This is an informal account of our attempts in the School of Public Health to help students understand academic honesty, plagiarism detection and the University’s requirements.

CONTEXT

Our students are postgraduates studying a range of courses in flexible mode, meaning they do not progress as a cohort, may study electives and core units in any sequence and at any intensity and may undertake units of study either online, face to face or in mixed mode. Some of our students are mature-age, returning to study after a break, and around 20% have been educated exclusively in non-Western systems. Our courses are one year Masters’ courses, meaning there is an intensive focus on content. Academic literacy and honesty issues, where they existed, were commonly addressed by lecturers in individual consultations; academic writing courses specific to Public Health content were held from time to time, but attendance was poor. Students were routinely referred to the WriteSite and Clearer Writing workshop, offered by the Learning Centre.

THE PRACTICES WE HAVE USED

When we decided to introduce Turnitin three or four years ago, we realised that educating students about the purpose and functioning of the software as well as improving academic literacy around issues such as paraphrasing and incorporating citations would be challenging in our flexible learning context. We therefore decided on a multi-facetted approach, both face-to-face and virtual, feeling that a bit of redundancy wouldn’t hurt.

For those who attend our Semester 1 orientation, our attitude to academic honesty and the steps we take to discover instances of plagiarism are outlined within the e-learning orientation and in the Student Welcome. These are covered in slightly less detail in the Semester 2 orientation, due to time constraints. The student welcome is recorded (voiced PowerPoint) and available on our Student Support site for distance students.

In Week 3 of both semesters, a 1.5 to 2 hour session is offered introducing concepts of academic honesty and good academic practice, outlining University policy and providing content-specific examples of plagiarism and how to avoid it. We then introduce and discuss Turnitin reports for two reasons: we feel it is only fair to show students how their work will be reported on, and we feel the reports have an educative function, since they can be used to provide contextualized examples of issues in citation and referencing. The false positives, flaws and limitations of Turnitin reports are highlighted, and students have hands-on practice in interpreting reports. Handouts are provided with examples of embedded citation, including how to take a stance towards the material cited. Students are referred to the WriteSite and University sites and policies. Attendance at these sessions has been disappointing.

Given we have many distance students, an interactive online module has been developed for those who cannot attend face-to-face. It includes a recording of the session described above, links to library and University resources, animations and drag-and-drop practice to demonstrate the School’s two preferred referencing styles and practice activities based on Turnitin reports. These are presented in a logical teaching sequence and there are interactive activities to test understanding and finally a quiz. Students have three attempts and must get 80% in one of the attempts. Students can opt to do only the quiz if they feel confident in their understanding (since they are postgraduates many have prior exposure to these concepts).

WHAT WE HAVE FOUND

We have not formally evaluated the impact of these measures on the incidence of plagiarism but anecdotally, they have had a noticeable impact. The only formal study we undertook was in response to student pressure (especially from Medical students) to self-submit and receive a Turnitin report prior to final submission. Students in two units of study were given this opportunity and asked whether they preferred this as opposed to seeing the report after submission and only if there was a problem. Students were evenly divided on this question, but the strategies they used to address apparent plagiarism in their assignments were so pedagogically undesirable that self-submission was abandoned on that basis alone. We are currently working on a whole