity and potential instances of plagiarism in student coursework. The Turnitin software uses a process of text matching to compare a piece of student work to its archive of electronic sources which include electronic publications, over 3 billion web pages and previously submitted student work from over 15,000 institutions. This guide applies to the use of the service for postgraduate research students only. Other practice in the University may apply to undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes.

## **Rationale for the Use of Turnitin**

The use of a similarity checking service to assess thesis content for similarity and potential instances of plagiarism is a requirement within the General Regulations: University Calendar for Postgraduate Students.

Regulation 7.1.5 of the [Study Regulations for Research Degree Programmes](#) states: The principal supervisor must ensure that appropriate sections of the draft thesis (or critical analysis for PhD by Published Works) have been submitted to the University-recognised similarity checking service, and the report used for feedback purposes, prior to the submission of the thesis (or critical analysis).

Research students should normally have at least one opportunity, but not more than two to have each relevant chapter/section of their thesis submitted through Turnitin. Depending on the subject of study and level of progress, draft reports/papers or thesis chapters/sections, as appropriate, should be submitted to Turnitin prior to Annual Progress Review meetings and the submission of the thesis.

The University has regulations<sup>1</sup> in place to investigate and deal with allegations of misconduct in research, including wilful plagiarism. If used at an early stage, Turnitin can assist in raising any concerns regarding the similarity of the student's work and help prevent this being a significant issue at a more critical stage of the development of the thesis. Turnitin can be used as a tool to help identify any research student misconceptions with regard to academic writing and citing of sources, according to the conventions of their discipline.

Through initial training and awareness raising (see training and guidelines sections below) as well as the practical implementation of Turnitin at a designated stage of the student's research, the supervisor and student are able to make an informed decision regarding the content of the thesis and the evidence used to support it. The software will contribute to the assurance of academic integrity prior to submission to the examiners.

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<sup>1</sup> Any allegation of plagiarism or duplication in unpublished work which is submitted by a postgraduate research student for assessment (via Annual Progress Review or oral examination) will be dealt with under the Procedures for Dealing with Academic Offences accessible at:

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/dasa/AcademicAffairs/GeneralRegulations/Procedures/ProceduresforDealingwithAcademicOffences/>.

Any other allegation of misconduct in research by a postgraduate research student will be dealt with under the Regulations Governing the Allegation and Investigation of Misconduct in Research accessible at:

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/Governance-ethics-and-integrity/Policies-procedures-and-guidelines/>.

The use of Turnitin may not be feasible in some subject areas where there are more practice based outcomes such as in Music or the production of computer code for particular IT projects. Turnitin is not designed to help assess the similarity of the research rationale, ideas or arguments put forward by the student.

## **Training and Support**

Whilst research students are expected to have a good understanding of citation methods when they enrol on a Research Degree Programme, some students may require additional guidance or training in the early stages of their research, particularly if they are required to adopt a method of citation which is unfamiliar to them. Students can access training and support from the following sources:

- (i) The Graduate School offers writing courses for postgraduate students, with additional programmes for international students. These programmes include sections on plagiarism, and the role of effective citation in reducing the risk of plagiarism occurring.
- (ii) Students experiencing particular difficulties regarding citation methods can access a free online tutorial in Harvard, Vancouver, MHRA and OSCLA referencing ([Cite2Write](http://www.qub.ac.uk/cite2write/))<sup>2</sup>.
- (iii) Subject librarians at Queen's provide training and support regarding standard, and subject specific referencing styles. The Library at Queen's provides a range of online materials and links to external sources which can provide further information and tutorial support on citation. Students can manage their references and bibliographies through bibliographical management programmes such as Refworks® which is free for all staff and students at Queen's. One to one training can be provided to students by subject librarians in the use of this software.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cite2write/>

## Guidelines for the Use of Turnitin

The approaches to the practical use of Turnitin identified below are largely generic, particularly in terms of when the software should be used. Differing approaches to research and structures of theses may require a slightly altered approach by some Schools.

- (i) Turnitin is available as a site licence, and continuous access is available to all Schools and individual staff users upon setting up an account, which can be arranged through the Centre for Educational Development (CED). Supervisors may then create a series of opportunities for students to submit to the service and view the similarity checking report.
- (ii) It would be good practice for Schools to ensure that as part of their induction programme and prior to Annual Progress Review meetings, research students are made fully aware of the use and general functionality of Turnitin.
- (iii) Turnitin should be universally applied across all Research Degree Programmes rather than a random sample of particular programmes or students. This avoids the potential for future challenges from students for unfair, discriminatory or exceptional treatment by a member of staff. Supervisors should use their discretion and experience of the subject area to determine which chapters of a thesis include a significant body of literature (e.g. introduction, literature review, and discussion) and should be submitted to Turnitin.
- (iv) As indicated in the regulations, Turnitin should be used to inform students of potential issues regarding similarity within their thesis, and to provide an opportunity to address these prior to submission.
- (v) Depending on the subject of study and progress of the thesis such a process should be undertaken on the written submission (e.g. literature review, draft paper, or thesis chapter) that students produce for each Annual Progress Review meeting, and at an advanced stage of the student's writing up process (such as when the student is close to a final draft of a chapter), but before the student makes final changes and corrections. The supervisor must also provide support to the student to help interpret the report and, where required,

offer advice on correct writing and citing of sources in line with the conventions of the discipline in which they are studying.

- (vi) Principal supervisors should not attempt to produce a similarity report on a full and/or final draft of a thesis, rather one chapter at a time which will be less time consuming and allow for a continuous assessment of the student's work.
- (vii) Each chapter submitted through Turnitin will be recognised as an 'assignment' in the 'class' of the student. Following analysis of an early draft, the supervisor and student will be able to upload and access an advanced version of the chapter near its completion: 'a revision assignment'.
- (viii) The software does not make a judgement on whether a student has plagiarised existing work through inclusion in his/her thesis and this should ultimately be considered through academic judgement. Similarity reports require interpretation and there is no defined percentage of matching text which determines plagiarism.

Practical guidelines on the use of Turnitin are available from CED. Supervisors who have no prior experience of navigating and interpreting the similarity reports produced by Turnitin should familiarise themselves with the support information on how to use Turnitin to access a student's work..

For queries relating to the use of Turnitin, staff should contact the eLearning Team in the Centre of Educational Development at [elearning@qub.ac.uk](mailto:elearning@qub.ac.uk). Queries relating to University regulations and their reference to the use of similarity checking software should be directed to Academic Affairs at [academic-affairs@qub.ac.uk](mailto:academic-affairs@qub.ac.uk).

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

Question: Why do theses have to be submitted to Turnitin?

Answer: It is good practice for a thesis to be submitted to a similarity checking service to assess the content for similarity, and to highlight and deal with potential instances of plagiarism at an early stage in the student's research. It is also a requirement under regulation 7.1.5 of the Study Regulations for Research Degree Programmes.

Question: Where can supervisors find support for Turnitin?

Answer: The Centre for Educational Development will provide support for supervisors in the use of Turnitin. Contact the eLearning Team in CED at [eLearning@qub.ac.uk](mailto:eLearning@qub.ac.uk).

Question: When, and on what should Turnitin be used?

Answer: A student's written submission (e.g. draft report/paper or chapters/sections of the thesis) for Annual Progress Review should be submitted to Turnitin for feedback purposes prior to the Annual Progress Review meeting. Chapters should also be submitted at an advanced stage of the student's writing up process (e.g. when the student is close to a final draft of a chapter) but before final changes and corrections are made. Supervisors should use their discretion and experience of the subject area to determine the appropriate sections of a thesis for submission to Turnitin. Appropriate chapters would be those that include a significant body of literature which should be cited in accordance with the discipline conventions.

Question: Is it mandatory to use Turnitin on a thesis?

Answer: Yes, relevant chapters of all theses must be submitted to Turnitin, to enable students to receive and act on feedback before they make final changes and submit their thesis for examination.

Question: Can a student contact CED to get a Turnitin account?

Answer: No, the Turnitin software is for staff use and supervisors set up areas in the software to which students submit their work.

Question: Are there materials to help students sign up and upload to the service?

Answer: Yes, [CED Turnitin webpages](#) provide advice for students including Access and Getting Started. Schools can make this available to students.

Question: Who is responsible for explaining the implications of the similarity report to the student?

Answer: The supervisor is responsible for explaining to the student how the similarity report should be interpreted in the context of the discipline. The supervisor should also make the student aware of the consequences of plagiarism under the University regulations.

Question: Can I use Turnitin to check the similarity of work submitted to another institution?

Answer: No, the Queen's Turnitin licence is for use with students enrolled at Queen's only. If you are an external examiner at another institution and wish for a similarity check to be carried out on the work you are examining you should request it from that institution.

Question: I am an Editor/ Reviewer for a journal; can I check the similarity of submissions?

Answer: No, the Queen's Turnitin licence is for use on the work of students enrolled at Queen's. No other material should be submitted. Irrespective of this, you do not have permission of the copyright holder to upload the work.

Question: Does copyright law apply to Turnitin?

Answer: Yes. The student is normally the copyright holder of the thesis and they should be made aware that in submitting to Turnitin they are providing a copy of their work to be used in the process of checking its similarity, and then subsequently to be held in a database for the purpose of checking the similarity of other submissions.

Question: What if a third party owns the copyright of the thesis?

Answer: The supervisor should check with the copyright owner if they agree to submit to the Turnitin service. If they wish, a similarity check may be performed without the content of the thesis being added to the database and this option may be chosen when the Turnitin assignment is created.

Question: What if the material in the thesis is politically sensitive, contains commercially confidential information, or is a matter of national security?

Answer: All content in the Turnitin system is held securely and no content held within the database will be released for use in plagiarism cases held at other institutions without specific consent of the supervisor of the thesis. It is, however, recognised that the comparison process takes place in the USA where the data is also held. For this reason the supervisor may wish to use discretion not to upload or compare content which is of a sensitive or a secure nature.

Question: I have received a request from a lecturer within Queen's or at another university to grant access to a copy of a chapter of my student's work as it has been listed as the source for a match to another essay, what should I do?

Answer: This rarely occurs but in order to help the system work to protect your student's thesis from being plagiarised please take the following steps:

- (i) Contact your student and gain permission to release a copy of the source, as the student is the copyright holder. If the student gives consent, click the button to grant the lecturer access to a copy of the source.
- (ii) If your student does not give consent, or the student is not contactable, refuse the request.

Question: Where can I get more general information about the quality assurance of Research Degree Programmes?

Answer: The Queen's [Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes](#) outlines regulations, codes and policies, guidance material and research management forms to support the quality assurance of Research Degree Programmes. Please feel free to also contact Academic Affairs on [academic-affairs@qub.ac.uk](mailto:academic-affairs@qub.ac.uk) with any queries, concerns, or areas of good practice that can be disseminated across the University.