

# Using Turnitin to improve academic writing: an action research inquiry

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## ABSTRACT

As a tutor of academic writing in a university committed to widening student participation, I frequently assist students in making sense of the feedback they have received on their essays. Students simultaneously have to learn how to improve their knowledge of their subject whilst also understanding the general conventions of academic writing in their area. It is an emotional as much as intellectual process (van der Hulst et al. 2014). Combining qualitative data from staff and student focus groups with quantitative data from the Turnitin system, this action research report provides a series of practical resources rooted in practice reflections and current debates, as a possible way to tackle this pedagogical problem.

## INTRODUCTION

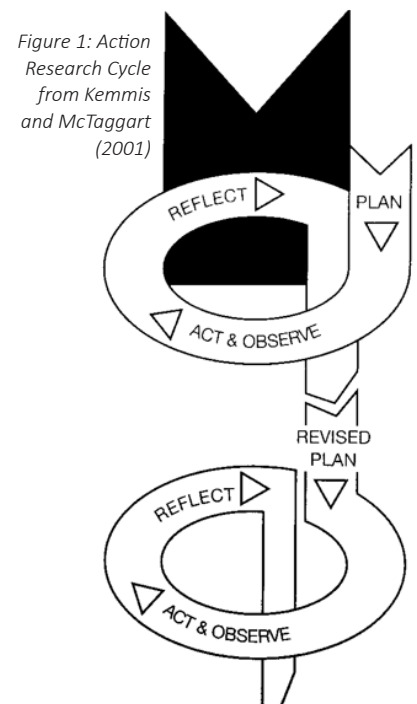
This is an action research report which aims to explore how far Feedback Studio (formerly Grade Mark), an online programme created by Turnitin (2016; formerly iParadigm), enables students to improve their academic writing, and how my colleagues and I can change our practices to do so. The report aims to present an outline of the issues encountered by adopting the various critical lenses recommended by Brookfield (1995), which enable any particular problem to be tackled from a number of perspectives. My report also seeks to provide a series of recommendations based on the problems that have been identified.

## REVIEW OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before presenting my rationale, findings and strategies for solving the problem, it is useful to define the concept of action research, so as to explain the decisions made, and the order in which they were made. In her study of action research for practitioners, Koshy (2005) provides five variants of the action research cycle. Of the five models provided, Kemmis & McTaggart's (2001 in Koshy 2005: 4) research spiral's useful simplicity is striking, and its emphasis on a cascading process of revised plans is helpful when reacting to

## KEYWORDS

TURNITIN  
ACTION RESEARCH  
STUDENT FEEDBACK  
ACADEMIC WRITING  
ACADEMIC LITERACIES



circumstances uncovered during reflective practice. Though clear and applicable to my project, it has shortcomings. Elliot's (1991) model, by comparison, mentions reconnaissance/ planning. A reconnaissance of data from tutors and students alike, combined with viewing the problem through a theoretical lens (Brookfield 1995), is specifically useful to my interventions. By sharing data on observed trends, it is presumed that change could be effected both amongst individuals and at the university as a whole (Koshy 2005: xiii). Kemmis & McTaggart's (2001 in Koshy 2005: 4) model is participatory in nature, something which Koshy (2005) also finds empowering. My project is also participatory in nature. Likewise, Lewin's seminal 1946 study finds action research involves networks of people (Lewin 1946: 35; Koshy 2005: 2). Lewin assumes fact-finding comes from 'intergroup relations', leading to an assessment of 'the effectiveness of various techniques of change' applied to the problem (Lewin 1946: 37), in keeping with my decision to include tutors, students, theorists and myself together to make sense of the full nature of the problem (after Brookfield, 1995).

Aside from action research theories, certain themes recur in feedback-oriented literature surveyed which elucidate my 'line of thinking' (Lewin 1946: 34). These are, loosely: feedback for learning development; Turnitin and plagiarism; and Turnitin and academic writing. The latter is most in need of further clarification and development. Much work has been done concerning feedback and learning development (Hattie & Timperley 2007; Shute 2008; van der Hulst et al. 2014). Some studies conflate plagiarism avoidance with academic development (Barrett & Malcolm 2006; Ball et al. 2012; Buckley & Cowap 2013). Understanding these discrete differences adds convenient labels to the way the problem is described (Brookfield 1995).

Turnitin and plagiarism is popularly debated and well researched; Turnitin

and academic writing is, by contrast, undeveloped. An online search using the Scopus database of scholarly publications found 85 studies concerning Turnitin and plagiarism were published between 2002 and 2016 (Scopus Search Results 2016a). Only eight studies from the same period match the search terms 'Turnitin' and 'academic writing', and most of these have 'plagiarism' in their titles (Scopus Search Results 2016b). For example, Buckley & Cowap (2013) write more about plagiarism detection than formative feedback cycles. They note how Turnitin increases the quality of work that students submit (p. 565). Their exploration of academic writing development is narrowly linked to concepts of academic misconduct. The view of Turnitin given by the UK's Higher Education Authority – an organisation that seeks to raise standards in higher education teaching – highlights the software's ability to develop 'academic writing with a focus on plagiarism prevention' (Ball et al. 2012). Some of the studies surveyed, then, conflate academic writing and plagiarism

Van der Hulst et al. (2014: 2) find effective feedback has a positive effect on students, especially when students can use that feedback in an active, focused, future-looking manner; it is, they argue, incumbent on practitioners to decide how best to present feedback. In turn, Watkins et al. (2014) find that effective, usable feedback is critical for learning development (p. 28). Agius & Wilkinson (2014) survey recent works, finding best practice in formative assessment leads to positive learning development; like Ball (2010), they find structured feedback (through annotations) boosts students' confidence and motivation. These ideas concerning feedback recall the University of East London's corporate objective of promoting learning by doing (UEL 2015a:10).

The UEL literature concerning assessment, e-submission and feedback provides a useful institutional lens (Brookfield 1995). These policies do not enforce the

use of Feedback Studio for developing academic writing, but rather find its use indicates good practice. The University's Assessment Policy describes Feedback Studio as a way for students to: (a) submit their work, (b) receive their grades and (c) see their feedback (UEL 2016a:1). The University's view of Feedback Studio as a developmental tool is also aligned with its E-submission Guidelines (2013), finds the formative use of Feedback Studio supports formative learning, is pedagogically desirable, and is something students should be able to take advantage of (UEL 2013). The University's student advice about formative use of Feedback Studio mentions plagiarism, but not academic writing. However, it does recommend multiple submission (UEL 2016b). The University's own advice to practitioners concerning Turnitin addresses how academic writing improvements can be achieved via Feedback Studio. However, it finds Quick Marks can be used alongside free text annotations. Uniting all these policy documents, then, is a lack of explicit mention of whether Turnitin can help develop academic writing per se.

## INSTITUTIONAL JUSTIFICATION OF AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Initially, I wanted to find out why students find Feedback Studio difficult and/or intimidating. By looking at my own history as a learner, I am able to put myself back into the position of the students I teach (Brookfield 1995: 29) so as to clarify the nature of the problem (Lewin 1946). UEL says it offers 'people opportunities for education and employment that they otherwise would not have had' (UEL 2015a: 2). This describes my own experience of education. As a product of Britain's comprehensive education system, I was my family's first university student, completing my PhD research in a university that has a long tradition of promoting social mobility, most especially from students who would traditionally not participate in higher education. I created academic meaning on my own

terms, largely through trial and error (Lea & Street 2009: 369). Feedback from teachers was critical. As well as an intellectual process, I remember feedback being a deeply emotional process (see also Hatziapostolou and Paraskakis 2010: 144). By enabling students to rationalise their academic writing feedback from Feedback Studio, we help them become successful academically and in response to later employment situations (UEL 2015a: 15), thus empowering students to meet their learning outcomes (Fry et al. 2014: 136), rather than articulating Turnitin as a device that simply records errors.

My action research is in sympathy with UEL’s Learning and Teaching Strategy (Cottrell 2015: 2), since feedback is a way of knowing our students. The Learning and Teaching Strategy highlights the importance of motivating and developing students (Cottrell 2015: 4; Hatziapostolou and Paraskakis 2010: 144); my interventions can address this. In keeping with this, interpreting Feedback Studio data provides insight into students’ learning development (Cottrell 2015: 7).

## ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE: STEP ONE

Steps One and Two happened before formal research started. I include these steps retrospectively, since – at the time – they responded directly to student-oriented (Brookfield 1995) issues my teaching partner and I had identified in working with feedback interventions. They were simultaneously reconnaissance and action responses, since by reflecting on my interventions in the use of Feedback Studio to improve academic writing, I was able to change later practice, but without convenient theoretical names for the process (Brookfield 1995: 30). These steps used triangulated qualitative data from colleagues and students as the basis for the actions decided upon (Koshy 2005: 5), demonstrating they were in fact action-research responses, if undeveloped at the time.

Activity	Purpose	Praxis notes
'Do-now', where students write notes on what they want from the session.	Personalised learning objectives, contextually relevant to prior learning.	Corporate Plan 2015–2020 (UEL 2015a) – learning by doing; Fitzpatrick et al. (2009, p. 17)
A quick quiz on when their next assignment is due, and its title, etc.	Make session immediately relevant to current assessment (Fry et al. 2014: 136).	Students who understand the importance and purpose of the task are more likely to produce more meaningful texts (Lavelle & Zuercher 2001: 384).
Reflection on the essay they wrote before – how they felt about it, what it was.	a) Link to sessions I had delivered before. b) Introduce a reflective mode.	Biggs & Tang (2011) – link classroom activity to assessment activity.
Fill in a form based on the feedback accessed via their tablets from Turnitin. Good and bad feedback; how they feel.	a) Identify and analyse the feedback. b) Use Turnitin as an active feedback repository. c) Address their emotions.	a) Corporate Plan 2015–2020 (UEL 2015a) – learning by doing b) Learning and Teaching Strategy (UEL 2015b) – means to record progress and gain higher marks. c) Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis (2010: 144) – feedback is emotional.
Based on feedback, compare own strengths/weaknesses with good/bad/average model texts.	a) Foster critical reading. b) 'Work' with their developmental needs to understand them further.	a) Criticality is part of LOs for module (see Mann 2015). b) Corporate Plan 2015–2020 (UEL 2015a) – learning by doing; Fitzpatrick et al. (2009: 17) – do-it-yourself undergraduate learning – constructivist.
Write instructions to self – how to implement improve on negative, and continue positive feedback in future.	Identify the most practical ways to apply the feedback; use this to consolidate the learning from this session.	When students are actively involved in the feedback process, they have more chance of improving (Agius & Wilkinson 2014: 558)

Table 1: Step One – lesson description

Step One began when my colleague, a module leader, observed that those who had made use of the opportunity for formative feedback performed better in their summative assignment than other students. In order to maximise the cohort’s academic success (Cottrell 2015), my plan was to allow students to use feedback from previous work on their then-current drafts. Using a colleague lens, I asked my new teaching partner to observe my lesson, and then to discuss my decisions with me (Brookfield 1995).

I designed and delivered a workshop lesson with six main activities as follows.

The module leader found that my resources worked well in encouraging students to engage with the feedback process. My observer found that, while

the learner-led activities were motivating and generated good debates, some students struggled to understand what their feedback meant. We also noticed some students had problems with finding feedback. Students needed a ‘decoding’ activity. We decided to tackle this head-on in Step Two, through a modified collaborative session plan.

## ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE: STEP TWO

Collecting data from mixed sources, in mixed formats and from various colleagues was certainly a key part of Step Two (Koshy 2005: 143). We asked another colleague’s advice: she had taught feedback from Turnitin before. She advised us to focus on ensuring students understood their feedback and were

Activity	Purpose	Praxis Notes
'Do-now'" – discussion about the feelings attached to feedback.	'Use' the emotional responses to generate debate.	Hatzia Apostolou & Paraskakis (2010: 144)- feedback is emotional.
Brainstorm – purpose of feedback; relate to non-academic study.	Connect it to prior knowledge.	Constructivism – connecting individuals' learning to their already-acquired experiences in various environments (Cole 2005: 220)
'Do-now', where students write notes on what they want from the session.	Personalise the learning objectives, to make contextually relevant to their prior learning.	Corporate Plan 2015–2020 (UEL 2015a) – learning by doing; Fitzpatrick et al. (2009: 17)
Reflection on the essay they wrote before – what it was.	a) Link this to sessions I had delivered before.	
	Biggs & Tang (2011) – link classroom activity to assessment activity.	
A quick quiz on when their next assignment is due, and its title, etc.	Make the session immediately relevant to the assessment they have to write in the near future (Fry et al. 2014: 136).	Students who understand the importance and purpose of the task are more likely to produce more meaningful texts (Lavelle & Zuercher 2001: 384).
Tick-box activity – what do you do with written comments?	A focus on how the written comments should be used.	
Decoding exercise based on real feedback commentaries provided, as taken from Turnitin.	Understand the implications of the language of feedback.	Amos & McGowan (2012: 5) – understanding academic language and its meanings improves academic writing.
Write instructions to self – how to implement improve on negative, and continue positive feedback in future.	Identify the most practical ways to apply the feedback; use this to consolidate the learning from this session.	When students are actively involved in the feedback process, they have more chance of improving (Agius & Wilkinson, 2014: 558)

Table 2: Order and purpose of feedback session

able to implement it. We matched this advice with the qualitative observations from Step One to devise an improved series of resources. We also gathered sample feedback comments information from Feedback Studio directly in order to enable students to experience the interpretation of 'model' feedback, treating the language of feedback as a distinct academic genre (Swales 1990).

As action for Step Two, then, we created resources and delivered a session centred around understanding 'model' feedback, as follows.

Students found exploring the language of tutors' feedback as a genre in itself useful for highlighting how developmental feedback can positively affect academic writing (Amos & McGowan 2012: 5). However, we detected continuing

issues with students' general mastery of Feedback Studio. Students reported that the style of feedback is very different from tutor to tutor, some negatively. We therefore decided to closely explore how the feedback was delivered.

### STEP THREE: TUTOR LENS: TURNITIN AUDIT DATA INTERVENTION

Step Three used data rigorously, to enable specific professional insights (Koshy 2005: 1). I aimed to record how tutors use

Grade band	Average number of characters in general comments
High	1,210
Low	1,458
Med	1,283

Table 3: Average Number of Characters in General Comments

Feedback Studio, so as to form future pedagogical responses, following on from the qualitative insights gained from Step Two. Instead of simply analysing the comments at the end essays, I decided to find a way to quantitatively record patterns, getting away from the 'qualitative paradigm' (Koshy 2005: 86).

Accordingly, I opted to survey 12 sample essays from four modules. I selected samples with high, medium and low scores. I categorised and then counted all marginal annotations or Quick Marks or general comments made by the tutors as at the end. I gained insights into popular feedback themes, as well as understanding the range of approaches. I also measured the number of characters present in the end feedback, finding there was no significant difference in the average length of general comments provided for each kind of paper.

Notably, feedback was presented in a variety of styles, with some tutors entering nothing at all in the overall final comment boxes (sticking instead to just marginal comments), and another writing large amounts of detail. I also found that 56% of all comments used in Feedback Studio were free-text annotations, and not Quick Marks. A count of the themes of the comments/Quick Marks is represented in the graph below.

The data confirmed the qualitative picture my teaching partner and I had formed concerning the range of styles and depth of feedback. It was therefore enormously useful as a contextual base. I decided that a focus group with students (Step Four) and then tutors (Step Five) might help explore and perhaps explain this variance in practice.

### ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE: STEP FOUR

Having identified just how Feedback Studio is used in Step Three, I now aimed to compare my new data against student experiences and opinions (Brookfield 1995; Koshy 2005). I wanted to generate

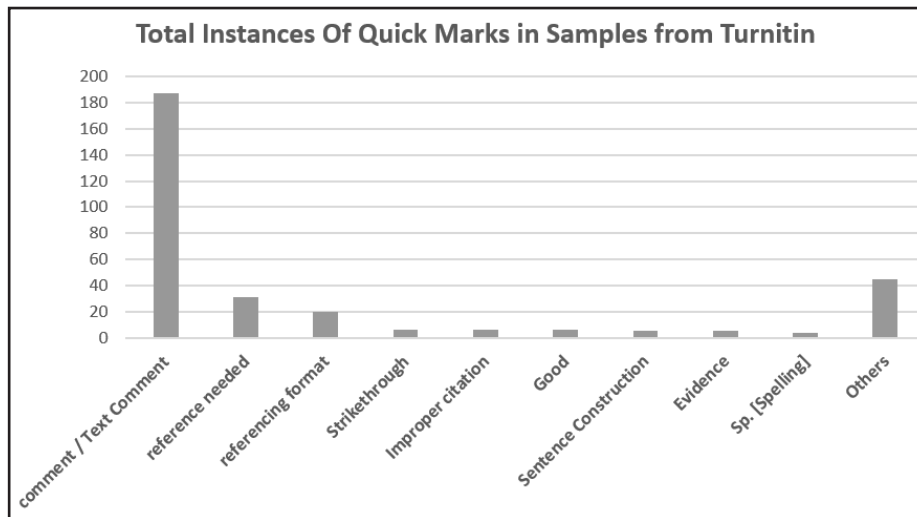


Figure 2: Frequency of Quick Marks/Annotations Used

It was surprising to learn that students sometimes feel as though they only receive negative comments, but this is reflective of feedback’s emotive content (Hatzia Apostolou & Paraskakis 2010: 144). Students also demonstrate that they upload their work for formative drafting purposes, echoing UEL’s view of Turnitin as a formative tool.

## ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE: STEP FIVE

The plan for Step Five was greatly informed by Step Four, but involved the lens of my colleagues (Brookfield 1995).

a data ‘product’ that could be used to inform further Steps (Koshy 2005). After recruiting a student focus group, I devised guide questions to generate debate (after Helpful Hints for Conducting a Focus Group, 2015), and convened my session.

It was unexpectedly found that my chosen questions resulted in a relatively narrow range of themes in students’ responses. This allowed for convenient tabulation of thematic responses, resulting in a change of plan, itself a mini-cycle of action research (Koshy 2005). An additional change was to add a sentiment category onto the data, as it was clear that these were generally discernible from the records I had made. The deliberately selective table below attempts to show the ranges of issues that were most useful in enabling me to reflect on my own practice (Koshy 2005: 30).

The graph below summarises positive and negative sentiments that were assigned to every statement provided by students by theme.

Similarity remained a dominant theme, even though the subject was academic writing, demonstrating that Feedback Studio remains synonymous with plagiarism, even if its stated purposes are different. That said, responses about ‘feedback culture’ (meaning how it is given, and how students use it) suggest that some students see Feedback Studio as a tool for developing their writing.

Theme	Notable positive comments	Notable negative comments
Similarity (index)	Student C: ‘I had about two paragraphs, I forgot to change in my own understanding. That was a wake up call.’	Student H: ‘even if you have perfect writing... you can lose grades [by having high levels of similarities]... [tutors should] not always believe in Turnitin as sometimes students do not [plagiarise] their work.’
Feedback culture/lecturer comments	Student B: [Feedback Studio helps develop academic writing because]: ‘lecturers get back to you highlighting faults... the feedback helps you know where you went wrong’ Student H: ‘It is the lecturer’s feedback and corrections that count.’	Student A: ‘some teachers only give negative feedback’ Student B: ‘Once, my feedback did not encourage me.’
Submission	Student A: ‘I use [Feedback Studio] in submission and checking my submission’	Student F: ‘I don’t like when work disappears after the deadline... [Feedback Studio] helps with the deadlines not the assignments’
Similarity (index)	Student C: ‘I had about two paragraphs, I forgot to change in my own understanding. That was a wake up call.’	Student H: ‘even if you have perfect writing... you can lose grades [by having high levels of similarities]... [tutors should] not always believe in Turnitin as sometimes students do not [plagiarise] their work.’
Feedback culture/lecturer comments	Student B: [Feedback Studio helps develop academic writing because]: ‘lecturers get back to you highlighting faults... the feedback helps you know where you went wrong’ Student H: ‘It is the lecturer’s feedback and corrections that count.’	Student A: ‘some teachers only give negative feedback’ Student B: ‘Once, my feedback did not encourage me.’
Submission	Student A: ‘I use [Feedback Studio] in submission and checking my submission’	Student F: ‘I don’t like when work disappears after the deadline... [Feedback Studio] helps with the deadlines not the assignments’

Table 4: Notable student comments by theme from focus group

Theme	Notable positive comments	Notable negative comments
How tutors use it / feedback culture	Tutor A: 'The voice tool is my key [tool]... because you can contextualise words far better through your voice than if you write down something which can be easily misinterpreted, depending on the mood of the student.' Tutor G: 'I tend to do quite a lot of corrections on their writing... spelling, grammar... structure problems and in the written feedback I go section by section... so mine's quite long winded...'	Tutor F: 'I don't know its capabilities basically, so I'm sure I'm underusing Turnitin, but – from what I know and what I do – I know I'm fairly confident with it.'
Areas for development (all 'negative' in a sense)	Tutor A: 'It's not fulfilling that feedback loop because not enough students are accessing it.' Tutor A: 'I have no control of that [wish to separate/suppress the grade from the list of feedback], and I think that is a missed opportunity.' Tutor F: 'I think we're probably not sure about the full capability of Turnitin, so we found this difficult to answer.' Tutor C: 'At an earlier level, I think students probably need more guidance.' Tutor G: 'I think we could do with pointers as to what else Turnitin could do for us and the students because at the minute I think we are underusing it.'	
Feedback culture	Tutor C: '[Feedback Studio helps students] understand the criteria for their assessment and how they should be able to self-regulate their own work before we've even marked it...' Tutor F: '...would [there] be scope for our Level 4 students to have... that Turnitin submission [looked at by support staff] so students get... feedback simply on the structure... just on the way it's being laid out.'	Tutor C: 'We are trying to teach the students what is looked at and assessed in an assignment and then produce work to match it. Quite often that is missed...' Tutor C: '[we need] 'a big focus on how to do time management in assignments... how to focus on how each is being developed as time progresses.'
Quick Marks	Tutor A: 'I think if you've taught a module, you know what the common errors are, and you can – ahead of time – change [Quick Mark sets]... I can create [a number of] new quick marks... some are about writing skills... I've also found it can make you more precise in your comments.'	Tutor C: 'Turnitin does encourage people to give quite a lot of comment about grammar and writing and how to do the essay but you could just develop a Quick Mark set about what is more specific to your topic and what is the feedback for your learning outcomes... You have to focus on what your goals are and make sure that's what you're giving them feedback on.'

Expecting similar themes to crop up, I provided similar questions and used the same approach. I aimed to understand the choices that tutors made in marking work through Feedback Studio, and understand more about their assumptions of students' opinions, and students' understanding of the system.

As before, I have selected comments from the Tutor Focus Group that are most

pertinent to the unique circumstances of my problem. (Koshy 2005: 30). And, as before, the extent of responses is represented in the graph underneath.

Focus group responses from this step brought up the following points that will usefully inform the final step of this action research:

a) tutors are keen to supply feedback in a

meaningful developmental way, following UEL's Assessment Policy (UEL 2015b)

b) tutors believe students don't always read and 'use' their feedback

c) Quick Marks are seen as a developmentally useful form of feedback (Watkins et al. 2014: 28) when they are relevant to the assessment criteria

d) tutors don't always fully know how the system works, and are sometimes unsure as to how their use of it can be developed

e) some tutors believe it can be used for developing academic writing, whereas others do not

f) Feedback Studio's voice feedback system may reduce the emotional impact of giving feedback.

## ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE: STEP SIX

Step Six is untested; it is the basis for an untaught lesson. It is, though, executed as a resource, so it is possible to evaluate and hopefully justify its structure with reference to the previous steps and the information they have provided. The table below shows how previous steps affected and justified its production.

## CONCLUSION

This action research report had a very difficult genesis, most especially because I had to use the data for dual purposes: to inform specific practice changes (Koshy 2005), and to inform a fuller, more generalised study of Feedback Studio that will hopefully follow the present study. The report is therefore necessarily briefer than the original intention. I removed a further step concerning software development recommendations, recognising its irrelevance to my own practice. Understanding action research from the process of constructing this report may be of use should I need to teach the genre to my students in future. The following conclusions are made after Brookfield (1995).

### TARGETS

Based on the foreground findings, I will benefit from implementing the following changes to my practice, or the following follow-on activities.

- Deliver revised workshops to students concerning the various purposes of Turnitin, and how to use it, especially in the first year of degree programmes.
- Use Feedback Studio to proactively

identify those students who are clearly most in need of help.

- Provide tailored feedback workshops to students soon after feedback is delivered.
- Give data about Turnitin to all interested parties through colleagues who lead on the development of learning and teaching excellence.
- Undertake more focus groups with

colleagues to explore how we can collaborate on maximising our use of Turnitin.

- Following further research, provide Turnitin with a comprehensive list of proposed software changes, most notably the use of a grammar-checking facility.
- Via follow-on research, expand the data sets recorded thus far. ■

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