

## **TITLE AND AUTHORS**

Avoiding plagiarism, developing identities: Responsibility, academic literacies and the curriculum.

A JISCPAS Case Study

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## **ABSTRACT**

The incidence of plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct has become a cause for concern across the higher education sector in recent years. A range of factors have been identified as contributing to the incidence of plagiarism, and institutions have responded in variety of ways to tackle the issue in terms of education and prevention. Arguably, first year undergraduates represent a section of the student body which should receive particular attention in this respect, as they enter an unfamiliar educational context, which presents new and complex demands.

This report describes a small-scale JISCPAS-funded project which investigated the experiences and perspectives of first year students and key staff groups at a Scottish post-92 university, focusing on the development of year 1 students' academic literacies, their experiences of coursework and their awareness of appropriate academic practice. A variety of data collection methods were employed including literature review, semi-structured interviews, journals, and focus groups. The study highlighted some key differences between staff in different roles in terms of how they view their own and the institution's responsibilities in this area, and in the extent to which they believe development should be generic or discipline-specific. The data also suggest the presence of an implicit staff model which constructs anti-plagiarism strategies as separate and unrelated to other aspects of academic writing development. The student data documented the central role of confidence, emotion and identity in the student experience, and highlighted a range of issues across the university in terms of how we should support coursework and develop student academic literacies.

The report concludes with suggestions for development of institutional and individual academic practice in this area, to better support the development of first year student literacies and confidence within the curriculum.

# 1. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The first year experience is a crucial time for the development of academic literacies, yet for many students it can be a difficult period of adjustment to a new set of requirements, requiring familiarisation with a new set of academic conventions and practices, many of which are not made explicit. Students may be unclear about the parameters of acceptability, and can find themselves unintentionally in breach of plagiarism regulations.

Much research has been undertaken about the extent of student plagiarism and the characteristics of those who commit it. However, there is less research on students' experience of learning (Haggis & Pouget 2002) and how students can be helped to develop strategies in order to avoid plagiarism, and even less on exploring the locus of responsibility for "teaching the skills" required. At an institutional level, Napier University has well-developed academic conduct policies and procedures in place. Napier has also recently adopted an embedded, academic literacies approach, which aims to develop and embed literacies development within the curriculum. However, as at all institutions in the Higher Education sector, there is a wide variety of attitudes and approaches evident in staff, with differing views about how this development should be approached, and the extent to which the responsibility lies with previous educational institutions, specialist remedial staff, the students, or the academics themselves.

This report builds on work previously conducted in Napier University (Greig 2006, Gourlay 2006a, b & c) and the findings will be used to inform development of academic practice and institutional policy within the institution. The long-term aim is to enhance consistency of practice and support in order to develop student academic/information literacies in general; more specifically for the avoidance of plagiarism at the important first year stage and crucially in progression throughout students' university careers. Results will be disseminated within Napier and also to the wider academic community.

## **2. PROJECT AIMS & OUTCOMES**

### **Aims**

To investigate the first year student experience in terms of academic literacies, skills development and awareness of appropriate academic practice.

To explore academic and academic support staff attitudes and strategies for the development of students' academic skills and awareness of appropriate academic practice, with a particular focus on the first year.

### **Outcomes**

1. Produce in-depth case study accounts focusing on the first year student experience of the development of academic skills across the 3 faculties
2. Characterise academic support staff's view of academic literacies development for first year students.
3. Describe academic staff's explicit or embedded input related to academic literacies for first year students.
4. From 1-3, produce a synthesis of all identified key issues for development and examples of good practice
5. Develop a staff and student 'roadmap' for first year students' academic literacies development
6. Provide recommendations to the appropriate bodies within the university for staff and student development needs and policy development

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

A mixture of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were employed to gain a detailed overview of both student experience and staff perspectives surrounding this issue. A literature review of the area was carried out initially to survey related research and commentary on the topic. Nine student volunteers from across the faculties were invited to complete 'coursework journals' and to take part in two semi-structured interviews during semester 2 of session 2006-07. An online survey was designed on Ultimate Survey, piloted, then administered to all academic staff. This survey was aimed at lecturers teaching and supporting first year students, and gave rise to 80 responses covering all faculties and schools. Three focus groups also were run with staff in different roles; staff teaching on first year modules, faculty academic support officers, and library staff.

#### **4a. Findings From Staff Focus Groups And Questionnaires**

All three staff groups unanimously agreed that there was no such thing as a 'typical' first year student, acknowledging the increased diversity of students in this post-1992 university. However, perhaps the most important finding from the focus groups was that, despite displaying student-centred views in terms of pedagogy, teaching staff expressed views consistent with a 'deficit' model of academic literacies development. The teaching staff tended towards 'blaming' the students or previous educational institutions for a perceived lack of capabilities and awareness; a deficiency which should be tackled primarily by extra-curricular remediation. In contrast, the academic support officers and library staff expressed perspectives which were implicitly or explicitly more consistent with an 'academic literacies' approach; one which regards reading and writing as intrinsically bound up with the incremental development of discipline knowledge – and therefore part of the mainstream curriculum. Interestingly however, although all three staff groups were aware of the wide

spectrum of plagiarism behaviours, they seemed to consider anti-plagiarism knowledge and related literacies as somehow separate from other aspects of student academic development.

### **Teaching staff**

- Tended to hold negative views about student abilities, applying a 'deficit' model
- Expressed concerns about standards of student literacy and numeracy which was seen as poor and worsening
- Claimed that all staff in Higher Education were responsible for students' academic development but paradoxically wanted students to come into Higher Education already "prepared"
- Were highly critical of the school system which was blamed for perceived student inadequacies
- Were concerned over a mismatch of expectations in student transition from school or Further Education
- Like academic support staff, teaching staff could not identify specific key first year aspects of academic literacies, which instead were described in very general terms and held to be programme-specific.

### **Library staff and academic support officers**

- Held more positive views about student abilities, especially non-traditional students, applying an academic literacies perspective
- Did not attribute blame to the school system, considering all staff in Higher Education to be responsible for students' academic development in partnership with students
- Highlighted lack of confidence in academic writing as the key issue for non-traditional students
- Library staff specified aspects of information literacies that all first year students needed to develop, regardless of programme.
- These two groups highlighted what they saw as an unhelpful focus among teaching staff on the mechanics of referencing and citation,

reporting occasional lack of consistency evident among teaching staff themselves

- Identified the way forward as increased collaboration with teaching staff in curriculum development, assignment design and module planning

## **4b. Findings From Student Interviews And Journals**

A range of themes arose from the student data:

### **Transition from school / college**

Students reported the following points related to their transitions from previous educational institutions to university:

- A lack of experience of referencing in school or college
- School essays having been handwritten under exam conditions
- Word counts not used at school
- Feeling 'small' at the start in relation to university and other students
- Feeling that they should be 'in at the deep end', but with support
- Much less guidance at university than at school in terms of reading
- Sense of being 'lost' at the start of first year in terms of finding sources
- Intimidating when reading journals for the first time
- Confidence increased over time in terms of academic style

A recurrent theme here was a sense of being unsure about requirements in the first round of coursework and resultant anxieties, although this varied across students and assignments.

### **Plagiarism**

When questioned specifically about plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct, students raised the following issues:

- Fear about accidental plagiarism when drawing on own knowledge

- Lack of trust when reading each-other's work in case of collusion
- Fear about plagiarism when writing directly after reading a source
- Difficulty of using own words if not confident in language or concepts
- Confusion arising from different referencing conventions
- Conflicting or unclear advice from some lecturers

Key issues for students here seemed to be a sense of uncertainty about *when* to reference in the text, a lack of clarity about the extent to which they should use their general knowledge without referencing, and lack of confidence about 'using their own words'. Referencing conventions did not seem to be as problematic.

## **Groupwork**

This issue was spontaneously raised by several students in the study, in particular the following points:

- Worries about offending group members
- 'Freeloaders' in groups pulling down the mark
- Difficulties with giving constructive criticism to friends
- Preferring to choose own groups to work with reliable people

Although it was acknowledged that groupwork can work well and be useful, there seemed to be a degree of anger surrounding some students' experiences, some of which had been fraught with conflict and social difficulty.

## **Motivation**

Motivation was another major theme, with the following points arising:

- Multiple deadlines causing lack of motivation
- Feeling like 'giving up' when struggling with writing
- Feeling overwhelmed when reading
- Leaving work to the last minute because rest of class is doing so
- Financial pressures leading to long working hours

- Sense of pride when receiving good feedback or marks
- Finding feedback useful and reassuring
- Learning while doing an essay

These points related to practices surrounding writing as a source of both a loss of motivation and also enhanced self-esteem. Writing seems to be a stressful arena of struggle for these students, but also one which can lead to a sense of achievement, satisfaction and learning.

### **Working together**

The data showed that, unsurprisingly, the students engaged in a range of practices which might be termed 'unofficial' peer support:

- Working together 'in crisis' overnight in computer lab before deadlines
- Sharing difficult-to-access books
- Getting peer feedback on coursework drafts
- Consulting peers to confirm understanding of coursework requirements
- Raised confidence linked to checking in and comparing self with peers

This raises interesting questions regarding concerns raised about groupwork above, and suggests that these students are not averse to working together; in fact they seem to work as a 'community' of peers in various respects regarding coursework production.

### **Challenges and negative experiences**

The students reported a range of factors which might be termed challenging or negative in their coursework experience:

- Finding writing very stressful and experiencing fear of failure
- Understanding writing requirements through failure / negative feedback
- Unclear instructions regarding requirements
- Struggling to find sources of information
- Finding skills modules tedious, preferring module-specific support

- Annoyance about deadlines very near to exams
- Worry e.g. as lecturer changed mind about focus of assignment
- Finding 1000 word assignments too short to include required reading

## **Guidance**

It should be stressed that students expressed positive views related to the guidance on writing that they had received, in addition to mentioning areas where they felt they could benefit from more guidance. Linked to the previous section, the following points were highlighted by the students:

- Desire for more guidance on how to approach writing in general
- Desire for examples of what should and should not be referenced
- Desire for writing feedback earlier in the semester
- Desire for guidance on format / text types e.g. reports versus essays
- Desire for guidance on in-text referencing in particular
- Desire for guidance for reflective writing
- Sense of being expected to do everything 'on their own'
- Appreciated being required to hand in a plan in advance

The student data overall also seems to suggest an important role for of writing in the formation of student identity (e.g. Ivanic 1998), with students linking perceived successes and failures to their sense of overall confidence and belonging as a student.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

### **First year as transition**

All three staff groups acknowledged the increased variation in the 'ability' of first year entrants and were very aware that retention was affected by the changing context of Higher Education in which many students were "juggling" university work with paid employment and childcare or other commitments. Teaching staff agreed that first year is a key time to address the 'culture shock' of change from school, engage students in active learning and as a

transition to deeper learning. This resonates with Booth (2001:487) who stated that first year was a "...particularly important point of intervention" not just for transition but to "create the foundations" for lifelong learning. However, teaching staff expressed concerns that the increasing diversity of students, combined with changes to the University entrance requirements, had negatively affected the standard of the first year experience, resulting in first year being insufficiently challenging for the majority of students. They expressed concerns over retention and the effects on students' motivation and morale beyond first year.

As highlighted above, the students were aware that they had entered an environment where the requirements were different from those experienced previously. The students' motivation and morale seemed to fluctuate according to their experiences with academic writing. The issue of transition is obviously a key one for students, and the data suggest that although good practice is going on, more specific guidance and support could be offered to students in terms of coursework production and plagiarism avoidance.

### **Responsibility & blame**

Teaching staff were clear that all staff in Higher Education share responsibility for student academic development, but, unlike the academic support officers, they did not emphasise the sense of responsibility held by students themselves, and seemed to perceive students' sense of personal responsibility to be low, a point echoing Devlin's (2002) findings among staff.

They were highly critical of the academic performance of students coming directly from school or Further Education; describing current standards as highly variable, but more often as poor and getting worse. The pedagogical approach in the school system was blamed for causing the lack of academic literacy for Higher Education. Teaching staff felt that many students are unused to independent learning and expect to be "spoon-fed" resources (echoing Lowe & Cook 2003). An undue focus on exams or outcomes rather

than the process of learning was seen as compounding the inculcation of “bad habits” by the school system including:

- passivity in the nature of learning resulting in lack of flexibility or transferability of learning
- the use of Google as the only means of information-searching
- acceptance of unreferenced copy-pasting as project work

Teaching staff questionnaire comments were scathing about student capabilities on entry to first year. Teaching staff specified the following student problems; grammar & syntax, punctuation, spelling and vocabulary and to a much lesser extent, information retrieval, evaluation of material and critical thinking. They did not expect to have to address “basic literacy and numeracy” but did expect to address citation and referencing. The tendency among academics to focus on “easier” aspects of academic literacy has been noted elsewhere (Lillis 2001). Paraphrasing was not explicitly mentioned despite well-noted student confusion and difficulty with this concept and its strong link to avoidance of plagiarism (Macdonald & Freewood 2002, Park 2003, Duggan 2006, Warn 2006).

School system inadequacies were seen by teaching staff as compounded by student use of “texting” language and some also perceived an attitude problem among students; a functional, instrumental focus on passing modules rather than developing learning. Furthermore, some teaching staff mentioned a gender difference in academic development; young males were seen as sometimes coming from school over-confident in their abilities and with an unhelpfully competitive attitude. Interestingly, questionnaire comments from staff contradicted the widely-held beliefs about international students and plagiarism by repeated mentions that home students often had the greater writing and syntax problems.

The students seemed to be aware that they had to learn and adapt their practices surrounding reading and writing on entry to university. Some

students commented that they had not had much guidance at school or college to prepare them for university writing, but this varied across informants. Their comments indicated that they largely accepted this was partly their responsibility. They seemed to view the responsibility for clarifying requirements as lying with their subject lecturers.

### **Models of development: academic literacies versus the deficit model**

Academic support officers and library staff attached no such blame to the school system or further education. They also expressed the belief that all staff share responsibility for student academic development and, unlike teaching staff, mentioned the responsibility of the student in partnership. Academic support staff in particular clearly subscribed to a broad academic literacies view, acknowledging the complexity and ambiguity inherent in higher education, the importance of the student developing their own voice (Bloxham & West 2007) and that one-size could not 'fit all' in terms of the literacies required by students across different subject areas. They echoed the belief of Lea (2004:739) who states that the "...academic literacy approach challenges the belief that literacy is concerned with the acquisition of a set of cognitive skills, which once acquired can be used without problem in any situation".

Academic support officers and library staff were broadly positive in their views regarding student abilities on entry to university, focusing on what students brought with them, what students can already do and their personal journey in terms of academic development and critical thinking. They described non-traditional students as having maturity, a wealth of experience from the real-world and/or employment, communication skills and a questioning nature. However, both of these groups highlighted lack of confidence in academic writing as a key issue for non-traditional students. Both library staff and academic support officers reported that some teaching staff tended to focus overly on the mechanics of citation rather than seeking to develop student thinking and ideas. They considered that a focus on plagiarism was negative and that instead the approach should be the promotion of confidence in academic reading and writing.

In contrast, as described above, teaching staff expressed an expectation that students should arrive at university already in possession of all the necessary academic abilities which would need minor adjustments for higher education. Overall, the teaching staff group seemed to have a more negative view of student abilities, describing their own approaches to development as “plugging the gap” left by the school and further education systems. The main strategy to address “gaps” was to offer “bolt-on” module input on referencing, citation and using electronic resources in first year. Interestingly, this seems to be at odds with their stated opinions that separate skills modules were unsuccessful. In contrast with the findings of some other studies (e.g. Pickard 2006), teaching staff did seem to have a broad understanding of plagiarism in principle and its spectrum of component behaviours. These strongly mirrored Napier’s in-house definitions and regulations (Napier University 2006). They were aware of the wide range of factors contributing towards plagiarism and believed that plagiarism occurred most often due to unintentional or negligent behaviours. Citation and referencing were held to be the key to its avoidance but paraphrasing was not addressed.

Unlike the teaching staff and the academic support officers, the library staff saw the key information literacies required in early first year as relatively easy to specify; they propose an initial generic focus on the basics of information literacies at the start of semester 1, in contrast to their broader discipline-specific perspective on academic literacies as a whole. These aspects of information literacies were discrete, not held to be programme-specific and included: joining the library, knowledge of the location of libraries, physical and electronic library induction & tour, searching library catalogues and basic e-journals, and the Dewey classification system. Later on, other databases or resources were needed and this part was held to be programme-specific. Avoiding plagiarism was not directly mentioned.

The library staff were clear that development of literacies is a process and that “bolt-on”, one-off induction sessions were wholly insufficient; described as a kind of ‘tokenism’ on the part of teaching staff. They firmly

rejected separate study modules as unsuccessful and advocated “built-in” (e.g. Bennet et al 2000) development within the subject curriculum and strong links to assignments. Developing academic practice in relation to plagiarism avoidance was seen by academic support officers and library staff to involve:

- increasing the transparency of staff expectations for students
- more explicit discussion and groupwork in class related to staff expectations
- more explicit information in programme/module handbooks and in assignment guidelines or feedback.
- collaborative working between library staff and teaching staff in particular.
- cost-effective use of library staff and academic support staff input with more timetabled large group and cohort input.
- a gradual unfolding of formative tasks in a process approach, embedded within subject input and timed carefully to link to assignments.

The academic support officers were, however, careful to point out the impossibility of being 100% explicit in higher education, which by its nature is inherently tacit and ambiguous.

Interestingly, all three staff groups implicitly seemed to regard academic strategies for plagiarism avoidance as separate from and different to the development of academic literacies. This separation may be seen across the sector; other than referencing and citation, paraphrasing and strategies for avoiding plagiarism are often omitted from other work which attempts to describe generic domains or academic skill sets (Booth 2001, Lizzio & Wilson 2004, Newell-Jones et al 2005).

The students did not express strong views about this issue in either direction, although some expressed a desire for more module-specific advice over generic modular treatment of the issue, which was reported as being tedious

and not perceived to be relevant. However, the issues raised by the students point to difficulties and challenges surrounding requirements and conventions required for particular items of coursework, and identification of differences between subjects and modules in this respect. Additionally, although some of the students' reported areas of confusion may be perceived to be generic to academic writing as a whole, many of them were concerned with how to approach writing within their own subject area genres. These type of issues could arguable be most effectively tackled from within the module itself.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

By using a variety of data collection methods, first year student and staff perspectives in terms of academic literacies, skills development and awareness of appropriate academic practice were investigated. As summarised above, despite holding 'studentcentred' views regarding pedagogy and showing sensitivity to the pressures on today's students, the teaching staff appeared to base their views on an implicit 'deficit' model regarding student writing. In contrast, the academic support officers and library staff seemed to be working from what could be termed an 'academic literacies' paradigm. Interestingly, all three groups of staff implicitly seemed to view anti-plagiarism strategies as sitting separately from other aspects of developing academic writing. Like the academic support staff, the teaching staff could not specify a generic set of academic literacies goals for first year students, as these were held by participants to be programme-specific. The library staff identified some aspects of information literacies seen as required by all students at the beginning of in first year - these are generic and related to the basic operation of library and information services.

A range of good practice was identified by staff which could be implemented at institutional and programme level; the most common strategies referring to transparency about coursework requirements, with the proviso that much of the knowledge of what constitutes 'good' academic writing in a discipline is tacit, learned in practice and therefore arguably

impossible to express fully in advance. This aspiration matches well with the reported guidance needs of the students, who expressed a desire to have more detailed exemplification, advice and formative feedback from lecturers in terms of finding appropriate information, text formats, the use of references and sources, and stylistic conventions in the subject area.

This study has served to reinforce the decision taken in session 2006-07 at Napier to adopt an 'Academic Literacies' approach to the development of academic reading and writing, complementing existing support available. This shift in approach is to be embedded into the curriculum review being undertaken in session 2007-08, for implementation in 2008-09. A series of staff workshops is being run and staff development opportunities will be offered in order to help staff to embed an emphasis on academic literacies and plagiarism avoidance into their teaching and guidance on coursework writing, with a view to engendering 'writing for learning' across the institution. This development will encourage staff to demystify assessment, to encourage student analytical reading linked to writing and to use short writing tasks in class. The following is a selection of development points covered in the workshops for staff, with the particular importance of developing first year students emphasised:

- Make assessment guidelines and instructions as explicit and clear as possible in terms of rationale, what type of text the students should produce, and how they should approach the task.
- 'Plagiarism-proof' assignments by avoiding repetition and predictability, and by making them current and /or personalised.
- Include in the guidelines positive reminders about sources, academic conventions and good student academic conduct / practice.
- Give students anonymised examples / extracts from previous (or invented) coursework for analysis.

- Build assignment plans / drafts into module plans to be used for formative feedback, not necessarily marked; may be used for peer discussion.
- Ensure feedback is specific, meaningful and respects student feelings / functioning to build confidence
- Encourage students to notice / point out features of writing in the discipline, such as common terminology, particular referencing conventions, format and stylistic features.
- Share and discuss assessment criteria with students, and have them apply the criteria to their own / each others' drafts.
- Help students to develop personalised reflective checklists
- Use short writing tasks focused on specific learning goals: reading for argument; applying a scientific concept to a context; interpreting a data set. A task should require students to produce "...a small amount of writing from a large amount of thinking" (Mitchell 2007).
- Link in-class writing tasks to discussion.
- Use short writing tasks to enhance students' sense of responsibility for their learning and to develop groupwork

It is hoped that this staff development and further collaborative work between Educational Development and the library, in tandem with existing good practice across the institution, will serve to better support both staff and students, taking joint responsibility to enhance student academic literacies, success and sense of self-esteem in first year and beyond.

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