

SUPPORTING FIRST YEAR ONLINE LAW STUDENTS WITH
THEIR TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY: DEVELOPING LAW-
SPECIFIC RESOURCES ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND THE
ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

The past decade has seen an increase in tertiary online education (and online education was of course the default method of delivery at most universities during the Covid-19 pandemic). Little research, however, has explored the experiences of online students and how to best support their transition to university study. This article discusses the development of law-specific resources on academic integrity and the academic environment designed to help first year online law students transition to university. Moreover, it analyses students' responses to the resources collected through student surveys and semi-structured interviews of participating students. Findings show that the law-specific resources had a positive impact on first year online law students often leading to an enhanced understanding of academic concepts and increased confidence levels in approaching assessment tasks.

Keywords: Online law students, transition, first year experience, academic integrity, academic environment

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I INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen an increase in tertiary online education, especially, but not only during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the Australian education context, the Grattan Institute notes that ‘improved educational technology via the internet has made off-campus study easier’ and that increasing numbers of students are now studying in this mode.¹ While online study contains great benefits for students and universities, it also brings along challenges, including, for example, how to best support online students in transitioning to university.

Research suggests that many students, including law students, struggle to successfully navigate the first year of university.² In that context, much scholarship has focused on the experience of on-campus students and identified a need to carefully scaffold first year learning.³ While transitioning to university may be particularly challenging for online law students who generally lack immediate in-person interactions with peers and academics, the question of how to best support online students’ transition to university remains under researched.

Academic integrity is a particularly serious matter in the law discipline. Students engaging in academic misconduct may be prevented from progressing through the degree and may not be admitted into legal practice due to lack of ‘good character’.⁴ Moreover, lack of information about the academic environment including, for example, university policies relating to assessments, may prevent online students from successfully completing the first year of university.⁵ Such negative experiences can act as a major hurdle for the successful completion of a law degree as they may cause students to withdraw.

Successfully transitioning first year online law students may be especially impacted by students’ varying degrees of academic readiness and, relatedly, limited knowledge of academic integrity culture and the academic environment.⁶ It is well researched that one way of supporting students’ transition to university culture is to explicitly outline and apply performance expectations.⁷ This article describes the development of law-specific resources on academic integrity and the academic environment

¹ ‘Mapping Australian higher education’ *Grattan Institute* (Report, 2016) 5 <<https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/875-Mapping-Australian-Higher-Education-2016.pdf>>.

² Sally Kift, Karen Nelson and John Clarke, ‘Transition Pedagogy: A Third Generation Approach to FYE-A Case Study of Policy and Practice for the Higher Education Sector’ (2010) 1(1) *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education* 1, 5.

³ Sally Kift, ‘Transforming the First Year Experience: A New Pedagogy to Enable Transition’ (Conference Paper, Enhancing Student Success Conference, April 2005); Sally Kift, ‘The Next, Great First Year Challenge: Sustaining, Coordinating and Embedding Coherent Institution-Wide Approaches to Enact the FYE as “Everybody’s Business”’ (Conference Paper, Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, 2008).

⁴ Michelle Evans, ‘Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct by Law Students: The Importance of Prevention Over Detection’ (2012) 17(2) *International Journal of Law & Education* 99. On problems concerning admission, see also *Re Liveri* [2006] QCA 152; *Re A JG* [2004] QCA 88.

⁵ Jed Locquialo and Bob Ives, ‘First-year university students’ knowledge of academic misconduct and the association between goals for attending university and receptiveness to intervention’ (2020) 16(1) *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 1.

⁶ Adam Webster et al, ‘Enhancing the First Year Curriculum and Experience: Law School ‘Boot Camp’ (2018) 28(1) *Legal Education Review* 1.

⁷ See eg, Angela Bowles et al, ‘Staying the distance: students’ perceptions of enablers of transition to higher education’ (2014) 33(2) *Higher Education Research and Development* 212; Catherine Meehan and Kristy Howells, ‘In search of the feeling of ‘belonging’ in higher education: undergraduate students transition into higher education’ (2019) 43(10) *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 1376.

implemented in two compulsory first year law courses at a large regional university in Queensland, Australia, between 2017 and 2022 as well as their impact on students.

The article first provides an overview of existing literature on transitioning first year students as well as justifications for the introduction of resources including tutorials and quizzes on two succinct areas: academic integrity and the academic environment. It subsequently explores considerations which were relevant for the specific design of the respective resources thus providing a case study on the development of the resources. This may be useful to other university educators contemplating the use of law-specific resources on academic integrity and the academic environment to support their students in transitioning to university. The article subsequently outlines the methodology which relates to the collection of qualitative and quantitative student feedback on the resources. The sections on findings present student quantitative and qualitative feedback on their experiences with the resources, the discussion contextualises this feedback, and provides practical recommendations.

II LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

A Transitioning First-Year Students to University

Scholars have long pointed out problems with the successful university transition of first-year students, not the least due to their different levels of academic preparedness.⁸ Kift and Nelson highlight that students undergo a dramatic transition during their first year at university requiring specific support.⁹ Others note that some first year students may experience stress and anxiety.¹⁰ Kift found, *inter alia*, that there is a need to design the curriculum to carefully scaffold and mediate the first-year learning experience.¹¹ The results of these studies clearly indicate the importance and relevance of developing and embedding curriculum items into first-year law courses to help law students navigate the academic space as a university student, build their confidence, and engage with integral issues such as academic integrity.

While there is considerable research on transitioning first-year on campus students, there is a gap in the literature concerning the online first-year student experience and there is a need for more recent literature on the first-year experience.¹² By providing insights into the experiences of first-year online law students with law specific-resources designed to support their transition by enhancing knowledge of academic integrity and the academic environment, this gap can be filled.

⁸ Kift, Nelson and Clarke (n 2) 8.

⁹ Sally Kift and Karen Nelson, 'Beyond Curriculum Reform: Embedding the Transition Experience' (Conference Paper, HERDSA Annual Conference, July 2005).

¹⁰ Karen Nelson, Sally Kift, and John Clarke, 'Expectations and Realities for First Year Students at an Australian University' (Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, 2008).

¹¹ Sally Kift, 'The First Year Student Learning Experience in Australian Higher Education' [2009] *Australian Learning and Teaching Council* 2.

¹² For studies focusing on online students see eg, Julie A Nelson, 'Advantages of Online Education' (2008) 20(6) *Home Health Care Management and Practice* 501.

B Justification for the Selection of the Two Distinct Areas: Academic Integrity and the Academic Environment

While a range of studies of the first-year experience and transitions have usefully focussed on a range of ‘macro’ issues associated with the transition to university,¹³ we have focused on specific aspects of the academic experience. The developed resources are directed at two distinct areas of knowledge: academic integrity and the academic environment.

A growing body of international literature, based on successive surveys of higher education students, found that incidences of academic misconduct are increasing.¹⁴ One reason why students behave without academic integrity is to do with misunderstanding relevant rules.¹⁵ Students may unintentionally plagiarise where they do not know how to properly quote, paraphrase or reference or understand what constitutes collusion.

Another reason is that academic custom writing sites (that is, third parties who complete assignments for students to submit to their university as their own work¹⁶) have increased in prevalence and sophistication in recent years, enhancing the risk of contract cheating.¹⁷ This is exacerbated by the recent widespread adoption of artificial intelligence sites such as ChatGPT which ‘multiplies the risks which already exist around contract cheating in potentially opening up these services to a wider range of students who may not see using AI as cheating or who may not have the funds to use essay mill sites previously’.¹⁸ Especially in the context of online students, King et al note that there may be greater opportunities to engage in academic misconduct because controlling student identity in online assessments is more challenging than in invigilated on-campus exams.¹⁹ Academic misconduct among law students is a wider sectoral issue and a particularly severe one. Law students who behave without academic integrity may not be admitted into legal practice due to lack of ‘good character’.²⁰

In light of the research, it is clear that online (as well as on campus) law students would benefit from resources that develop relevant knowledge on academic integrity early on in the course with a view to avoiding intentional and unintentional academic integrity breaches. Barrett and Malcolm further point

¹³ See eg, Madeleine Bornschlegl and D Cashman, ‘Considering the role of the distance student experience in student satisfaction and retention’ (2019) 34(2) *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 139; Elizabeth A Bates, Linda K Kaye and Joseph J McCann, ‘A snapshot of the student experience: exploring student satisfaction through the use of photographic elicitation’ (2019) 43(3) *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 291; Jacqueline Douglas, Robert McClelland and John Davies, ‘The development of a conceptual model of student satisfaction with their experience in higher education’ (2008) 16(1) *Quality Assurance in Education* 19.

¹⁴ See eg, B Perry, ‘Exploring Academic Misconduct: Some Insights into Student Behaviour’ (2010) 11(2) *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 97-108; B Winrow, ‘Do Perceptions of the Utility of Ethics Affect Academic Cheating?’ (2016) 37 *Journal of Accounting Education* 1.

¹⁵ LG Power, ‘University Students’ Perceptions of Plagiarism’ (2009) 80(6) *The Journal of Higher Education* 643.

¹⁶ Michael J Draper and Philip M Newton, ‘A Legal Approach to Tackling Contract Cheating?’ (2017) 13(11) *International Journal for Educational Integrity* DOI:10.1007/s40979-017-0022-5.

¹⁷ C Ellis, IM Zucker, and D Randall, ‘The Infernal Business of Contract Cheating: Understanding the Business Processes and Models of Academic Custom Writing Sites’ (2018) 14(1) *International Journal for Educational Integrity* <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-017-0024-3>>.

¹⁸ Debby RE Cotton, Peter A Cotton and J Reuben Shipway, ‘Chatting and cheating: Ensuring academic integrity in the era of ChatGPT’ (2023) *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* DOI: 10.1080/14703297.2023.2190148, 8.

¹⁹ CG King, RW Guyette Jr and C Piotwoski, ‘Online Exams and Cheating: An Empirical Analysis of Business’ (2009) 6(1) *Journal of Educators Online* 1.

²⁰ *Re Liveri* [2006] QCA 152; *Re AJG* [2004] QCA 88.

out that education on plagiarism is most effective when it is ‘perceived as immediately relevant to the individual student’.²¹ The developed academic integrity resources were therefore law-specific and integrated in one compulsory first year law course. The specific design and development are discussed further below.

III DEVELOPING LAW-SPECIFIC RESOURCES FOR ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

The majority of students enrolled in the Bachelor of Laws (‘LLB’) and Juris Doctor (‘JD’) degree at the authors’ university are mature age (ie, 25 years of age or older) and study online. The authors of this article developed resources on academic integrity and the academic environment, which were subsequently introduced in two first year law courses to assist online students with their transition to university. The initiative ran from semester 2, 2017 to semester 2, 2020 and were supplemented with additional resources developed in 2022. The resources were implemented into two compulsory first year law courses via the courses’ learning management systems. The courses were selected due to at least one of these courses being offered in semesters 1-3 – thus ensuring that the resources were available for first year students, regardless of their semester of entry. Consequently, by the end of the first year, students should be able to develop the necessary skills to successfully handle academic expectations, particularly around assessment. The below provides an in-depth overview of the resources contained in the two courses.

A Academic Integrity Resources

The need to provide students with a deeper understanding of academic integrity led to the development of a tutorial and quiz on plagiarism and academic misconduct. As pointed out above, most first-year law students at the university study online and a large proportion of course content in the relevant courses is also delivered online. There is however no certainty that all students will listen to the recordings of lectures that are provide to them, so a discussion about academic integrity and the academic environment that a lecturer may include within the classes is insufficient. Therefore, the tutorial and quiz on academic integrity was made available online via the courses’ learning management platform.

The resource was developed by using the learning management software to create a so-called ‘lesson’. A lesson contains a series of HTML pages of lesson content and/or questions which can be graded. This allows educators to introduce customised content and questions which then becomes available to students without further intervention from the course educator. The lesson content for the resource on academic integrity, which was informed by the university’s academic integrity policies, consisted of five academic misconduct study modules. These were: assessment cheating, contract cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, and collusion. In addition, there was also an employability-oriented module on the consequences of academic misconduct for lawyers, thus contextualising academic integrity as a professional as well as an academic essential. After each module, students answered multiple-choice questions about fictional law-student scenarios to test their knowledge of academic integrity. In 2022, these resources were complemented by a recording in which the authors spoke about each element of

²¹ R Barrett and J Malcolm, ‘Embedding plagiarism education in the assessment process’ (2006) (2)1 *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 38, 38.

academic misconduct, citing actual examples of academic misconduct that had been encountered within the Law School.

In the past, students specifically reported confusion about the difference between collaboration and collusion in the assessment context, particularly where they were involved in online or on campus study groups. To allow students to gain a better understanding and avoid potential integrity breaches, the resource included specific fictional case scenarios relating to joint student work and questions of collusion and collaboration.

Apart from covering a broad range of different academic integrity issues, the developed resources were also law-specific and student-focused. Non-specific academic integrity resources hold the risk that law students view them as generic and do not relate to them. Their impact can therefore be limited. To avoid student disengagement, all quiz questions dealt with fictional law student behaviour. Students working through the resources must correctly identify whether the law students in the fictional scenarios have or have not behaved with academic integrity and for what reasons. While the quizzes allowed for unlimited retries, guessing was avoided by shuffling the answer order on repeat. Successful completion of the lesson was required as a prerequisite for subsequent course assessments. Students gained access to the resources immediately after course enrolment and were able to self-pace their study – and direct any questions to their regular course educators.

The resource was designed to meet the needs of the first-year cohort of mature-age online students, many without recent study experience. Materials were written in straightforward language, from the students' perspective, and avoiding the use of jargon. The interface was free of clutter, and navigation was easy on handheld mobile devices, which students frequently use.

The design of the resource also took into account that many enrolled online students worked and had family commitments. While it was possible to complete the curriculum and assessment in less than one hour, students were able to engage with additional resources, through embedded links, if they wished. After they had completed the tutorial and quiz, students were able to return to the content and links at any stage to refresh or deepen their knowledge.

B Academic Environment Resources

Apart from academic integrity, law-specific resources on the academic environment were developed and implemented in another compulsory first year course. This is in keeping with the approach suggested by Nelson, Kift and Harper that 'it is within the formal or academic curriculum that students must find their place'.²² Again, students gained access to the resources immediately after course enrolment and were able to self-pace their study with questions regarding content directed to their regular course educators. The tutorial contained six modules on the following topics: integrity, email etiquette, use of textbooks, assessment policies and procedures, useful university contacts and organisation of study materials. Students in previous years had reported difficulties in navigating the various required university policies (such as the procedure for seeking assignment extensions and the documentation required to apply for deferred exams). The default response was therefore to ask the

²² Karen Nelson, Sally Kift and Wendy Harper, "'First Portal in a Storm': A Virtual Space for Transition Students" (Conference Paper, ASCILITE Conference, 2005, 509-17).

course examiner for assistance, causing frustration where the student had to be referred to another section to deal with their query.

Students also reported the need for further guidance on general skills which are needed both throughout their degree and which are transferable to the workplace. These skills include the standards of professional communication, expectations when dealing with university staff through to issues such as organising assessment and how to study for a problem-based law exam. This was particularly challenging for online students for whom it was sometimes difficult to access student resources on the physical campus including libraries and student centres or to ask their fellow students for advice. Examinations are acknowledged to be a source of stress for first year law students²³ so resources were specifically provided showing worked examples of previous exam papers and model answers were written at a distinction, pass and fail grade standard, including marker comments.

As with the academic integrity resources, after each module, students answered multiple-choice questions about fictional law-student scenarios to test their knowledge of the academic environment. Feedback was provided for each option, and a student could not progress to the next question until a correct answer had been given. Successful completion of the resources was required, and a prerequisite for subsequent course assessments. The value of empathy is interwoven throughout the resources, made clear as an objective and expectation for student learning and professional practice, and translated into practice through these formative activities.²⁴

IV METHODOLOGY

The project not only sought to develop the above law-specific resources but also to explore their impact on first year law students. The evaluation aimed at obtaining student feedback on the resources and to identify whether students considered it to be valuable and effective. Specifically, it set out to assess whether engaging with the resources allowed students: 1. to enhance their understanding of the respective content, namely academic integrity and the academic environment, 2. to obtain knowledge useful for the remainder of their degree, and 3. to increase their confidence levels in navigating the academic space. Before carrying out the evaluation, an application for ethics approval was successfully made to the university's ethics section [H17REA235F1 – Learning the Ropes in First Year Law].

Data relevant to the evaluation of the resources was collected through student interviews about their experience with the resources in 2018 as well as through a longitudinal survey, gathering qualitative as well as quantitative response data on the overall student impact of the resources each semester.

In 2018, data was collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with a total of nine students who had engaged with the resources in the relevant courses in 2017 (semester 2 and 3) and 2018 (semester 1). Participants were interviewed after the end of the semester. Participants were first- and second-year students and had been voluntarily recruited from three courses with a total enrolment of 538 students. Participants were approached by a research assistant (a final year law student), who

²³ K Galloway et al, 'Approaches to Student Support in the First Year of Law School' (2011) 21(2) *Legal Education Review* 235.

²⁴ 'UA Academic Integrity Best Practice Principles' *Universities Australia* (Report, 2017) <<http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/UA-Academic-Integrity-Best-Practice-Principles.pdf>>.

provided an overview of the study before participants gave their consent. After their written consent was provided, they were immediately interviewed.

Interviews were undertaken face-to-face as well as through a video-conferencing platform by a research assistant. The academic staff were provided with transcripts of the interviews, but not the participants' names. Thus, the 'anonymity' of the participants was protected and they did not feel any power imbalance which might be felt if interviewed by the course lecturers. Questions focused on participants' observations about the resources including knowledge before and after participation and how the resources could be improved.

In addition, data was gathered through a longitudinal collection (nine data collections across three years, that is each semester the resources were available)²⁵ whereby a total of 612 students who had used the resources responded to a voluntary anonymous electronic survey.²⁶ Students were surveyed on whether they felt the resources provided them with an enhanced understanding of academic integrity and the academic environment, whether they perceived the knowledge obtained through the resources as useful for the remainder of their degree and whether engaging with the resources had enhanced their confidence in completing future assessment items. This was done each semester the resources were used through a voluntary anonymous online survey tool (SurveyMonkey). The survey contained a combination of open questions and dichotomous questions (yes or no). An additional survey was undertaken in 2022 specifically about the value of the additional resource – ie the recording on academic misconduct. Thematic analysis was used to extract and analyse different themes from student data.

V FINDINGS

This section contains key findings of the evaluation by analysing whether 1. students felt the resources had enhanced their understanding of the particular content, 2. students thought the knowledge obtained through the specific resources would be useful during the law degree and 3. whether they believed that engaging with the resources had led to an increase in their confidence in navigating the academic space, approaching assessments and behaving with academic integrity. The below explores the impact of the resources on first-year law students.

A Enhanced Understanding of Academic Integrity and the Academic Environment

There was a total of 612 responses from 2017 to 2020 with data collected from each semester the resources were used. Most students who completed the survey agreed that the resources enhanced their understanding of academic integrity policies and the academic environment (ranging from 74%-93% depending on the semester). A breakdown of these responses follows in Table 1.

In 2022, students were surveyed again and asked about the value of the law-specific Academic Integrity recording. Most students (83%) that responded agreed that the law-specific nature of the recording was 'useful' or 'very useful'. Furthermore, the majority (77.1 %) agreed that law-specific resources were more valuable than the longer, university-wide generic resources (Table 2).

²⁵ Semester 2 and 3, 2017; semester 1-3, 2018, semester 1 and 2, 2019; semester 1 and 2, 2020.

²⁶ See further Table 1, which lists the participants' responses by semester.

Table 1: Online survey of student satisfaction with interventions

Survey question	Sem 2, 2017	Sem 3, 2017	Sem 1, 2018	Sem 2, 2018	Sem 3, 2018	Sem 1, 2019	Sem 2, 2019	Sem 1, 2020	Sem 2, 2020
Online survey response rate	38% (82/217 students)	20% (15/73 students)	38% (93/248 students)	49% (86/174 students)	55% (47/86 students)	44% (105/241 students_	28% (54/191 students)	43% (109/256 students)	15% (21/138 students)
Did the intervention enhance your understanding of the university’s policies and procedures?	Yes – 93%	Yes– 87%	Yes – 88%	Yes – 93%	Yes– 94%	Yes – 89%	Yes – 74%	Yes – 93%	Yes – 100%
Do you believe the knowledge obtained will be useful during your law degree?	Yes – 94%	Yes– 93%	Yes – 92%	Yes – 98%	Yes– 98%	Yes – 96%	Yes – 96%	Yes – 91%	Yes – 92%
Has the intervention increased your confidence levels in approaching your course-related assessments?	Yes – 81%	Yes– 80%	Yes – 85%	Yes – 89%	Yes– 92%	Yes – 80%	Yes – 91%	Yes – 90%	Yes – 81%

Table 2: Online survey regarding the law-specific Academic Integrity recording 2022

N = 35					
1. How useful did you find the law-specific AI resource?	Not useful - 0	Somewhat useful – 2 – 5.7%	Moderately Useful – 4 – 11.4%	Useful – 23 – 65.7%	Very Useful – 6 – 17.2%
2. Do you feel law-specific AI resources are more valuable than generic ones relating to all students?	Yes – 27 – 77.1%	No – 1 – 2.9%	Unsure – 7 – 20%		

Particular themes featured in student feedback related to ease of use of the resources, the clarification of difficult areas and benefits for online students. These themes are discussed below.

1 Ease of Use

Student survey responses show that students appreciated the ease of use of the resources with one student highlighting that they are ‘easy to read and navigate through’ (survey, 2020). Another student’s comment highlighted that the content is ‘explicit and unambiguous’ (survey, 2017). One survey comment noted that the resources provide ‘clear examples on things [they] didn’t know were classed as misconduct’ (survey, 2017).

2 Clarification of Difficult Areas

Apart from being concise and easy to use, student responses also pointed out that the resources clarified especially difficult areas. Particularly in the context of academic integrity, students were found to be aware of the broader concept but lacked knowledge of particulars. This ‘half-knowledge’ is problematic as inadvertent misconduct can have the same consequences as intentional breaches. This problem was identified by one student interviewed in 2018. The student noted that their knowledge had changed pre- and post-quiz, emphasising that they had had only a ‘general idea based on experiences as a student in high school but, actually, getting in-depth as to what is expected as a law student was much more clarified in that aspect’ (interview 2). The law-specific recording mentioned resources that students regularly use, with one student stating, ‘I felt like the information provided was helpful, and the specific examples clarified some types of cheating, for example, websites that sell notes’ (survey, 2022).

The academic integrity resources sought to allow students to gain an in-depth understanding of the specifics of academic integrity in relation to a broad range of topics. Student survey responses confirm that students appreciated this holistic approach with one student noting that while they ‘knew some of the policies the resources have given [them] more insight’ (survey, 2019). One student remarked that working through the resources had allowed them to ‘identify and avoid problems that [they] may have fallen into unintentionally if [they] had not undertaken the tutorial’ (survey, 2020). The law-specific recording canvassed detection, which resonated with one student who stated ‘It is very clear that all IT usage can be monitored, possibly down to the keystrokes used. I did learn a few new things’ (survey, 2022).

When presented with different scenarios relating to what constitutes plagiarism and academic misconduct students noted that ‘there were quite a few that [they] were not sure about’ and that they ‘did not fully understand the elements of contract cheating’ (survey, 2018). Others pointed out that they found some areas of plagiarism ‘ambiguous’ and multiple students remarked that they were outright ‘surprised’ that some of the scenarios were classed as misconduct (survey, 2017).

Prior to preparing these resources, students had specifically reported to the authors that they were confused about the difference between collaboration and collusion in the assessment

context, particularly where they were involved in online or on campus study groups. Therefore, the resources included specific fictional case scenarios relating to joint student work and questions of collusion and collaboration. Student survey responses show that students found the knowledge gain in this area extremely valuable with one commenting that ‘the section on collusion was particularly helpful in distinguishing the line where collaboration ends’ (survey, 2018) and another stating that they ‘know now the boundaries of group work’ (survey, 2018).

Some students (ranging from 6-26%, depending on the semester) did not think that the resources enhanced their understanding of the relevant areas. These students frequently noted that they had studied similar content in other courses or degrees. However, even where students did not obtain new knowledge some nevertheless felt the resources were useful. One surveyed student commented, for example, that ‘it was a good refresher as a mature-aged student’ that it ‘was helpful to bring that info together’ and that ‘it provided [them] with exact links to specific details of the course including assessment details and course readings. It also provided [them] with the appropriate communication techniques when contacting course moderators and examiners’ (survey 2018).

3 Particular Benefits for Online Students

A particular concern of introducing these resources was to provide material to assist students, regardless of their mode of study. In terms of the theme of this article, it is relevant to consider the impact of the resources for the online student cohort. One interviewed student (interview 4) commented on the usefulness of the resources for online students who generally do not come onto campus, noting that the resources:

I guess if you are there in person in a tute or whatever you can ask straight away. [With these resources] you do not have to wait for a specific time to make sure you are there, logged into zoom for it, you know as in an online tutorial. So you get the clarification in that which you would otherwise get if you were on-campus.

Apart from commenting whether students felt the resources had enhanced their knowledge, students also provided feedback on whether they thought the knowledge obtained through the resources would be useful while studying their degree, as discussed below.

B Useful Knowledge Obtained During Law Degree

The intention of the project was not only to provide resources of relevance to their first year of study, but also to set students up for success for the whole of the degree, by providing links to resources that students could review in later semesters when questions about academic integrity or the academic environment more generally arose during their studies. This aim appears to have been achieved. Data collected through the longitudinal collection showed that, depending on the semester, between 92% and 98% of surveyed students believed that the knowledge obtained through the resources would be useful to them throughout their law degree.

Student responses particularly focused on the benefits of the early introduction of the resources in the first year and the consequences for subsequent years of study. One surveyed student remarked that the resources have ‘shown [them] exactly where and who to go to if and when [they] need help which led them to conclude that ‘each semester there will be assessment and exams and this knowledge will help (survey, 2018). One student commented that ‘clarifying and touching base ensures that the students are on the same page’ (survey, 2017) with another noting that ‘having this presented so early in the course (especially in a quiz format as opposed to simply a reading) will keep academic integrity in the forefront of [their] mind in tackling assessments into the future (survey, 2017). In the 2018 survey one student stated that ‘as a first year student... there is ambiguity with respect to what does and does not constitute academic misconduct and that training on these issues is ‘especially useful for newer students’ (survey, 2018).

The importance of early introduction is echoed in the 2018 student interview where one student remarked that if they had not taken the quiz during their first semester, they would not know ‘what to expect with academic integrity, and the honesty that goes with that’. The student stated that this would be because they would have treated their university study like high school which ‘had different levels of what they expected of you’ (interview 9). Another interviewed student emphasised that the academic misconduct tutorial had enhanced their knowledge and that it therefore became ‘a foundation [for]... doing your assignments’ (interview 8). The student concluded that the tutorial highlighted important areas they were unaware of and ‘didn’t actually realise were considered academic misconduct. The law-specific recording mentioned the potential for blackmail¹ from the contract cheating sites, which resonated with at least one student who wrote ‘I found it very interesting to hear about different ways certain kinds of cheating could come back to haunt students in the future (i.e. some may lead to extortion or expulsion from practice)’ (survey, 2022).

C Increase in Confidence Levels

The resources aimed at providing students with in-depth knowledge on academic misconduct and the academic environment. The research further explored the question of whether the obtained knowledge on how to navigate the academic environment and avoid academic misconduct had boosted students’ confidence levels in approaching assessment items and navigating the first year. Data gathered through the longitudinal collection showed that between 85% and 91%, depending on the semester, felt that the resources had increased their confidence levels in navigating the academic space and approaching assessment items. Surveyed students who did not agree that the resources had increased their confidence levels frequently noted that they were already aware of the content and therefore their confidence levels pre and post resources remained the same.

¹ For a discussion of this issue, see, for example, Jonathan Yorke, Lesley Sefcik and Terisha Veeran-Colton (2022) 47(1) ‘Contract cheating and blackmail: a risky business?’ *Studies in Higher Education* 53.

VI DISCUSSION

The development of the law-specific resources for online first year law students was informed by concerns about the transition of online students due to their varying levels of academic readiness. The resources were designed through a framework of awareness, development and prevention, rather than the conventional approach in higher education law, which is frequently grounded in detection and punishment.² The findings show that after engagement with the resources the majority of students reported an enhanced content understanding, felt that the knowledge they obtained would be useful throughout their degree and noticed an increase in confidence concerning navigating academic assessments and the academic environment.

Students who did not report an enhanced understanding frequently pointed out that they had studied similar content in previous courses or degrees and already felt knowledgeable. These responses highlight that there are different levels of academic readiness among first year online law students. Therefore, early orientation would benefit first year students and provide a foundational base that students of all levels of readiness can utilise, and provide course educators with knowledge that all of their students have this important understanding .

Findings further showed that students appreciated the following aspects of the resources most: 1. the early introduction of the resources in the first year which ‘levelled the playing’ field and provided all students with the same degree of knowledge for future study; 2. that the resources were designed in a way that was easy to use and navigate and 3. their particular benefits to provide early knowledge to online students due to being available on the course management system of the two courses and set as a precondition to accessing the first assessment item. In terms of content, the findings demonstrate that the law-specific nature of scenarios kept students engaged and allowed them to clarify difficult areas. This is in line with Benson et al’s findings that ‘for a tutorial to have any value it must be used practically in context such as a course requirement’.³ A further significant findings was that, during this period, no instances of academic misconduct were reported in these core, first year courses.

The research presented in this article has limitations as it examined only one initiative designed to support the transition of online first-year law students at one university. This is a limitation because the experience of the cohort at this university, being students who are predominantly mature-aged and first-in-family to study at university may not translate to the experience of other universities whose cohort is predominantly school leavers. This is particularly the case with the academic integrity resources, due to the attention received on this subject during their schooling. Additionally, the sample of interviewed students is based on a small sample 1.5% of the total cohort and only included students who were enrolled in 2017 and 2018. Therefore,

² Michelle Evans, ‘Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct by Law Students: The Importance of Prevention Over Detection’ (2012) 17(2) *International Journal of Law & Education* 99.

³ L Benson et al, ‘Developing a University-wide Academic Integrity E-learning Tutorial: a Canadian Case’ (2019) 15(1) *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 14 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-019-0045-1>>.

this may limit the ability to make a clear generalisation of the impact of the academic integrity and environment intervention.

VII CONCLUSION

This article presented the findings related to the design of law-specific resources developed for first year online law students in place between 2017 and 2022 to support their transition to university. They address a wide range of academic integrity concepts and university assessment policy documents through to how to approach the study of law and successful preparation for problem-based law exams. The evaluation of the project through student interviews and surveys has shown an overwhelmingly positive experiences with resources during the time they have been available, leading to an enhanced understanding of relevant areas as well as an increase in student confidence when navigating the academic space. During the period of the project, no instances of academic misconduct were detected in the courses in which the resources were utilised. While the resources have been developed specifically for first year law students, they are relevant and easily adapted to other disciplines. For example, the format of the academic integrity resources (that is, devising a scenario and asking questions to highlight practical examples of plagiarism, collusion and contract cheating) has been utilised in the development of the university-wide academic integrity tool.