

Duncan, N.J., Baughan, P., Dymiotis-Wellington, C., Halsall, S., Litosseliti, L. & Vielba, C. (2009). Promoting good academic practice through the curriculum and project work. Paper presented at the Teaching and Learning 7th London Scholarship of International Conference, London.



**CITY UNIVERSITY  
LONDON**

[City Research Online](#)

**Original citation:** Duncan, N.J., Baughan, P., Dymiotis-Wellington, C., Halsall, S., Litosseliti, L. & Vielba, C. (2009). Promoting good academic practice through the curriculum and project work. Paper presented at the Teaching and Learning 7th London Scholarship of International Conference, London.

**Permanent City Research Online URL:** <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/5874/>

### **Copyright & reuse**

City University London has developed City Research Online so that its users may access the research outputs of City University London's staff. Copyright © and Moral Rights for this paper are retained by the individual author(s) and/ or other copyright holders. All material in City Research Online is checked for eligibility for copyright before being made available in the live archive. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to from other web pages.

### **Versions of research**

The version in City Research Online may differ from the final published version. Users are advised to check the Permanent City Research Online URL above for the status of the paper.

### **Enquiries**

If you have any enquiries about any aspect of City Research Online, or if you wish to make contact with the author(s) of this paper, please email the team at [publications@city.ac.uk](mailto:publications@city.ac.uk).

# **Promoting Good Academic Practice through the Curriculum and Project Work**

**By Patrick Baughan, Nigel Duncan, Christiana Dymiotis-Wellington,  
Stephen Halsall, Lia Litosseliti, Carol Vielba**

**City University London**

## **Abstract**

This paper outlines a University wide initiative introduced at City University London, the underlying aim of which is to develop good academic practice skills amongst students and discourage them from undertaking plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. The initiative is organised under three projects, which are being undertaken by a set of eight Educational Development Associates (EDAs) - existing academics acting *as 'change agents' within their Schools*. The paper focuses on the first project that EDAs undertook, that being the Learning Activity Project. This involved EDAs working with staff within their Schools to develop new, formative, programme-specific learning activities, to be undertaken by all students in the first term of their studies, and with the aim of providing students with practice in the study skills that they need to demonstrate in subsequent assessments of that programme. After reviewing relevant literature on academic conduct issues, the main body of the paper provides three case studies, each of which details the development of a learning activity in one of the Schools of the University. These learning activities share a common element, in that they are all delivered using a piece of software called OLIVIA. However, for purposes of this paper, each case study details specific aspects of the relevant learning activity, such that readers are provided with a broad perspective of the experiences of implementation of the project through the lenses of different Schools. The last section of the paper details the evaluative mechanism that is being used for the initiative as a whole.

## **Introduction**

At City University London ('City University') we have observed, as have colleagues elsewhere, evidence of a decline in student understanding of what is expected of them in terms of good academic practice. This goes alongside an increase in the discovery of plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct. While recognising the importance of having effective methods of identifying and investigating misconduct and a fair system of responding to it when found, we felt that it was equally important to develop a positive, learning-focused approach to the issue – with the aim of providing further information to students, and minimise academic misconduct cases. We also sought to ensure that this approach operated across the whole University.

With this in mind, a new group, entitled the Good Academic Practice Group ('GAPG'), was established, with the overall aim of promoting good academic practice skills amongst students across the University. The group was convened by the University's Academic Lead on Assessment, and included membership from various central services, including

the Learning Development Centre, the Academic Development Unit, the Library, and the Students' Union. At the core of the group were eight Educational Development Associates, appointed from each School of the University, to develop a University-wide community of practice, and enable projects to be implemented via a Schools-based approach. The group also benefited from both internal and external funding sources, with the funding used to pay a responsibility allowance to the EDAs for the extra duties each had taken on.

During its initial meetings, the group established a number of projects to be implemented by EDAs within their respective Schools. Our planning for these projects benefited from the input of an external adviser, Jude Carroll, of the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development. The projects were set out as follows:

1. To address students' understanding of academic conduct issues through a new Learning Activity, embedded in their curriculum, which is designed to get them to engage with what is expected to achieve good academic practice. This has become a requirement of every programme within the University.
2. To address teachers' understanding by developing their insight into how assessments may be made less prone to academic misconduct.
3. To disseminate our work throughout the University and embed it so as to ensure a culture change, through carrying out an effective evaluation of the initiative to ensure that it provides a sound basis for continuing development in these and related areas.

We have made progress in all three projects, but initially concentrated on the first: addressing students' learning. It is this project which will form the focus of this paper.

The main intention of this project is to provide students with an active learning experience which is part of their curriculum, so that it is not seen as an 'add-on'. This activity should introduce them to the best ways to utilise and apply the prior work of others. They should be introduced to proper referencing and how to gain credit by responding to rather than merely presenting the work of others. Thus, we hope to bring all students up to a 'level understanding' of good study and writing skills within their own disciplinary context, irrespective of their previous experiences or educational backgrounds.

A number of new proposals have been introduced in the different Schools. Some of these are specifically oriented to the issues that arise within their own disciplines. The variety of different proposals being introduced provides valuable material for our evaluation, in judging what works best in different contexts. For the purposes of this paper, however, we address one particular approach to the project which has been adopted by a number of programmes.

## Literature Review

There is broad agreement amongst both academic researchers and practitioners that cheating and plagiarism pose a serious problem for higher education. McDowell and Brown (2001) identify four factors that contribute towards academic misconduct increasing: first they point to the 'massification' of higher education which has produced larger classes and falling staff ratios; second changing patterns of assessment, in particular a shift towards coursework and group-work; third the availability of material electronically and the use of electronic means to produce work; and finally labour market and other pressures on students to achieve grades that are as high as possible.

While McDowell and Brown (2001) accept that plagiarism and cheating cannot be eliminated, they believe that it can be minimised by: developing strict controls over students when they are undertaking assessments; ensuring that students understand the rules and penalties for academic misconduct; designing assessments to make plagiarism and collusion difficult; and creating a culture of student self-regulation in which cheating in any form is seen as unacceptable.

Writers such as Lea and Street (1998) identify three models, each with roots in different academic disciplines, which can be used to understand the nature of student writing. The first model, stemming from behavioural and experimental psychology, sees student writing as the acquisition of skills; the second model, developed from work in social psychology and anthropology, sees student writing as a socialisation or acculturation process, while the third, referred to as academic literacies, focuses upon the way that students negotiate their way through conflicting practices to develop their own identities. Each model is associated with a set of practices that are themselves amenable to improvement.

They also note that amongst the various characteristics of poor student writing (such as bad spelling, muddled arguments, or inconsistent statements) poor academic conduct, specifically plagiarism and collusion, is singled out within higher education as requiring formal responses involving surveillance and discipline transforming the tutor from educator to authority figure (Lea and Street, 1998, p. 168). Such actions imply that poor academic conduct cannot be addressed through skills teaching alone, but any intervention must take account of the social and power context in which learning occurs.

Carroll (2007) proposes an holistic approach to improving academic conduct that combines aspects of all three models identified by Lea and Street. This covers prevention, detection and dealing with suspected cases. In Carroll's approach prevention has five main strands: developing a common understanding of what constitutes plagiarism; designing out the opportunity to plagiarise; designing in clear guidance on what is expected; teaching students necessary research and writing skills; and developing a culture where plagiarism is not tolerated.

Research involving staff and students has shown that the concept of plagiarism is open to multiple interpretations and is understood differently by different groups within the

higher education system (see for example, Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne, 1997; Lea and Street, 1998; Johnston, 2003). Ambiguity arises in the view of Lea and Street from the difficulty in understanding “the implicit relationship between acknowledging the source of the text and acknowledging the authority of the text” (p. 167). This view recognises the problems that novice writers experience in presenting output that is not derivative.

Nevertheless, there is a demonstrable link between lack of student knowledge and skills and academic misconduct. Carroll, (2007) building on work by Bannister and Ashworth, (1998) highlights the importance of balancing warnings against plagiarism with a programme of study skills teaching and continuing academic support. This is our goal in introducing embedded learning activities across the University’s programmes.

Although a wide variety of learning activities has been introduced across the University, we will present one which has been adapted to a number of different disciplines. ‘OLIVIA’ is an online course which takes students through many aspects of their studies via nine units (e.g. on databases, managing information, plagiarism, referencing), and which offers the opportunity for blended learning: via a demonstration, hands-on learning, self-paced learning, and self-assessment tools that check progress (quizzes and surveys). It was designed by Imperial College, London, and was provided to us by City University Library. The facility of incorporating material from different disciplines made it particularly suitable for our purposes.

We will present three case studies, focussing on the challenges for implementation; the experience of implementation and the student experience respectively. Each comes from a different School.

### **Case Study 1: Challenges for Implementation (City Law School)**

#### **Impediments to Training**

In attempting to discourage academic misconduct at the City Law School (CLS) one of the key challenges faced in disseminating appropriate training to the students on the various programmes was a problem which will be familiar to hard working and hard pressed academics everywhere. We have entitled this ‘justified inertia’.

Justified inertia, as an impediment to anti-misconduct training, can be explained as follows. In order to implement a training module which is specific to each of the various programmes across the School it would be necessary to incorporate a degree of programme-centred specificity to the contents of the training system. Indeed, endeavouring to provide programme specific anti-misconduct training was a basic requirement of the EDA mandate. Clearly, this would require a level of input by those involved in directing and overseeing each of the modules. The levels of input required would likely vary from low, to very high.

Furthermore, it was felt that in order to benefit fully from any learning resources provided by the GAPG, student learning must follow a learning spiral format. That is to say, student learning must follow a continuous and incremental spiral of knowledge developments, as described by Northedge and Lane (1997) which is based on incremental iterations of Kolb, Rubin and Osland's (1991) concept of a learning circle.

The required repetition and reinforcement implied by learning spiral theory would, therefore, potentially compound the workload concerns of Programme Directors and staff. Many Programme Directors expressed concerns that sufficient staff and time resources could not be brought to bear within the time periods envisaged nor at the time of the academic year envisaged nor within the budget costings which programmes were currently operating under. Programme Directors were also concerned that, given that the CLS provided a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate law courses and that, consequently, the CLS student body included students new to university level study, students with extensive experience of university study, students coming to us with significant professional experience and students studying with us in order to access professional qualifications, there would be a broad range of prior levels of knowledge, in relation to potential misconduct issues and how to avoid them, within the student body. This diversity of prior knowledge levels gave rise to a real concern that choosing appropriate levels at which to 'pitch' the system to be made available to our students could prove extremely difficult and time consuming.

#### Training Solutions – the OLIVIA System

By using OLIVIA we were able to circumvent many of these concerns and thereby overcome the justified inertia impediment. OLIVIA was a pre-existing resource which enabled us to provide students with a continuous use resource that they could access as and when required, and on as many occasions as required. The opportunities for continuous access, incorporating the potential for repeated use, fitted well with the Northedge and Lane (1997) theoretical underpinnings to our project. This facility for direct and ongoing access by our students enhanced the opportunities for reiterative learning across a wide topic range and incorporating the potential for Programme Directors or others to increase or amend the information available. These inherent features of OLIVIA also enabled students to acquire and develop knowledge at the level appropriate to their own pre-existing skills base system and to their current educational 'task in hand' and then to build on this from the menu of training opportunities available on the system.

Another particularly useful aspect of the system was that it came to the GAPG with a ready made support infrastructure in the form of highly skilled support staff at the University Library. The Library team could load a module of the system to an appropriate location in CitySpace (the University's Virtual Learning Environment) for any given programme. The system could then have its content modified to make that particular module specific to the needs of that particular programme. Once a basic, standardised package for OLIVIA had been agreed for the CLS as a whole, a highly beneficial impact on workload and staff resource usage could be expected. The existence of a standardised

CLS version of OLIVIA significantly reduced the amount of additional work that Programme Directors would have to do to make their particular module of OLIVIA specific to their programme of study. Moreover, even if Programme Directors were unable to assign appropriate resources to modifying the module before the beginning of the academic year, due to resource constraints, they would still have the standardised version available to enable their students to benefit from the training available.

OLIVIA, therefore, enabled us to find a resolution to a number of the concerns summarised by the concept of justified inertia. Co-operation between the EDAs and the University Library effectively eradicated much of the resource constraint concerns expressed by Programme Directors.

### **Case Study 2: Learning Activity for 1<sup>st</sup> Year Engineering Students (School of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences)**

#### Background

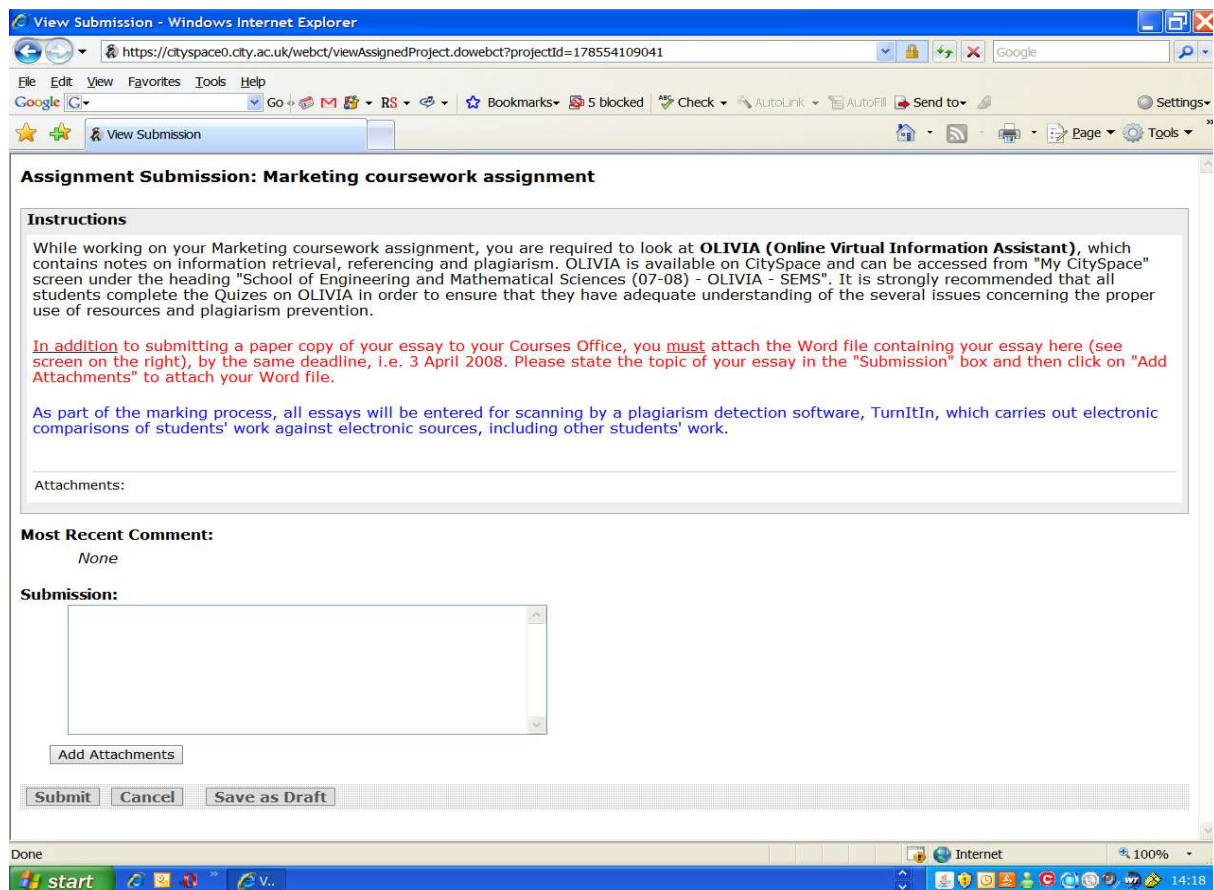
Undergraduate students in the School of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences (SEMS) are normally required to submit numerical work or reports on experimental work and problems with plagiarism and, in particular, collusion are not absent. In order to promote good academic practice to new undergraduate engineering students, the first piece of non-numerical, non-experimental summative work was targeted during the academic year 2007-8. Coincidentally, this was an essay that all engineering students are required to submit for a first year module on Engineering Management. Therefore, a single learning activity was used in order to address around 400 Civil, Electrical/Electronic/Information, Mechanical and Aeronautical Engineering students. Moreover, this complemented the aim of promoting good academic practice and raising plagiarism awareness by using a component that is already part of the undergraduate curriculum, thus introducing no additional workload for staff or students.

#### Implementation and Evaluation

The learning activity was planned as follows:

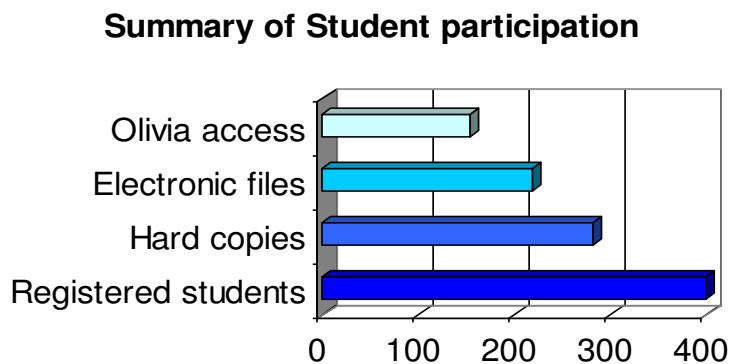
- 1) At the time of the setting of this coursework, students were briefly introduced to the additional dimension of the exercise and were addressed by the EDA for SEMS and the Engineering Learning and Research Coordinator on good academic practice.
- 2) Students were referred to the SEMS version of OLIVIA for information and guidance.
- 3) Students were asked to submit their essays electronically, through CitySpace, and by doing so they were automatically giving their consent for their work to be tested in Turnitin, a plagiarism detection tool. Figure 1 shows a snapshot of the instructions and submission screen within CitySpace.

Figure 1



For a coursework on Marketing, students were asked to write an essay of around 750 words. Student participation in this exercise is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2

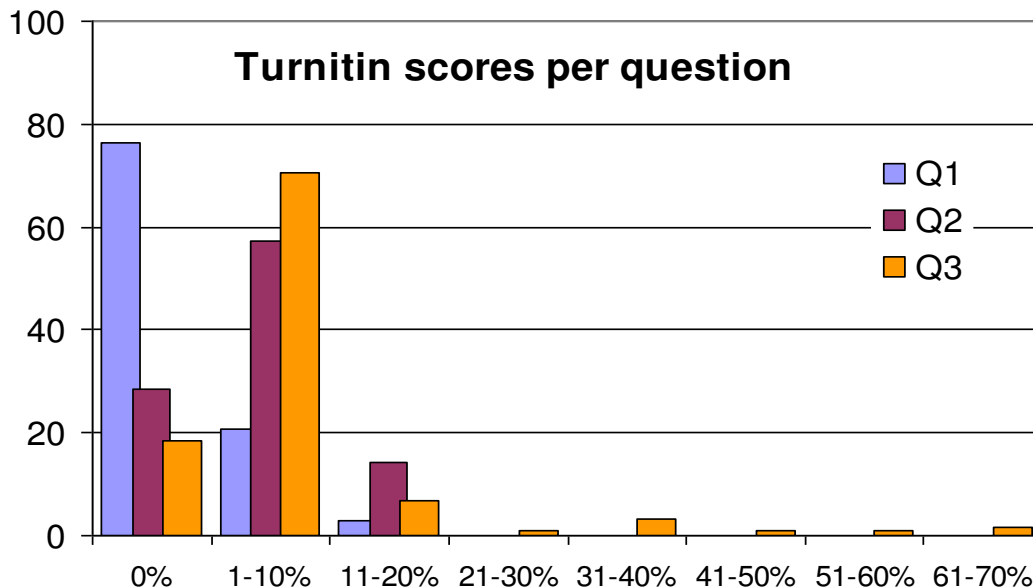




The indicated number of students registered for the module is somewhat conservative, as this is based on data from the start of the academic year, hence it does not allow for students who may have withdrawn from programmes at an early stage. As far as OLIVIA is concerned, although the number of students who accessed this appears rather low, it is expected that in some cases two or more students may have jointly looked at OLIVIA while only one student was actually logged on and therefore featured in the data. A positive observation is that of those students who did access OLIVIA, many logged on two or more times, confirming the usefulness of this resource.

Electronic submissions were scanned for plagiarism using Turnitin and the results are illustrated in Figure 3. Scores appear promising, but it is possible that in some cases the real percentage of plagiarised material may actually be higher than the value given by Turnitin as the included electronic sources, against which student submissions are scanned, cannot be all encompassing. A straightforward example of this problem is a case where the same assessment had been handed out in the past and a student from the current year plagiarised the work of a student from a previous year. Provided the work of the previous student had been neither plagiarised nor scanned in Turnitin, the submission of the current student would erroneously appear to contain no plagiarised material. Therefore, these results need to be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the module lecturer was satisfied with the received submissions and commented on an overall enhanced quality of the submitted essays in comparison to those previously submitted by students of other cohorts.

**Figure 3**



**Further reflection**

Based on the experience of running the learning activity presented in this case study for the first time, a number of questions remain unanswered, such as:

- Did those students who did not submit their essays electronically have something to hide?
- What would the results given by Turnitin look like had the students not been addressed on good academic practice?
- What influence did this learning activity and OLIVIA have on the work of the students for this particular assessment, as well as for the rest of their studies?
- Did the learning activity achieve a much needed reduction in collusion among students?

Although the answers to some of these questions are hard to establish, continuing to develop and implement such learning activities will lead to better understanding of such issues.

As in all cases when introducing a new activity, there is room for improvement and the lessons learnt will be used to enhance this activity for new intakes of Engineering students and to plan equivalent activities for students on other programmes. Namely, a need has been identified for a mechanism that would maximise the proportion of students taking full advantage of such learning activities.

In summary, the implementation of a learning activity that in essence was handled as a formative exercise within a summative assessment was very successful. In addition to offering clear benefits to students, this activity promoted awareness and encouraged interest among teaching staff from across the School. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary approach, whereby all first year Engineering students were simultaneously addressed, was efficient and involved only minimal interference with a single module and a single assessment.

### **Case Study 3: Assessing OLIVIA's usefulness: early student responses (School of Community and Health Sciences)**

As discussed above, the OLIVIA system has provided us with an approach to the learning activity that has successfully circumvented colleagues' concerns (around issues of staff time, resources, and practical support) and has addressed some key learning principles (direct and ongoing access by students, the development of a learning spiral approach, and the adaptability of the system to different student levels as well as disciplines). But has this particular approach been successful with the students? Have they found it useful and in what ways?

Early informal discussions with undergraduate Year 1 students in the Department of Language and Communication Science (LCS, within the School of Community and Health Sciences) made it clear that, from a student's perspective, there were two elements of a proposed programme or learning activity that were deemed to be particularly useful: the potential for students, first, to engage with this programme or activity in their own time and at different points in the academic year; and second, the potential to learn about good academic practice within the context of their particular programme or discipline.

Taking these into account, we decided, in the first instance, to introduce all the different units of OLIVIA to these students (but giving them the opportunity to go back to the units they wished to revisit later in their studies); and to include discipline-specific content in addition to the standardised Olivia content.

In 2007, a group of Year 1 BSc in Speech and Language Therapy students in LCS were introduced to OLIVIA, during one early-in-the-year session within their Study Skills module. This was accessed via CitySpace. Two members of staff were present to offer guidance and support. Twenty of the students completed a survey after the session. Their responses inform what follows.

All respondents found OLIVIA useful; 65% finding it very useful. 90% felt it was set at an appropriate academic level and 80% that it was relevant to their subject area. The Units on Referencing and Plagiarism were found the most useful and most found the quizzes useful. Although 65% found it easy to navigate, 25% found it difficult at first and 5% (one respondent) not easy. 25% did have occasional technical difficulties and one respondent had difficulties most of the time.

These survey responses should only be treated as indicative, given the number of students involved, and the fact that students were given a choice to complete this part of the activity (and students who did not find it as useful may have chosen not to give their views). What these early responses do suggest, however, is that the majority of these students found the activity useful, set at an appropriate academic level, and a reference tool on which they definitely want to draw throughout their course.

These positive results may reflect the stage at which students are in their programme. First year undergraduates are more likely than, for example, final year undergraduate or postgraduate students to find such information useful, especially when it is new and makes no assumptions of prior knowledge (as is the case in OLIVIA). In other words, OLIVIA could be a very appropriate first point of contact for introducing students to academic practice and conventions; this knowledge could then be built upon through a range of different types of learning and teaching activities. This could be further illustrated by the students' responses on the units that they found most/least useful. Referencing, which they found most useful, can be taught very effectively through an online tool at the beginning of a programme, however more 'grey' areas, such as critical evaluation of sources, or more complex areas, such as the use of the Internet, may require more communicative learning activities involving other learners and a facilitator. Alternatively, OLIVIA still offers the possibility for teachers to release units selectively, and also be creative with their use of those units, by linking them to other areas of CitySpace and websites, and by adding various media such as film clips and PowerPoint presentations. Indeed, in the following academic year (2008), it was deemed more appropriate to release specific units selectively to our first-year cohort, and in coming years, we will be exploring increasingly more customised and creative ways of using unit content.

The responses we received also suggest that students can relate better to discipline-specific content that points to their specific needs (e.g. acceptable processes and conventions, terminology used, ethical approaches encouraged etc.) within a particular programme. The fact that 80% of our 20 students found the examples used in their version of OLIVIA relevant to their subject area and a further 15% found them occasionally relevant reflects the part-customisation of OLIVIA at that particular point in the project. It would appear to be a step in the right direction for staff to make every effort to customise and integrate tools/activities into their programmes as much as possible. They will not only prove to be more relevant to students' educational task in hand, and therefore more effective; they are also less likely to be perceived by them as a voluntary add-on.

Our students above mostly found the quizzes designed to check progress at the end of each unit useful for their learning and at the right level. These provide opportunities for self-evaluation, which can take place as many times as students feel they need, and at different points in a programme. Self-evaluation can help increase students' confidence and independence. More importantly, it offers an opportunity for students to reflect on their own work and progress in learning, and on their own learning skills and strengths and weaknesses. In addition, of course, OLIVIA allows for a marked assignment to be added to its self-test quizzes.

Finally, although most of our students in this sample found OLIVIA easy to navigate and did not encounter any technical problems, there were some students who occasionally had difficulties using the system.

## **Evaluation and Conclusion**

This being a three year funded initiative, it was felt important that a robust evaluation should be undertaken. After consideration, it was decided that the initiative should be evaluated by way of a two stage process: a self-evaluation by members of GAPG undertaken during the life of the initiative, and a fuller, external evaluation, undertaken following the end of the initiative.

The self-evaluation is being undertaken by members of GAPG in co-operation with the Student Union. It involves the development of an inventory of all learning activities introduced for programmes around the University, indicating what the activity is, when it was undertaken, and any problems encountered. This is followed with the writing of a series of case studies, in which a sample of Programme Directors and Students from different Schools will be invited to reflect and comment upon their experiences of the initiative to date. Finally, EDAs will be asked to complete a reflective document, in which they consider their experiences of implementing the projects. The external evaluation will attempt to measure the extent to which the initiative has achieved its original objectives, and will collect views from a wider variety of parties, including Heads of Department, Programme Directors, Students, and EDAs. After all three projects

have been completed, the effects on academic misconduct cases within the University will be scrutinised.

With reference to the Learning Activity Project, the following information can be deduced from those aspects of the self-evaluation undertaken so far.

- An extensive range of activities have been introduced across the University.
- There has been information and ideas-sharing within Schools, though less sharing of ideas between Schools.
- The limited sharing of ideas which had taken place earlier has been considerably extended, raising staff awareness across the University.
- Students have understood the purpose of the project, thanks, in part, to Student Union involvement in the broader initiative.
- There have, however, been ‘pockets of resistance’ within some departments of the University.

We have also gained considerable experience in the use of a VLE-based resource such as OLIVIA. As a result of identifying its strengths and its limitations for our particular purposes, (some technical problems, and a lack of in-house support to resolve them) City University Library has developed a replacement for OLIVIA which is being piloted in 2008-9. Another associated reason behind this development move is an effort to expand the remit and possibilities of the tool - to move away from the concept of information literacy towards one of a vast information point for students, including a broader range of study skills. We will be reporting on these developments in due course.

In conclusion, this paper has discussed an ongoing organisation wide initiative, which has the aims of further developing students’ academic practice skills, whilst dissuading them from academic misconduct. In particular, it has focused on the first project that EDAs have implemented within their Schools, that being the Learning Activity Project. As it remains ongoing, it would not yet be appropriate to provide final conclusions, but feedback received so far suggests that the initiative is bearing some positive results in terms of promoting the development of appropriate and subject-specific study skills amongst students of the University.

## **Reference List**

Ashworth, P., Bannister, P., and Thorne, P (1997) Guilty in Whose Eyes? University Students’ perceptions of Cheating and Plagiarism in Academic Work and Assessment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22, p187 -203

Bannister, P. and Ashworth, P. (1998) Four Good Reasons for Cheating and Plagiarism in Rust, C. (ed) *Improving Student Learning Symposium*. P233 – 241. The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford.

Carroll, J. (2007) A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford.

Johnston, B. (2003) The Concept of Plagiarism, Learning and teaching in Action, Vol 2, No 1 Available at:

<http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/ltia/issue4/johnston.shtml>

Kolb, D. A., Rubin, I.M. and Osland, J. (1991) Individual and organisational learning, topic introduction, Organisational Behaviour: an experiential approach, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, pp. 58-60

Lea, M. R. and Street, B. V. (1998) Student Writing in Higher Education: and Academic Literacies Approach. Studies in Higher Education, 23, p157 - 172

McDowell, L and Brown, S. Assessing Students: Cheating and Plagiarism (2001)

Available at:

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/id430\\_cheating\\_and\\_plagiarism](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/id430_cheating_and_plagiarism)

Northedge, A. and Lane, A. (1997) 'What is learning?' in Northedge, A., Thomas, J., Lane, A. and Peasgood, The Sciences' Good Study Guide, Milton Keynes, Open University, pp.20-2.