University Library Referencing Guide: 
a focus group analysis

University Library
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1 Executive Summary
As the University’s designated authority for referencing styles, the University Library is responsible for providing support and guidance in the use of the styles across all campuses. An important element of this role is the provision of accurate, accessible referencing support materials. In order to provide easy access to important information and examples, the Library created an online Referencing Guide (“the Guide”) in 2015. Following the launch of the Guide in 2016, Library staff monitored its use over a 12 month period and at the end of that time, sought feedback from our community as to whether it had successfully addressed the perceived need. Focus groups were conducted with staff and students, revealing two main themes: that students were still facing challenges with referencing correctly; and that there are differing approaches taken by staff around the degree of rigour applied to marking and teaching in this area. The Library hoped to address the former set of challenges by improving navigation and updating content within the Guide, and enhancements were developed over a 6 month period culminating in the re-designed guide being launched in time for Semester 1, 2019.

2 Report Objective
This report outlines the process and outcome of the Library’s investigation into the student and staff experience of using the Library’s online Referencing Guide and associated printable ‘quick guides’. Specific mention is made to several issues and concerns raised by staff and students around referencing, but the primary intention is to report on the process of improvement to the Guide.

3 Background
Up until 2015, Schools had created in-house versions of style and referencing guides for students based on a range of referencing styles. These varied in scope, quality, accessibility and depth. By adopting a centralised approach that adhered strictly to the published style manuals, the Library provided 24/7 online access to a resource that contained a consistent message about referencing to students and staff across all schools and campuses. The Guide aimed to consolidate and repackage referencing information from the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), the Australian Guide to Legal Citation (AGLC), and the Chicago Manual of Style – Notes & Bibliography (Chicago) into one “source of truth” that would enhance the development of academic writing and adherence to Academic Integrity principles.
4 Research & Investigation Methodology

An extensive literature review was undertaken by the group, which revealed the following themes in the higher education sector internationally:

- With an increase in the variety of information sources found online, students continue to find referencing difficult and lack confidence in their ability to cite sources correctly (Brown, Dickson, Humphreys, McQuillan, & Smears, 2008; Gibbs, Kooymen, Marks, & Burns, 2015; Gray, Thompson, Clerehan, Sheard, & Hamilton, 2008; Kargbo, 2010; Park, Mardis, & Ury, 2011)
- Plagiarism is often the result of poor referencing skills rather than intentional cheating. The main reason given by students for incorrect referencing is not knowing how or when to reference (Greenwood, Walkem, Smith, Shearer, & Stirling, 2014)
- Gibbs et al. (2015) developed an online referencing tool that generated good use with positive feedback: evidence showed that it was being used on a continuing basis (85.5% of users had used it before), and 97% of students indicated they would refer it to friends.

The research indicates the importance of providing a clear, accessible, and accurate referencing guide to staff and students. While the Library can access usage statistics on visits to Guide pages, we cannot determine the satisfaction and efficacy of these visits. It was therefore decided to undertake focus group interviews to learn more about the staff and student experience of using the Guide.

Focus groups of 3-6 participants met on-campus for approximately one hour per session in April 2016. Demographic groups were not mixed, and totalled 33 undergraduates, 2 postgraduates, and 14 staff members in Fremantle; 8 undergraduates and 2 staff members in Sydney. Focus group sessions were audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed using NVivo software.

5 Reflection

Two major themes emerged from the data analysis:

1. The design, content and usability of the Referencing Guide
2. The way in which students learn, approach and complete referencing tasks
The main points specific to these themes are:

**Referencing Guide:**
- Reviews of the Guide were largely positive
- Calls for an improved search facility
- Claims that the guide navigation is overwhelming or confusing
- Calls for the full Guide to be made printable
- Calls for more information on secondary referencing

**Student referencing activities:**
- Claims that there are inconsistent approaches to referencing modelled in formal course documents such as Course Outlines (some of the staff who were interviewed echoed this)
- Confusion about terminology, particularly the difference between ‘formatting’ and ‘referencing’ when using a style (the former regarding expectations specific to the essay’s style and layout, the latter regarding technical aspects of citations)
- Claims that there are inconsistencies in the ways referencing is taught and marked across units and Schools
- While academic staff are hesitant to provide information about secondary referencing (so as to discourage use), students find the lack of information in the Guide about secondary referencing is confusing

### 6 Application

The data from this action research project point to some of the challenges that staff and students face with referencing at The University of Notre Dame Australia. The findings illustrate the need for the Library to further develop its referencing support materials to meet these challenges (see Section 6. Further Action). Through this example of reflective practice, the Library is able to demonstrate its support for the community while reflecting the University’s Objects of excellence in teaching, scholarship and research, and the provision of pastoral care.
7 Further Action

Improvements made to the Referencing Guide to date:

- Modifications to the Guide layout have been deployed to improve navigation and take into account good practice in Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)
- Provision of additional descriptive links to examples of different reference types at the top of APA pages
- Additional explanatory information added to key examples to assist students in formatting references
- A complete review and revision of two of the referencing style guides: AGLC and Chicago. Edits made comply with new editions of both these styles, and include additional explanatory notes and examples throughout
- Examples of secondary referencing were added with guidance notes for appropriate usage
- Coloured graphic examples were redesigned for the top of each page, ensuring consistent, standardised colours are used throughout the Guide, and across the three styles
- Further referencing FAQs added to the Library’s AskUs knowledgebase

Improvements underway:

- Referencing examples in the Guide will be enhanced by linking to related and more detailed explanations in the AskUs knowledgebase
- Links to AskUs will be more clearly displayed within the Guide
- A more comprehensive printable version of the Guide will be made available

8 Conclusions

Embracing the affordances of technology to create a centralised online guide based strictly on the publication manuals of the styles endorsed by the University has been received positively by the community. The University Library nevertheless has an obligation to continue to improve the Guide and associated materials so that students and staff may rely on it as an easily navigable and accurate “source of truth”. This aspiration, coupled with advocacy for the importance of correct referencing to support the University’s commitment to Academic Integrity will hopefully also assist in enhancing/aligning Departments, Schools and Institutes to model and encourage best practice in teaching, learning and research applications of referencing.
Appendix A: Selected Student and Staff Comments

**Student comments:**

“[The referencing guide is] easy to find and pretty much everyone knows where it is. Within less than a week of being here I knew where it was ‘cause everyone would direct me to it.”

“It’s pretty logical. It’s good. You go to the library page, you go ‘referencing’, it brings up this, and you go ‘yeah, great! I found it easy to follow anyway.’

“You need to have a little pop up box that says, ‘How to reference a reference in a reference.’”

“I think an ‘Ask question’ thing on the website, rather than a frequently asked question. You put it up there and then the library could go ‘look, this is how you do it’. Like you know how you go to Yahoo Questions or whatever? So do that, and then leave the thread on the library website, you type in the question and it already comes up, someone has already answered it.”

“You always get the same talk: ‘you don’t reference, you’re plagiarising’; ‘if you’re plagiarising, we find you’; ‘you’ll have to repeat the unit’ - it’s always the same. They’re doing it for a reason because they’re trying to emphasise [that] if you don’t do it properly, you’re not going to pass Uni. But as a first-year student, you’re sitting there going, ‘I’m the only person in this class. I’m going to die.’

“Referencing is pretty daunting if you come from not knowing anything about referencing, to going ‘OK, this is essential about everything you do, you’ll have to reference, and there’s a few styles’ so I think that was something that, especially for the first week, was pretty intense.”

**Staff comments:**

“I think the main issue with referencing with past experience is that you can teach it, but it’s the actual application; that’s where [students] find the difficulty. They may understand the logistics behind it, where to put the comma and what have you structurally, [but] ‘when do we use it, how do we use it, and why is it important?’: that brings those other skills of summarizing, synthesizing, paraphrasing, not cutting and pasting.”

“I think the biggest challenge [with referencing] is to get the students to realise that this is something that needs to stay with them throughout their whole degree.”

“We need to know APA inside and out and to mark the student work with a fair degree of consistency and quality.”

“I think some students will say, ‘No-one is interested in what I think.’ I said, ‘We are interested in what you think, but you need to have evidence to support that.’”

“The purpose of referencing is not what we’re doing a very good job of getting across to them sometimes. They see it as a box ticking exercise, like a formality that we have a hoop that we have to jump through, just to dot the I’s and cross the T’s rather than saying ‘No, this is about you critically evaluating the research that you read and knowing what it’s actually saying.’”
10 References


Ends