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# Plagiarism Avoidance for New Students: Smoothing the transition into Higher Education.

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Plagiarism and referencing are areas in which the transition into Higher Education can be a particularly severe leap. University expectations regarding referencing are often wildly different from those previously encountered, not just for international students but for UK school leavers and mature students (Hardy and Clughen 2012). These expectations are often implicit rather than clearly expressed, hidden in little-read departmental handbooks or pre-enrolment information at a time when the student is more concerned with immediate issues of where they will live and whether they will make any friends. Lillis (2001 p14) calls referencing “an ideologically inscribed institutional practice of mystery”. This paper reports on an initiative from the University of Bradford library which attempts to smooth the transition into HE by introducing students to ideas of referencing and plagiarism in a timely and non-threatening manner.

## Background

In 2008, the University of Bradford revised its process for breaches of plagiarism regulations. An increasing number of cases appeared to be due to ignorance of plagiarism and referencing rather than deliberate cheating, and education rather than punishment was seen as the appropriate response. The Plagiarism Awareness Programme (PAP), devised and delivered by subject librarians, is now a compulsory part of the formal disciplinary process.

By 2011, over 700 students had been through the PAP. Feedback from students referred (Fig. 1) shows a high level of approval, but suggests that students felt they would have benefited from having this information earlier in their courses. Subject librarians and Learner Development Unit staff had been offering workshops and embedded teaching but coverage was piecemeal. 38% of students referred to the PAP said they had not received any previous instruction on plagiarism. In addition the University Learning and Teaching Committee were concerned about the number of appeals from students against breach convictions on the grounds that they had not been adequately informed about good practice in advance. A further concern was the workload that the breach procedure imposed on staff from the academic schools, the library and the Academic Quality Unit.

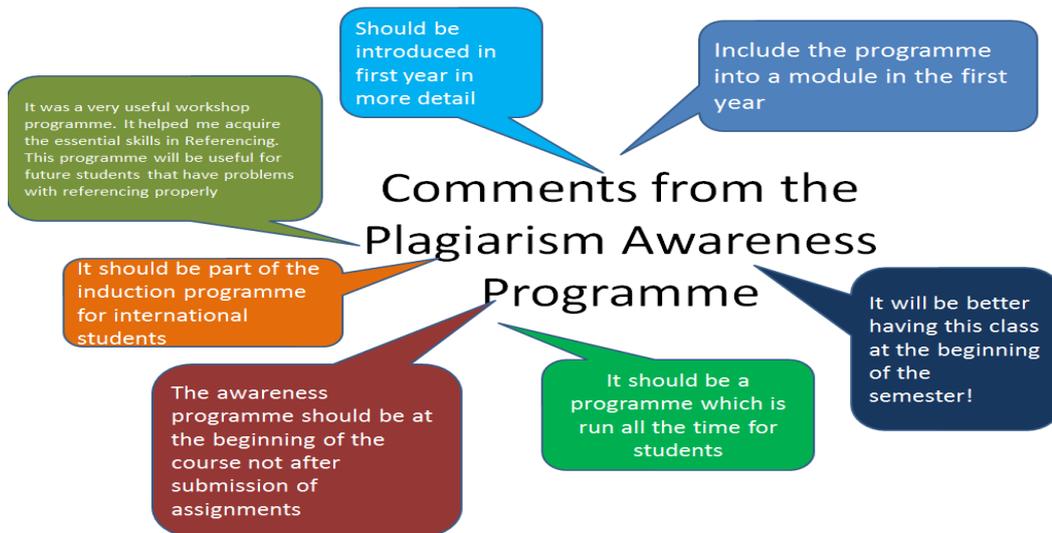
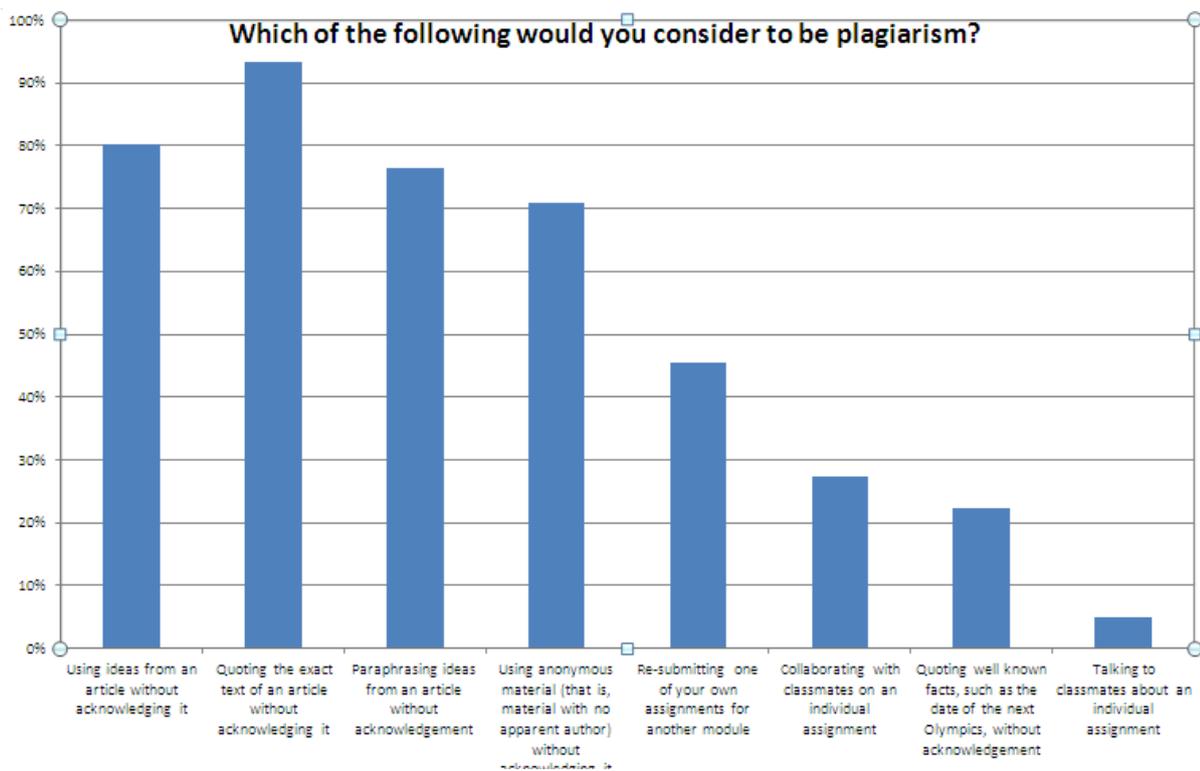


Fig. 1 Comments from PAP feedback forms

A final driver was a 2010 survey on plagiarism, to which 703 students responded. Plagiarism was both an area of concern and of serious misunderstandings. Many students believed quoting a well known fact without attribution to be plagiarism. A surprisingly small proportion considered collaborating with classmates on an individual assignment to be problematic.



Data from 2010 plagiarism survey (n=703)

## **The Plagiarism Avoidance for New Students Course**

In May 2011 the University Learning and Teaching Committee decided that an induction course on plagiarism should be delivered to all new students at the start of the 2011-12 academic year. It was variously suggested that the course be restricted to either undergraduate or international students, but statistics on referral to the PAP showed that the problem of plagiarism was not restricted to specific groups

The library was tasked with designing the course, which we named the Plagiarism Avoidance for New Students course or PANS. Completion of the course had to be monitored, so our only choice for delivery route was through our Virtual Learning Environment, Blackboard.

The programme consists of 5 learning objects and a 10 question test. We used the adaptive release function of Blackboard to allow the objects to appear one by one, hoping to force the students to work at a more reflective pace instead of diving straight for the quiz. The programme was supported by a new web page, plagiarism explained (University of Bradford 2012), so that if a student wants further information on any aspect of the lessons they can follow links to that specific area on the website.

We had hoped that all students would be able to take the same course but found that we could not create a course on plagiarism without mentioning referencing. We decided to create versions for Harvard and Numeric styles. We also had to ensure the course was relevant and comprehensible to all of our new students, whatever their age, subject background or country of origin. Finding examples of common knowledge that would be obvious to both 70 year old archaeologists from Yorkshire and 18 year old engineers from Singapore was quite a challenge!

The method of delivery was decided in negotiation with each school. Most chose to release the course and require students to complete it in their own time, others decided to run it in scheduled sessions run by subject librarians.

As the aim of the course was to ensure that students had a good understanding of plagiarism the pass mark was set high at 70%. However, the course was designed to be formative rather than punitive, so any students who failed were referred to their personal tutors for further guidance. Completion was monitored by the schools, with varying penalties for non-completion. Some schools would not mark work until the course was completed, in others the students had to make a personal appointment with the Associate Dean!

## **Constraints and challenges**

We faced a number of technical challenges in rolling out the course in such a short timescale.

The programme was to be released to over 2000 students to complete in an uncontrolled environment so we reluctantly decided that, in the interests of security, students would not be able to see the answers to the quiz once they had completed it.

There was no single area in Blackboard in which we could place the programme and reach all relevant students, so subject librarians identified core first year modules in which to embed the course, which was deployed in nearly 50 areas of Blackboard! This brought with it challenges of tracking students who should be taking the course and of fixing any problems that arose.

We initially designed the learning objects with Glomaker, but found that these were difficult to migrate between Blackboard areas. Our next choice was Powerpoint, but these would not launch as shown from Blackboard when run in Internet Explorer. We experimented with animated PDFs but these would not run on

Macbooks. So eventually we removed all interaction and sound from the learning objects and linked them to Blackboard as “flat” PDF files.

## Development

Over 2000 students took the programme between October and December 2012. We found that the course was more successful when delivered in session and completion rates were better. At the end of the first semester, we reflected on results and decided on some major revisions to the programme.

The biggest complaint received was that students were unable to see the answers to the quiz. This was addressed by creating a pool of 50 questions in 10 subject categories, which provide a different test for each student. They now receive the correct answers and detailed feedback.

We also looked at the breakdown of results by question to see which questions had proved most problematic. In some cases, the questions were badly worded so were revised. In others, subject librarians who had delivered the course considered that the problem lay with students’ understanding of the issue rather than with the wording of the question. In these cases more information was added to the lessons.

In the next academic year we hope to develop the programme further. We aim to adapt the course into individual objects for use by school librarians, and to gather more feedback as to its usefulness.

## Conclusion

The most important indicator of the success or failure of the course is the number of referrals to the PAP as a result of student plagiarism. Since the PAP began in 2007-8 we have had over 200 referrals every year. However, this year we have had only 120. The biggest drop is amongst first year students, who have taken the PANS. Whilst we cannot prove a causal link it is still heartening to see the fall!

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th and above
2008-09	106	50	36	46
2009-10	92	68	31	34
2010-11	63	93	44	49
2011-12*	30	40	27	13

Table 1: Referrals to the plagiarism awareness programme by year of study, 2008-2012

\*Years run from September to August. For the 2011-12 year we have not yet had the September referrals. In previous years September has seen 12-16 referrals so we do not expect the figures to increase significantly by the end of the year

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