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

Key Words

Professional identity, workforce planning,

Abstract

This paper reflects on our findings from a survey and interviews designed to explore a shift in the roles and responsibilities of ALL practitioners in the 21st century and to consider what this shift might mean for our future as professionals and a profession. From the early 1980s, the work of ALL practitioners developed separately from that of Academic Developers (AD) in most institutions; ALL staff were broadly focussed on language and discourse, and worked with students, while ADs focussed on learning theory and worked with discipline lecturers (Chanock, 2011). Recently, however, the boundaries of these roles have blurred, allowing for various kinds of collaborations among ALL, AD, and discipline lecturers (and sometimes library staff), and organisational restructure to bring ALL and AD together and/or to assign similar work to both. Some hope that this may mitigate the marginalisation commonly expressed by ALL practitioners (Stevenson & Kokkin, 2007), although a merging of roles may also risk devaluing of the particular knowledge, skills, values and purposes that have shaped ALL work; others fear that the effect will be to do 'away' with ALL work altogether (Wingate, 2006). Our research aimed to form an objective picture of how our colleagues are situated in this shift, and a subjective picture of how they feel about their position and its implications for their sense of purpose, possibility, and satisfaction in their work. Closed questions were designed, first, to obtain information on the educational and cultural experiences that have brought colleagues into the field, and second, to find out how their work is positioned currently in their institutions. Open questions elicited their thoughts on how their education and experience have shaped their work and the field more broadly, and how current trends are likely to impact their commitment and satisfaction in ALL work. We hope that sharing our findings on these topics with our peers at the biennial conference will allow us to use our understanding of where we have come from, where we are now, and both our concerns and excitement about our future, in order to chart a constructive and adaptable future for the profession within the increasingly changing and contested field of higher education.

References

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