

Postgraduate Nursing Student Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, and Confidence in Appropriately Referencing Academic Work

Melanie Greenwood, MN, RN, Grad Cert. UnivLearn&Teach;
Kerrie Walkem, MN, RN, Grad Cert. UnivLearn&Teach; Lindsay Mervyn Smith, PhD, RN;
Toniele Shearer, MCN, RN, Grad Cert. UnivLearn&Teach; and Christine Stirling, PhD, RN

ABSTRACT

Preventing plagiarism is an ongoing issue for higher education institutions. Although plagiarism has been traditionally seen as cheating, it is increasingly thought to be the result of poor referencing, with students reporting difficulties citing and referencing bibliographic sources. This study examined the academic knowledge, attitude, skills, and confidence of students in a school of nursing to understand poor referencing. A cross-sectional quantitative and qualitative survey was distributed to postgraduate ($N = 1,000$) certificate, diploma, and master's students. Quantitative data gathered demographics, cultural and linguistic background, and use of technology. Thematic analysis discovered patterns and themes. Results showed participants understood requirements for referencing; half indicated poor referencing was due to difficulty referencing Internet sources or losing track of sources, and many lacked confidence in key referencing tasks. Despite this, 50% did not make use of referencing resources. Overall, these data suggest incorrect referencing is rarely intentional and predominantly caused by skills deficit. [*J Nurs Educ.* 2014;53(8):447-452.]

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Ms. Greenwood is Senior Lecturer and Coordinator, Postgraduate Studies, and Dr. Stirling is Associate Professor and Associate Head, Learning and Teaching, School of Health Sciences, University of Tasmania, Hobart; and Ms. Walkem is Lecturer, Dr. Smith is Lecturer, and Ms. Shearer is Lecturer, School of Health Sciences, University of Tasmania, Launceston, Tasmania, Australia.

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Address correspondence to Melanie Greenwood, MN, RN, Grad Cert. UnivLearn&Teach, Senior Lecturer, and Coordinator, Postgraduate Studies, School of Health Sciences, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Private Bag 135, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia 7001; e-mail: melanie.greenwood@utas.edu.au.

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Plagiarism, “the theft of words or ideas, beyond what would normally be regarded as general knowledge.” (Park, 2003, p. 472), is considered as a serious offense in higher education institutions. The associated language, with terms such as *theft*, *cheating*, and *academic dishonesty*, and penalties, such as expulsion from courses if caught, highlight how seriously plagiarism is viewed. Plagiarism is increasing (Park, 2003), and higher education institutions are meeting this problem with stronger systems to provide students with plagiarism information, as well as using software to match students’ work to a large database of documents, resulting in an originality report.

Despite these measures, plagiarism remains a concern for educators. Plagiarism is traditionally (and by definition) seen as a deliberate act, with students represented as being aware of the concept of plagiarism but making a deliberate decision along a “scale of serious versus non-serious cheating” (Brown, Dickson, Humphreys, McQuillan, & Smears, 2008, p. 141). However, there is increasing debate about whether plagiarism is deliberate cheating. Brown et al. (2008) suggested that in the majority of cases, plagiarism is the result of students not understanding the process for constructing written academic papers. This approach reframes some instances of plagiarism as an inability to reference work appropriately, a concept that forms the basis of this article. Proposed reasons for poor referencing include differences between Western and non-Western cultures in understanding knowledge ownership and, hence, the concept of plagiarism. Such cultural differences make it difficult for non-Western writers, who are obliged to write in English, to adhere to Western ideas of what constitutes plagiarism (Adler-Collins, 2011). Language proficiency may also be an issue, as universities are increasingly enrolling students who do not use English as their first language (Ellery, 2008; Hendricks & Quinn, 2000). Others suggest that students take shortcuts because of excessive assessment requirements, poor time management skills, or assessment submission dates being too close together (Carroll, 2002; Ellery, 2008; Park, 2003). Reasons that specifically support the unintentional nature of plagiarism include lack of clarity within a university regarding referencing requirements (Ellery, 2008) and grow-

ing staff-to-student ratios that lead to less time discussing writing practices (Park, 2003).

Students' ability to extract and build on ideas is expected to supersede the simple reproduction of ideas as they progress through academic study. As students progress, they are expected to develop independence in relation to accessing the technologies that support learning and academic writing, to access resources provided by academics, and to search out other resources to support completion of assessment tasks. However, an exploratory study aimed at understanding student use of technologies found that students are not as independent in their approaches to learning as expected, and they appear to favor passive, linear forms of teaching (Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Vojt, 2011). Nursing postgraduate students may have additional difficulties, as many nurse clinicians commence postgraduate studies either for the first time or after a long break and consequently are not confident academic writers (Richardson & Carrick-Sen, 2011). Overall, university students in Australia report that although they are aware of institutional resources related to plagiarism, they admit to not accessing them (Alam, 2004). This lack of self-directed learning may explain why simply making resources available to assist students to understand and avoid plagiarism has been reported as having only minimal impact (Estow, Lawrence, & Adams, 2011).

Embedding activities into courses that promote greater understanding of plagiarism have been shown to be effective in decreasing plagiarism. This increases the knowledge and skills of students around avoiding plagiarism (Estow et al., 2011) and supports the idea that plagiarism is often a referencing skill deficit. Referencing software may also improve referencing skills; however, student computer skills and the use of such software vary across universities.

The current study sought to obtain information on the referencing knowledge, attitudes, skills, and confidence of postgraduate students within the School of Nursing and Midwifery. Survey questions asked about student understanding about the need to reference, difficulties they have with referencing, the value they attribute toward referencing, their ability to recognize inappropriate referencing, and their use, if any, of referencing software. This information will help academics to support postgraduate students to reference correctly and, thus, to help minimize plagiarism in the online learning and teaching environment.

METHOD

Design

This study was conducted using a cross-sectional survey design. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional human research ethics committee.

All School of Nursing and Midwifery students in the postgraduate program at the certificate, diploma, and clinical master's level were invited to participate. Students were either new to postgraduate study or were continuing on in existing postgraduate courses. Invitations to participate in the survey were distributed to students ($N = 1,000$) by a third party via the online student learning management system. LimeSurvey®, an open-source survey application, was used to collect responses

to questions, which drew upon the literature and built on previous research in the field. The survey response rate represented 26% ($N = 244$) of enrolled students. Two reminders were sent to students to encourage completion. A convenience sample of the students within the target group provided lecturers with further understanding of referencing issues within the postgraduate student group. Although the return rate was low, it was sufficient for further understanding the referencing phenomena and was within the range found in other recent studies (Baack & Alfred, 2013; Braaf, Manias, Finch, Riley, & Munro, 2013) that used similar descriptive statistics and univariate analysis.

Data Collection

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected between March and April 2012. Permission was obtained from Brown et al. (2008) to adapt and use their survey tool from an educational intervention study that focused on referencing skills. Adaptations to the tool related to contextualizing referencing scenarios. The revised survey tool was pilot tested for usability with a representative sample of clinical nurses. The tool by Brown et al. included survey sections on participant demographics, beliefs about the importance of referencing, reasons for not referencing correctly, and referencing-related skills and confidence, including the recognition of referencing. Most sections provided statements, and respondents were able to agree with more than one statement. Five examples of referencing or plagiarism were given, and students had to indicate whether they were examples of correct or incorrect referencing. One open-ended question asked students, "What have been the issues for you, if any, in meeting the standards of writing (including correct referencing) required at university?" and students had the option of identifying reasons for not referencing correctly.

Data were entered into a statistics program (SPSS® version 17) for analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation of key variables, whereas the two open-ended responses were analyzed using a combination of thematic analysis and content analysis. Thematic analysis of the responses was performed, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis involves discovering commonalities and variation among participants and is a method for identifying and reporting patterns, or themes, within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three researchers (K.W., L.M.S., T.S.) independently coded the open-ended responses and met regularly to discuss this iterative process and emergent themes and codes. Any disagreement was discussed until common understanding and consensus were reached. The answers to the question "If you don't always reference correctly, what are the reasons for that?" were analyzed using content analysis, which counts the frequency of key words, phrases or concepts within the data set. Three researchers independently examined one third of the data for key words, phrases, and related concepts. Each researcher's results were then examined for reliability by the other two researchers. Results were compared for similarities and overlap, and each researcher's results were merged into one set of key concepts. The combined results were examined again, and concepts were further refined until agreement was reached on five key concepts and their frequency. These five key concepts reflect the majority of the data included in the responses to this question.

RESULTS

Of those who completed the survey, most respondents were women (90%), which reflected the school's postgraduate student characteristics. Participants were aged 20 to 29 years (21.3%), 30 to 39 years (27%), 40 to 49 years (28.3%), 50 to 59 years (20.1%), and 60 years and older (3.3%). The majority of participants worked full time (65.2%), spoke English only (82%), gained their initial nursing qualification at a university (71.5%), and had not undertaken any prior study at the university before completing the survey (61.9%). **Table 1** shows the student characteristics.

Survey Results

Respondents had positive attitudes to referencing. When asked how important was referencing, most (97%) of the students responded that it was either very important or important. The response from students to the question "Why do you believe you should reference others work in your assessments?" indicated appropriate attitudes toward referencing. In addition, the majority of the participants were aware of the purpose of referencing. The reasons most commonly chosen from a list of explanations for referencing (participants could select more than one) were to credit the original authors of the ideas cited in the assignment (54%), to demonstrate the credibility of information in the assignment (21%), and to add evidence from other sources to substantiate an idea (18%).

Participants were asked to respond to a list of reasons for not always referencing properly (**Table 2**). The results suggested that poor referencing is largely caused by a skills deficit, rather than inappropriate attitudes. Reasons cited for not referencing included difficulty in referencing Internet sources (43.8%), losing track of the origins of information (41.8%), and never having been taught to reference properly (28.7%). A higher proportion of participants undertaking their initial nursing qualifications in hospitals felt they had never been taught to reference properly (54%), compared with those who gained qualifications in a university (20%). Few students felt they failed to reference properly because referencing did not help to develop clinical skills (7.6%), the time taken was not worth the mark awarded (5.6%), it was not a useful real-world skill (4.4%), or because it was too much effort (3.6%).

Students were asked to identify correct and incorrect referencing scenarios to check their referencing skills, confirming that most students did understand the key elements of correct referencing. The most incorrect answers (17%) were in response to a question about the indentation of long quotations, followed by another about paraphrasing (12%).

Students were also asked to indicate their confidence levels for particular referencing scenarios and skills. The results suggest that although students can identify the key referencing skills and believe they are important, they are not fully confident about referencing. Less than one third of students felt confident or very confident that they could give someone else information about referencing (31%) or that they could use secondary referencing (29%). Confidence was higher for paraphrasing (44%), direct quotations (55%), and retrieving information from a library database (44%).

TABLE 1
Study Participant (N=244) Characteristics

Characteristic	n (%)
Sex	
Male	24 (9.8)
Female	220 (90.2)
Age at prior birthday (y)	
20 to 29	52 (21.3)
30 to 39	66 (27)
40 to 49	69 (28.3)
50 to 59	49 (20.1)
60 and older	8 (3.3)
Employment status	
Full time	159 (65.2)
Part time	78 (32)
On call or no permanent employment	7 (2.9)
Language spoken	
English only	200 (82)
Another language and English very well	33 (13.5)
Another language and English well	11 (4.5)
Initial professional education	
Hospital	65 (26.9)
University	173 (71.5)
Vocational education	4 (1.7)
Highest level of qualification currently held	
Hospital based short course(s)	6 (2.6)
Bachelor's	130 (57.3)
Honors	1 (0.4)
Postgraduate certificate	41 (18.1)
Diploma	41 (18.1)
Master's	8 (3.5)
Any study completed at the School of Nursing and Midwifery prior to the first semester of 2012	
Yes	93 (38.1)
No	151 (61.9)

Note. Some percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Not all participants responded to all questions.

Results of questions related to computer skills showed that only a small number (2%) had not used a computer before, and most respondents could access and search the Internet (83%), use e-mail (70%), and access audio or video files on the Internet (72%). Although more than half (58.4%) of the students were aware of the university's online referencing resources,

TABLE 2
Study Participant (N = 244) Responses to Reasons for Not Referencing Correctly

Reason	n (%) ^a
Referencing Internet sources is difficult	110 (43.8)
Lost track of where information came from	105 (41.8)
Never taught how to reference properly	72 (28.7)
I ran out of time to finish referencing	29 (11.6)
Referencing does not help to develop clinical skills	19 (7.6)
Referencing was not needed in my past academic work	16 (6.4)
The time it takes is too great for the grade derived	14 (5.6)
Referencing is not a useful real-world skill	11 (4.4)
Too much effort	9 (3.6)
It makes it easier and lecturers will not notice	1 (0.3)

^a Respondents could select more than one variable.

only 50% of these students had used them. Few students used referencing software, with 9% using Endnote™, 9% using Microsoft Word Referencing™, and 4% using Reference Works™.

Student-Specified Issues

Students were asked, “What have been the issues for you, if any, in meeting the standards of writing (including correct referencing) required at a university?” Four main themes emerged from the responses—student confusion, system related, unintentional errors, and academic related. Each of these themes will be discussed and demonstrated in this article.

Student Confusion (Technical Aspects)

Students commented on feeling “confused” when applying referencing conventions to their written work. These conventions were understood as rules that must be followed precisely. A typical comment made by participants was “[it is] hard to get all the italics and full stops and commas in the right places.” Another participant commented, “I find it confusing to get it right. There are so many rules.”

Students also reported uncertainty in their interpretation of referencing guidelines, particularly when referencing particular sources, such as those from the Internet. At times, confusion stemmed from student difficulty in following and understanding the Harvard referencing guide provided by the school. They found that the referencing guide lacked clarity and was difficult to follow, which is reflected in the comment, “I attempt to follow referencing guides but find them confusing.”

System Related (Diverse Referencing Styles)

Students commented on the confusion created through the use of different referencing styles between various universities and between various faculties. As one participant stated, “Different lecturers and universities want different referencing systems, which makes everything confusing.” Another stated, “I get a bit mixed up between the different systems.” Some other responses included “having to change to the Harvard System has meant I have made a number of errors in my referencing,” and “It is difficult to learn to reference in the correct manner according to different university guidelines.”

Respondents mentioned the diverse array of sources available. They noted that, at times, these sources did not provide the information required to be correctly referenced. One participant commented, “The biggest issues have been learning how to reference Internet sources or government Web sources and publications, where the authors, publication dates, and publishers can be ambiguous.”

In particular, information on the referencing of some Internet sources was not provided in the referencing guide. One participant wrote, “[the referencing guide] didn’t always have good examples of how to reference all types of information,” and another stated, “I find that the referencing guides do not contain every example of different references.”

In addition to the traditional forms of publication, other forms of publishing are evolving to include a wider range of outputs. One student commented, “I haven’t done any referencing for 12 years, and I am not aware of the new changes and technology. We only used journals and textbooks the last time I referenced.” Currently, not all publications include traditional information, such as publisher and location. Referencing guides tend not to include the full scope of sources of publications. In such circumstances, the student is required to interpret guidelines and apply the recommendations to unfamiliar sources.

Unintentional Errors

Students commented that they made unintentional referencing errors, despite having knowledge and understanding of the referencing system required. They felt their grades were penalized for simple referencing mistakes and typographical errors. Comments that reflected these beliefs included “losing marks for putting a comma instead of a full stop or a space...come on... [expression of frustration],” and “Sometimes I make errors because I am tired and fatigued,” and “being penalised [*sic*] for formatting errors, which I don’t think is a referencing error.”

In contrast to unintentional errors, attitudinal values to referencing that resulted in errors were highlighted. Students indicated that they were not prepared to spend the time to reference correctly, viewing the requirement as a tedious, technical chore. One participant noted, “the process is too time consuming and long winded,” and others wrote “I don’t really see the point, and ...it takes too much time, can be annoying.”

Academic Related (Confusion and Inconsistencies)

Students viewed the different expectations of lecturers around referencing standards as being problematic. The standard required by individual lecturers varied. One participant stated, “I found that referencing (skills or lack thereof) de-

pended on each individual lecturer, some are strict and some are more lenient.” Another wrote, “What I did throughout my undergrad nursing degree has been marked down in my postgrad studies. This can be frustrating!” Another commented, “I also find some lecturers mark harder for incorrect referencing or mistakes.”

Students also wrote about the inconsistency of lecturers’ interpretation of referencing conventions. Typical comments included “different lecturers/tutors [teaching assistants] with inconsistent ways of Harvard referencing, and “Lecturers and markers can be inconsistent in what they perceive as correct.” Another commented, “Lecturers/tutors [teaching assistants] have been inconsistent in marking references; in one case, the tutor was incorrect and the paper [had to be] remarked.”

The preceding four themes captured students’ feelings of frustration related to referencing. Many felt they strived to reference correctly and follow the guide required by the school. As one student noted, “I worry a great deal about the correct way to do it.” However, students also mentioned that “the high academic standards are a challenge, as a result I lose marks after putting in a reasonable amount of effort.”

Although no other themes were identified, other issues raised by students in response to the survey questions included an inability to effectively search the library databases and use referencing software, such as Endnote. Some were concerned about their ability to paraphrase and write in an academic style, as well as to interpret assessment requirements. Other issues related to student time management.

DISCUSSION

The current study shows that participants agree that referencing is important, they know the purpose of referencing, and that plagiarism is rarely intentional; instead, it is predominately caused by a time or skills deficit. Although most study participants were previously required to use referencing conventions, similar to findings of the study by Brown et al. (2008), many lacked confidence and felt inadequately prepared to meet the required academic writing standards. The wide range of reasons provided for why referencing is problematic indicates that addressing the issue by higher education institutions will require a multifaceted approach.

Referencing knowledge and skills among the nursing students undertaking postgraduate studies show elements of continued confusion around the “how to” aspect of academic writing. Academic protocols for assessment and writing need to be updated to help students to better acknowledge sources, particularly those using Web-enhanced technology, such as blogs, wikis, and other e-scholarship or e-research formats (Gray, Thompson, Clerehan, Sheard, & Hamilton, 2008).

Geographical distance is no longer a barrier to postgraduate study, with many courses delivered fully online. E-learning allows students to engage with their lecturer and other students, regardless of their location. As a result, students enter postgraduate nursing programs with increasingly diverse backgrounds in terms of their familiarity and experience with particular referencing styles. Therefore, the confusion created by requiring students to change their referencing style to suit

the school in which they currently study may be expected to increase. Universities may need to consider adopting simpler versions of referencing than those used by publishers to prevent students from being intimidated by details about punctuation.

Although some students reported difficulty understanding the resources provided, only a small number of students accessed the online referencing resources provided, despite having identified difficulties with referencing. This is similar to the findings of other studies (Brown et al., 2008; Neville, 2012). Thus, universities may need to consider how students can be taught about academic referencing. The lack of confidence and, for some, the unfamiliarity with the requirements of academic writing, including referencing, also highlights the importance of having initial low-stakes formative assessment tasks to allow students to acquire and develop the requisite academic writing skills. Other strategies to negate the assumptions about rules of effective writing with which students enter university programs include designing engaging and interactive assignments, providing examples of benchmark articles, and allowing time in the curriculum to provide instructional scaffolded feedback to teach students how to write (Gehrmann, 2011; Okoro, 2011).

Although the response rate is a limitation of the generalizability of the current study findings to a wider population, the sample size allowed for descriptive evidence, using frequencies to fulfill the study aim. Themes identified from the analysis of the data and contingency tables are based on categorical variables that help to describe the cohort who responded to the survey and are not intended to describe any degree of variability or predictability among the reported variables or within the student cohort (Field, 2005). The study explored referencing issues of a cohort of postgraduate students; therefore, conclusions may be applicable to the particular student group only.

Overall, the study findings support calls from others for universities to move beyond the approaches that “assume plagiarism is deliberate and is undertaken for personal gain” (Devlin & Gray 2007, p. 181). Many incidents of plagiarism are likely to result from poor skill development (Breen & Maassen, 2005), as well as difficulty in establishing the authorial voice (Ellery, 2008). Student acquisition of referencing skills is developmental.

Punitive responses to students who do not reference appropriately should be avoided in the first instance, except where gross breaches occur, and clear distinctions should be made between formatting problems and failure to recognize sources. A preventative approach, followed by an educative response to plagiarism, could form the first level of response to most minor cases of plagiarism. Software that detects plagiarism will not successfully decrease plagiarism unless they are linked to referencing skill-development programs. However, such software can be used in an educative framework, where students are encouraged to assume responsibility for correctly attributing ideas to the work of others. This software allows students to identify areas that require editing and assists in redrafting papers (Bretag & Mahmud, 2009). However, referencing software should remain just one tool among many.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving referencing skills, thereby decreasing cases of plagiarism, will need a multifaceted approach. Simplifying and clarifying instructions or requirements will help to decrease student confusion. Educational strategies need to be applied to referencing skills, and feedback should be provided in a nonpunitive manner to align with progressive development of writing skills. Referencing software may assist students with academic writing in terms of balancing assessment submission pressures, as the effect may transfer to later publication outputs.

CONCLUSIONS

To manage the growing incidence of plagiarism, universities need to better understand their students' referencing skills. Although the findings from the current study will help to focus activities for academics and students within the newly formed School of Health Sciences, the recommendations can be incorporated into programs of learning at other institutions. Further research that identifies approaches to improve students' referencing knowledge, skills, and attitudes would be beneficial, but the findings of the current study support a move toward differentiating between poor referencing skills and deliberate plagiarism.

Current resources are poorly used by students; therefore, new approaches to preventing poor referencing need to be considered. A comprehensive holistic approach to the issues of referencing and plagiarism should be a responsibility that is shared by academics, students, colleges, universities, and publishers. Simplifying convention to be relevant to student writing activities and instructor writing assessment, including referencing training, may be a good starting point for improving students' referencing capacity.

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