



# **The use of Turnitin at the University of Oxford: A guide for tutors, examiners and administrators**

**Education Committee  
Updated Michaelmas term 2019**

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## Version history

1.0	September 2019	Original publication	Document created by merger of elements of Annex G of the <i>Policy and Guidance for Examiners</i> and <i>The use of Turnitin at Oxford University for Tutors and Administrators</i> . No substantive changes.
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## 1 Introduction

This document brings to together information provided by IT Services in relation to the use of Turnitin and advice previously provided in the *Policy and Guidance for Examiners* in relation to the role of Turnitin in the consideration of plagiarism.

## 2 What is Turnitin?

Turnitin is an electronic text matching system that can be used to find text matches between students' submitted work and existing electronic sources. Since Turnitin is a web-based system, student papers (essays or assignments) need to be made available in electronic format (Turnitin cannot be used for submissions of, or comparison with, material in printed format).

Oxford University has a subscription to the TurnitinUK service, which is supported and informed by JISC. IT Services manages the service and creates instructor accounts on request. IT Services provides ongoing support and training in using both the direct TurnitinUK service, and the WebLearn-Turnitin integration.

Submitting an assignment in Turnitin generates a Similarity Report. The Similarity Report is the result of comparison between the text of the submission against the search targets selected for the assignment; this may include billions of pages of active and archived internet information, a repository of works previously submitted to Turnitin, and a repository of tens of thousands of periodicals, journals, and publications.

A Turnitin Similarity report has value as a teaching tool and can be a useful piece of evidence when considering whether a student's submitted work might contain plagiarised material. It is not, however, a plagiarism detection system. Interpretation of Turnitin reports in relation to the consideration of plagiarism requires the application of academic judgement.

## 3 Using Turnitin as a teaching tool

Education Committee supports and encourages the use of Turnitin, not just for work submitted for a summative assignment (where it may help identify potentially plagiarised material), but also as a formative tool for tutors to help students learn good referencing and paraphrasing practices, and to acquire the necessary skills and judgement to apply to their academic work and publications.

It is University policy<sup>1</sup> that students can be provided with access to Turnitin for formative use under the supervision of their tutor/supervisor, for work that would *not* eventually be submitted for a University Examination. This can assist in the development of students' information literacy skills – identifying, finding, evaluating and synthesising resource materials – and emphasise good practice, rather than focusing on rules and penalties.

The relevant Supervisory Body should decide whether their students have access to the Similarity Reports for formative assignments. All of the arrangements should be made clear in course handbooks.

The WebLearn-TurnitinUK integration allows students to submit their essays after their administrator has created an 'assignment' in a suitable WebLearn site in which the students are site members. The tutor can decide whether the students can view their Similarity Report, and whether they can make more than one submission of a piece of formative work.

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<sup>1</sup> *Policy and Guidance on undergraduate learning and teaching; Policy and guidance on postgraduate taught degrees.*

Students are not permitted to scan through Turnitin either draft or final versions of any work that is to be submitted for any University examination.

Some courses require students to submit summative work very early in Michaelmas term. If this is the first year of their course, little or no opportunity may have been provided for students to practise extended writing with proper referencing. International students who have come from a different educational culture may also not yet have mastered good referencing and paraphrasing by Michaelmas term. Thus, preparing students and providing opportunities for them to attain the relevant skills will become more time critical. Other courses may have frequent occurrence of plagiarism indicating that their students need more guidance.

Such groups of students would benefit from having information about plagiarism sent to them prior to their arrival, along with other course material, as well as details of the University online plagiarism awareness training course<sup>2</sup>. Well-publicised opportunities for students to take the online course within the department and/or have instructor led interactive plagiarism awareness training would be particularly helpful. Whilst such training cannot be made mandatory, monitoring can be undertaken.

Ideally, an opportunity to run a piece of formative work through Turnitin will have been provided prior to the first summative assignment these students submit. This will provide an opportunity for you to support your students in skills of referencing and paraphrasing.

## 4 Setting up Turnitin for use

Turnitin can be used in two modes (see diagram or workflows below):

- **formative**, which focuses on a tutor or supervisor working with a student to encourage and develop acceptable academic writing and citation skills; or
- **summative**, which checks a piece of examined work to measure the extent of text matching between the student's work and other electronic sources. Students do not receive a copy of these Similarity Reports.

Turnitin can be accessed directly and it is also integrated with the WebLearn Assignments tool, which is the recommended route for students to submit their own work online. The online submissions are also automatically time and date stamped which is relevant for applying academic penalties for any missing/late work. The different processes are outlined in the 'Workflows' diagram below.

If administrators, examiners or moderators wish to use Turnitin for work submitted online via WebLearn, the process is the same but the type of WebLearn site used will depend on whether the work to be submitted is formative or summative. The WebLearn Assignment Tool is used in both cases.

### Formative assignments

Assignments must first be set up by the course administrator ('maintainer') in the WebLearn site using the Assignment Tool with Turnitin integration turned on. Students should be enrolled as site members and given access to the relevant assignments for which they have entered so then they can submit their work. Once an assignment deadline has passed, the course administrator can send the assignments 'behind the scenes' to Turnitin and the resulting Similarity Report is automatically returned to the WebLearn assignments area.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/site/:skills:generic:avoidplag>

## Summative assignments

Assignments must be set up on an Anonymous Online Submissions WebLearn site. All Anonymous Online Submissions WebLearn sites are managed centrally whilst retaining course administrators 'maintainer' rights. They contain the WebLearn Assignment Tool but with different features to the those available on the standard WebLearn sites - they import candidate ID numbers, rather than student names into the system, to ensure candidate anonymity remains in place for markers; provide templates in the Resources area that are devoid of identifying metadata (with and without 2D coversheets<sup>3</sup>); and import SpLD information from eVision to enable administrators to cross-check work which should have 2D coversheets included.

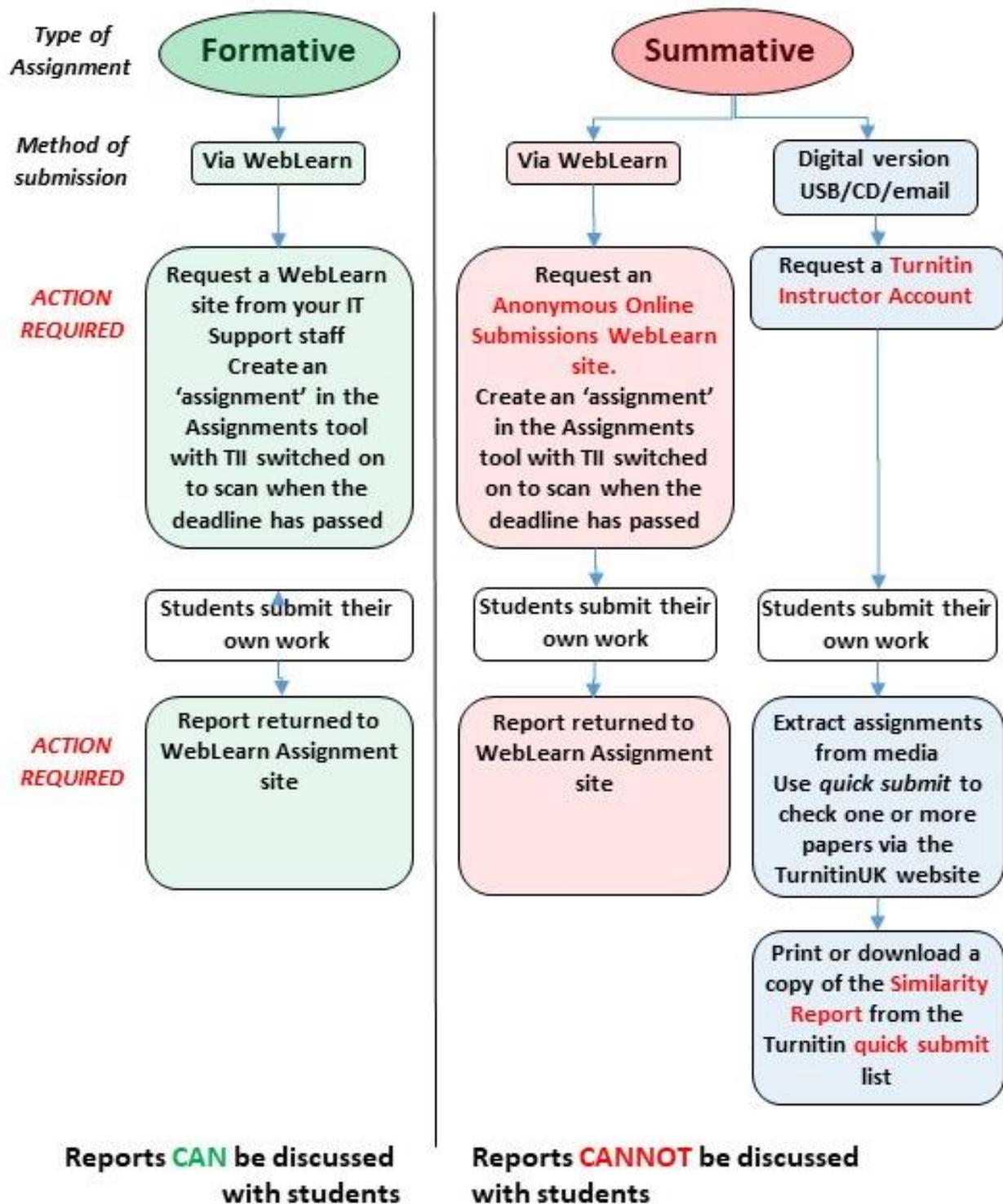
The use of WebLearn for the submission of summative assignments no longer requires prior permission from the Proctors. If you do not already have an Anonymous Online Submissions WebLearn site and wish to set one up, please contact [headofexams@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:headofexams@admin.ox.ac.uk). You should also request access to the Online Submission Information WebLearn site which has guidance documents, and useful hints and tips.

Alternatively, for summative assignments submitted in hard copy, any digital copies of essays received on a USB, by email etc can be checked manually. This will require an administrator to obtain a Turnitin instructor account. You will then need to extract, collate and upload the essays manually. The quick submit option via the TurnitinUK website (<http://www.Turnitinuk.com>) allows you to submit one or more student assignments for a quick check for text that matches existing electronic sources.

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<sup>3</sup> The 2D form gives general advice to examiners about the possible impact of an SpLD on writing skills, including issues with spelling, grammar, planning and structure.

## Workflows



## Comparative steps in the two submission routes

WebLearn submission	Non-WebLearn submission
Add the Assignments tool to your site and tick the box for Turnitin integration (formative assignments only). For summative assignments request an Anonymous Online Submissions WebLearn site first.	Requests a Turnitin instructor account from <a href="mailto:Turnitin@it.ox.ac.uk">Turnitin@it.ox.ac.uk</a>
Students should already exist in the WebLearn site. If not, it is easy to add participants by importing course groups from the central database.	Ensure instructions to candidates are explicit in the format the digital copy is to be submitted along with the hard copy of their assignment.
Staff member creates an assignment in the Assignments tool, specifying closing date and closing time, and selecting the required Turnitin options.	Enable quick submit (once off).
Students login using their Oxford single sign on and submit their essay to the assignment area.	Course administrator retrieves hard copy submissions from Exam Schools, and identifies, extracts, and collates digital versions ready for scanning.
Course administrator initiates scanning of the assignments uploaded and Similarity Reports are returned to the Assignment site.	Course administrator submits one or more student assignments, or a zip file of assignments using quick submit.
Other site maintainers, such as administrators and examiners can see the assignment and Similarity Report, depending on permissions in the WebLearn site.	Only the staff member who submitted the paper/s can view, print or download a copy of the Similarity Report from the Turnitin quick submit list.
At the end of the term or academic year, take a bulk download of all assignments in the WebLearn site for archival purposes - the assignments will be removed when current students are removed from the site or when the students have been added to the site as a course cohort and their course details change in eVision. The downloaded data includes the individual student submissions, as well as the date and time of submission.	At the end of the year, all work must be archived according to the current rules, including any Turnitin Similarity Reports obtained.

## Advantages of using the WebLearn-Turnitin integration

- You do not need to request a separate Turnitin account
- Your students can be easily added as participants in your WebLearn site by importing the course group from a central Oxford University database (Add Participant Group), or adding as individuals to a small assignment.
- Students make use of their existing Oxford single sign on (SSO) login details
- Students submit their own work using the WebLearn Assignments tool
- Turnitin Similarity Reports are delivered back to the WebLearn Assignments tool, for analysis and discussion with the student (formative assignments only).

- The environment is familiar to students and staff who already use WebLearn

### **Anonymity requirement for summative assignments and use of the WebLearn-Turnitin integration**

- Students are usually identified in the WebLearn site by their Oxford single sign-on (SSO) login details. Anonymity for examined (summative) work is required and therefore such assignments will have to be set up on an Anonymous Online Submissions WebLearn site – contact headofexams@admin.ox.ac.uk.
- However, Turnitin reports are not anonymised when submitted to Turnitin via WebLearn and should only be shared with those who are trained to interpret the reports and have the authority to decode candidate numbers. Under no circumstance should Similarity Reports for summative assignments be released to students.

## **5 Interpreting Turnitin reports**

Interpreting Turnitin reports is not straightforward and requires the application of academic judgment.

After student assignments have been submitted and compared to various repositories and databases, Turnitin will produce a Similarity Report for each submission. The Similarity Report highlights the parts of the student’s text which match with text already held in the Turnitin and other online databases. An overall score (the Similarity Index) is assigned measuring the percentage of the submitted work which is found in other sources. Scores can be adjusted to take account of properly quoted text and bibliographies.

It must be noted though that Turnitin cannot identify text that may have been copied from books (or any other sources) that are not available in electronic format. Even then, there are limits to the databases that Turnitin has access to for searching purposes – there may be some electronic journals or databases that do not have partnership agreements that allow Turnitin to search their content.

Turnitin can match only electronic text, not equations, computer programs, images, tables, diagrams or pictures. It is therefore important to check the sources of any surrounding text to see whether the diagrams etc are also copied from the same source.

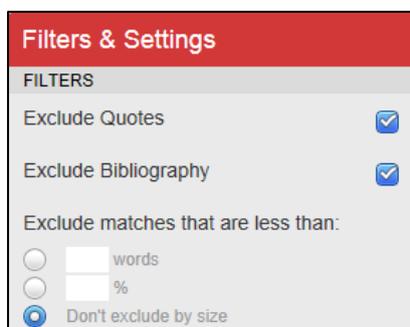
The list of all submissions shows a visual ‘traffic light’ indicator next to each one, according to the extent of the match percentage:

SIMILARITY	
0%	0% Blue icon
6%	1-24% Green icon
43%	25-49% Yellow icon
58%	50-74% Orange icon
80%	75-100% Red icon

There is no recommended ‘threshold’ as to what scores might be acceptable or unacceptable.

Each assignment needs to be evaluated individually, taking into consideration the nature of the subject matter (e.g. in a Law essay it may be acceptable to cite legal cases without using quotation marks), the nature of the assignment task (e.g. the cognitive level of the task), and any other factors relevant to the particular task.

A high percentage match should not be taken as an automatic indicator that there is a problem with the work; the list of matches may include correctly referenced sources, reference lists, declarations of authorship etc. There is a filter in the online report which can filter out correctly quoted material (only double quotation marks are recognised), and reference lists. A list of references may also be filtered out but must be preceded by the heading 'References', 'List of References', or 'Bibliography' in order for Turnitin to recognise it – the filter then ignores everything that follows that heading. Note that if the references are within a formatted table in MS Word, it will not be recognised as a list of references:



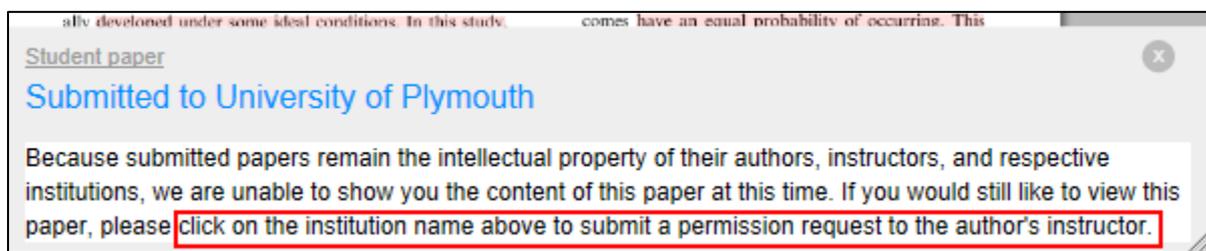
A match of 0% can also be suspicious. In the normal course of writing, one would expect at least some matches of short, commonly used phrases. A score of exactly 0%, or a low percentage when other symptoms of plagiarism appear present, may indicate that the writing has been electronically manipulated to disguise words and confound the software (e.g. it is possible to insert 'non-displaying spaces' within words, which will make the words unrecognisable to the software).

Double check that sources have been attributed correctly and not lumped together e.g. multiple articles from same website may show up as a single large match.

Sources should be checked to ensure there is no misattribution e.g. a report may have been syndicated and published on a different website, causing Turnitin to identify a different source from the one referenced by the student.

Where the Turnitin report shows a match with work submitted to another university, check if there may be a third source that both students may have copied from.

For privacy reasons, Turnitin does not allow access to student papers from other universities if these have been found as a match. Permission needs to be requested from the respective university to that piece of work, if required. This can be done through the online interface, by clicking on the match in question and then clicking on the name of the institution:



If a match is found between two student assignments from the same cohort (say, Student A and Student B), it is not possible via the software to identify who copied from whom. That is, the paper of the 'plagiarist' may have been submitted and saved to the Turnitin database before that written by the original author. Any such case should be referred to the Proctors for further investigation.

The Similarity Report can be refreshed in the online document viewer. If this is done at a later date, it may yield a different score to the one first generated (due to the dynamic nature of content on the internet). Therefore **a copy of the Similarity Report should be**

**downloaded at the time of the investigation**, as evidence of matches found at one particular point in time.

## **6 Using Turnitin as a tool for the screening of summative assignments**

Exam Boards may wish to use Turnitin as one tool in **helping to identify** potential cases of plagiarism, collusion or contract cheating. Points of guidance for this are given below.

Exam Boards first need to decide whether they want to submit:

- all summative work to Turnitin;
- randomly-selected samples of summative assignments; or
- specific summative assignments where initial marking has raised concerns of poor academic practice.

Candidates need to be advised about the procedure for their degree and this should be detailed in either the examination conventions or the course handbook.

When all summative work or specific assignments are to be screened by Turnitin, the Examination Regulations need to specify when, where, and how electronic copies of work are to be submitted. Candidates submitting hard copies of their work should submit the electronic copies by USB stick, to the Examination Schools before the submission deadline.

Where work is to be randomly or selectively screened, these regulations might be expressed in terms of candidates being required to provide electronic copies promptly on request (instead of submitting these along with hard copies). If concerns are raised by a marker, the digital copy of the work submitted should also be confirmed as a true copy of the hard copy.

On courses where the electronic copy is only used for screening the work through Turnitin, the hard copy submission is deemed as the formal submission. Unless the examination conventions specify otherwise, academic penalties for late or missing work can only be applied to the hard copy and not to the digital copy.

Departments or colleges should contact the Examinations and Assignments Team if they plan to use the WebLearn-Turnitin integration for students to submit summative assignments. Certain conditions need to be met, including necessary changes to the course regulations prior to adopting online submission.

Candidates whose work is being screened or might be screened need to certify that the electronic copies of their work are identical to the hard copies. It is not essential for Examiners to obtain individual approval for screening of work, but it is prudent to make students aware that electronic copies will be or might be screened (especially if the work is to be added to the Turnitin database). This can be covered by a subject-specific statement on the Declaration form which candidates submit. The sample declaration of authorship form is available from [www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism](http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism).

Departments are advised to appoint a number of designated Turnitin 'instructors' who are trained to use Turnitin and interpret Similarity Reports. They should normally be members of staff involved in the examinations process (such as the Exam Board Administrator(s) and Chair of Examiners). Departments should ensure that new members of staff and faculty involved in this role are given adequate training.

Users of Turnitin (for submitting papers and reviewing Similarity Reports) should make use of the training and support provided by IT Services. Use of Turnitin on examined material (essays, reports, dissertations, theses) by individuals who have not undertaken training is strongly discouraged, as misuse of the software could compromise a later disciplinary investigation by the Proctors.

## 7 Support and training for staff and administrators

Various sources of help and support are available in using Turnitin for both the formative improvement of students' academic writing skills and for formal detection of possible occurrences of plagiarism. They include:

### **About Turnitin at Oxford University**

IT Services runs the Turnitin service at Oxford University. More information about the service and support provided is available at <https://help.it.ox.ac.uk/Turnitin/index>. The Service Level Description is available from a link on the same page.

### **Courses for staff**

IT Services offers two face-to-face sessions each term (search 'Plagiarism' on the courses website). Book a place at <https://help.it.ox.ac.uk/courses/overview>

### **Plagiarism: Interpreting Similarity Reports**

What do the percentage matches mean? What about direct citations? Should I include bibliographies in the Similarity Index? This lunchtime session covers Turnitin Similarity Reports and how to interpret the results. You will have a chance to submit a sample document via the WebLearn integration with Turnitin.

### **Turnitin: User Group**

A group for staff users of Turnitin to share ideas and practices to inform institutional practice in the use of Turnitin. Guest speakers attend whenever possible. Each division should have at least one representative on the Turnitin User Group in order to keep informed of any changes or updates.

Discussions can be conducted or questions posed on the Turnitin User Group mailing list in WebLearn: [tii-community@weblearn.ox.ac.uk](mailto:tii-community@weblearn.ox.ac.uk).

### **Staff support site in WebLearn**

Visit the staff support site for information on the use of Turnitin at Oxford University, frequently asked questions, videos, case studies and quick guides:

<https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/hierarchy/info/plag>

You can browse the material and join the site if you wish to receive email notifications, particularly about the Turnitin User Group (above), and any other issues for discussion.

### **TurnitinUK website**

Use the TurnitinUK website (<http://www.Turnitinuk.com>) to activate your instructor account and the quick submit option to submit a small number of papers.

The TurnitinUK support site (<https://help.turnitin.com/feedback-studio/turnitin-website/turnitin-home.htm>) offers detailed support for instructors and students.