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Original Citation

Ireland, Chris and English, John (2011) Challenging and developing conceptions of plagiarism held by first year Accountancy undergraduates. Documentation. iParadigms Europe.

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Challenging and developing conceptions of plagiarism held by first year Accountancy undergraduates

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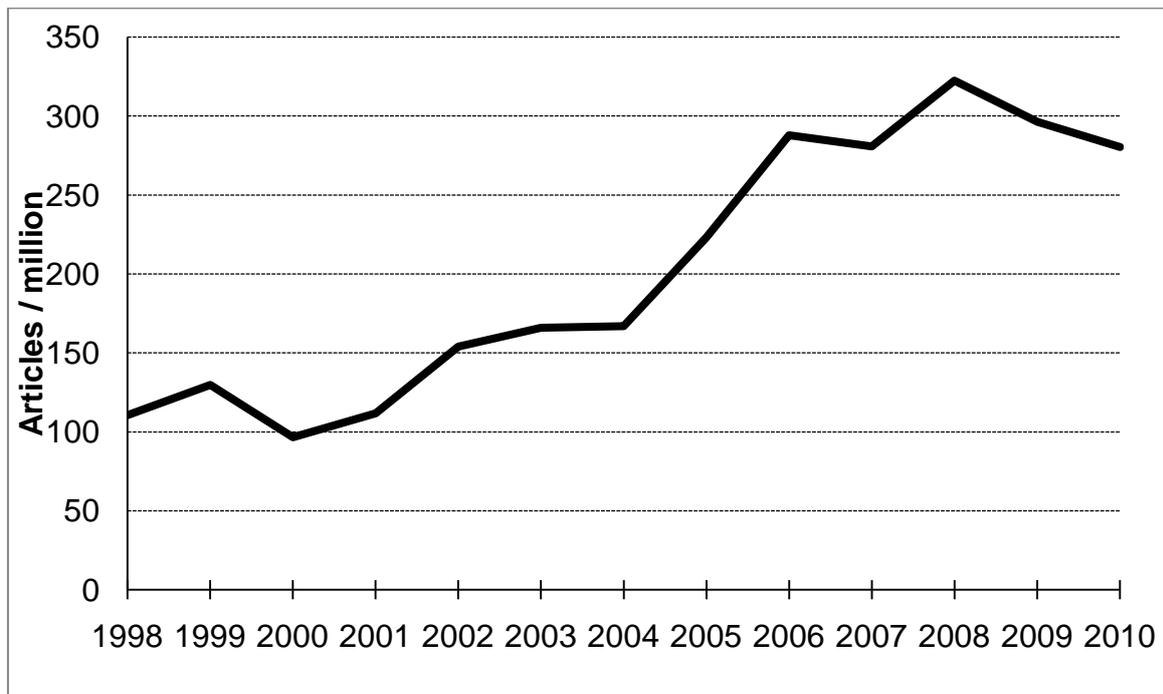
Introduction

This report presents an intervention which takes place over six weeks at the start of the first year of a degree course. The intervention aims to help the students develop an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism, why they should avoid it and the types of writing that are likely to be valued during their time at university. As part of the intervention students also have opportunities to complete short academic assignments and receive feedback on their writing.

The course which is the focus of this report is the Accountancy and Finance degree offered by the University of Huddersfield. A common misconception amongst aspiring accountancy students is the emphasis that is placed on writing. Students are often very numerate but despite warnings during recruitment many are still taken by surprise by the amount of writing that is required. It was decided that an early extended introduction to academic writing would help the students develop their writing and begin to incorporate features which are valued, such as critical writing and eliminate features likely to cause problems, such as plagiarism.

The main driver for the development of a new approach was a growing concern regarding plagiarism in the university and higher education sector as a whole. A simple search of academic articles for 'plagiarism' using Summon, the University's resource management system demonstrates how this concern was growing at the time (see Figure 1). Between 2000 and 2008 the number of academic articles returned per year when searching for the word 'plagiarism' had tripled.

Figure 1 - Search results for 'plagiarism' per million academic articles using Summon between 1998 and 2010 made on 10 May 2011



Our first attempt at plagiarism education

Prior to 2006 there had been no formal inclusion of plagiarism education in the accountancy curriculum. From the academic years 2004/5 and 2005/6 the course had incorporated six hours of extra classes which covered study skills areas such as reading, essay planning, reflection and, during one week, plagiarism. The session on plagiarism took the form of an exercise, in which the students were presented with a paragraph and a series of ways in which it had been used in academic writing. From this they had to decide which uses were acceptable and which were not acceptable. Where the reasoning for an answer was not clear there was time for discussion.

It was apparent during the two years that these sessions ran that this approach was not the solution to helping students with their study skills. Few students attended the sessions in 2004/5 and despite being designated as compulsory in 2005/6, attendance remained poor. The fact that the sessions had no subject specific content, were not part of a timetabled module and were not directly assessed meant that these classes were the lowest priority as far as the students were concerned. A further concern was that students studying accountancy were showing the lowest level of engagement, in terms of appointments made to seek help with study skills, with the School's Academic Skills Unit when compared with other departments in the Business School (English and Ireland, 2008).

The concerns that were apparent from these experiences were reflected by others writing around the same time. Both Wingate (2006) and Wall (2006) had pointed to the negative perception students might have of skills related sessions with Wingate (2006) seeing the divorce of the subject from study skills as the primary weakness of such sessions.

The development of the module and initial approach to plagiarism education

In 2005 the department was planning a new first year module which would be where personal development planning would be embedded. This provided an opportunity to build the academic skills along with other developmental areas, particularly the promotion of employability in the curriculum. The module, 'Accountants in Organisations' (AIO), began in 2006/7 and included a focus on a range of study related skills. Writing, for the reasons explained above, was considered a priority and it was decided that the students should have the opportunity to submit a formative written assignment in the fourth week of study. In the weeks leading up to submission of the assignment, the students attended tutorials in which they carried out activities focussing on citation, reference lists, plagiarism and other writing issues as well as focussing on content relevant to the assignment which was about the design of their CV.

The assignment was submitted via Turnitin as well as on paper and during the week that followed the students received written feedback on the assignment which mainly focussed on writing issues and were able to book individual appointments to discuss their feedback. Most students seemed to have incorporated the ideas from the writing sessions into their assignments, however, a large minority of students had not adequately integrate the ideas about citation, referencing and plagiarism despite the topics being covered in the weeks leading up to submission.

Discussions with students who attended individual tutorials with their feedback and who had not written acceptably revealed a range of understanding of what had been required to write acceptably and it was clear that the activities undertaken prior to the submission of the assignment had contributed to this diverse understanding. For students who had not written acceptably, this ranged from those who had previous knowledge of plagiarism and who had the added task of trying to reconcile the concept as presented in their new environment with the understanding they had gained in their previous studies or had simply not paid attention because they thought they already knew all about plagiarism, to those who had no recollection of discussing plagiarism despite having attended the sessions in which relevant activities were carried out. This outcome is consistent with findings of Perry (2010) who found that in a survey of students who had received teaching on plagiarism, only half could recall that they had indeed attended such sessions. This evidence led to the feeling that we had to find a way of raising the awareness of more students and demonstrate that the topic of plagiarism was important before any learning could take place. We were helped in our plan by evidence from an internal report concerning the 2007 induction programme, in which it was revealed many students felt that they wanted to begin studying sooner and sensed that some of the time dedicated to campus tours and induction talks was delaying the start of teaching.

The development of the current approach

The evidence from these first two years helped us to establish a new starting point for the approach to helping students develop their writing and learn about plagiarism. Firstly, we realised that we had to assume that new students would begin with a range of understandings of plagiarism and attachments to these understandings. Carroll (2007) explains that plagiarism can derive from students continuing to apply the rules they used in their previous studies. Indeed, we have established that some students have developed writing practices with trusted teachers in their previous studies which would not be valued in higher education. We describe those who do not incorporate these new rules as “*Naïve Infringers*” (Ireland and English, 2011) based on the “*framework for understanding student behaviour*” proposed by Perry (2010, p.99) in which he labels those who plagiarise and have no understanding of plagiarism as “*Accidental Infringers*”.

We recognised that an intervention that was going to encourage students to question understandings of plagiarism would require an approach which demanded deeper engagement. In fact, Carroll (2007, p.10) suggests that students need “*opportunities to see, read and analyse the structure of acceptable pieces of work*”, believing that without this, students will continue to approach their studies in the way they had previously. This is particularly important as it is likely that their previous experiences of study were successful considering they were about to embark on a degree course. This was later evident in an end of year reflection about the feedback on the first assignment in which one student wrote, “*I got my work back ... it was plagiarism, and this kind of work if hand (sic) in at college would get [a] good result*”.

We also recognised that a cohort of students would have a range of learning preferences which would need to be taken into account and therefore a variety of activities would be necessary. Furthermore, in considering the range of activities that might help the students, we felt experiential learning might be particularly valuable, believing that plagiarism would not be seen as a problem for some students if they did not have the opportunity to experience it and have some time to reflect on it.

Finally, the decision to begin the intervention at the earliest opportunity is supported by Bennett (2005), Dawson and Overfield (2006) and Ellander et al (2010) who all advocate early intervention in ensuring that students are alerted to the importance of not plagiarising with Ellander et al (2010, p.159) emphasising the benefits of presenting the intervention in the positive light of developing the “*authorial identity*” of students.

From these ideas the current approach, which began in 2008/9, developed.

The current approach

Since 2008/9 the AIO module has maintained the earliest possible focus on writing and plagiarism. Table 1 shows a summary of the intervention and the timing of the components which are discussed in the remainder of this report.

Table 1 – The elements of the intervention

Week	Day	Activity
0	Tuesday	Distribution of Baseline Essay (500 words)
	Friday	Submission of Baseline Essay via Turnitin (500 words)
1	Monday am	Distribution of Academic Report (500 words)
	Monday am	Lecture 'Reading at University'
	Monday pm	Lecture by the School Librarian
	All days	Feedback on Baseline Essay (in tutorial)
	All days	Time management activity (in tutorial)
2	Monday	Interactive Plagiarism Lecture using a student response system
	All week	Online plagiarism test
3	All week	Online referencing quiz
4	Thursday	Submission of Academic Report via Turnitin (500 words)
5	All week	Feedback on Academic Report

The first written assignment: the Baseline Essay

The traditional approach to Freshers' Week in which new students were taken on tours of facilities and were spoken to by various groups meant that many experienced information overload and important messages were lost in the mass of information the students were receiving. Indeed, it is probably for this reason that Carroll (2006) maintains that students do not remember what they are told during induction week when discussing how and when to teach plagiarism. She emphasises the need to let students realise early on that what is valued by the University and the rules of the University may be not be the same as in their previous education system.

Under the current approach the students only have two compulsory informational sessions during the first week. One concerns vital details such as finance and welfare, while the other, on the Tuesday of induction week is the first lecture of the AIO module. The first half of the lecture introduces the students to the module while during the second part the brief for the first written assignment is distributed. The assignment, known as the 'Baseline Essay' is a 500 word essay about work placement. This draws on the fact that many of the students will have chosen to study the degree because of the opportunity to undertake a work placement in the third year and also maintains the principle that skills development should be embedded in module content. In an end of year reflection one student referred to this advantage when writing about this essay

"I felt that it was a chance to learn about placements and a chance to improve my writing style both at the same time, which was pleasing as these were two things which I wanted to do".

In the assignment brief the students receive basic instructions to follow, including how they should cite and quote their sources but also other requirements that would normally be expected, such as, expectations relating to the presentation of written assignments. The task is kept as simple as possible with the students being given a reference list of the three sources they are permitted to use. Despite this exercise being the first step in the students' introduction to writing at university, there is intentionally no mention of plagiarism in the brief. The essay is called the Baseline Essay since we are trying to establish evidence of the academic writing students produce as they enter the course and provide them with evidence of their writing to reflect upon at the end of the academic year. The students submit the finished assignment via Turnitin three days after distribution and the submissions are assessed using Grademark.

Feedback on the Baseline Essay

Davis and Carroll (2009) explain that both written and spoken formative feedback on plagiarism can be useful in helping reduce plagiarism. The written feedback on the Baseline Essay is provided via Grademark which has the facility to provide hyperlinks to useful resources along with any comments made on student papers. This means that students can access relevant online support as they read their feedback.

The students initially have access to their written feedback in their first tutorial and have the option of receiving spoken feedback in front of the rest of their group. This is entirely voluntary and if they chose not to receive feedback in this way, they can make an appointment to receive feedback in private. Over the three years that this system has operated there has been no lack of volunteers. Many students gradually recognise the value of this non-threatening activity and there seems to be a sense that if more volunteer then more will be learned.

In reflections on their learning at the end of the academic year a number of students have commented positively about the approach. One student wrote

"I got one-to-one feedback ... but not only did I get the advice on my own work, I also got advice from my classmates (sic) work. This helped me so much as I could apply it to future pieces of work".

Another wrote

"The feedback I was given was both oral and written which I found very useful as the tutor saw me individually and pointed out where I was going wrong. My tutor also went through the rest of the group members (sic) essays and pointed out where we all did well and where we made mistakes".

Students who choose to receive feedback in front of the group may have some of their assignment displayed on the classroom screen and this may also include a discussion of the Turnitin report. While it is important for students to understand the role Turnitin plays in identifying potential plagiarism, the technology is also useful

when used formatively in helping students learn about how to improve their use of sources (Davis and Carroll, 2009).

This approach was inspired by the response of a final year student in a survey conducted in 2007. In the survey students were asked to write about a critical event in the development of their understanding of plagiarism. In response the student wrote:

“In high school I was fairly unfamiliar with plagiarism until I failed an English coursework for plagiarism. I was stood up in front of the class and told to explain a metaphor in my essay. When I couldn't I was told to re-write the essay. Since then I have always sufficiently referenced others' ideas.”

This made us realise that despite the unethical nature of the event, a deep impression had been left, which several years later, despite further instruction, remained the most prominent memory of plagiarism. We therefore believed that if we could replicate this scenario as closely as possible while remaining ethical, we might be able to alert a greater number of students to the importance of the topic.

The approach also meant that students who had written acceptably but may still not have a fully developed understanding of plagiarism, a group referred to by Perry (2010) as “*Blameless Innocents*”, would have access to examples of writing which cover gaps in their understanding.

As well as encouraging students to develop their understanding of plagiarism, the approach attempts to demonstrate to the students what is valued in academic writing. Therefore the feedback does not only focus on plagiarism but a variety of writing issues with emphasis also placed on positive points in the scripts. This can range from examples of instructions being followed in the brief to evidence of critical discussion. Indeed, in cases where scripts are found to have a number of positive attributes then the advice of Heinrich (2007) is followed and, with the permission of the authors, the scripts are published on the VLE, along with comments, so that the whole cohort has the opportunity to read types of writing which are likely to gain them the most credit.

In a survey which is completed voluntarily following the intervention, the students are asked to indicate which of the activities we have employed added most to their understanding of plagiarism and which added least (See Table 2). While it might not be easy to separate the oral feedback from the written feedback, the results suggest that the oral feedback is useful, particularly in the past two years where more students have identified it as adding most to their understanding than adding least. However, we believe that for some students this exercise only acts as a challenge to their understanding of plagiarism and that the activities which follow help them to develop a new understanding.

Table 2 - Which activity added most and which added least to your understanding of plagiarism?

Which added most to your understanding of	2008 (%)	2009 (%)	2010 (%)	TOTAL (%)
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plagiarism?				
Written feedback on essay	6 (7.69)	6 (9.23)	5 (9.26)	17 (8.63)
Oral feedback on essay	4 (5.13)	10 (15.38)	9 (16.67)	23 (11.68)
Interactive Lecture	22 (28.21)	23 (35.38)	20 (37.04)	65 (32.99)
Test	32 (41.03)	17 (26.15)	10 (18.52)	59 (29.95)
Quiz	10 (12.82)	4 (6.15)	1 (1.85)	15 (7.61)
Report feedback	4 (5.13)	5 (7.69)	7 (12.96)	16 (8.12)
None of the above	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	2 (3.70)	2 (1.02)
Total	78(100.00)	65(100.00)	54(100.00)	197 (100.00)
Which added least to your understanding of plagiarism?	2008 (%)	2009 (%)	2010 (%)	TOTAL (%)
Written feedback on essay	19 (24.36)	14 (21.54)	17 (31.48)	50 (25.38)
Oral feedback on essay	14 (17.95)	7 (10.77)	3 (5.56)	24 (12.18)
Interactive Lecture	9 (11.54)	10 (15.38)	7 (12.96)	26 (13.20)
Test	6 (7.69)	10 (15.38)	11 (20.37)	27 (13.71)
Quiz	12 (15.38)	14 (21.54)	7 (12.96)	33 (16.75)
Report feedback	18 (23.08)	9 (13.85)	9 (16.67)	36 (18.27)
None of the above	0 (0.00)	1 (1.54)	0 (0.00)	1 (0.51)
Total	78(100.00)	65(100.00)	54(100.00)	197 (100.00)

During the same week as the feedback is given on the Baseline Essay students receive the brief for the second 500 word assignment (see Table 1) which continues to be about the CV that the students prepare in order to make a mock application for a placement position. The students are asked to prepare a report about two decisions, supported by evidence from their reading, that they made in preparing the CV. Whereas, in the first assignment they did not select the sources to be used, for the second task they have a free choice and therefore input from a librarian during the same week guides them in how to access relevant sources. Similarly, a session on reading at university prompts the students to reflect on the research they had carried out in preparation for the previous assignment and encourages them to consider making adaptations for future studies.

The Interactive Plagiarism Lecture using a student response system

At the beginning of the second week the students have an interactive lecture on plagiarism in which they are asked to decide whether some scenarios and short samples of writing constitute plagiarism. The lecture requires the students to respond anonymously via a student response system to the questions which are posed, enabling them to receive rapid feedback. A feature of the session is that they are asked at the beginning and at the end if they have ever plagiarised. Table 3 shows a summary of the responses to these questions over the three years that the lecture been in operation. During the first year the session had little impact on the students' perceptions of plagiarism with 78% giving the same response to the question when posed before and after the session (26 chose 'I have plagiarised' and 6 chose 'I have never plagiarised from 41 responses). Of the remaining

students only 5 (12.2%) decided that they had previously plagiarised after initially responding that they had not. However, in the following years the numbers changing their mind during the session rose with 18 (23.7%) of the 2009 group and 13 (35.1%) of the 2010 group deciding that they had in fact plagiarised after initially indicating that they had not.

Table 3 - Student responses when asked anonymously if they had ever plagiarised 1) before the interactive lecture and 2) after the interactive lecture

	1)	I have plagiarised	I have never plagiarised	I have never plagiarised	I have never plagiarised
	2)	I have plagiarised	I have never plagiarised	I have plagiarised	I have never plagiarised
2008		26	4	5	6
2009		30	4	18	24
2010		15	3	13	6
Total		71	11	36	36

The apparent increased impact of this interactive lecture is supported by student responses in the survey conducted following the intervention where just under a third of students over the three years identified it as adding most to their understanding of plagiarism (see Table 2).

Online plagiarism test and referencing quiz

Immediately following the lecture an online version of the questions in the lecture is made available via the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for the rest of the week. The students are required to complete it successfully in a maximum of three attempts. For those that are having difficulty in completing the test successfully, support is offered in the form of automated feedback on the answers and, if necessary, individual tutorials. During the third week the students are offered a further online assessment in which they answer multiple choice questions about writing and referencing. This quiz is intended to present a positive view emphasising the reasons why sources be included and demonstrating how to show them.

The first of these online activities has proven to be popular. However, Table 2 shows that this popularity has declined with the proportion selecting it as the activity adding most to their understanding of plagiarism more than halving from 41% in 2008 to less than 19% in 2010 and those selecting it as adding least rising from less than 8% in 2008 to more than 20% in 2010. One explanation for this might be that as our confidence grows in conducting the activities which precede this and we gain knowledge of what works best, so students begin to develop their understanding of plagiarism earlier.

The worth of the test is also supported in comments made by students in end of year reflections. One student suggested that the fact they were able to repeat the test was useful:

"[We] had to understand the importance of plagiarism and to make us write in a style this is acceptable for University. For this, I had to complete an online test concerning plagiarism. I found it hard to grasp with at first but then later after reading notes, I attained full marks".

Another student noted that the online test was the point at which they began to understand the concept:

"... I was unable to grasp the concept of Harvard Referencing until I did the online test ... I found the concept of multiple choice on plagiarism highly effective for me as I learnt various new facts about plagiarism".

Finally, another student emphasised the usefulness of the test in supporting the written assignment they were preparing:

"... with the aid of the online test, I was able to create an essay [the Academic Report] with the appropriate referencing."

The second written assignment: The Academic Report

During the fourth week the students are in the process of completing both their CVs and the written report about its design. As with the previous assessment the students submit this report via Turnitin and receive feedback during the following week via Grademark. The aim of the process is not only to help the students to continue the development of their understanding of plagiarism but also to continue emphasising what writing is likely to be valued, for example, in this task the students are encouraged not to use direct quotations unless they feel it is absolutely necessary.

During the first two years of the current approach, plagiarism was mentioned in feedback on this report to just three students. During the third year of the approach this rose to eleven. It transpired that nine of these students, due to border entry difficulties, had missed induction week and had therefore not completed the previous writing task, nor been available for the group feedback.

Table 2 shows that few students indicated that this final part of the approach had added most to their understanding of plagiarism. This is consistent with the low numbers who had plagiarism mentioned in their feedback and suggests that by this stage most seemed confident that their understanding had developed over the previous weeks.

A developing understanding of plagiarism

In the survey conducted once the intervention is complete the students are asked if they had heard of plagiarism prior to university. Table 4 shows that of 198 students who have taken part in the survey over the three years, 168 (84.8%) had prior knowledge of the concept.

Table 4 - Had you heard of plagiarism before you came to University?

Year	No (%)	Yes (%)	Total
2008	16 (20.3)	63 (79.7)	79
2009	8 (12.3)	57 (87.7)	65
2010	6 (11.1)	48 (88.9)	54
Total	30 (15.2)	168 (84.8)	198

While this demonstrates that large numbers had prior knowledge of plagiarism, a large minority (15.2%) claimed no prior knowledge. This was supported by a number of students writing in their end of year reflections, for example

“For the first month we were taught about plagiarism ... I had never heard of this before.”

“When I started university it was my first time to be familiar with the phrase plagiarism ...”

However, when those who indicated that they had heard of plagiarism were asked in the next question if their understanding had changed since starting university, 159 of 167 responses (95.2%) indicated that it had changed (see Table 5). This suggests that this intervention that engages students for an extended period is helpful given the numbers who had an understanding of plagiarism prior to starting the degree that was not the same as that held by the university.

Table 5 – Has your understanding of plagiarism changed since starting university?

Year	No (%)	Yes (%)	Total
2008	5 (8.1)	57 (91.9)	62
2009	3 (5.3)	54 (94.7)	57
2010	0 (0.0)	48 (100.0)	48
Total	8 (4.8)	159 (95.2)	167

Conclusion

The approach aimed at helping students learn about plagiarism described in this report has existed for three years. The experience of running the module and the evidence collected supports the continuation of the approach and it is hoped that more students are now able to develop appropriate approaches to study and writing earlier than otherwise would have been the case.

By making the earliest possible start in emphasising what is valued and what is not valued through a series of varied activities, the students have a number of opportunities to reflect on their academic writing. Importantly, they have two opportunities, a month apart, to write and gain formative feedback, thus providing a safe environment for them to develop their writing at university and possibly pass through stages of writing which can be classed as plagiarism. One such stage named patchwriting is mentioned by Carroll (2009) as being an indication that a student needs to learn more, while Pecorari (2003) explains that students writing in this way need support to develop their writing. Evidence that this may be present amongst these students came in one end of year reflection in which the student said how difficult it had been to write “*without plagiarising*”, attributing this to a lack of confidence he had had in his own writing which he had since overcome.

While the intervention may sufficiently support the writing needs of some students it cannot cater for the writing needs of all; for some this intervention is a starting point. However, since the intervention is led by one of the School’s Academic Skills Tutors in collaboration with the module leader, those who feel they require more support know that it is available without fear of being seen as seeking remedial help. It is probably, therefore, no coincidence that the number of accountancy students voluntarily visiting the School’s Academic Skills Tutors for support with writing has increased considerably since the module began.

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