

GUIDANCE NOTE ON THE USE OF 'TURNITIN' PLAGIARISM CHECKER

I am indebted to Dr Peter Looker for his advice and have quoted him extensively in this advice note

It appears that Colleges, Schools and Institutes may be using TurnItIn analysis of PhD theses in a rather rigid way by applying a percentage figure for matching as an indicator as to whether or not there is plagiarism.

Quantitative limits are not appropriate in using anti-plagiarism checks.

Firstly, TurnItIn and similar systems are text-matching systems checking submitted text against text in its own databases. Thus TurnItIn is not, of itself, a plagiarism detector.

Furthermore, one should guard against TurnItIn giving a clean bill of health if, for example, there is plagiarism but it is from translations or other material not part of the TurnItIn database.

As Peter Looker says, bibliographical material, correctly quoted and cited material, frequently used phrases and "common knowledge" will be picked up by TurnItIn but are perfectly legitimate and not plagiarism.

NO amount of plagiarism is acceptable – not even one sentence.

Peter tells of a recent experience which is illuminating. He says "So, as I found in my course last semester, one student had 22% matching, but ALL of that material was in the bibliography and was perfectly legitimate. Another had 7% and all of the matching was completely unacceptable because it was plagiarised. This happens often. If there had been a limit of 10%, the first piece of work would have raised the red flag, but the second wouldn't."

He continues "Lastly, I suspect the thing about percentage is a confusion between plagiarism and an unacceptable amount of quotation from secondary material. So for example, if I had a piece of work that had 30% matching in the body of the text and it was all legitimately quoted and cited secondary material, I'd be talking to the student about an over-reliance on the work of others, not plagiarism.

In short, it is the responsibility of the marker, when using Turnitin, to look at the matching material in the process of marking. In the case of supervisors, I'd suggest that when doing a final read of the thesis, the supervisor should be reading from the Turnitin report, and will then be able to see (at the glance of an eye) the nature of the matching in the process of reading."

I trust that all RIPOCs will ensure that the mechanical application of percentages will not apply and that the TurnItIn check will be applied in a proper and discriminating way.

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