



UNITED STATES

Plagiarism-detection firm to be sold for US\$1.7 billion

Beth McMurtrie, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 08 March 2019

Stamping out student plagiarism is big business. How big? Worth US\$1.735 billion, to be exact. That's the price that Advance, a privately held media, communications, and technology company, will pay to purchase Turnitin, the 800-pound gorilla of plagiarism-detection services. Although not the largest ed-tech deal ever made, it is, in the words of one analyst, "massive".

So what does the deal, **announced** on Wednesday, mean for higher education and for education technology? We talked with a few ed-tech observers, as well as senior officers at Turnitin and Advance, to sort it all out. Their takeaways:

AI and machine learning in the classroom are the next big bet

While its roots are in plagiarism detection, Turnitin actually has a broader portfolio. For example, **it owns Gradescope**, which offers AI-assisted grading tools, and Lightside Labs, which uses machine learning to provide feedback on students' writing.

Chris Caren, chief executive of Turnitin, said the company's next step is to become a platform for colleges and high schools to submit all types of student assignments, digital or on paper. It would then use AI to help instructors review that work to, among other things, spot at-risk students and devise remediation plans.

The company is also developing Turnitin's software to branch out into the STEM fields and detect plagiarism in coding, for example. In other words, it hopes to become a one-stop shop for all sorts of tech-driven teaching services.

Caren noted that nearly half of the company's business is now international. In China, in particular, there is interest in using Turnitin's technology to help students improve their ability to write in English, similar to how companies like Duolingo or Rosetta Stone improve spoken language skills.

Advance, which owns companies like Condé Nast, has recently begun investing in data and analytics companies, said Janine Shelffo, Advance's chief strategy and development officer.

Turnitin's strong market presence and its advanced technologies, said Shelffo, make Turnitin a valuable investment.

"There's a whole road map where we can see where tech innovation will increasingly power personalised learning and enhance outcomes for all students."

Sexy tech gets the attention, but workhorse tech may be more valuable

Cutting-edge technologies – like predictive analytics and adaptive learning – often attract a great deal of money but can fail to live up to their hype. The kind of tech more central to teaching and learning, like the ability to detect plagiarism and speed up grading, is often a better bet, said Michael Feldstein, an education-technology consultant.

And even though some instructors are ambivalent about using Turnitin's main product – believing that it sends a signal that they don't trust their students – the company has been highly successful. It says its products are used by more than 34 million students in more than 15,000 schools and colleges in 153 countries. About 12 million students are enrolled at an American college that has a licence with Turnitin, said Caren.

"You have this paradox where you have a product and there are strongly mixed feelings about it in higher ed," said Feldstein. "Yet it has done phenomenally well financially – in an environment where time and again the next big sexy thing has struggled to perform."

Sean Michael Morris, director of digital learning at the University of Mary Washington and a long-time critic of Turnitin, said the rise of ed tech was tied to larger stresses being placed on college teaching. Budgets shrink, class sizes grow, and large courses are often taught by time-strapped adjuncts.

"As classrooms get larger, 40, 50, 200 students," he said, "teachers throw up their hands and say, 'How am I going to grade so many essays? I'm going to let technology do it for me.'"

The controversy over Turnitin's business model is unlikely to go away

The rap on Turnitin, as well as on every other tech company that collects information on students, is that it trades on their work to do its business, and it's unclear how that material will be used. As Turnitin expands its services domestically and abroad, and gathers more kinds of student data, those concerns will only grow.

James Wiley, principal analyst for technology at Eduventures, a higher-education research organisation and consultancy, said education-technology companies have long struggled with such ethical challenges. It's one thing, he said, to use students' work internally to refine products. It's another to use it externally in pursuit of further sales and marketing opportunities. "I'm going to be watching for the privacy questions," he said.

Morris, for one, said he worries that Advance could mine its new database of student work in order to create marketing campaigns targeted at students. Both Caren and Shelffo said

that fear is unwarranted. “We have no intention of using the database for anything other than refining the Turnitin products,” said Shelffo.

Still, said Feldstein, Turnitin’s valuation “should cause some soul-searching” about how higher education evaluates and uses technology. “Why is it,” he asked, “that the dialogue that we have about technology from a pedagogical perspective, the usage we make of it in the classroom, and the valuations that it gets from investors are so frequently and dramatically out of line with each other?”

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