

# Academic Language and Learning (ALL) in Australia: an endangered or evolving species?

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# Malkin's qus in Grierson w/shop 2015

- What do our choices to enter this field reveal about the higher education sector and our role within it?
- What do we find on our entry to this profession, what do we bring to our employment, [and] to the field?
- How is our field perceived? By students, academics, and administrators. How do or should these perceptions matter to us and how might we respond?
- What do we see as the current and future challenges and opportunities in the field?

# Previously asked questions

- 1990 K. Samuelowicz :“Profession, emerging profession or... a bag of tricks? Learning skills counsellors in Australian tertiary education institutions”.
- 2001 C. Webb: “What is the LAS profession? Who are the LAS advisers?”
- 2003 P. Zeegers “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?”

Webb saw “a pervasive belief amongst LAS professionals that their work continues to reside on the margins of university work, unrecognised and unrewarded” (2001).

All three lamented the very limited career paths, opportunities for research, and access to discipline colleagues experienced by people in the field.

2007, Stevenson & Kokkinn on ALL:

“... the overall picture is of a group of practitioners whose work is understood at best obscurely by those who employ them and those who use their services. They are often in the front line when cracks appear in their institution’s most recent student recruitment strategy and are often downsized and downgraded when belts are tightened. Yet despite inheriting a practice which was formed within the inhibiting boundaries of a deficit view of student learning, they have forged a practice which shows their ability to contribute to a learning environment in which students are engaged and enabled to participate in and contribute to their disciplines.”

# Significant change in 21 C: Embedding development of ALL into disciplines

Stevenson & Kokkinn: “The developments around embedding .... may have been the first time that the potential of ALL practice became clear and the first time that the practice was conceptualised as anything other than clinical and remedial” (2007, p. 49).

- ALL practitioners in teams with academic developers, learning designers, and/or specialists in information literacy
- Greater integration into disciplines and degrees
- Greater access to policy, planning, and discipline academics?
- Greater distance from students, with shift online
- Teaching devolved to peers, outsourced to online providers

ALL: Evolving or endangered?



# Focus & Method of our survey

“We are seeking to explore the current experience of ALL professionals in Australia, specifically from which backgrounds, pathways, and past careers we as professionals derive [origins]; why we enter the field, what does (or does not) sustain us and cause us to remain [purposes], and vitally, what we feel might be the current challenges facing our work and range of roles [destinations].”

- 23 qus, quant & qual (closed choice of answer; open text box)
- 105 respondents (AALL 191 + Unilearn list)
- 1,359 comments
- Sorted into themes; report >10% of answers or 10 “mentions”

# Results: Countables

- 84% female
- 73% > 45 yo; 46% > 55
- 22% in ALL < 5 years; 52% 5 - 15 years; 24% longer (8% > 25 years).
- 39% in Victoria and 23% in NSW
- 86% have English as L1
- 77% have some command of a language(s) other than English.
- 60% have lived for 6 months or more in a non-English speaking country
- 48% have masters = highest qual; 33% have doctorate.
- first degrees: Social Sciences (33%); literature (29%); 13% in Physical, Health, and Life Sciences combined.



# What impelled people into ALL work?

- *needed a job (12%),*
- *opportunity (14%),*
- *TESOL pathway (26%),*
- *perfect fit for interest (25%).*

What they brought: social activism,  
intellectual interest in language

- *school experience (13%);*
- *an interest in social justice and empowerment (20%);*
- *HE led to interest in academic discourse (23%);*
- *Linguistics leading to ESL (23%);*
- *interest in linguistic and cultural diversity (24%);*
- *empathy gained through experience (63%)*

# What has shaped your contribution to ALL?

- Understanding of: *second language acquisition* (11 mentions), *pedagogy* (12 mentions), *learning processes* (14 mentions), *genre and discourse* (15 mentions), and *needs of students* (16 mentions).
- Commitment to: *the belief that everyone can learn* (11 mentions) and to *social justice* (14 mentions)
- Encouragement and support from: *AALL resources, opportunities, and conferences* (12 mentions); *AALL colleagues in institution, state, and nation* (14 mentions); and an *ALL culture of learning, collaboration, and innovation* (18 mentions).

## How positioned? Classification

- Roughly 39% academic, 50% professional, and 12% other
- Compare 2015: 45% academic, 55% “general”
- Compare 2003: 55% academic, 27% general HEW levels 7 or 8, and 18% mixed (Barthel, 2003).

In your uni, do ac developers and AALL staff work separately, collaboratively, some of each, or other?

- 27% work separately; 10% collaboratively; 37% some of each; and 28% “other”.
- 17% thought a separate focus was appropriate as the skills and expertise of ALL and AD are different
- 48% thought the groups should collaborate. But there were concerns about how well this is managed:
  - 23% suggested that ALL services are at risk of being under-utilised or not utilised at all.
  - 20% felt that collaboration between the groups can be under-resourced.

## Not necessary to be co-located w/AD

“The work of ALL is probably best when it straddles the two roles. We get a lot of academic development work from going into classes to 'explain' the assessment writing tasks to students (which requires working with academics to determine those requirements). We usually work with the academics to draft an assessment rubric to show students what they are required to produce and how it will be judged. Often the need for an assessment 'workshop' becomes evident from students attending the drop-in in the first place. ... If I am not working with students I believe I have diminished authority when I speak to academics about their students' learning needs (and when I speak to students about lecturers' requirements of the assessment tasks).”

Frustrations: low status and lack of understanding or appreciation by management.

- *lack of time and resources (14%);*
- *low status (18%);*
- *unrealistic expectations (11%);*
- *downgrading of role (21%);*
- *poor visibility of ALL (20%);*
- *lack of ALL embeddedness (21%);*
- *management do not value or understand (50%).*

# What might make you want to leave?

- *reclassification as professional (10%);*
- *redundancy, retirement (17%); poor management (20%);*
- *better or academic job (22%);*
- *lower or lack of respect (31%).*
- “Winning lotto”
- “I think about it all the time”
- “Death!”
- “At the moment I wouldn’t even consider this as I think I've found the perfect job”.



- “When my role means that I do not get much time to work with students and is increasingly administrative or developing materials”.
- “bad management” = “lack of institutional commitment, consultation and foresight about what students really want and need, and how to deliver it most effectively - e.g. wanting to cut individual consultations and replace them with huge lectures and online resources - which don't help when students don't yet know what they don't know!”
- A “lack of control or agency in our work”

- “1. lack of time for publications or research project participation, not having a researcher profile and opportunities for proper evaluation of my work, etc. 2. Feeling overworked and unable to help staff and students due to under-resourcing 3. New working spaces that may not be conducive to proper engagement with students or academics (e.g., open space offices)”.

- “the lack of interest and recognition by some key players in the ALL sector of the mathematics work that many ALL educators do”

# What sustains & motivates you in your work?

- 75% *student success/helping people learn/  
student life skills*
- 25%: collegiality
- 25%: *student contact*
- 22%: *demystifying the academy*
- 14%: *flexible duties*
- 13%: *working with progressive academics*
- 11%: *Interesting, varied work*

“I love materials development and embedding academic language in curricula”;

“seeing [students’] confidence improve ... as they finally understand how to tackle university and understand why they've been struggling”;

“I am motivated by students who all have a story”

“the students, always the students. I enjoy it when the 'light turns on', when they 'get it'”.

- “Since joining ALL it has been the collegial and collaborative nature of the work that has kept me here”
- “opportunities to work with and learn from talented and truly kind colleagues”
- “the developmental nature of the work and the opportunity to be reflective and involved in shaping the practice where I work”
- “the appreciation shown by my employers and by the students I work with for the job that I do”

“The range of the ways we work.  
Collaboration, college-facing teams, working  
in the disciplines to embed literacies,  
individual teaching, workshops, small groups,  
developing resources...two steps forward and  
one back but wow! when it works,  
transformational.”

# Main challenges, now and in future

- *profit-driven, high-volume environment (13%);*
- *student contact replaced by online presence (24%);*
- *further marginalisation (25%);*
- *recognition of our role in learning and teaching (34%);*
- *need for better understanding of our role (39%);*
- *funding cuts (42%).*



# Comments on challenges

- The perceived implications of universities' spending cuts included "casualization of the workforce and an increasing shift to online study environments", entailing de-skilling of ALL staff and difficulties adapting where training was not offered for new tasks
- A typical comment was concerned with "the shift of ALL work from experienced and qualified academic staff to students, other professional staff (library) staff and online outsourced programs and the concomitant lack of respect for ALL staff and their capacity to shape policy and practice".

- Again, however, there was at least one dissenting voice: “From the conferences and symposia I have attended, I hear a lot of negativity and sometimes feel that some ALL educators have yet to move to a more flexible and innovative space rather than bemoaning their current state”.

## Possible developments seen as positive

- *more academic development work* (10 mentions);
- *more flexibility in modes of teaching* (given adequate resources for developing materials) (10 mentions);
- *and more collaboration with academics and embedding in disciplines* (20 mentions).

## Ways to influence or manage change: Individuals

- *develop ways to evaluate our effectiveness* (11 mentions);
- *promote our work and communicate our worth* (20 mentions);
- *undertake PD on emerging technologies* (11 mentions);
- *be open to change/learn new skills* (16 mentions);
- *network for support, and collaborate* (11 mentions);
- *understand the HE landscape* (11 mentions);
- *maintain a research and evidence base for our work* (21 mentions).

# Managing change: Institutions & AALL

- While ALL professionals should *demonstrate our value to institutions* (12 mentions),
- Institutions should *value and listen to ALL staff* (15 mentions);
- and *recognise ALL contribution to retention and student development* (11 mentions).
  
- For its part, the AALL Association should *advocate for the profession with one coherent voice* (14 mentions).

## Individuals:

- “connecting our work to wider educational trends e.g. how do we connect with MOOCs?”
- “How can learning analytics demonstrate our value-adding? How can we evaluate our contribution beyond the single cause-effect models used in individual program/initiative evaluations?”

# Universities:

- “make academic literacy an assessable component of written assignments”
- “put AALL work front and centre when marketing the institution overseas”;
- “include compulsory ALL modules in foundation or first year”;
- “influence government for more funds for our work. Perhaps students get a voucher they can 'spend' with us”;
- “commit to a whole-of-institution approach to embedding ALL and valuing it through recognising ALL practitioners as both academics (if the person wants to research) and teachers (if they are happy not to research)”;
- “love and cherish their learning centres”.

## AALL could Educate bodies/persons with power over our work

- “Promote the key concepts & strategies of AALL to governments and institutions to recognise the field of AALL as professionals who support and work towards equity for student learners in higher education”
- “Hold conversations on a national level with accrediting bodies and other professional associations in education”
- “Emphasise the importance of international students globally and in Australia, beyond revenue generators”
- “Try to educate Vice Chancellors”
- “Make representations on these issues to PVCs Learning & Teaching and submissions to policy development”
- “Establish stronger connections with other similar bodies outside Australia - e.g. EATAW; more practitioner research”
- “Support/commission research which connects our work to wider educational trends”



## *Professional development for members*

- “Promote cross-institutional collaborations and projects”
- “Provide evidence of models that work and ones that don’t”
- “Offer innovative workshops and research articles in developing areas”
- “Record & share innovative practices”
- “Better understand the STEM disciplines”

## *Formal training and certification*

- “Develop formal qualifications/certification for AALL staff and work to achieve recognition of it”
- “Offer accredited training programs for ALL tutors, training programs for online materials development”
- “Get [ALL] established as a recognised area for Education graduates”

“Band together to provide our own consultancy, so that when AALL work is outsourced we can provide it competitively. ...We cannot change what universities will ultimately do, and they are under increasing budget pressure. We need to be innovative and creative to meet the challenges.”

# What has/ has not changed?

- Still undervalued, underpaid, misunderstood
- BUT more integrated into Teaching & Learning
- More collaboration with AD, embedding into curricula
- Percy , 2014 -- ALL practitioners “should be centrally involved in collaborative educational development practices with discipline staff alongside academic developers, such that their experience with students and expertise in language can be used to the benefit of all”.
- BUT erosion of access to students
- Supportive, collegial culture of ALL

# Always precarious habitat, and changing

ALL educators arrive, often 'by accident' (Percy, 2011), from a variety of pathways with diverse qualifications and experience to operate in an environment where their work is often cast in both academic and service terms; where they may be deployed, just as one example, to teach 'generic learning skills', 'academic literacy' and/or 'English language proficiency'; and where academic literacy, for example, is recognised as a moral imperative and a marketable commodity, a remediable 'skill' and a developmental capacity, the responsibility of the student, the responsibility of the ALL educator, the responsibility of the discipline academic and the responsibility of the curriculum.

The tensions between the various histories and rationalities that underpin these multiple understandings keep ALL educators in an ambiguous space, floating between the margins and the centre, between the student, the faculty and the institution, between a liberal notion of equity and the values of the marketplace, between fixing the problem, changing the culture and constantly reinventing themselves. (Percy 2015, p. 882)

# What would Foucault say?

Rather than ALL practitioners having agency to shape the purpose and practice of the profession, “it is the historical and political constitution of the student as the subject of higher education and the object of government that has a direct bearing on who and what the ALL educator can ‘be’ in any particular historical moment” (Percy 2015, p. 885).

## Changes in ALL practice follow attempts by HE to adapt to changing visions of society

- 1960s-1980s, “welfare society”, unis seen as “social levellers”
  - ALL mediated differences between students and academy
- 1990s, neoliberal, “learning society”
  - ALL gave “lifelong learners” generic skills
- 2000s, “quality assurance”
  - ALL support quality of curriculum and learning environment



# The end?

We hope not.....

