

# WORKING PAPER SERIES

**Discipline: Management/Education**

## A Case of Miscommunication? Obstacles to the effective implementation of a plagiarism detection system in a multicultural university

**Swapna Koshy**  
*University of Wollongong in Dubai*

**WP 76/2009**

June 2009

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# **A Case of Miscommunication? Obstacles to the effective implementation of a plagiarism detection system in a multicultural university**

**Swapna Koshy**

College of Undergraduate Studies,  
University of Wollongong in Dubai,  
[SwapnaKoshy@uowdubai.ac.ae](mailto:SwapnaKoshy@uowdubai.ac.ae)

## **Abstract**

The issue of plagiarism has besieged universities worldwide and proactive preventive measures implemented include the use of plagiarism detection systems like TurnItIn. This paper explores the use and potential misuse of TurnItIn by the students of a Western University in the Middle East that hosts a diverse academic community comprising 70 different nationalities. Preliminary findings show that the use of TurnItIn.com has generated a whole new approach towards plagiarism. Student interviews revealed that they seemed to have developed a false sense of competence based solely on TurnItIn results. Text matching was often misinterpreted to mean plagiarism and the focus of students when submitting assignments was preventing text matching on TurnItIn. These and other similar findings led to the conclusion that there has been a lack of accurate communication about plagiarism and the use of TurnItIn. An in-depth analysis of these issues may help to develop strategies to overcome the obstacles to the effective use of plagiarism detection systems. This may also lead to a re-evaluation of the current system.

**Keywords:** plagiarism, plagiarism detection systems, TurnItIn, text matching, miscommunication

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Swapna Koshy** has over sixteen years of tertiary teaching experience in subjects ranging from English Language and Literature to Study Skills. She has been an instructor in the College of Business at the University of Wollongong in Dubai for four years. Swapna has a Diploma in TESOL and a doctoral degree for studies in Indian Aesthetics. She has published articles in the field and also co-edited a book titled *Indian Poetics and Modern Texts* and a literary journal *Littcrit*.

# **1. Introduction**

Electronic plagiarism detection/prevention systems have been used to counter growing cases of plagiarism in academic institutions. This paper assesses the use of TurnItIn in a university in the Middle East. As in other educational institutions, the use of TurnItIn was instrumental in reducing the number of plagiarism cases, mainly unintentional ones. However, research showed that the system had generated unhealthy 'study patterns' among students. Teachers too were sometimes using the system in a counter-productive manner. These and other areas of concern that need to be addressed are identified in this paper. The problem, it is recognised, lies mainly with the improper communication about the use of the system to students and faculty. Solutions to the problems identified are suggested, which focus mainly on proper communication and education of staff and students in the usage of TurnItIn along with the need to use the system as a pedagogical tool.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Plagiarism: a global issue**

There has been an alarming increase in recent years in the incidences of plagiarism in educational institutions, publishing houses, news agencies and other institutions where creativity/ingenuity, competition, research and individual contribution are correlated. First year students, accomplished academicians, budding writers, established authors and popular statesmen have been charged with misappropriating others' work. Educational institutions have been singled out for strong criticism by the public and the media as they are expected to strengthen the moral fabric of society. Many major educational establishments survive on public funds and are therefore responsible to the government and the public. The occurrence of plagiarism in institutions of higher learning has furthered the view that academic standards are falling world wide concurrent with a global erosion of values. The commercialisation of education, which has led to the decrease of academic integrity among staff and students and the popularity and accessibility of the World Wide Web, are blamed for abetting this 'crime'. In short, plagiarism by students is a major challenge to effective learning.

Educational institutions have been forced to take strong action against these charges as the implications are many and sometimes threaten their existence. Academic and administrative measures have been implemented to curb instances of plagiarism. Academic initiatives including revised curricula and assessment methods, teaching of study skills and extensive coaching on referencing have been supported by policies that implement strict punitive measures. Of late, technology too is being used extensively and effectively as a preventive measure.

### **2.2 Plagiarism detection software**

Numerous products and services, both fee-based and free, which perform varied functions, are available to detect plagiarism. The *Technical Review of Plagiarism Detection Software Report* (Bull et al., 2000, p. 3) prepared for the Joint Information Systems Committee by the academics of the University of Luton reviewed five popular plagiarism detection software under a number of criteria including reliability, technical requirements, ease of use, and costs for institutions. In summarising the functions of detection systems the report states that:

*"Some software programs and services are designed to detect material cut and pasted from the Internet, while others detect instances of identical or very similar*

*submissions. Some services have the facility to compile databases and so build-up a repertoire of assignments and material that has been purchased from paper-mills and essay-banks.”*

Plagiarism detection systems like TurnItIn.com, edutie.com, EVE2, CopyCatchGold, WordCheck, MOSS and JPlag (to detect software plagiarism) have been used by major universities around the world. Plagiarism detection software is becoming more and more popular and has been credited for the decrease in instances of plagiarism (Martin, 2005). Perceptions of students and staff towards the use of technology-based solutions have been the subject of extensive research and analysis. These studies conclude that the academic community highly favours the implementation of plagiarism detection software (James *et al.*, 2002).

### **2.3 TurnItIn**

TurnItIn.com is the most popular plagiarism detection service among the academic community mainly due to the ease of implementation and the clarity of reports generated. The company behind TurnItIn, iParadigms, was founded by researchers at the University of California at Berkeley in 1996 to monitor the recycling of research papers in their classes. The interest of their colleagues motivated them to team up with other teachers, mathematicians, and computer scientists to form the world's first internet-based plagiarism detection service – Plagiarism.org. It is now known as TurnItIn and iThenticate, both of which are widely used and trusted services for preventing plagiarism. The comprehensive nature of the product is clear from its coverage of different possible sources of plagiarism.

*“Every paper submitted is returned in the form of a customized Originality Report. Results are based on exhaustive searches of billions of pages from both current and archived instances of the internet, millions of student papers previously submitted to TurnItIn, and commercial databases of journal articles and periodicals (TurnItIn.com, 2006).”*

The *Technical Review of Plagiarism Detection Software Report* (Bull *et al.*, 2000) which compared TurnItIn with four other plagiarism detection software systems rated TurnItIn the best software with the maximum range of functions (cut paste, paper mills and collusion). Testimonials of the benefits of TurnItIn are aplenty. Success stories posted on the service provider's website represent major schools and colleges. Relevant research has also been conducted to evaluate the system.

### **2.4 Evaluation of TurnItIn**

Several studies have been conducted to evaluate plagiarism detection software including TurnItIn. In Australia, a project by the Victorian Vice-Chancellors' Committee trialled TurnItIn as part of a study on the extent of plagiarism at six Victorian Universities, and recommended its use. The Joint Information Systems Committee funded by the UK's Further and Higher Education Funding Councils advocated the use of TurnItIn in all colleges and universities in the UK after rigorous reviews of several plagiarism detection services (Symons, 2003). The selected client list posted by TurnItIn.com on its web page includes several North American and Canadian institutions. This is in spite of legal issues mainly regarding copyright that has ensnared many American universities using plagiarism detection software.

The ubiquitous use of TurnItIn is testimony of its benefits. Over the past years several studies have been conducted to gauge the merits of the system. Most studies conclude that the benefits for the academic community are many including deterring plagiarism, supporting academic staff, giving incentive to improve citations, having potential to raise academic standards and the like (Savage, 2004; Frazer, Allan & Roberts, 2004). The disadvantages cited include comments that using TurnItIn is time consuming, it does not distinguish between cited and un-cited material, students can initiate legal action over intellectual property rights, electronic copies of whole texts are not accessed by TurnItIn, students may send different papers to the teacher and to TurnItIn, and concerns about cost (Frazer *et al.*, 2004; Savage, 2004). Most users are satisfied with the system and some even testify that it “performed flawlessly and met all expectations” (Martin, 2005, p. 151). Most academic institutions that have proactive measures in place to minimise plagiarism have subscribed to TurnItIn.

## **2.5 A Middle Eastern experience**

As elsewhere in the world, plagiarism has been a major concern for universities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Preventive measures including enhancing study skills, honing referencing and research skills and severe punitive measures have been practised. In some government-run institutions students are expelled after the first instance if caught plagiarising and precluded entry to other tertiary education centres. Most major universities and some higher secondary schools in the UAE subscribe to TurnItIn.

This study is based on the use of TurnItIn in the offshore campus of an Australian university located in the UAE. The author is a faculty member of The College of Business and teaches the subjects Introduction to University Life, Literary Skills and Business Communications. The first two are general education subjects made mandatory for all first year students by the Ministry of Higher Education. Business Communications is a 100-level optional subject for Business and IT students. Introduction to University Life and Literary Skills are study skills based subjects developed to help high school students in the transition to university life. The focus is on developing independent research and writing skills. Tutorials on plagiarism awareness and avoidance are conducted in the first weeks of every session to initiate students. On an average, upwards of 95% students enrolled are unaware of plagiarism and correct referencing.

The student body is highly diverse and represents different educational cultures and over 80 nationalities. Some students have attended primary and secondary schools where English is not the medium of instruction. Compulsory attendance of tutorials on plagiarism and information disseminated in the first lecture of every subject ensure that these students start off at a somewhat identical level. All subject outlines have detailed sections on plagiarism and the use of TurnItIn. Information on assessments in the same document includes TurnItIn submission requirements. A generic cover sheet, including attestation that the work is the student's own and information about plagiarism as a serious offence, is to be handed in with every written assignment. Educative measures are backed by administrative ones; students can be expelled from the university for a second offence in a case of severe plagiarism, and records of offences are maintained in the student file.

To supplement all these initiatives, The Project for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (PELT) was established in January 2005. Its aim was to improve student

learning and to promote staff development. PELT runs regular workshops for students on topics like 'How to Avoid Plagiarism in the Future' and 'Using Referencing and TurnItIn to Avoid Plagiarism'. Staff training sessions cover university policies and procedures on academic integrity, assessment design strategies to minimise plagiarism and the implementation of TurnItIn.

In spite of the preventive measures, a number of cases of plagiarism were noted. Large classes made it difficult for teachers to detect plagiarism. It is in this context that TurnItIn was launched in 2004 and trialled in two subjects that I taught. The trial was successful and both staff and students found it a useful measure to prevent plagiarism. In early 2005, it was made mandatory that all written assignments, except tests and exams, must be submitted to TurnItIn in all undergraduate and postgraduate subjects. Though the initial response of staff and students were not favourable, they are now starting to appreciate the system.

### **Problems encountered**

TurnItIn has now been used for two years to assess the originality of assignments submitted in the subjects I have been teaching. An evaluation of the efficacy of TurnItIn is thus timely. Cases of plagiarism have reduced considerably though staff are now more aware of and alert to instances of plagiarism by students. However, it was observed that students have developed a false sense of competency based solely on TurnItIn results. The percentage of text matching was considered as an indicator of performance. Many first year students misinterpreted text matching to mean plagiarism and the focus was on preventing text matching through literal paraphrasing and poor summarising. As TurnItIn matches strings of eight words it is easy to cheat the system for instance, by just misspelling words. As first time users of TurnItIn, honest students who found instances of text matching in TurnItIn reports were appalled to be 'caught' for plagiarism. Conversations with students also revealed that most students believed that the acceptable percentage of plagiarism was 20%. It was thus deemed necessary to conduct further research about the misconceptions regarding plagiarism and the use of TurnItIn.

## **3. Methodology**

Both quantitative and qualitative data was used for the study. The sample consisted of 48 first year students and 55 100-level students. A majority of first year students were using the software for the first time. All of them were aware about plagiarism and the methods of avoiding it including summarising, paraphrasing, in text-citing and referencing. A questionnaire consisting of closed and open ended questions was used. Students were instructed to indicate their views on a 5-point Likert scale. Survey questions covered the themes of perceptions of TurnItIn as a prevention/detection tool, a pedagogical tool and evaluation of the functions of the software. An additional section was added to survey students who had been charged with plagiarism in the past. The survey was completed anonymously and was not compulsory. Qualitative data was collected through two focus group discussions and a student interview. The first focus group consisted of first year students who were using TurnItIn for the first time. It was a mixed ability group. The second focus group interview was with a group of 100-level students who had used TurnItIn several times. An interview was also conducted with a student who was charged with plagiarism in the previous session. This student consistently gained high grades.

### 3.1 Data Analysis –Questionnaires

A questionnaire with several open ended and a few closed questions was used to receive feedback from students about their perceptions of TurnItIn. A summary of the results of this questionnaire is displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1 Analysis of questionnaire**

Student Perceptions of TurnItIn		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
1	TurnItIn is a plagiarism detection software	1	6	11	48	36
2	Using TurnItIn helps to improve academic competence	6	16	17	49	14
3	Using TurnItIn helps to avoid cases of unintentional plagiarism	3	20	16	44	17
4	The text matching facility on TurnItIn is useful	4	22	22	43	9
5	The percentage value of text matching given is useful	3	9	16	58	14
6	Text matching always leads to plagiarism	18	40	17	16	8
7	Some instances of plagiarism have not been detected by TurnItIn	3	22	34	29	4
8	False reports about sources used have been generated by TurnItIn	4	16	43	26	10
9	TurnItIn matches text with all material on the web	3	7	19	52	19

It is a cause for concern that 83% students responded that they perceived TurnItIn as a detection rather than prevention tool. However, they seemed to agree that the software had pedagogical benefits as 62% agreed or strongly agreed that it would improve academic competence and 61% agreed/strongly agreed that TurnItIn helped to avoid

unintentional plagiarism. In comparison, a study by academics at Flinders University on student perceptions of a trial of TurnItIn reported that "46% students felt the software would assist them to avoid unintentional plagiarism. 33% students were also concerned that plagiarism would be detected when it was unintentional or coincidental" (Green *et al.*, 2005, p. 30). It must be borne in mind here that academic competence was related by students to a low percentage of text matching and in turn to better grades in the focus group interviews. Only 52% agreed that the text matching facility is useful probably because they equate text matching with plagiarism. This further strengthens their view of TurnItIn as a detection software. Though 35% students opined that some instances of plagiarism had not been detected by TurnItIn, 71% were under the false impression that TurnItIn matches their assignments with all material submitted on the web.

The answers to the four nominal questions are analysed below in Table 2. The results are divided into responses of the whole sample group, responses of first year students and responses of 100-level students. It should be noted that many third year students were enrolled in the 100-level course.

**Table 2 Responses to nominal questions**

Responses	Results		
	Whole group	First year students	100-level students
Priority when handing assignments is avoiding text matching and plagiarism	21%	26%	20%
Paraphrasing/summarising used to avoid text matching not plagiarism	34%	40%	9%
The acceptable percentage of plagiarism is 20%	72%	75%	71%
It is important to avoid text matching rather than plagiarism	11%	4%	17%

It is clear that a number of students have been misguided about the advantages and use of TurnItIn so much so that their priority when handing in assignments has been to avoid text matching and plagiarism. Though most 100-level students were aware that paraphrasing/summarising is used to avoid plagiarism and not text matching, responses given during the interview with this sample group showed an excessive dependence on 'rephrasing' which hindered deep learning. The most important issue that has surfaced in the survey is about the acceptable percentage of 'plagiarism'. This is mainly because students equate text matching with plagiarism and because they believe that teachers rely heavily on the colour coded originality reports. This issue is discussed in detail in the interview section.

To the open ended question about their experiences with TurnItIn, most students pointed out that text matching was a major concern. Comments included:

*"Not useful because university name, reference list etc. always indicate some level of matched text"*

*Bad since I had some level of plagiarism considering that I did not plagiarise.  
The text matching was all from the reference list.*

*Text matches common words which increases percentage of plagiarism.*

*Matched text was my own.*

*Abnormal plagiarism results for no reason.*

*Always at least 1% plagiarism.*

*Unintentional text matching can lead to false cases of plagiarism.*

*Never had more than 14% plagiarism.*

*Frustrating when text matched.*

*Text I wrote matched – unfair leads to increase in plagiarism.*

*Once I had 1% text matching which scared me a bit.*

All these comments indicate that there has been a serious miscommunication about the use of TurnItIn and the evaluation of the originality reports. This has lead to the misconception in student minds equating text matching with plagiarism. Comments like "I am always scared to submit to TurnItIn" show the undue stress that students endure due to miscommunication. Anxiety about the software and the result it generates is definitely not going to encourage deep learning.

Other negative comments included:

*Gives similarities with sites not used.*

*Generated wrong websites which I have not even looked at.*

Students think the defect is with the system as they are not trained to use the reports.

### **3.2 Focus group interviews**

A mixed ability group of twenty first year students was interviewed on condition of anonymity. The instructor acted as facilitator and a list of prepared questions was used to stimulate discussion. Notes were taken and later transcribed. Most responses were similar to that of the responses to the open-ended question on the questionnaire and are therefore not dealt with in detail here. Comments on functions of the software included:

*Frustrating that your concept has been already submitted.*

*It is a pain as teachers use it to catch you.*

Remarkably, many students opined that a draft provision needs to be incorporated.

*A draft [provision] is necessary as a tester and we must be allowed to make changes to the draft.*

Several students supported this view; thus it became clear that students thought they were not allowed to change the version submitted to TurnItIn even if it showed plagiarism.

A small group of 100-level students was interviewed on condition of anonymity to see if their responses differed from those of the first group. The instructor acted as facilitator and the same list of prepared questions was used.

These students also conceived TurnItIn as a plagiarism detection software. They were annoyed that even articles like ‘a’ and ‘the’ were highlighted. Their main grievance was with teachers who counted the text matching as an unofficial marking criterion. A 2% text matching was supposed to reflect ‘good work’ while if they had 30% it led to a reduction in marks. And the explanation was “because you copied”. Students’ comments showed that they were adopting strategies to avoid text matching perceiving it as *the* major problem – “we end up paraphrasing more than before”; “we rephrase the paraphrase so text matching cannot catch us”; “writing paraphrases is scary. Without TurnItIn it was easy. Now we paraphrase, reread and rephrase otherwise the percentage will increase”. This has been a problem in many universities as Baskett, Collings and Preston (2004, p. 87) point out: “Initially, most students perceived plagiarism as the reproduction of matching text, and TurnItIn proved highly effective in confronting students with the extent of this.”

As in the interview with the first year students, these students also commented that it was necessary to have a draft provision. One student said “severe plagiarism is usually in group reports [work]”; “last semester our [group’s] plagiarism was 15%; we can’t change others work so seeing the report before submission would be advantageous.” They explained that the perception of allowed percentage of plagiarism comes from the colour coding system. “... 30% is the maximum plagiarism allowed ... at least get yellow colour. 25–30% is the danger line; above 30% some marks will be cut. [It is] different from teacher to teacher ... depends on teacher’s thinking – low % equals more marks”; “if it is only 5% we are happy – mentally. We cross our fingers and pray we have done our best ... let our mistakes not be spotted.” Green et al. (2005, p. 31) analysing student concerns about the use of TurnItIn quote a student: “Text matching is a far cry from my understanding of what plagiarism is. In fact, it may assist plagiarists by allowing them to reduce text matching of plagiarised notes.”

Therefore, a potential problem is that students may focus their attention on avoiding detection and develop the necessary skills for that, and in turn they become experts in ‘dodging’ the system. Frazer et al. (2004, p. 16) echoes this view: “This is the danger with students – i.e. they check that they won’t get caught only and thereafter do not worry about citing fully.” However, since TurnItIn text matches referenced text it leads to a higher percentage of matching text. Students should be made aware of the provision to exclude quoted and bibliographic material. Frazer et al. (2004, p. 19) quote remarks by staff of RMIT University about the potential dangers of not using the software wisely. “Turnitin does not know the difference between referenced and unreferenced material. Indeed Turnitin actually gives increased text-matching when referencing is included because of the references themselves.”

### **3.3 Student interview**

A consistently high achieving student who was charged with plagiarism in the previous session was interviewed. This student had used TurnItIn several times, but was found to

have plagiarised and received a zero in a major assignment. Questions asked were about whether she accepted that she plagiarised and if so why; and also why TurnItIn had not helped her. Like the students in the focus group, this student also pointed out the need to have a revision draft:

*"if we see in red or something you can avoid unintentional plagiarism. At least one draft is necessary ... It was my mistake. I saw the red marking in the conclusion ... I forgot to paraphrase. Without draft it helps only the teacher to understand what has been plagiarised. Giving a revised version to the teacher would be cheating ...."*

## 4. Solutions

The need for effective solutions to these misconceptions generated mainly through miscommunication is urgent. Firstly, the software has to be promoted as a prevention tool and not a detection or policing one. This will help change students' negative attitudes to the use of the software. Secondly, practical lessons on reading TurnItIn reports can be incorporated into the Introduction to University Life course which is compulsory for all students. This will help students to understand the various functions and the utility of the software. These measures have to be backed up consistently by faculty across all disciplines and levels. For this, it is important that staff is well versed with the utility of TurnItIn. In the past the stress has been on setting up assignments on TurnItIn and the technicalities behind it. The focus should be not only on implementation but also on the potential uses of the software. Workshops on reading originality reports, interpreting colour coding and other key functions of TurnItIn may be helpful. As RMIT academics Frazer et al. (2004, p. 16) point out: "Staff ... departing from an educative approach could introduce a culture of conflict and generate complaints." Faculty has to be trained on using TurnItIn as a pedagogic tool that encourages a deeper approach to learning.

Faculty should be made to realise the importance of conveying the right message to students. The Faculty Development site of Lehigh University offers detailed advice to staff which other institutions can use as a model. This comprehensive site points out that "well-designed assignments and effective communication between student and instructor" [emphasis added] are necessary to foster academic integrity (Lehigh University, 2002, p. 1). Similar instructions are echoed on the University of Southern California (USC) web site "Faculty should consider and explain to students how the use of turnitin's 'originality reports' by the instructor and/or by the student is meant to advance the course's learning goals and applicable principles of academic integrity" (USC, 2005). The importance of proper communication and education is stressed by the report on the implementation of TurnItIn in the University of Leicester. "They [plagiarism rates] also show a decrease, from the pilot study, following the introduction of detailed information about Turnitin and its use as a teaching as well as a detection tool" (Morgan, 2006).

It is interesting to note that TurnItIn.com advertises itself as plagiarism prevention and not detection software. "Recognized worldwide as the standard in online plagiarism prevention, Turnitin helps educators and students take full advantage of the internet's educational potential" (TurnItIn.com, 2006). The website also gives clear guidelines on the use of the originality reports:

*'Although Originality Reports can be very effective at helping to identify suspected individual cases of plagiarism, Turnitin plagiarism prevention works even more powerfully when used as a deterrent. ... The color of the report icon indicates the overall similarity index of the paper, based on how much matching text we found. The possible similarity indices are:*

- blue (no matching text)
- green (1 word – 24% matching text)
- yellow (25 – 49% matching text)
- orange (50 – 74% matching text)
- red (75 – 100% matching text)

*These indices do not reflect Turnitin's assessment of whether a paper has or has not been plagiarized. Originality Reports are simply tools to help you find sources that contain text similar to submitted papers. The decision to deem any work plagiarized must be made carefully, and only after careful examination of both the submitted paper and the suspect sources. [emphases added]"*

Academics using the software thus need to read the instructions on the web site closely. A major problem that students face is the matching of referenced texts. This can be minimised by using the provision to exclude quoted and bibliographic material. The website (TurnItIn.com, 2006) addresses the problem effectively:

*"Originality Reports document all instances of matching text including quoted and bibliographic material. If quoted or bibliographic material is flagged, you can exclude it from the report. When you exclude material, the Originality Score on the report and in your inbox is updated to reflect the exclusion of matching text"*

The importance that students attach to the percentage of matching text stems mainly from the practice of academics who allocate grades based on text matching. Institutions have to take rigorous steps to communicate to teachers that percentage of text matching can not be used as a criterion for assessment. Students also need to be assured that the Originality Report is not the only tool that teachers use to assess plagiarism.

As students have pointed out, provision for a draft and revision of it is necessary if prevention is to be the focus. All staff must be encouraged to use the draft provision in order to maximise the benefits of the software for students. The RMIT study (Frazer et al., 2004) on implementing TurnItIn cites a student comment: "A draft submission would be useful if you genuinely forgot to reference, so that it would not be treated as plagiarism." It will be a good learning experience for new students and will help them to reference correctly and avoid cases of unintentional plagiarism.

## **5. Conclusion**

In spite of the limitations discussed, the benefits of using TurnItIn to deter cases of plagiarism are many. This study shows that many of the problems identified have stemmed from miscommunication about the correct use of the system. These can be overcome by educating staff and students. A survey of staff perceptions of TurnItIn may

also give insight into the issues discussed. It would also be worthwhile to explore further the use of TurnItIn as a pedagogical tool. Teacher guided student evaluation of the draft version and use of the provision for peer evaluation provided by TurnItIn.com are potential pedagogical tools. The time and money spent on installing and maintaining the software can thus be put to better use.

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