ALL Identity: Minimum Professional Requirements, Training and Pedagogy for Academic Skills Advisors

Key Words

Identity, minimum professional requirements, training, pedagogy, ALL

Abstract

The roles of Academic Language and Learning (ALL) staff are expanding across the university sector in Australia. Duties include generic workshop delivery, one-to-one advising, and resource development as well as curricula development with embedded academic skills, design of rubrics, professional development for staff, team teaching assignment-specific workshops, and creating videos and recorded resources for online learning environments. Thus, universities seek to recruit ALL staff with a wide range of skills, experience and qualifications to fit such a diverse, expanding role. The widening scope of work of ALL staff means that a re-articulation of an ALL identity is needed. This study investigates the minimum professional requirements (MPRs) required in ALL recruitment, the training of ALL staff and the preferred pedagogy when advising individual students. A questionnaire was distributed electronically to Managers of Academic Skills Centres across 39 universities in Australia, with a 72% response rate. The Managers were selected given their direct decision-making in ALL recruitment and training. Results of the study indicated that a significant proportion of ALL units exist centrally, with some working in consultation with cross-disciplinary professionals, including Educational Designers and Librarians. Despite this, the range of responsibilities and skills required of ALL staff was extensive. Barthel's (2013) benchmarking reveals the range of the work carried out by ALL staff in Australia but not the experience or qualifications required. Cameron et al (2005) and Moore (2012) noted a preference for ALL staff with teaching qualifications and/or experience. Our study broadly confirmed this but also highlighted a range of preferred qualifications and experience. These 'preferred' qualifications (such as a PhD) and 'preferred' experience (such as one-to-one advising) indicate a transition for ALL from a niche field to one which is much more broadly based. A field where MPRs are less clearly defined than in other areas of student support (Careers Advising, for example) and a field presenting significant challenges for ALL managers seeking to identify suitable candidates with a complex combination of qualifications and experience. It is also interesting to note that many managers indicated the need to train staff post recruitment (in areas such as e-learning). In addition, managers highlighted the importance of using peer-to-peer modelling and shadowing of developmental teaching and advising approaches when training new ALL staff. The study also explored preferred pedagogy when ALL staff teach and consult one-to-one. Chanock (2007) noted this ten years ago and a literature review reveals little subsequent investigation around this important question except for Moore (2012) who found ALL staff working with students to co-construct knowledge. Thus, a gap remains regarding the articulation of advising pedagogy. This research into the current MPRs and preferred pedagogies of Australian University ALL centres provides a thought-provoking context around shared standards, expectations and responsibilities in the ALL field. The snapshot provided by this study serves as a benchmark to inform our understanding of the current ALL identity and how our positions are changing in the current higher education climate.

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