Plagiarism: Proactive Prevention Instead of Reactive Punishment

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - This study investigated whether providing university students with extra feedback regarding their referencing improves their referencing confidence and reduces their propensity to plagiarise. The study also sought to increase our understanding of what factors underlie student plagiarism.

Design/methodology/approach – Undergraduate and post-graduate accounting students were surveyed regarding their experience when completing a formative essay designed to give feedback on their referencing ability. All students in one undergraduate and one postgraduate accounting course were invited to participate in a post-assessment, electronically administered survey consisting of sixteen questions.

Findings - The results indicate that a considerable number of the students perceived the formative assessment to be of benefit with respect to improving their referencing confidence. A significant proportion of the students indicated that their understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and their confidence in avoiding plagiarism improved as a result of the assessment and its associated feedback.

Research limitations/implications - This study supports the provision of assessment designed to assist students with improving their ability to both recognise and avoid plagiarism in their written work. However, this research has not investigated whether these types of exercises lead to an actual reduction in the incidence of plagiarism in tertiary student cohorts. This is an area for future research.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Tertiary Education, quality teaching.
Introduction

The detection of plagiarism and the resulting administration of punitive measures against students accused of plagiarism is an incredibly time-consuming exercise for academics. Academic integrity is an essential graduate attribute and ignoring the problem of plagiarism in students’ work is not an ethical option for the student or the academic. Instructors can either take a blind, reactive and punitive approach to plagiarism or attempt to proactively address the issue through education and reduce the volume of plagiarised assessment items being submitted by students.

This study resulted from the increasing concern by the authors regarding the prevalence of plagiarism in the summative assignments submitted by students in two tertiary accounting courses. As a result of these concerns a compulsory formative assignment was introduced in an attempt to proactively address this issue and educate the students in acceptable writing techniques and requirements. The study aimed to increase our understanding of what factors underlie student plagiarism. The focus of this study was to ascertain whether a formative referencing assignment benefited the students in terms of increasing their referencing confidence, their understanding of the term ‘plagiarism’, their written communication skills and whether the assignment assisted them in avoiding unintentional plagiarism both in current and future studies.

Literature Review

The cohorts of students investigated in this study were all enrolled in accounting programs at either the undergraduate or postgraduate level. The importance of generic skill development in accounting undergraduate courses is emphasised in the extant literature and by accounting professional bodies (Ballantine & McCourt Larres, 2004; Ballantine & McCourt Larres, 2009; De Lange, Jackling, & Gut, 2006; Jackling & De Lange, 2009). Generic skills are defined by De Lange, Jackling and Gut (2006) “as transferable qualities to suit the industry in which graduates work; these include but are not limited to communication, team, leadership, problem solving, analytical and interpersonal skills.” (p. 366). The development of sound communication skills by students includes the ability to correctly cite and paraphrase sources of literature. However, recent research by Kidwell and Kent (2008) found that students from an Australian university consider copying a few sentences from the literature without proper acknowledgement and citation to be trivial in terms of ‘cheating’ behaviours. Indeed, Kidwell and Kent’s (2008) study found that half of the students studying on-campus at the university investigated admitted to this type of cheating in the past.

Devlin and Gray’s (2007) qualitative study investigating the reasons underpinning student plagiarism has provided some insight into the Australian context. Their findings, although drawn from a limited sample, suggest that Australian students plagiarise for the following reasons:

1. Inadequate admission criteria;
2. Poor understanding of plagiarism;
3. Poor academic skills;
4. Teaching/learning issues;
5. Laziness/convenience;
6. Pride in plagiarising;
7. Pressures; and,
8. Education costs. (Devlin & Grey, 2007 p.187)
The results presented by Devlin and Gray (2007) and Kidwell and Kent (2008) support the anecdotal belief of the authors that many students have little understanding of the concept of plagiarism and lack the requisite skills to paraphrase and reference properly. Further, these studies support the provision of assessment designed to specifically focus students’ attention on improving their ability to both recognise plagiarism and avoid it in their written work. There is little that can be done by academics, in a practical sense, to alleviate the pressures and education costs faced by students, neither can academics alter a student’s intrinsic character (e.g. being lazy or taking pride in being able to get away with plagiarism). Academics also have little control over the entry standards being set by institutions. However, it is possible to tackle the poor understanding of plagiarism, the lack of academic skills and the teaching and learning issues faced by tertiary students. As academics and teachers it is up to us to explore practical solutions to these problems.

In an era of increasing internationalisation of student cohorts, it is also necessary to consider whether students for whom English is their second language (ESL students) face greater hurdles in avoiding plagiarism when compared to students who are native English speakers (Sheridan, 2010). For practical reasons, particularly workload and equity considerations, it is not possible to design assessments that differentiate between domestic and international students. Both native English speakers and ESL students appear to have trouble identifying what constitutes plagiarism but ESL students seem to have a greater propensity to engage in major plagiarism (Marshall & Garry, 2006). Both student cohorts are at risk of engaging in plagiarism when they do not understand the term, however ESL students are potentially at a greater risk of penalty as they are more likely to engage in major plagiarism and are less likely to consider plagiarism to be a serious problem (Marshall & Garry, 2006). Clearly, there is a need to address this lack of understanding regarding the concept of plagiarism and its ethical implications. Providing students with information (e.g. presentations and literature) is one method of tackling this issue. However, while universities have a plethora of information available regarding plagiarism that is readily accessible to students, there does not appear to be any reduction in the incidence of plagiarism amongst students.

The provision of detailed, precise information regarding what constitutes plagiarism is suggested to increase student awareness of this problem and encourage students to think more deeply regarding this issue (Brown & Howell, 2001). Further, the adoption of ‘certifications of authorship’ has been found to improve the recognition of plagiarism as a dishonest action by students (Sims, 2002). It is a common requirement in Australian universities that students must attach a ‘declaration’ to submitted assignments attesting to the originality of their work. While these declarations may help students more readily recognise that plagiarism involves a dishonest action, this will not necessarily lead to a reduction of plagiarism by students. The effectiveness of a declaration is dependant upon students first being able to recognise what constitutes plagiarism. Despite the provision of detailed referencing information and the use of certifications of authorship, the evidence from Australian universities still suggests that plagiarism is endemic in students’ work and overcoming this problems requires a solution that encompasses active learning for the students (Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; McGowan, 2005). When students lack prerequisite referencing skills, honour codes, certifications of authorship and/or declarations may do little to assist the students in recognising plagiarism in their work.

The limitations of honour codes become particularly relevant when applied to student cohorts that have little understanding of the ‘rules of the game’. Leask (2006) asks us to review our attitude as to why students plagiarise. If teachers can change their perspective on plagiarism and accept that many cultures view the reproduction of others’ work differently from the traditional western view, then it is possible that teachers can work together to close cultural divides and reduce the propensity of
students to plagiarise unintentionally. Four areas of staff development designed to assist students to avoid plagiarism are identified by Leask (2006) as being:

1. Helping teachers to become intercultural learners: in order for teachers to understand their students’ perspectives they need to understand how different cultures influence how their students learn;
2. Extending the teaching team to include staff who have specific skills in providing learning support to students;
3. Reflecting on assessment methods and evaluation of teaching methods to assist teachers to learn how to improve the student experience; and,
4. Encouraging teachers to shift the focus from changing students to fit the ‘stereotype’ to understanding what the teacher can learn from culturally diverse students.

As acknowledged by Leask (2006), prior research has identified some major areas that can be focused on to deter plagiarism, i.e. the structure of the assessment task, communication to the students regarding expectations and modification of the amount and timing of the assessment items (see also Carroll, 2002; Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Devlin, 2006). Findings by Barry (2006) and Landau, Druen and Arcuri (2002) support the notion that the inclusion of assessment items that give students the opportunity to practice paraphrasing can increase a student’s understanding of plagiarism. These studies support the notion that in order to avoid unintentional plagiarism a student needs to acquire the skills necessary to paraphrase other authors’ work and cite those authors correctly. Some students will have developed these necessary skills prior to undertaking tertiary education; however there appears to be a considerable number of students who enter into the tertiary learning environment without the prerequisite skills to avoid plagiarising. As noted by East (2010), “while students can be initially confused or even cynical about the conventions of plagiarism, they can also learn that some of these seeming arbitrary rules are, in fact, reasoned conventions” (p. 75). This leaves academics with the task of designing tasks for students that will enable them to improve their ability to recognise plagiarism, and be able to write in such a manner that they correctly paraphrase and acknowledge their sources.

Earlier studies examining the benefits of allowing students to practice paraphrasing conducted by Barry (2006) and Landau, Druen and Arcuri (2002) were experimental in nature and the research design was limited to face-to-face student cohorts. Both of these studies measured the change in a student’s ability to detect and paraphrase set pieces of text after practice and instruction. In the current study the authors are conducting an ex post evaluation of a formative assessment item that is required to be submitted by both face-to-face and external (distance) students. For the purposes of this study the assessment task under investigation was defined as a formal formative assessment task which

...take(s) place with reference to a specific curricular assessment framework. They involve activities required of the student (i.e. to do the work) and of the assessor (to assess the work and provide feedback from which the student can learn) (York, 2003 p. 478)

While the literature suggests that students react positively to formative assessment (York, 2003), its effectiveness in proactively preventing plagiarism in subsequent summative assessment items has, to the authors’ knowledge, not been previously studied. This evaluation of the formative assessment was undertaken in the form of a survey to ascertain the students’ perception of the value of this assessment item in terms of whether the formative assignment improved their referencing confidence, helped them to better understand the term plagiarism, whether they felt more equipped to avoid plagiarising in future assignments and, finally, whether this assignment should continue to be a compulsory assessment item. In this respect the current study differs markedly from the previous studies outlined above and provides insight into the students’ perceptions of what will assist them in avoiding plagiarism.
Research Questions

Based on the literature review and on the rationale of the study, the following research hypotheses have been identified:

\( H_1 \): When compared to undergraduate students, postgraduate students have lower perceived referencing confidence.

\( H_2 \): The provision of a formative referencing assignment will increase a student’s awareness of what constitutes plagiarism.

\( H_3 \): Students will perceive a formative referencing assignment as assisting them in avoiding plagiarism.

\( H_4 \): The provision of a formal assessment task on referencing will increase the perceived confidence of students when writing summative assessment items.

\( H_5 \): When compared to students whose first language is English, students with English as their second language will perceive themselves as being less confident in their referencing abilities.

Methodology

All students in both the undergraduate and post-graduate financial accounting theory courses were invited to participate in the formative assignment survey after they had completed the major summative assignment in the course but before they sat for their final exam (a period of approximately three weeks). The survey was administered electronically via the ‘electronic study desk’ using the tertiary institution’s online learning management system, WebCT. Invitations to participate were made via email and on the course home pages on WebCT. The survey consisted of sixteen questions regarding the students’ experience of the formative assignment. Fifteen of the questions required responses on a seven-point Likert scale (very strongly disagree, strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree, very strongly agree). The sixteenth question ascertained whether they had completed a referencing assignment before undertaking their current studies. The questions asked students to indicate how strongly they agreed with questions regarding their referencing confidence before and after completing the formative assessment, their understanding of plagiarism before and after the formative assessment, their awareness of university policies and the feedback they received regarding the formative assessment item. Students were also asked eight general demographic questions including whether they were ESL students and whether they were resident in Australia at the time of the survey. All responses were anonymous.

Formative assignments as an educational tool

The assignment consisted of a short (750 word) essay where the students were required to demonstrate their referencing skills. This compulsory formative assignment was perceived to be a relatively simple task for the students. A question developed from the course content was required to be answered in essay format. A requirement of the assignment was that the students use at least three different sources of information (eg. text book, journal article, professional magazine) and that these sources were cited in the essay using at least one direct quote and one indirect quote. It was required that all referencing be completed in the Harvard referencing style, as this was the Faculty standard. Students were provided with general feedback on the content of their essays and detailed, qualitative feedback regarding their
The formative assignment was not the only measure introduced into these courses to proactively address plagiarism. In the very first lecture, and housed on the online learning management system, students were provided with a PowerPoint presentation on correct referencing, citation and acknowledgement. Further the summative assignment component of the course was also redeveloped. Previously, the students were required to submit two essays answering questions relating to the course content. In order to minimise the incentive or opportunity for students to ‘cut and paste’ or plagiarise in other ways from online or hard copy sources (including the study materials), the summative assessment item was revised to be one major report where students were required to apply financial accounting theories to a case study. Thus, regurgitation of the theory from the textbook, study materials, and other likely sources was insufficient in order to obtain a passing grade in the assignment.

Results

Of the 206 students enrolled in the undergraduate course, 61 students completed the online survey, a response rate of 29.6%. In the postgraduate course 77 of the 322 students enrolled completed the survey, a response rate of 23.9%. A summary of the percentage to which students agreed with the survey statements is provided in Table 1 below. Table 2 summarises the results of testing the hypotheses, these results are discussed below.
Table 1:  
Summary of Student Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Undergraduates (% agree)</th>
<th>Postgraduates (% agree)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prior to Completing Formative Assignment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Completion of a Referencing Assignment</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Confident with Referencing</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaware of University Policies</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not Understand the Term 'Plagiarism'</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referencing Assignments Incorrectly</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>After Completing Formative Assignment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Confident with Referencing</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>67.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formative Assignment Assisted with Key Concepts</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>72.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Understanding of term Plagiarism</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged to Think More Deeply about Avoiding Plagiarism</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Confident they would not Plagiarise</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developed more Effective Communication Skills</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback helped them improve Referencing Skills</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>67.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient Feedback Provided</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>71.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreed that the Assignment should be Compulsory</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Aware of University Policies</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Confident when Completing Summative Assignment</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>68.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: 
Results of Hypothesis Testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Hypothesis supported</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$H_1$: When compared to undergraduate students, postgraduate students have lower perceived referencing confidence.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>$t=-2.479$</td>
<td>$p=0.05$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$H_2$: The provision of a formative referencing assignment will increase a student’s awareness of what constitutes plagiarism.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>$t=-2.763$</td>
<td>$p=0.001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$H_3$: Students will perceive a formative referencing assignment as assisting them in avoiding plagiarism.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>$t=-3.369$</td>
<td>$p=0.001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$H_4$: The provision of a formal assessment task on referencing will increase the perceived confidence of students when writing summative assessment items.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$H_5$: When compared to students whose first language is English, students with English as their second language will perceive themselves as being less confident in their referencing abilities.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$H_1$: When compared to undergraduate students, postgraduate students have lower perceived referencing confidence.

The confidence of students in their referencing skills before and after completing the formative referencing assignment was assessed. In order to assess their confidence before completing the referencing assignment the students were asked to rate how much they agree with the following statement:

‘I was not confident that I could reference correctly in my assignments before completing assignment 1’ (PRECON)

In the undergraduate group 32.9% of the students agreed to some extent with the above statement while 58.5% of the postgraduate group agreed to some extent (refer Table1). The post-graduate group was significantly less confident with their referencing ability before completing the assignment ($t= -2.479$, $p=0.05$). Thus, hypothesis one was supported.

To assess the students’ confidence in their referencing after completing the assignment they were asked to rate how much they agreed with the following statement:

‘I am more confident that I can reference correctly after completing assignment 1’ (POSTCON)

Of the undergraduate students who responded 39% indicated that they were more confident in their referencing ability after completing the formative assignment compared to 67.6% of the postgraduate students (refer Table1). The postgraduate
group were significantly more confident with their relative referencing ability after completing the formative assignment when compared with the undergraduate students increase in confidence ($t = -3.273, p=0.001$). However, as nearly 40% of the undergraduate students felt that the assignment improved their referencing confidence as well, the assignment appeared to have benefit for both student cohorts with respect to their referencing confidence.

$H_2$: The provision of a formative referencing assignment will increase a student’s awareness of what constitutes plagiarism.

In order to assess the students’ understanding of the term plagiarism before and after the formative assignment, the following two questions were asked:

‘**Before** completing assignment one I did not understand the term plagiarism’

‘**After** completing assignment 1 I have a greater understanding of what the term plagiarism means’

Only 8.1% of the undergraduate students responded that they did not understand the term plagiarism before submitting the formative assignment compared to 13% of the postgraduate students (refer Table 1). However, for both groups a number of students agreed that the assignment improved their understanding of plagiarism (27.8% of the undergraduates and 46.8% of the postgraduates). Again, the post-graduate students seemed to gain the most benefit in terms of increased understanding of plagiarism. These findings support hypothesis two; that the formative assignment will increase a student’s awareness of what constitutes plagiarism.

The study also investigated whether the inclusion of a referencing assignment encouraged students to consider why they should avoid plagiarising. In order to assess this effect the students were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statement:

‘**Assignment 1 encouraged me to think more deeply about why I should avoid plagiarism**’

Of the undergraduate respondents 31.1% agreed to some extent with this statement while 52% of the postgraduate students agreed to some extent (refer Table 1). A comparison of the two groups suggests that the assignment had a greater effect on the post-graduate group in terms of making them think more deeply about avoiding plagiarism ($t = -2.763, p=0.05$).

$H_3$: Students will perceive a formative referencing assignment as assisting them in avoiding plagiarism

The ultimate aim of introducing the referencing assignment was to reduce the incidence of plagiarism amongst the student cohorts. To gauge the success of the assignment, students were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with the following statement:

‘**After completing assignment 1 I am more confident that I will not plagiarise when completing my assignments**’ (PLAGCON)

For the undergraduate group, 31.1% indicated that they were more confident they would not plagiarise after completing the assignment while 27.8% indicated that they were not more confident they would not plagiarise (refer Table 1). In the postgraduate cohort the reported increase in confidence was more dramatic with 59.8% reporting an increase in confidence that they would not plagiarise with only 16.9% not reporting
an increase in confidence. Again, there was a significant difference in the responses between the two groups (t=-3.369, p=0.001). These findings support hypothesis three, however it was the postgraduate cohort who perceived the formative assessment as providing the greatest assistance in avoiding plagiarism.

A regression model was developed in order to better understand the underlying factors that increased a student’s confidence regarding not plagiarising in the future. The dependent variable was PLAGCON and the independent variables were PREUND, PLAGUND, PLAGTHNK, ESL and COUNTRY. The model was significant (f=32.566, p<0.001) with an R² of 0.554. Of the five independent variables three were significant: PLAGTHNK (t=6.134, p<0.0010), PLAGUND (t=2.063, p=0.05) and ESL (t=2.331, p=0.05). The variable COUNTRY was marginally significant (t=-1.964, p=0.1).

Interpretation of the coefficients on the significant independent variables suggests the following:

- A greater understanding of the concept of plagiarism increases a student’s confidence of not plagiarising in their written work;
- Encouraging students to think about why they should avoid plagiarising increases a student’s confidence that they can avoid plagiarism; and,
- Students who have English as a second language are less confident that they can avoid plagiarising even after completing the formative referencing assignment.

**H₄**: The provision of a formal assessment task on referencing will increase the perceived confidence of students when writing summative assessment items.

As discussed above, after completing the formative referencing assignment both student cohorts were required to submit a major summative assignment. In order to gauge whether the students felt that the referencing assignment increased their confidence when referencing in the summative assignment they were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following statement:

‘Assignment 1 helped me to feel more confident about my referencing when I was completing assignment 2 in this course’

In the undergraduate cohort, 44.2% of the respondents agreed to some extent with this statement while in the postgraduate cohort 68.9% agreed to some extent with this statement (refer Table1). Again, the greatest support for this hypothesis was found in the postgraduate cohort and this could possibly be explained by there being a greater proportion of ESL students in the postgraduate cohort.

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1 The independent variables were constructed from the students’ responses to how much they agreed with the following statements:

- **PREUND**: Before completing assignment one I did not understand the term plagiarism
- **PLAGUND**: After completing assignment 1 I have a greater understanding of what the term plagiarism means
- **PLAGTHNK**: Assignment one encouraged me to think more deeply about why I should avoid plagiarism
- **ESL**: Please indicate whether English is your second language (Yes or No response)
- **COUNTRY**: Please state which country you were located within while studying this course (Dummy variable: Australian resident coded as ‘0’, resident of another country coded as ‘1’)

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When compared to students whose first language is English, students with English as their second language will perceive themselves as being less confident in their referencing abilities.

In the undergraduate cohort 11.5% of the students indicated that they were ESL students, while 59.7% of the post-graduates were ESL students. Overall, 41.7% of the students who responded to the survey were ESL students (refer Table1). In order to assess the effect of this student characteristic on a student’s confidence two regressions were conducted.

The first regression was conducted with PRECON as the dependant variable. The independent variables were student gender, age, enrolment status (full or part-time), study mode (internal or external), number of courses completed, hours of employment, country of residence (Australia or other) and ESL (English as a second language or native English speaker). The model was significant \( f=5.609, p<0.001 \) with an \( R^2=0.275 \). However, only two of the independent variables were significant. The number of courses previously completed by a student was negatively correlated with the dependent variable \( t=-2.115, p=0.05 \). Therefore, the more courses that a student had previously completed, the more confident they were in their referencing ability. ESL was significantly, positively correlated with the dependent variable \( 2.935, p=0.05 \). Thus, English as a second language appears to be associated with less confidence in a student’s referencing ability. Therefore, hypothesis five was supported.

The second regression was conducted with POSTCON as the dependant variable and the same independent variables stated above. The model was significant \( f=3.495, p=0.01 \) and again the only two significant independent variables were number of courses \( t=-2.187, p=0.05 \) and ESL \( t=2.316, p=0.05 \).

It would appear that referencing confidence among the two student cohorts is positively associated with the number of prior courses completed by the student and negatively associated with English not being the student’s first language. This is despite the extra help being provided in the form of the referencing assignment.

**Discussion and Suggested Future Research**

This study was designed to achieve two purposes:

1. Gain insight into whether providing tertiary students with extra feedback regarding their referencing improves their confidence with respect to referencing and reduces their propensity to plagiarise; and,
2. Increase our understanding of what factors underlie student plagiarism.

The responses from the students surveyed suggest that a considerable sample of the students found the formative referencing assignment of assistance with respect to improving their referencing confidence. In addition, a significant proportion of the students indicated that their understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and their confidence in avoiding plagiarism improved as a result of the assignment and its associated feedback. This finding supports the earlier assertions of Leask (2006), Barry (2006) and Landau, Druen and Arcuri (2002) whose research indicated that providing students with the opportunity to incorporate referencing and paraphrasing practice into their course assessment can assist their understanding of plagiarism (see also Carroll, 2002; Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Devlin, 2006). Based on these findings it is suggested that exercises designed to give tertiary students more paraphrasing and referencing practice be incorporated, where practical, into tertiary courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
The results indicate that assessment items which encourage students to consider why they should avoid plagiarism, together with developing a student’s understanding of what constitutes plagiarism, can assist students to avoid plagiarising in their written assessment. However, it is clear that students who are not native English speakers face the greatest hurdles in overcoming their propensity to plagiarise. Addressing the needs of ESL students is an area of teaching and learning research that requires further investigation. This issue is of great importance in Australia where large numbers of ESL students are being enrolled in tertiary programs.

There appears to be a gap between the referencing confidence of those students undertaking post-graduate accounting programs versus those undertaking undergraduate accounting courses. The results obtained in the current study suggest that the greatest benefit from the formative assignment accrued to the post-graduate students. This result was not surprising to the authors as, in past semesters, it was the post-graduate students who had the greatest tendencies to plagiarise and it was therefore assumed that this cohort had less experience with correct referencing and the concept of plagiarism in a western context.

As students progress through their tertiary programs their confidence in their referencing ability appears to increase. At the undergraduate level, students in the third year of tertiary study completed the formative assignment assessed in this research. It is assumed that students at this level would have had considerable experience in submitting assignments and would have received previous feedback on their referencing attempts. Despite this assumption, the authors’ experience is that these students still struggle with correct referencing and avoiding plagiarism. It is therefore suggested that undergraduate students would gain great benefit from similar formative referencing assignments where these assignments were implemented early in the students’ program of study. As a result it is hoped that students’ confidence in their referencing and paraphrasing abilities is matched with their actual skill set.

A limitation of this study was the timing of the survey. Students were asked to reflect upon their referencing and propensity to plagiarise before completing the formative assignment. However, this reflection was not undertaken by students until after the formative assignment was completed. The accuracy of the students’ responses would have been increased if this part of the survey had been administered prior to the students submitting their formative assignment. Further, this research has not investigated whether these types of exercises lead to an actual reduction in the incidence of plagiarism in tertiary student cohorts. This is an area for future research.
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