

The role of referencing policy and advice in supporting undergraduate learners

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Abstract

Students entering undergraduate programs in 21st century Australian universities come from increasingly diverse backgrounds and, on commencing study, are often exposed to a variety of advice about what is expected from them as tertiary students. Referencing is a fundamental part of academic research and writing, and one which daunts many undergraduate students, particularly in their first year of tertiary study. This paper discusses the rationale and content of a referencing policy developed by a regional university in response to a changing student population and an expanding range of disciplines. Using referencing as an example of academic activity, the paper suggests that students' competence and confidence can be enhanced if they feel they belong to a community of academic practice, and are made aware of the norms and expectations of that community through consistent policy and advice.

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Introduction

As in many Australian universities today, the 'typical' first-year undergraduate is no longer a teen-aged person who has just finished their secondary education. Even allowing for the 'gap' year commonly taken by school-leavers, and including such students, school-leaver undergraduates are now in the minority at Central Queensland University (CQU). The majority of the university's undergraduates are over 25 years of age. As well, the on-campus experience of university students 20 years ago is no longer the norm. Most of CQU's students (including first years) are studying externally or by mixed mode. Further, almost half of CQU's students, 10,640 out of 22,660, do not come from an Australian educational background (Central Queensland University, 2004). This has many implications for the way that the first-year experience of students should be understood and supported. The assumptions underlying the design of the experience for students 20 years ago need to be re-examined if they are to apply to students in 21st century Australian universities.

Universities can no longer assume that first-year students will have just left secondary school, where they have been adequately prepared for tertiary study, including academic writing and referencing. Staff and student involvement with referencing provides a micro-view of the difficulties universities have with providing educational services for a university system which has changed enormously and continues to change. This paper discusses the background and content of a referencing policy and accompanying website developed at CQU in

response to a perceived need for a more consistent approach towards this area of academic activity.

Students' attitudes towards referencing

Acknowledging sources through acceptable citation practices is a fundamental part of academic research and writing, and one which presents problems for many undergraduate students. With an increasing number of students having completed formal schooling many years before commencing university, not having the benefits of regular face-to-face contact with university teaching staff, and/or not coming from an Australian educational background, the number of referencing queries (among others) to learning support units such as CQU's Communications Learning Centre (CLC) has risen dramatically. Like most such support centres in Australian universities, the Centre has been responsible for offering generic advice about assignment writing, including referencing, and has a website which provides this advice. A search on Google (December 12, 2004) yielded an amazing 324,000 hits for the search terms 'learning support, referencing'. Many of these sites make explicit the concerns of students about referencing, particularly in the early stages of their tertiary experience:

It's very common for new students to be *extremely concerned* about referencing. Are you one of these students? Do you believe your referencing skills are not up to scratch? Does the *fear of committing plagiarism worry you?* (University of Queensland, *Distance Learning Support*) [emphasis added]

This section is designed to gently ease you into the part of essay writing that *many students dread*—the Referencing! (James Cook University, *Study Skills Online*) [emphasis added]

The students' 'fear' or 'dread' of referencing acknowledged in the above quotations is exacerbated by differing cultural attitudes towards intellectual property, with many of CQU's international students in particular not sharing the Western ideas of what constitutes plagiarism. The connection with plagiarism is also prominent on these websites with the language of Western morality and ownership being employed:

The most important reason why we reference is because it is *honest* to do so and we'd be acting *unethically* if we didn't. Bottom line, many of the ideas and much of the data and materials you will use while you are studying *belong to someone else*. In other words, they are the *product of someone else's hard work*; they are their *intellectual property*. To use this material and not acknowledge their *ownership* is *intellectual theft*. (University of Queensland, *Distance Learning Support*) [emphasis added]

Anyanwu (2003, p. 178), writing on "lessons in plagiarism" states that, while there is currently much discussion in universities about detecting and disciplining students who plagiarise:

There has been less examination of the students who have breached plagiarism policies because of a lack of understanding about acceptable and unacceptable citation practices, the students' perceptions of plagiarism, their skill in applying referencing

techniques and their reactions to being part of a plagiarism investigation at a tertiary level.

Many CQU students, particularly those from non-Australian educational backgrounds, feel extremely pressured about avoiding plagiarism and using referencing correctly, without fully understanding what is considered acceptable. For instance, there needs to be a raised awareness in Australian universities that while reproducing others' texts or quoting from lecture notes word-for-word without acknowledgment is considered a serious breach in Western academia, it is a widespread and quite acceptable practice in the educational culture of many Eastern countries (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997). Institutional expectations about acknowledging intellectual ownership need to be made clear to all students and staff.

Community of academic practice

Rose (1996, p. 34) confirms much of the previous discussion by acknowledging that “inexperienced academic writers, would-be members or initiates of scholarly disciplines, deviate from accepted practices for citing the literature of a particular area of study in a number of ways familiar to teachers of undergraduates”. However, her stimulating paper, “What’s love got to do with it? Scholarly practices as courtship rituals” is delightfully different from much of the published literature on citation. She argues for “adopting a rhetoric of identification for explaining citation practices” and challenges the “capitalist economic terms that currently prevail in textbook discussions of quotation, paraphrase, and other means of incorporation ideas from one or more texts into another” (p. 34)—such terms as ‘property’, ‘ownership’, ‘theft’ which are so prominent in advice given to students. She offers practical advice on developing a set of guidelines based on this alternative approach, and concludes that:

Credible citation practice is more than a matter of selective quotation, fluent paraphrase, accurate summary, avoidance of plagiarism, and precise punctuation. It is an act of building community, collaboratively constructing shared knowledge. (p. 45)

Tapper (1999) supports Rose’s call for inclusion of students in a community of practice through integration of citation and other academic practices into all aspects of a student’s learning experience. As discussed by Rose, Tapper laments that “academics may view students’ communication skills only in deficit terms, and rely on referring students to academic language and learning skills support units, rather than integrating communication skills teaching into their own disciplinary teaching” (p. 2 of 12).

While ‘policy’ is not often associated with ‘community’ as a concept, a group of concerned staff at Central Queensland University felt that a consistent approach within each discipline should enhance students’ sense of belonging to that disciplinary community, and help them to identify models for their own academic practices. Accordingly, a referencing policy and website were developed to help provide students with consistent models for referencing in the various discipline areas within the university, and to encourage them to feel a sense of membership of an academic community.

Background to the policy

Before the establishment of the Referencing Policy for Undergraduate Programs and the university's Referencing website, students who visited the Communications Learning Centre were experiencing common problems with this area of academic writing and, typically in a place of learning, a lot of these problems surfaced in the process of assignment writing and assessment. Most Australian universities offer advice and support to students through learning support units such as the Communications Learning Centre at CQU. The Centre, which is administered by the Division of Teaching and Learning Services, offers one-on-one assignment advice to students in a face-to-face situation and via email, as well as offering short courses on aspects of assignment writing, including referencing. When students apply for help, they are asked to fill in a Conditions of Service form which asks them to nominate the areas where they need help. The majority of students name referencing as an aspect of their writing where they require advice and reassurance.

As stated earlier in this paper, there also is an association of referencing with plagiarism and many cases referred to the university's Appeals Committee in relation to assignment grading have displayed a blurring of students' understanding of plagiarism and their use of referencing. While a policy and guidelines for technique cannot eradicate all such concerns about academic citation practices, they can contribute to a common understanding of what is required, as well as making the actual mechanics of referencing much more obvious.

Before the approval of the policy, advice on referencing was given in varying degrees by individual lecturers, School publications, and Faculty information. Because of restructuring and staff turnover, much of this advice 'fell through the cracks' and students were often directed to conflicting information or were not given any guidance at all. Added to this, the referencing in study materials that were prepared for individual courses was often incomplete, incorrect, or inconsistent with other referencing used within the same course or other courses within a student's program of study.

This situation was not unique to Central Queensland University. In 2004, the Council of Australian University Libraries (CAUL) distributed a survey to all Australian universities about their approach to referencing. Of the 22 universities which responded, only five (including CQU) answered 'yes' to the question 'Does your university have a specified referencing style?'. Below is a sample of survey participants' responses to the question 'Is support for multiple referencing styles seen as a problem for Library staff?':

Many academics inevitably have their own *individual interpretation* of a referencing style. The library can provide a generic guide to a particular referencing style but *cannot cover the wide range of interpretations* that exist when no one style is chosen. (Bond University) [emphasis added]

Information Services staff worry they cannot be 'expert' on every referencing style that might be used in the University—it is seen as a *training impossibility*. (Charles Sturt University) [emphasis added]

It's *confusing for students*, especially double degree students who need to use more than one style. (Deakin University) [emphasis added]

It is not really a problem here, but it must be acknowledged that a lot of the *support load is probably being carried by the Learning Advisers* (Study Skills Advisers) rather than by us. (James Cook University) [emphasis added]

No problems with the variety, except for the obvious ones, such as *lack of commonality, difficulty in teaching across different schools*, etc. (RMIT University) [emphasis added]

The main issue for us is *the lack of consistency even within departments and the problems it is causing for students*. (University of Auckland) [emphasis added]

Only from the perspective of having to deal with *variations on the commonly used styles*. (University of Ballarat) [emphasis added]

The only real problems we have with *compliance is when casual markers are recruited by the schools and are not properly briefed about UNE requirements* which often results in them marking according to other guidelines and *students being marked incorrect when actually doing the right thing*. (University of New England) [emphasis added]

We don't have a problem with multiple styles but we do have a *major problem with multiple variants on multiple styles due to individual academic preferences. It is confusing and distressing for students* who then seek assistance from Library staff. (University of Technology Sydney) [emphasis added]

The policy

In 2003, the Education Committee of Central Queensland University's Academic Board (ECAB) approved the university's Referencing Policy for Undergraduate Programs (<http://www.cqu.edu.au/referencing>). The policy was formulated in response to concerns from staff and students in many areas of the university that referencing advice and standards were inconsistent, and that it was difficult, especially for newcomers to academia, to know what type of referencing was expected. In many courses and programs, it was also unclear where students and staff could find guidelines on how to reference academic writing in particular disciplines.

After consultation with the Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning) in each faculty, a Referencing Working Party was formed, with representatives from the university's five faculties, the Library, and the Division of Teaching and Learning Services. The brief of the Working Party was to determine a way to reduce the confusion about referencing, by formulating a policy and supporting this with an informative website to set out clearly CQU's expectations in this area of academic writing. The Working Party agreed that, while a university-wide policy could not address all staff and student concerns about undergraduate referencing, it would focus the attention of teachers and learners on the issue and provide a base for a

common understanding of what is expected. According to Reid and Parker (1998, p. 1 of 7):

When a university develops a policy it is, so to speak, placing a frame around some field of activity with the intended effect of encouraging or requiring members of the academic community to look at that field of activity more attentively ... Attention may not always lead to action, but it is a prerequisite.

The broad statement of CQU's policy on referencing is: "Central Queensland University encourages academic rigour and honesty by giving clear and consistent referencing advice to students in undergraduate programs". The Working Party who developed the policy took into account the problems associated with referencing such as its association with plagiarism, and inconsistent, confusing advice. It was decided that the best approach would be to approach consistency on a School basis (a School being an academic unit of a Faculty with closely aligned disciplines and courses).

It was also decided that, to avoid the plethora of 'individual interpretations' of referencing styles that had evolved within the university, the latest editions of academically acceptable style authorities should be used as a basis for the guidelines. These were narrowed down to the styles recommended by *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; formerly known as AGPS), the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2001), and the *Australian Guide to Legal Citation* (Melbourne University Law Review Association, 2002). Both author-date and footnote/endnote styles recommended by the Schools were based on these publications. The Heads of Schools nominated the style to be used in their courses and these styles were appended to the policy to be reviewed every four years.

In addition, the policy states that "all teaching and learning material produced by the School recommends and uses the nominated referencing style". While there are still materials being disseminated that do not follow this part of the policy, for the most part, the Desktop Publishing Unit of the Division of Teaching and Learning services has worked closely with academic staff to ensure that the university's formal study materials use the appropriate style for each course. The Course Profile for each course directs students to both the referencing and the plagiarism policies and the referencing website.

The policy also states that "all assessment items requiring referencing [should] give explicit directions to students about the referencing requirements and nominate the referencing style to be used". This aspect of the policy is now almost universally observed, with the result that students who come to the Communication Learning Centre are more directed and confident in seeking advice. They tend not to display the generalised 'fear' and 'dread' discussed earlier; instead they are able to focus on specific problems of technique, assured that they will be seen to be 'doing the right thing'.

The policy and the website have been in operation for almost two years, and they have contributed to standardising the referencing styles in study materials and in assessment criteria. This has led to a more consistent approach in publishing study materials and in the ways that staff in the Schools give advice, set assessment criteria, and mark assessment items. As a consequence, undergraduate students who seek advice from the Communications Learning Centre can be given clear

instructions about techniques and approaches to referencing and are encouraged to see it as an integral part of academic writing, rather than some sort of stressful, mysterious adjunct.

Conclusion

While CQU's Referencing Policy for Undergraduate Programs and the referencing website have not provided an immediate and easy solution to the problems students experience with citation, they do provide a clear statement of the university's position. They also outline the responsibilities of staff in ensuring that students are aware of expectations in this area. Staff are also given clear directions about how to consider referencing when they are writing study materials and assessing students' work. Most importantly, students in undergraduate programs can approach their assignment writing in a more holistic way, being assured that they are doing the correct thing within their discipline and that there is institutional support for the citation aspect of their work. The Policy and guidelines have focussed attention on this seemingly straightforward, but very troublesome, area of undergraduate study and provide a good basis for making a constructive difference to undergraduate students' learning experience.

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