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Taking Responsibility for Academic Integrity: A collaborative teaching and learning design

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Taking Responsibility for Academic Integrity: A collaborative teaching and learning design

Abstract

La Trobe University, like many Australian universities, states that it values honest academic endeavour (Academic Integrity Policy 2011), and it can provide examples of good teaching practice in the areas of academic integrity, proper acknowledgment and avoiding plagiarism. Rather than relying on the chance that individuals will just develop good practices, this university has recently taken a more systematic approach to teaching students and staff about academic integrity and providing resources to ensure a consistent message and application of acknowledgment conventions. This systematic approach was made possible through the University's curriculum reform program, the *Design for Learning*. By positioning academic integrity and acknowledgment as issues of curriculum, La Trobe has created an educational opportunity and reduced the focus on punishment. Furthermore, the mandate to deliver academic integrity programmes to all commencing students and staff and to provide consistent guidelines supports the development of awareness that academic integrity is a whole of university responsibility – everybody's responsibility. This paper reviews one university's progress towards aligning academic integrity, with the intention to inform those who are interested in developing an integrated academic integrity education.

Keywords

academic integrity, Design for Learning, constructive alignment, collaboration

Cover Page Footnote

The contributions of the following La Trobe staff (past and present) have been vital to the success of this project
Alyson Waterson: Online Teaching and Learning Team Manager
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Ann Pearson: Administration Officer, Faculty of Education
Belinda Probert: (Former) DVCA
Brendon Munge: Associate Lecturer, Faculty of Education
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Introduction

Universities are educating students in an environment where information can be easily accessed and where platforms make it easy for people to create together and reproduce what others have created. These issues of originality, acknowledgment, and honest authorship are encompassed in the constructs of academic integrity and its communication. Making claim to academic integrity seems to enhance the reputational status of universities, yet most Australian universities take a piecemeal view of developing teaching and learning resources to facilitate academic integrity. The lack of systematic means to enact academic integrity leads a university to depend on chance and the good will of a few. In this paper, we argue for coordinated means to educate stakeholders in order to foster a culture of academic integrity. A mandated systematic approach is required to scaffold the development and communication of good practices. In taking up this challenge, La Trobe University staff collaborated to develop teaching and learning tools for students and staff. A small team with an interest in the pedagogy of academic integrity and awareness of the complexity of the concepts of integrity and acknowledgment was mandated to develop a suite of modules. These resources were then put to other stakeholders whose feedback informed further development.

In this paper, we detail the collaborative process involved in designing and producing a suite of academic integrity resources with the intention of sharing this experience with others who are interested in an integrated approach to academic integrity. We discuss the role of values and conventions in the teaching of academic integrity and acknowledgment in order to tease apart the issues of integrity from conventions of practice. Finally, we discuss ways to integrate academic integrity for the benefit of stakeholders.

The experience of La Trobe University does not exemplify a completed systematic approach to academic integrity, in which policy and practices are aligned and communicated, but rather it is a step in a process to develop better practices. The collaboration was made possible through the University's curriculum reform program, Design for Learning (*DfL*). By positioning academic integrity and acknowledgment as issues of curriculum, La Trobe University has avoided a punitive focus on academic misconduct and created an educational opportunity for communication with its academic integrity stakeholders.

Taking responsibility for academic integrity

The concept of academic integrity involves understanding what it means to be honest in the particular culture of the academic world, and being able to apply the scholarly conventions of acknowledgment. The La Trobe University policy explains that "Academic honesty is a fundamental principle in teaching, learning, research and scholarship" (La Trobe University 2012, p.1), and we argue that enacting this principle is not a matter of chance. La Trobe University's academic integrity site states that:

Academic integrity means being honest in academic work and taking responsibility for learning the conventions of scholarship.

In taking an academic integrity approach, La Trobe promotes academic honesty and teaches the conventions of scholarship. Scholarship involves research which builds on the work of others and requires appropriate acknowledgment of this work (*Academic Integrity and avoiding plagiarism* 2012).

The La Trobe policy recognises that demonstrating academic integrity is not just a student responsibility; the University, its staff and the students are all stakeholders responsible for academic integrity.

When a university moves to an academic integrity approach from that of focussing on academic misconduct, it reduces risks for its stakeholders and enables teaching and learning opportunities. Stakeholders in higher education benefit from the development of appropriate academic integrity teaching and learning practices, and quantifiable actions which enable quality assurance. From the student perspective, cheating and plagiarising carry the risks of penalties of failure and expulsion (Macey 2007), and without an integrated approach to the teaching and learning of academic integrity, students can be burdened with concern and anxiety. Breen and Maassen (2005) found that students were concerned about acknowledging properly, and in further research, Gullifer and Tyson (2010) learnt that students were anxious about being penalised for inadvertent plagiarism. For lecturers, inappropriate acknowledgment impacts on originality (Bertram Gallant 2008), assessing authorship, and their vested interest to maintain standards (Foucault 1991). From an institutional perspective, reputation is at stake if the university fails to demonstrate academic integrity (Preiss 2012). Taking responsibility to enact and communicate an academic integrity approach is in the interests of all these stakeholders.

A university can have an excellent policy, which extols the virtues of academic integrity, and it can have teaching and learning resources which are intended to provide vital education, but if these are not communicated to stakeholders they will have limited impact. Students can be unaware that their understandings of acknowledgment differ from those who are assessing their work (Emerson 2008). At the same time, those assessors might be unaware that their assumptions of acknowledgment are embedded in cultural understandings of academic text-making (East 2006). Simply making resources available to lecturers and students does not ensure that they are accessed or taken on board. A university might assure itself that appropriate resources and information have been made available but here the assurance stops. Macdonald and Carroll (2006) argue that communication about academic integrity needs to be systematic and integrated into university teaching.

La Trobe University, in 2009, did not have a systematic means to educate students about academic integrity; arrangements were ad hoc, with information and inconsistent guides scattered across the University. Furthermore, citation guides were localised and the number of styles prescribed by Faculties nearly equalled the number of disciplines. It was possible for first year students to be required to master three different citation styles, depending on their subject selection.

For a number of La Trobe students, awareness of academic integrity and the responsibility to comply with acknowledgment conventions seemed to be based on a fear of plagiarism and limited comprehension of what constituted a breach of academic standards. In our roles as an academic language and learning lecturer and a librarian on a research help service, we regularly dealt with distressed students struggling to meet the unstated, yet required, elements of academic acknowledgment conventions. The student effort and frustration was directed at meeting expected referencing conventions, rather than writing content for essays and assignments. In research conducted between 2004–2006, one of the authors found in the postings of 52 students and 16 interviews that there was a theme of concern about not knowing how to acknowledge properly (East 2010, pp. 87 – 139). Some students labelled the penalties for plagiarism as “unfair” (p. 117), and a fear of the unknown and injustice prevailed: “*You can be a bit scared when you are writing your first essay at uni that you may be caught plagiarising... [and] could be doing nothing wrong and be accused of cheating*” (p. 129). Some international students reported being shocked on first hearing of the concept of plagiarism: “*Because I feel that I got scared also I don’t know how to write*” (p. 118).

There was a need to teach students about academic integrity and acknowledgment, so they could be better informed, and the *DfL* provided a systematic means to do this. Through the *DfL*, the curriculum was being realised as a vehicle to ensure that students were assessed

according to intended learning outcomes made transparent at the outset of first year subjects. The *DfL* work focused on the first year experience and, in particular, the development of what Kift (2009) has labelled “the Transitional pedagogy”. She writes of a, “third generation FYE (first year experience) approach” that extends beyond the curriculum and requires a whole of institution transformation. At La Trobe, this approach was explained through Biggs’ theory of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang 2007), which proposes that assessment tasks are aligned with what is taught, which in turn accords with what students should be able to do, manifest as student learning outcomes. In line with Kift’s whole of institution transformation, applying constructive alignment would see academic integrity policies and their enactment aligned with the University’s procedures and practices in order to support student learning (East 2009).

We proposed a project to encapsulate this ideal. The project aimed to demystify the rules of academic integrity and to reform the entrenched departmental attitudes in regard to the referencing styles nominated for students to use. By educating students about academic integrity, well before the submission of the first assignment, we aimed to minimise significant areas of stress for commencing students. We developed a suite of resources which would inform students about the ethical issues of academic integrity and enable students to access and learn the academic rules and conventions of acknowledgement and referencing.

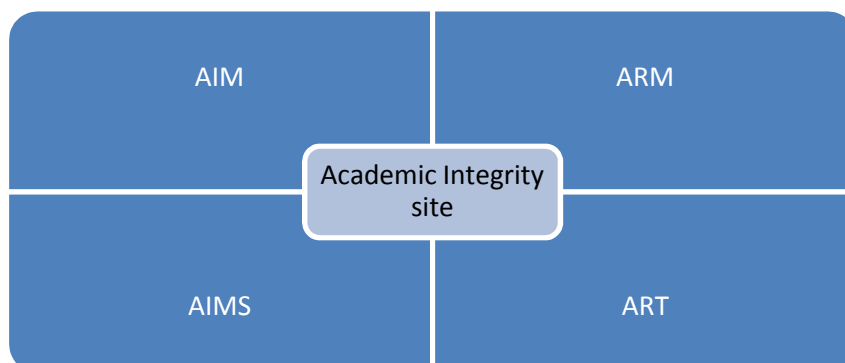
La Trobe’s suite of resources

The development of resources was underpinned by our experiences of dealing with students’ concerns and the research which analyses academic integrity as a problem of academic culture (Chanock 2008; East 2006; Howard 2000). In academic culture, breaches of academic integrity can be described as ethical issues and or issues of convention and practice. The ethical issues relate to dishonesty and cheating, while conventions of practice are concerned with the pedagogical specifics of acknowledgment, referencing and how knowledge is discussed. Teasing out these issues created the pedagogical framework to analyse assumptions about commencing students’ pre-knowledge and the expectations of their teachers. In particular, this meant we could presume that students knew about the concept of cheating and dishonesty (Kohlberg 1981), but were unlikely to be aware of how this manifests according to La Trobe’s values. Students would need clarification on particular areas of academic honesty, such as when sharing work becomes plagiarism and collusion. We did not assume that students would universally understand the concept of academic integrity and the process of academic acknowledgement (see Bretag et al. in press), and we saw skills development as integral to development of understanding.

Rather than developing one resource which attempted to teach the skills, conventions and ethics, we developed a suite of academic integrity resources:-

- The Academic Integrity Module (AIM) teaches students about La Trobe University’s values and is mandatory for all commencing undergraduate students,
- The Academic Integrity Module for staff (AIMS) teaches staff about their responsibilities and how La Trobe deals with academic misconduct,
- The [Academic Referencing Modules \(ARM\)](#) teaches students when to reference and why referencing takes place,
- The [Academic Referencing Tool \(ART\)](#) details examples of how to reference,
- The Academic Integrity site www.latrobe.edu.au/learning/integrity.html provides advice and information about where students can get help, in addition to links to policy and related resources.

Figure 1: The suite of academic integrity resources



The AIM introduces students to academic dishonesty and develops their ability to work within this ethical framework. It opens with a quiz to engage students and introduce them to the module layout and content. Students are advised to work through the topics in order, but they are not controlled by this and can spend time and effort on each topic as they see fit. The first topics introduce students to the University's academic integrity policy and their responsibilities. The topics progress from familiar concepts, such as cheating in exams, to more conceptually unfamiliar or imprecise concepts, such as collusion versus collaboration, plagiarism and acknowledgment. The module also informs students about text-matching software and where they can get more help. Inspired by the University of Western Australia's (2012) Academic Conduct Essentials module (ACE), the AIM is delivered through La Trobe's Learning Management System (LMS), and includes quizzes, questions and answers, animations, and case studies. Only the final quiz is mandatory, and students can attempt this multiple times to achieve the pass of 80%. A pass (or fail) in the module is recorded on each student's academic transcript.

The AIMS mirrors the framework of the AIM and introduces new teaching staff to the University's values and to their responsibilities. The module alerts staff to the University's resources for teaching the conventions of acknowledgment and its guidelines for dealing with breaches of academic integrity. As in the AIM, staff doing the AIMS can test their knowledge with quizzes and are required to achieve an 80% grade on the final quiz in order to successfully complete the module.

The ARM deals with the practice of academic conventions and was designed to introduce commencing students to the principles of referencing, and, when and how they can be applied. Depending on the referencing style of their Faculty, students would do one of the four interactive modules. The ARM resides on the Library's website with other research skills tutorials. Unlike the AIM, the ARM is not compulsory but supports academic teaching staff to begin the conversation on writing and acknowledgement in their discipline, with the confidence that students have been introduced to the basic concepts of referencing. Since its launch in first semester 2011, the ARM, which teaches the APA style, as used by the Faculties of Science, Health and Education, has had 68,000 visits.

The ART provides an extensive database of examples for the nominated referencing styles. Students and staff can consult it to compose citations for most print, electronic and online resources. The development of this referencing tool was significant for the project as it meant that the Library could take on the management and central responsibility for producing a consistent referencing guide on behalf of the whole University. Prior to this referencing was viewed solely as an area of Faculty and academic expertise. The ART design is based on the Griffith (University) Referencing Tool as this was clear and easy to use.

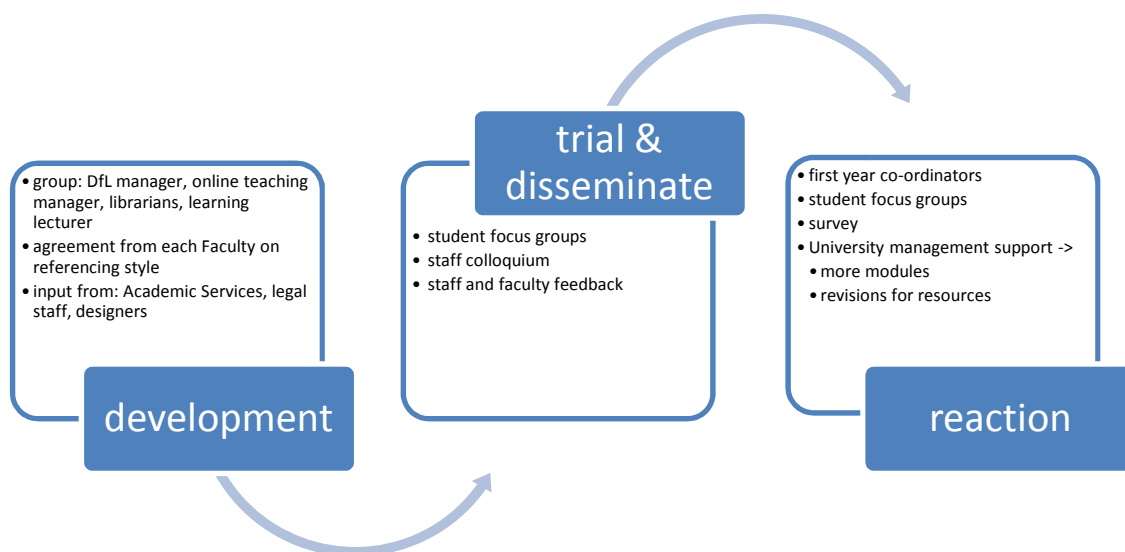
Students and staff can link to the Academic Integrity site from the ART, the modules and the academic integrity policies, and in turn the site has links to the modules. The Academic Integrity site not only explains the importance of the policies, it provides brief case studies to tell the story of how penalties for misconduct are enacted, and it provides contact details for students to find out more about academic integrity and where they can get help for allegations of academic misconduct. The site is directly relevant to the academic integrity modules with its explanation of the concepts they cover, links to further resources and a video (Stephenson 2012). This video explains to students how the AIM works, and how they can successfully complete the module.

By the end of 2011, over 84% of all first year students (5,257 students) had successfully completed the AIM, and the ART was the most visited page of the Library site. These successful outcomes were only possible because of the support of a number of actors across the University, and in particular the support of the *DfL* Project Manager. The need for this support continues, particularly for the AIM. Each semester, students' passes are recorded, and the module is uploaded along with properly formatted animations, glossary and quizzes. Furthermore, if all the resources are to maintain relevance with users so they can be accessed on different mobile devices, their format and content will need updating. The University noted the value of the AIM, and on the recommendation of the Education Committee, another AIM for postgraduate coursework students is being developed.

The collaborative process

The process for the academic integrity project had three stages: development, dissemination and reaction. The development stage achieved three academic integrity modules, the referencing tool and an update of the academic integrity site. Dissemination then took place at University wide colloquia and stakeholder meetings. The reaction stage has been ongoing with responses to stakeholder feedback through focus groups, surveys, user communications and decision maker requests. The process was and continues to be an experience of collaboration and cooperation.

The development team included a *DfL* project manager, an online teaching manager, librarians and an academic language and learning lecturer. The manager worked with the Faculties to gain consensus on the most suitable referencing style for each Faculty. This quest required persistence, fortitude and appreciation of academic teaching staff concern about which code was appropriate for their discipline. Finally, for first year students at La Trobe, APA and Harvard were the two recommended styles, with some exceptions, such as in Law. The online teaching manager enabled delivery of the academic integrity modules in La Trobe's first iteration of Moodle. The librarians and the academic language and learning lecturer collaborated with advice and feedback to develop content for the resources. The academic language and learning lecturer took responsibility for the AIM content and the librarians focussed on the content for the ARM and ART. A valuable outcome of the collaboration was the design elements in the academic integrity resources being consistent with other Library resources, for example, the use of avatars to guide students and tell stories.

Figure 2: The academic integrity project

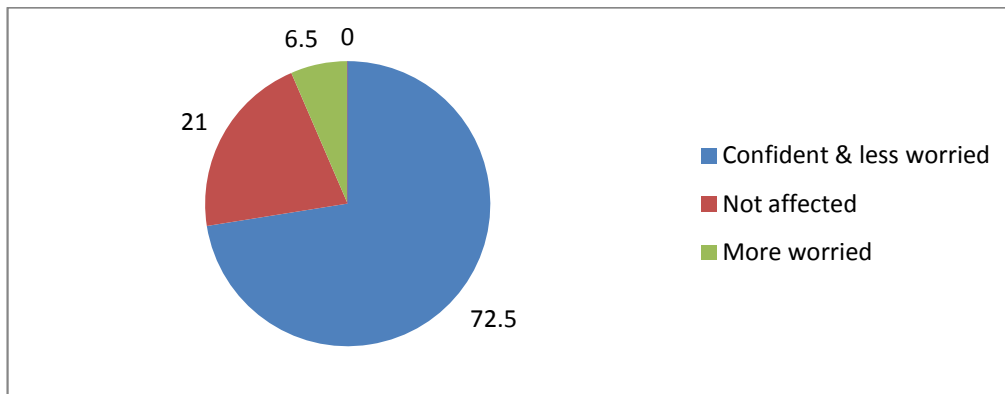
Other units in the University contributed to the development of the resources. The Academic Services unit, which collects La Trobe University's academic misconduct data, provided advice about misconduct scenarios which meant that realistic and relevant breach situations could be illustrated in the AIM. The online teaching team provided design elements, embedded quizzes and videos.

The student modules and the referencing tool were each trialled on focus groups of five international students preparing for university. Following their feedback, more examples were included in the modules, and in the AIM the wording of some questions was made clearer and the navigation to successful completion was made more explicit. A University teaching and learning colloquium provided an opportunity to both seek feedback and disseminate information about the resources. Following this, teaching and learning stakeholders, including First Year Coordinators and Associate Deans Academic were invited to review the AIM before it went live. This engagement led to further communication about the need for academic integrity education and explanation about the design pedagogy of the AIM. A version of the AIM was set up for each Faculty, which has enabled efficient recording of results and effective communication from First Year Coordinators to their students.

Reaction to the resources has been positive, particularly in response to their aims to allay students' apprehensions about inadvertent misconduct and to teach them about academic integrity at La Trobe. In July 2011, following the roll out of the modules, a catchment of 5,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students was invited, at random, by email from the University's *Planning and Institution Performance Unit*, to respond to questions about academic integrity. Ethics approval was granted for this survey, which was part of an Australian Government, Office of Learning and Teaching project survey of students at six Australian universities (*Academic Integrity Standards Project 2010 – 2012*). A draw of an iPad was offered as incentive for students at each university to do the survey, and at La Trobe University, 1,006 students responded. The La Trobe students were given three extra questions relevant to the academic integrity module. Of those who responded, the 342 students who said they had completed the AIM were directed to two more questions about their attitudes to academic integrity at La Trobe. Figures 3 and 4 summarise the responses to these questions.

Most of the 319 students who responded to the question, “Are you more or less worried about academic integrity after having received some instruction?” (Figure 3), reported being positively affected by the AIM. Fewer than 7% declared that they were more worried after having done the AIM, and for these students there are links to extra information and support. It could be that for this group being alerted to an unfamiliar issue early in semester is more timely than confronting the challenge at assessment time.

Figure 3: More or less worried about academic integrity

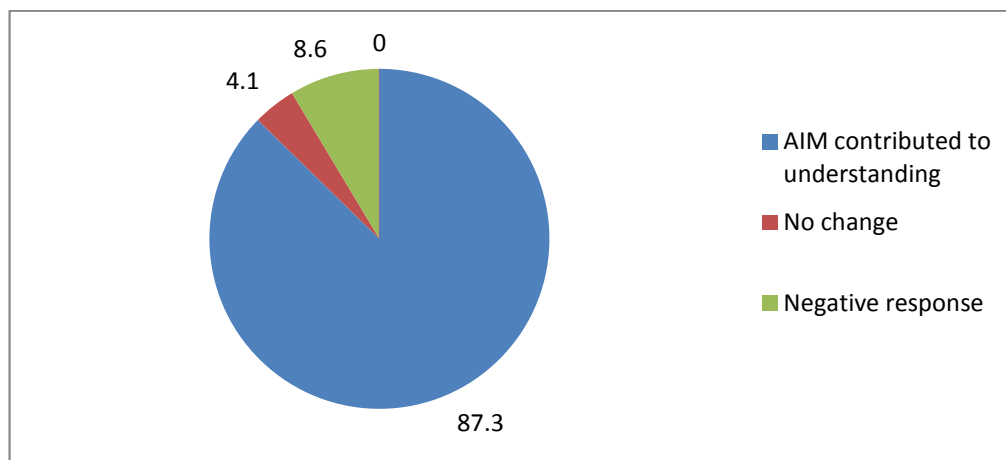


There were 267 responses to the request to comment to the question, “Has completing the AIM contributed to your understanding of academic integrity and how to apply this in your university work?” (Figure 4), and 233 of these were positive; for example:

“I’m less likely to accidentally plagiarise now. That makes me happy. :-)”
“It’s made me aware of how the system works at La Trobe which has put my mind at ease. I now know where I stand, what I can and cannot do and exactly what will happen if I am to break the rules so it’s been useful.”

Eleven responses were neutral, indicating that the AIM had not changed their understanding. Twenty three were negative:

“It didn’t really help, it is the referencing modules/ lib guides that are the greatest resource in terms of referencing and trying not to breach any academic integrity modules.”
“Not really. It simply resembles an assignment which one might receive. It gets completed and then you move on.”

Figure 4: Does the AIM contribute to understanding academic integrity?

We cannot know whether going in the draw for an iPad influenced students' responses and whether the size of the sample affected the results, but it is clear that for most of the students who responded to this survey, the AIM was more than compliance and it was seen as providing an educational benefit. This was also borne out in the focus group of five students who had completed the AIM.

The reaction to the ART has been overwhelmingly positive. Its dissemination was seamless as academic staff embraced it and recommended it to students via lectures, subject guides, and the LMS. This comment via the Library website feedback (2012) is typical, "*After three years struggling with reference guides, at last an easy one! THANKYOU.*"

The responses, in the focus groups, to the ARM were more mixed. Many students believed the questions in the referencing quiz were too simple, and some expected to find the detailed referencing examples, indicative of the ART, in this module. Nevertheless, students reported the ARM to be useful and stated that it improved or refreshed their understanding of referencing. Although the ARM is not compulsory, of all the Library's [LibSkills](#) pages, the Harvard and APA versions of the ARM have been the most heavily used.

Discussion

In recent years, educating students about academic integrity and how to avoid plagiarism has been taken up by Australian universities. This 'education' has taken form in a number of ways. Lee and Partridge (2011, pp. 82-83) list a number of common activities: "promotional materials... posters which carry AI slogans... orientation activities... handbooks...statements in course syllabi... an AI pledge upon entering the university or perhaps on every submitted assignment and exam... academic integrity tutorials...[use] of *Turnitin*" and skills workshops. In 2008, Fielden and Joyce noted that these activities tended to be ad hoc and remedial with a strong focus on reducing plagiarism and fixing students' deficiencies. More recently, a review of the language of Australian university policies showed a move away from a negative and punitive stance to a promulgation of academic integrity (Bretag et al. 2011).

Australian universities are informing their students about academic integrity and the need to avoid academic misconduct (Bretag et al. 2011), and many have an array of resources, but few have a co-ordinated approach. In a number of universities, academic integrity teaching and learning resources are developed in the library, or learning centres or an academic services unit. Sometimes all three areas provide resources, sometimes these are co-ordinated,

sometimes ad hoc or even over-lapping. Housing these resources separately reflects a university's organisation structure and different attitudes to knowledge and texts, but it does not necessarily serve the text making needs of students. From a user's perspective, whether guides to acknowledgement reside in learning centres which talk about knowledge and intertextuality, or whether they reside in the library which focuses on information literacy, is less important than being able to easily access referencing and acknowledgment guidelines when needed. As an example of good access, the University of Newcastle library (2012) provides an informative resource which explains referencing and gives a thorough overview of how to avoid plagiarism.

Access to academic integrity learning resources is not the only challenge for students. All too often, students in Australian universities are not only expected to navigate through a number of paths, they must also manage many pages of text. Students are expected to take time to read and comprehend the concepts of academic integrity on the assumption that the knowledge is intrinsically valuable. The test of student knowledge may come too late - at assessment time when students are expected to know how to acknowledge appropriately. To scaffold student learning about academic integrity, the ACE module at the University of Western Australia (2012) was designed to test student knowledge and introduce students to referencing expectations. The La Trobe University suite of resources also introduces academic integrity and tests students' knowledge but has streamed the ethical issues of cheating from the issues of acknowledgment conventions.

A co-ordinated, systematic approach to communicating academic integrity not only teaches students, it includes all the stakeholders in an institution. The teaching of academic integrity would be recorded according to when and how a university promotes academic integrity and communicates its regulations and responsibilities to students and staff (Macdonald and Carroll 2006). Griffith University (see Martin & van Haeringen 2011) is an example of a co-ordinated approach with its centralised guidelines in the "Institutional framework for promoting academic integrity among students". This framework details student and staff responsibilities and how they will be enacted, and, in its transparent listing of academic misconduct breaches, Griffith University demonstrates the impact of these practices. The framework site also links to relevant policies and teaching and learning resources.

Rather than being systematic, at La Trobe University, prior to the *DfL* curriculum reform program, separate academic integrity initiatives were being developed in a seemingly ad hoc manner. The Academic Language and Learning Unit and the Library were producing resources, and the Academic Misconduct Policy was relaunched as the Academic Integrity Policy, but there was not a systematic approach, nor a "whole of university transformation" (Kift 2009, pp. 9-10). The *DfL* offered the initiative to align teaching practices and assessments and to develop an academic integrity project to systematically introduce students and staff to their responsibilities.

The academic integrity project is not complete. The current resources are generic and so only introduce students to academic integrity and acknowledgment; they set the scene for practice opportunities in areas of subject specific acknowledgment. La Trobe University is yet to achieve a systematic approach to teaching academic integrity at the subject and discipline level, and there is still more to be done to ensure that students can practice the skills of academic integrity as they progress through their degrees. La Trobe University does have an institutional framework to promote academic integrity and deal with misconduct, but we recommend a more systematic demonstration that this has been enacted.

An important consideration in embarking on such an institution wide academic integrity project is not only the initial effort, but the amount of time and ongoing effort required. For example, each semester the AIM is uploaded and taken by a new cohort of students, whose

results need to be collected and recorded. While the collaboration and cooperation we have experienced as developers of the resources has been satisfying and rewarding, the ongoing success of the project remains in some part dependent on this good will. Our arguments for a new approach to academic integrity were well-received, but communication with our colleagues and the University about recommended good practices for academic integrity is not over. The project requires continued effort and mandated support. Through the *DfL*, La Trobe University now has the potential to take an aligned approach to integrating academic integrity, and creating a culture of academic integrity is a possibility.

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