REFRAMING TURNITIN: FROM PLAGIARISM DETECTOR TO FORMATIVE TOOL FOR ACADEMIC WRITING AND INTEGRITY

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Abstract:

Turnitin has historically been perceived by students as a punitive mechanism for detecting plagiarism rather than as a pedagogical tool to support academic writing development. This paper explores how Turnitin can be reframed and repositioned as a formative tool that enhances student engagement with referencing, paraphrasing, and academic integrity. Drawing on peer-reviewed studies, this article critically examines how students' relationships with similarity reports can shift through guided support, dialogic feedback, and academic literacy frameworks. The study offers a synthesis of evidence supporting the formative use of Turnitin, arguing for a pedagogical rather than disciplinary integration of the tool, and recommends inclusive, proactive educational strategies that foster academic confidence and reduce misconduct referrals.

Keywords: academic integrity; academic conduct; Turnitin; academic writing; plagiarism

1. Introduction

Academic integrity remains a cornerstone of higher education, yet it is frequently associated with punitive measures, compliance, and surveillance (Bretag, 2016). Technologies such as Turnitin, widely implemented to detect text similarity, are often framed by students as tools for catching cheaters rather than as developmental resources (Rolfe, 2011). This negative perception has significant implications for student learning, confidence, and engagement with academic skills, particularly in the early stages of university study.

As assessment practices evolve, so too must the tools and pedagogies used to promote student understanding of originality, source use, and attribution. While Turnitin is typically used summatively to flag potential misconduct, there is increasing recognition of its formative potential: helping students learn how to paraphrase, reference accurately, and revise their work with integrity (Walker, 2010; Buckley & Cowap, 2013).

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This article reviews research into the formative use of Turnitin and explores how student perceptions of the software can be positively transformed through academic literacy interventions. It argues that Turnitin, when embedded thoughtfully within teaching and feedback strategies, can support learning rather than merely act as a gatekeeper of academic misconduct.

2. Student Perceptions of Turnitin

Multiple studies have noted that students often view Turnitin with suspicion or fear, associating it with penalties rather than feedback (Dahl, 2007; Rolfe, 2011). In Dahl's (2007) qualitative study, students described Turnitin as a "policing mechanism," indicative of mistrust between institutions and learners. This perception can foster anxiety, especially among students new to academic conventions or from non-traditional backgrounds (Youmans, 2011).

However, where Turnitin is introduced as a teaching tool, rather than a monitoring system, student attitudes shift. Sutherland-Smith and Carr (2005) and found that when students receive guidance on interpreting similarity reports and are encouraged to revise drafts accordingly, their understanding of source integration and academic writing improves significantly.

3. Turnitin and Academic Literacy

Turnitin is increasingly recognised as a tool that can support the development of academic literacy, particularly when students are allowed multiple submissions and guided reflection on their reports (Buckley & Cowap, 2013). According to Lea and Street's (1998) model, academic literacy extends beyond surface-level grammar or referencing and includes the ability to understand disciplinary conventions and argument structures. Turnitin can be harnessed to foster this deeper understanding when students are encouraged to see their similarity report as part of a wider writing process.

Embedding Turnitin into writing workshops allows students to engage with academic norms in a low-stakes environment, especially when tutors explain the nuances of textual matching and proper citation. This pedagogical use helps demystify similarity scores and encourages students to develop autonomy over their writing choices.

3. Impact on Referencing and Paraphrasing Skills

Formative access to Turnitin has been shown to improve student referencing and paraphrasing skills (Walker, 2010). In a controlled study, students given iterative access to Turnitin along with tutor feedback were more likely to produce original work in their next assessment, and they made fewer unintentional citation errors than those in control groups without access to tutor support.

Student	Access to Tii + Tutor 15min	Access to Tii Only	AC Referral?
A	No Referral in the Following Assessment		
B		No referral	
C			Minor Errors and a Referral for Study Skills
D		No Referral	
E	No Referral in the Following Assessment		
F	No Referral in the Following Assessment		
G	No Referral in the Following Assessment		
H	No Referral in the Following Assessment		
I		No referral	
J			Minor Errors and a Referral for Study Skills

Note: Oldham (2025) Single Module; 24J circa 2000 students; All students were given the same option for Tii + tutorial (15 mins).

Similarly, Davis and Carroll (2009) found that regular interaction with similarity reports helped students internalise the mechanics of attribution and improved overall academic writing performance.

Research by Buckley and Cowap (2013) further emphasised the importance of scaffolded support: students who received contextualised instruction on how to interpret their Turnitin report were more likely to use it constructively, rather than simply attempting to reduce the similarity score without understanding why.

4. Institutional Practice and Academic Integrity

From an institutional perspective, there is a need for universities to move beyond punitive approaches to misconduct and instead adopt educative strategies that promote academic integrity. Formative use of Turnitin aligns with this shift, particularly in supporting students at risk of academic conduct issues (Newton, 2016).

Park (2017) contends that most plagiarism is unintentional and stems from misunderstanding, time pressures, or lack of confidence. Addressing these root causes through constructive Turnitin engagement has been shown to reduce misconduct referrals. Several institutions that embedded formative Turnitin practices reported a decline in academic misconduct cases and improved student satisfaction with feedback (Sambell et al., 2006)

5. Discussion - Shifting Student Mindsets

Changing the narrative around Turnitin from punitive to developmental requires a pedagogical culture shift. Students who perceive the tool as a learning aid are more likely to engage critically with their writing. This begins with how Turnitin is introduced—through supportive messaging, tutor modelling, and opportunities for formative submission. Explicitly discussing what Turnitin does (and does not do) is essential for reframing it as a neutral tool rather than a moral judge (Bretag et al., 2014).

When students are shown how similarity can arise from correctly cited quotations, common phrases, or assessment briefs, they become better equipped to distinguish between legitimate and problematic matching. Embedding this in tutorials, workshops, and digital learning materials can reinforce Turnitin's role as part of the writing process, not just a final check (Carter et al., 2017).

6. Pedagogical Embedding and Feedback Loops

Formative use of Turnitin is most effective when embedded into curriculum design. Strategies include:
- Allowing draft submissions with feedback,
- Using similarity reports in one-to-one or group tutorials,
- Providing annotated exemplars of good practice,
- Linking Turnitin use to study skills and academic writing modules.

Crucially, formative Turnitin use should be coupled with dialogic feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Rather than presenting the similarity score as a verdict, tutors can explore the matched text with the student to identify whether improvements are needed in paraphrasing, citation, or originality. This approach builds students' capacity for self-assessment and reflective practice.

7. Equity and Access Considerations

Not all students come to university with equal familiarity with academic norms. International students, those from vocational backgrounds, or students with neurodivergent profiles may find referencing and paraphrasing especially challenging (Pecorari, 2008). Formative Turnitin use can support equity by offering structured, low-risk opportunities to practise these skills.

However, institutions must ensure that Turnitin does not become a barrier to success. Providing accessible guidance, multilingual resources, and sensitivity to diverse writing styles is key to ensuring Turnitin supports rather than penalises marginalised learners.

8. Evidence of Impact

Emerging data from UK institutions suggests that when formative Turnitin interventions are embedded at Level 1, rates of academic conduct referrals drop significantly in later years (Harper et al., 2020; University of Edinburgh, 2022). For instance, pilot projects involving Turnitin tutorials and pre-submission support led to students feeling more confident in using Turnitin, understanding and students requesting additional access across their learning journey (Oldham, 2025).

Moreover, students report increased confidence in writing and a clearer understanding of what constitutes acceptable academic practice. When feedback on Turnitin reports is integrated into assignment preparation, the tool becomes part of a developmental arc rather than a post-submission hurdle.

9. Conclusion

This article has argued that Turnitin when positioned pedagogically, can transform student engagement with academic writing, referencing, and integrity. Rather than acting as a punitive surveillance tool, Turnitin should be reframed as a formative support mechanism—particularly for first-year or at-risk students. The literature overwhelmingly supports the notion that access to similarity reports, when coupled with guidance and feedback, leads to improved academic skills, greater confidence, and fewer conduct breaches.

Institutions must take proactive steps to embed formative Turnitin practices into curriculum design, staff training, and academic support. By doing so, they not only uphold standards of integrity but also empower students to become independent, reflective, and ethically minded scholars.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Appendices

Holistic Academic Integrity Strategy Overview
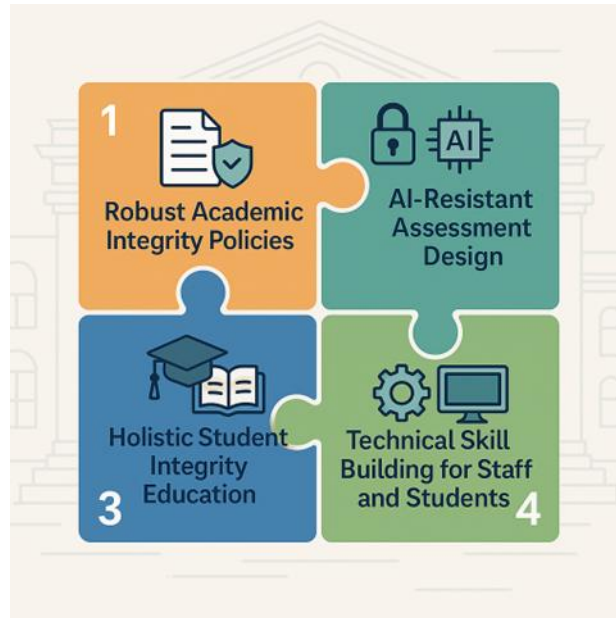
This strategy adopts a systems-based, interconnected approach to fostering academic integrity across the university. Each component is represented as a vital piece of a jigsaw puzzle, symbolising how these elements must work together to create a cohesive and effective integrity culture:

1) **Robust Academic Integrity Policies**
   Clear, accessible, and consistently enforced policies form the foundation. These outline expectations, define misconduct, and ensure fair, educative responses to breaches.

2) **AI-Resistant Assessment Design**
   Assessments are reimagined to reduce opportunities for misconduct by focusing on authentic, process-driven, and personalised tasks that are less susceptible to generative AI misuse.

3) **Holistic Student Integrity Education**
   Integrity is embedded throughout the curriculum, beginning at induction and reinforced through scaffolded learning, case-based discussions, and reflective practice.

4) **Increased Technical Skill Building**
   Both students and educators receive targeted training in digital literacy, referencing tools, and academic writing platforms, ensuring confidence in navigating academic expectations and technologies.