

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

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This paper reflects on our findings from a survey designed to explore a shift in the roles and responsibilities of Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practitioners in the 21st century and to consider what this shift might mean for our professional future. With the trend towards increasing collaborations among ALL, AD, educational designers and discipline lecturers, many of us hope this may mitigate the marginalisation commonly expressed by ALL practitioners, although a merging of roles may also risk devaluing of the particular knowledge, skills, values and purposes that have shaped ALL work.

Our research aimed to discover how our colleagues are situated in this shift, and its implications for their sense of purpose, possibility, and satisfaction in their work. Closed questions obtained information on the educational and cultural experiences that have brought colleagues into the field, and 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.

Key Words: professional identity, Academic Language and Learning.

1. Introduction

This article had its beginning in a workshop presented by one of us (Malkin) to new members of the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) field at the 2015 national conference of the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) in Wollongong. In her role as John Grierson scholar for that year – a role in which a new member leads a workshop for others -- Malkin canvassed her listeners' interest in a series of questions she had devised, which mirrored her own exploration of the field she sought to enter.

- 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, what do we bring 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?

These were questions with a particular resonance in a year that marked the 21st anniversary of the Conference; the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Association; the 20th anniversary of the meeting which had tasked itself with producing a document to define the mission and make-up of the emerging profession (Berghout-Vanderwal, Hicks, McGowan, & Carmichael, 1999); and the 20th anniversary, too, of the Victorian Language and Learning Network's publication *Academic skills advising: Towards a discipline* (Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995). Clearly, uncertainty about who and what we are, as a profession, has been with us from the beginning and persists today. The profession is therefore interested in the ways in which both commonalities and differences have shaped the field: where did we come from, what did we know, and how did that lead us to want to do ALL work? How has it influenced the way we work?

2. Context from ALL literature

Our questions have been asked before, at intervals, and in various forms as LAS – or Language and Academic Skills – evolved into ALL. In 1990 Katherine Samuelowicz gave a conference paper titled “Profession, emerging profession or... a bag of tricks? Learning skills counsellors in Australian tertiary education institutions”. In her Plenary Address for the 2001 LAS Conference on “Changing Identities”, Carolyn Webb asked “What is the LAS profession? Who are the LAS advisers?” In 2003, a keynote by Peter Zeegers, a co-convenor of the 6th Biennial Conference, was titled “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?”

These writers' observations on the state of the profession were not encouraging, evincing what Webb described as “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. To remedy these ills, Webb (2001) urged LAS practitioners to be more strategic, and to organise as a profession; likewise, Zeegers (2003, p. 31) spoke of the need for a professional association and a scholarly journal.

Despite the frustration of many in the field, however, a sense of momentum could also be discerned. In 2001 Webb saw her own role as having moved from that of a remediator “through that of mediator, to integrator, to transformer” (2002). Speaking at the 2003 conference, Percy and Stirling (2003) saw “LAS units [as] at a crucial point in their own transition from ... remedial models ... to a developmental and richly defined LAS pedagogy”, and optimistically declared that “our ‘stock’ is on the rise” (p. 59). And, two years after the founding of AALL with its refereed journal, Stevenson and Kokkinn (2007) were hopeful that these steps could counteract the legacy of the profession's origins in counselling and student services, and “the persistent belief by many university staff, and indeed many students, that the only role of ALL practitioners was to ‘fix’ wayward grammar” (p. 49). “The formation of a professional association”, they wrote, “offers a timely opportunity to challenge those contextual factors which are constraining [; otherwise] ... we will [likely] remain pinned to the margins of universities” (Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007, p. A45).

These hopes were both fulfilled and frustrated in the years that followed. Growing public pressure on universities to develop generic skills in their graduates has made the role of ALL more central, and created more opportunities to collaborate with lecturers to embed development of academic skills in their curricula. In Stevenson and Kokkinn's view, “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).

(For an extensive literature on this, see Chanock's (2014) bibliography on *Collaborating to embed/integrate development of academic literacies into subjects in the disciplines*, available on the AALL website at <http://www.aall.org.au/teaching-and-learning-resources>.) However, as several ALL practitioners have noted, embedding is time-consuming and may not survive changes of discipline staff (e.g., Catterall, 2003; Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007, p. 49; Thies, 2012).

A more central role for ALL has proved a mixed blessing in terms of organisational structures, with restructuring often placing ALL practitioners in teams with academic developers, learning designers, and/or specialists in information literacy. This can produce useful and creative joint projects, but when ALL is situated in central and 'non-teaching' units, ALL staff can find their distance from the disciplines increased. At the same time, much of the work of ALL staff has shifted from teaching face-to-face to creating materials for students to access online, a challenge which many have welcomed both for the opportunities to adapt their expertise to a new technological mode, and for the capacity to reach any student at any time or place. However, it also separates teachers from learners, and in the decline of face-to-face teaching we may see a message to be 'careful what we wish for'. At Stevenson and Kokkinn's university, "It was decided that the increase in student demand was to be met by increased group work, increased resource development and the adoption of shorter contacts with students" (2007, p. 49) i.e., 10-minute drop-in sessions in the first instance, with short appointments thereafter for more complex problems.

Elsewhere, much of the face-to-face work with students has been devolved upon peer tutors or mentors, with the implication that managers see little need for the specialised expertise of ALL staff. This includes both a knowledge of linguistics and the understanding, first articulated by Ballard and Clanchy in 1988, that "[t]he key to improving standards of student literacy lies ... in exploring [the] fundamental relationship between the culture of knowledge and the language by which it is maintained and expressed" (p. 7).

Similarly, collaborations with the disciplines and generic advice make little use of ALL knowledge about language, while online resources cannot readily meet the needs of students who have difficulties with language but do not know what to call them. Managers' lack of understanding of the nature of ALL expertise has been reflected in the downsizing or downgrading of staff in a number of institutions, restructuring of their roles into non-teaching central service units, and reclassification of their jobs from academic to professional. Gordon Taylor's three fundamental requirements for ALL work (Taylor, 1978, p. 37) – "contact with staff, students to teach and learn from, and time to think" – are increasingly hard to come by.

In 2007, Stevenson and Kokkinn (2007) summarised the situation of ALL as follows:

... 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. (p. 50)

3. Focus of our research

What does it take to sustain commitment to the job and to recreate it as the context changes? In analysing the data that emerged from our survey, Malkin was reminded of polar bears trapped on diminishing sea ice as a metaphor for many ALL colleagues whose practices evolved in one academic habitat and are struggling to adapt to another. In their responses to our research, these colleagues have shared their experiences and ideas, with implications for adaptation to the climate change afoot in higher education.

In a changing academic ecosystem, can we continue to develop an informed and effective practice that is a genuine resource for students? If so, how? And if not, do we want to remain in the job? Our survey shed light on all these questions – who we are, how we got here, and how we see the present and future of our profession.

4. Methodology

We have chosen a survey combining quantitative and qualitative elements as being suited to combining two kinds of exploration of a shift in the roles and responsibilities of ALL practitioners in the 21st century, in Australia as elsewhere. Since the early 1980s, the work of ALL practitioners had developed separately from that of Academic Developers 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; Chanock, Garner, & Clerehan, 1995; Taylor et al., 1988). Recently, however, the boundaries of these roles have blurred, allowing for various kinds of collaborations among ALL, AD, educational designers and discipline lecturers (and sometimes library staff), and organisational restructure to bring ALL and AD together and/or to assign similar work to both (e.g., Allan & Clarke, 2007; Baik & Greig, 2009; Chanock, 2013; Chanock, Horton, Reedman, & Stephenson, 2011; Deveraux & Wilson, 2008; Durkin & Main, 2002; Einfalt & Turley, 2009; Frohman, 2012; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Kokkin & Mahar, 2011; Percy & Skillen, 2000; Thies, 2012; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011; Yoo, 2016). 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 (to borrow a phrase that Wingate (2006) used in connection with “study skills”).

In our research, we wished 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. Our survey includes closed questions 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 are designed to elicit their subjective thoughts on how their education and experience have shaped their work and the field more broadly, and how current trends are likely to impact upon their commitment and satisfaction in ALL work. The survey was distributed via the AALL membership list (of 191 in November 2016) and the Unilearn list server, which reaches colleagues who do not belong to AALL, as well as those who do, and we received 105 responses. In reporting our results, we have assigned answers to emerging themes (arrived at separately, then refined) -- shown in italics -- and have selected quotations either for their representative character, or to show a range of divergent views. For the themes, we report here on those that featured in more than 10% of responses (and we have rounded the percentages up or down).

5. Findings

5.1. Demographics

First, the ‘countables’. We found that members of our profession are predominantly female, at 84%, and rather old – 73% of us are over 45, with 46% over 55. This age distribution does not mean, however, that most of us have been in the field for our whole career; 22% have worked in ALL for fewer than 5 years, 52% for between 5 and 15 years, and 24% for longer (with 8% persisting for over 25 years). This suggests that it is a field people enter, often, from some other working background. We are clustered in the more populous states in Australia, with 39% in Victoria and 23% in New South Wales. We are predominantly Anglophone – 86% have English as their first language – but, thankfully, not too monolingual, as 77% have some command of a language(s) other than English. Sixty percent of us have lived for six months or more in a non-

English speaking country (we framed our question in this way so that it would not elicit brief tourism, but travel of a more immersive nature). Forty-eight percent of us have a Masters degree as our highest qualification, while another 33% have a doctorate. The broad fields of our first degrees were heavily clustered in Social Sciences (33%) and literature (29%), with only 13% in Physical, Health, and Life Sciences combined.

5.2. What we bring

Our first open questions concerned what brought people into the profession, and what they brought with them, in the way of experience and education, that they thought shaped their approach to the work and their contribution to the field more broadly. There were a range of push and pull factors for entry into the field, but the ones mentioned by more than 10% of respondents included *needed a job* (12%), *opportunity* (14%), *TESOL pathway* (26%), and, happily, *perfect fit for interest* (25%).

With regard to what they thought they brought to the work that was important, respondents named a range of attributes, including *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%); and *empathy gained through experience* (63%). This might be experience of being the first in family to enter higher education; studying as a mature-aged student; undertaking postgraduate study; learning in a foreign language; or living in an unfamiliar culture. The concern for social justice and empowerment was evoked thought exposure to the struggles of others, including people of low socio-economic status, refugees, Indigenous students, or students with learning difficulties.

These themes suggest a combination of social activism and intellectual interest in language at the forefront of factors that impel people into ALL work. Travelling or working (and, in one case, marrying) overseas shaped respondents' understanding of the needs of international students: "Travelling and living in foreign countries, ... you are forced to communicate in a different language and are faced with cultural differences. This has made me more empathetic towards students and staff from a different background to mine" (Respondent 51).

Working with migrants and/or refugees, similarly, afforded insight into the experience of people settling permanently in Australia. It was not only an interest in people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds that shaped colleagues' approach to the work, however; more broadly, they sought to promote social justice through making higher education more accessible and comprehensible. One respondent listed her motivations as a "Strong sense of social justice fostered by a Catholic education; feminism; belief grounded in teaching experience of effects of poor literacy and intergenerational poverty on life opportunities, that education is an enabler of life opportunities" (Respondent 95). Interestingly, some respondents' own experiences of studying in Australian HE were a powerful influence in their determination to make it better for others. One respondent writes of her "experience of being a student, struggling with essay writing, thesis writing myself - and also being aware of other students 'not' always getting it" (Respondent 60), while another recalled "studying at university in an era where mystification was the default" (Respondent 48). For another, "Dropping out of uni after 1st year, and then returning to it as a mature age student gave me an appreciation of the stresses but also the satisfaction of combining learning with life" (Respondent 42).

An intellectual interest in language was another factor shaping respondents' work with staff and students; one respondent writes "Ultimately, I am most passionate about writing processes and the crafting of language, and those two aspects of writing are fundamental to how I can usefully explain academic work to students. (Some academic staff also say they have learned something!)" (Respondent 42). For one, it was experience in teaching discipline subjects that informed his/her practice: "My degrees involved a lot of textual analysis, which provided ground work for assisting students with writing. I previously was a lecturer and tutor in my academic fields. The teaching

experience and familiarity with students' and staff's needs help me to do this work" (Respondent 84). For another, it was a broader experience of working "in adult education in various settings: community college adult literacy programs, creative writing in the community, and developmental disability (DoCS in NSW) ... [that] has shaped my understanding of education as a life-long endeavour" (Respondent 44).

In response to the question, "What do you feel has shaped your contribution to the ALL field and its development?" responses encompassed both respondents' knowledge and convictions, and the supportive environment they perceived in ALL. Respondents thought that their understanding of a range of topics benefited ALL as a field: *second language acquisition* (11 mentions), *pedagogy* (12 mentions), *learning processes* (14 mentions), *genre and discourse* (15 mentions), and *needs of students* (16 mentions). A commitment to *the belief that everyone can learn* (11 mentions) and to *social justice* (14 mentions) were considered important as well. Encouragement and support of three overlapping kinds were named: *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). 13 answers were from people *unsure or too early in career*.

Representative comments included:

"social justice, the power of language, a belief that our work matters – reinforced by lots of students along the way; being able to link the on the ground stuff with bigger agendas and looking for a wedge into making an intervention into those big agendas" (Respondent 88);

and "good understanding of how language works, and of different genres and communication needs, as well as insight into needs of students new to the culture of tertiary education" (Respondent 79).

5.3. Where/how we are positioned

Because we were interested in how the structural changes to ALL in the last 10 years or so affected our respondents, we asked about their job classification and their satisfaction with that. The proportions were roughly 39% academic, 50% professional, and 12% other (these included 4 working in TAFE, 2 working part time in both categories, and 3 who had recently been restructured from academic to professional). These are somewhat changed since 2015, the last year for which national information about AALL centres was updated by Alex Barthel on the Association's website (at <http://www.aall.org.au/australian-all-centres>). At that time, 45% of ALL staff were employed as academic staff, with 55% "general" staff (now "professional"). An earlier benchmark is available from 2003, when Barthel obtained figures from 33 university ALL units (then known as LAS), where 55% of ALL staff were on academic appointments, 27% general staff at HEW levels 7 or 8, and 18% mixed (Barthel, 2003). A trend is apparent: academic appointments have been decreasing for some time (and the shift has sometimes been achieved by spilling ALL staff and re-advertising their jobs as professional appointments). In response to our survey question asking whether respondents were satisfied with their classification, 38% were satisfied while 8% were not. Of those who offered comments on why/why not, 15% felt that each classification has good and bad aspects, while 12% thought it depended on context; 58% thought the role should be academic, while 10% thought it should be professional (5% were undecided). A professional appointment could allow more freedom to work creatively, and to focus on students without pressure to publish research; on the other hand, it was frustrating for those who wanted opportunities for research and promotion, and could be a barrier to working with lecturers for whom academic status conferred credibility.

Our next question concerned the extent of separation or combination of the ALL role with the AD role in our respondents' institutions:

Historically, the work of academic developers (helping lecturers teach better) and the work of ALL professionals (helping students learn better) has usually been done by different people, positioned separately in the organisational structure of their universities. More recently, people from both groups have been teamed together to help lecturers develop students' academic literacies within their subject curricula. In your university, do academic developers and AALL staff work separately, collaboratively, some of each, or other (please specify)?

Responses indicated that 27% work separately; 10% collaboratively; 37% some of each; and 28% "other".

When asked about their satisfaction with this allocation of roles, 28% were satisfied, while 10% were not. A very high proportion of respondents to this question, 62%, chose to select the why/why not option, of which 48% insisted that the groups should collaborate. The next highest response at 23% suggested that ALL services are at risk of being under-utilised or not utilised at all. Whether or not this is a greater or lesser risk in collaborative environments was not able to be discerned. Twenty percent felt that collaboration between the groups can be under-resourced. It might be considered somewhat surprising that the role of an institution's particular type or situation was seen to play so small a role in the satisfaction in the allocation of these roles, with only 6% considering that 'context' made a difference to satisfaction.

Views were mixed but comments acknowledged the value, or at least necessity, of collaboration. One respondent reflected that

Curriculum development and professional development (teaching academic teachers) overshadows the work of student support. The former is considered more important than the latter and the only way in which the problem of lower retention, poor success and engagement can be solved sustainably. (Respondent 81)

While this encroaches on work with students, respondents recognised that it is not only students' lack of understanding that gives rise to difficulties, but also lecturers' lack of clarity. One said, "It would be so much easier if ALL and academic developers could work together. That way we wouldn't see as many students struggling with poorly conceived assessment!" (Respondent 84). More theoretically, another opined that "Learning and teaching are not separate. This perpetuates the disconnect that exists between 'content' and 'skills' which runs contra to my socio-constructivist approach to learning and teaching and language" (Respondent 40).

While 48% of comments agreed that *ALL and AD should collaborate*, 17% thought a *separate focus was appropriate* as the skills and expertise of ALL and AD are different. That a focus on *AD work could neglect the needs of students* was a concern for 17% of comments; and, as noted above, another 23% thought *ALL are not, or under, utilised in collaborations* and 20% thought that *collaborations were under-resourced*.

One respondent who worked separately from AD said that "The current situation [of working separately] fragments/compartmentalizes the whole learning/teaching experience [so that] it is not possible to make significant improvements" (Respondent 64), while another agreed that "there is too much cross-over ... to be working in isolation" (Respondent 29). Priorities could be problematic, however; for example, one respondent took issue with "much greater allocation of staffing and resources to support technology than to help students and staff focus on learning and teaching" (Respondent 63). By contrast, a respondent who had been a Faculty Online Educational Developer found that "where staff appreciate that they can do more than send students to me to 'be fixed', collaborative curriculum development can be very satisfying" (Respondent 44). This seems to lend support to a respondent's observation that

when the relevant partners are allowed to work in the most appropriate way for themselves and their skill sets it can be great. When people are forced to only do certain things, or to act outside their area of competence there is a lot of scope for things to go wrong. (Respondent 4)

Interestingly, a respondent who was happy with the separation of roles thought that lecturers were reluctant to consult AD for help as it might reflect upon their competence as teachers, but were willing to take advice from ALL on how to help students with their problems as learners. While working with AD may be intended to enhance access to lecturers, this respondent suspects that ALL could be “tainted” by association with staff tasked with improving lecturers’ performance.

Indeed, it is not necessary to be co-located with AD in order to do academic development work as part of the ALL role, as this comment elaborates:

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). (Respondent 104)

5.4. Frustrations

When asked “What frustrates you in ALL work?” -- apart from one “Nothing! I love it” (Respondent 22) – answers clumped heavily around issues of low status and lack of understanding or appreciation by management. The themes that were mentioned by more than 10% of answers included: *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%); and *management do not value or understand* (50%). Responses commonly deplored job insecurity, disruptive restructuring, and “employment of managers from outside the field who know little about it” (Respondent 42). Interestingly, however, there were voices opposed to the anger and resentment that have become so familiar over time. One respondent was frustrated by colleagues “whining about being on the periphery but not stepping out of our comfort zones to have more influence” (Respondent 61), while another nominated,

Sometimes, the negative discourse of ALL staff. It's common – particularly when ALL staff get together – to lament a lack of access to curriculum, a lack of recognition and collaboration, and generally grumble about being under appreciated experts. Although I recognise this, I think it's damaging. We need to find a way to leave this behind and move on constructively. (Respondent 1)

At least one respondent seems to have achieved this, saying,

At this stage, I don't have a sense of frustration. I tend to look at an issue as a challenge and have realistic expectations about the limits of my capabilities (I can't change the world but I can change my little bit of it). It takes understanding, patience and colleagues with whom I have similar goals. (Respondent 96)

One other response is, we think, worth quoting at length as it usefully shifts the focus to the bigger picture within which we are all situated.

After this length of time, I have reached the final stage: acceptance. Or perhaps more accurately, my focus has shifted to those things about higher ed more broadly that are problematic. Currently, (this week), I am frustrated by drives to improve casual lecturers’ teaching with a proliferation of guidelines and

resources, while not paying them for enough time to do a good job and be reflective and open to students. This creates a situation where lecturers and students see each other as the problem, rather than seeing the problem as something that has been created by a sector business ethos which believes that quality is an outcome of centralised control and not an outcome of those things which fairness fosters: professionalism, safety, innovation, shared goals, curiosity, community. In my own job, I do feel frustrated by my own fading knowledge and expertise, as there is generally little to no scope for professional development and research is discouraged. (Respondent 9)

What, then, might make our colleagues consider leaving the ALL field? Themes emerging from over 10% of answers included *reclassification as professional* (10%); *redundancy, retirement* (17%); *poor management* (20%); *better or academic job* (22%); and *lower or lack of respect* (31%). Interestingly, *online replacing face-to-face* was mentioned by only 7%, and generally, we were surprised by the small numbers of responses deploring the erosion of individual teaching and/or the move from face-to-face teaching to putting material online. These issues did attract comment, over several of the questions, but not above 10% for any. One respondent did, poignantly, say s/he would consider leaving “If I missed seeing young students’ learning journeys throughout the course of a whole year” (Respondent 73), while another said that “seeing our work become too automated” (Respondent 36) would be a reason to leave. Another would leave “When my role means that I do not get much time to work with students and is increasingly administrative or developing materials” (Respondent 26). Similarly, a respondent characterised “bad management” as a “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!” (Respondent 55). A “lack of control or agency in our work” (Respondent 104) was problematic, and more specifically, a respondent wrote of

“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). (Respondent 46)

We feel it important to include one comment about numeracy, that

the lack of interest and recognition by some key players in the ALL sector of the mathematics work that many ALL educators do is a key negative for me. Some key ALL educators can’t face including mathematics as part of ALL and this is a major put down for those of us for whom that is our focus. (Respondent 39)

Similar complaints have been voiced at previous AALL conferences, and this seems to be an ongoing problem.

Briefly, answers to what would make people leave ALL ranged from “Winning lotto” (Respondent 33) through “I think about it all the time” (Respondent 71) to “Death!” (Respondent 65), and we think it is important to emphasise that some are determined to stay, no matter what. One said “Nothing” would drive her out “– I am committed” (Respondent 88), while another said “At the moment I wouldn’t even consider this as I think I’ve found the perfect job” (Respondent 32).

5.5. Satisfactions

What, then, are the satisfactions of the work, for our respondents? Interestingly, although it was not cited by many people in response to earlier questions, 25% of people who answered the question “What sustains and motivates you in your ALL work?” named *student contact*. *Interesting, varied work* was important for 11%; *working with progressive academics*, for 13%; *flexible duties*, for

14%; *student life skills*, for 20%; *demystifying the academy*, for 22%; collegiality for 25%; *helping people learn* for 32%; and *student success* for 43% (that life skills, helping people learn, and success are overlapping themes seems likely).

In the comments, while one person wrote, “I love materials development and embedding academic language in curricula” (Respondent 61), most of those who wrote about student learning did so in language which suggests that personal contact was key to their satisfaction in their work. Examples include, “the joy of working with students” (Respondent 49); “the diversity of content that students present, student contact and constant opportunities to learn” (Respondent 15); “the satisfaction in seeing students able to do what they previously could not” (Respondent 81); “seeing [students’] confidence improve ... as they finally understand how to tackle university and understand why they’ve been struggling” (Respondent 55); “seeing students overcome their fears and challenges” (Respondent 13); “working with students in a just-in-time and just-enough manner – making an impact that is immediately useful and that leads to further learning” (Respondent 75); “I am motivated by students who all have a story” (Respondent 42); “learning from students about what was truly of value to them” (Respondent 25); “the important role academic literacies play for students in the whole of their university lives” (Respondent 89); “seeing how feedback on assignments, positive feedback and encouragement can make a real difference in a person’s life” (Respondent 24); and “the students, always the students. I enjoy it when the ‘light turns on’, when they ‘get it’” (Respondent 17).

The value of colleagues and the culture of ALL were greatly appreciated by many. One wrote, “Since joining ALL practice it has been the collegial and collaborative nature of the work that has kept me here” (Respondent 104), while another cited the “opportunities to work with and learn from talented and truly kind colleagues” (Respondent 95). And, while we saw frustration, earlier, with a felt lack of control or agency, in answers to this question we found people whose satisfaction came from having a sense of agency. Respondent 104 also reflected that, “my motivation comes from the developmental nature of the work and the opportunity to be reflective and involved in shaping the practice where I work”, while another respondent was pleased that s/he worked “with some passionate and dedicated people (academics and professional staff) – Ability to make a difference” (Respondent 55); and another felt rewarded by “the appreciation shown by my employers and by the students I work with for the job that I do” (Respondent 11). Our last quotation in this section comes from somebody who likes everything:

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. (Respondent 45)

5.6. Challenges

Inevitably, the question, “What do you identify as the main challenges facing our profession, now and into the future?” elicited answers that overlapped with those already offered in response to previous questions (we had intended some distinctions in focus between our questions that were not necessarily discerned – no doubt for good reasons – by our respondents). Themes that got more than 10% of mentions included: *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%); and *funding cuts* (42%).

The perceived implications of universities’ spending cuts were many: “casualization of the workforce and an increasing shift to online study environments” (Respondent 60), 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” (Respondent 81). 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” (Respondent 96).

“What do you think might change in our profession in the next decade (positive, negative, or neutral)” really was too close to the previous question and got similar answers, which do not need reiterating here. It is worth noting, however, that the following possible developments were 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). One respondent hoped for “Collaborative technology that enables better cohesion between academics and ALL” and envisaged that “The line between professional and academic employment will blur” (Respondent 18); and another favoured “merging of ALL and Academic Staff Development expertise and working together with discipline staff” (Respondent 83).

5.7. Solutions?

Next, we asked “is there anything you feel might or should be done to influence or manage change?” Respondents thought that individuals should *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); and *maintain a research and evidence base for our work* (21 mentions). While ALL professionals should *demonstrate our value to institutions* (12 mentions), institutions, they thought, should *value and listen to ALL staff* (15 mentions); and *recognise ALL contribution to retention and student development* (11 mentions). For its part, the ALL Association should *advocate for the profession with one coherent voice* (14 mentions).

Specific suggestions for individuals included “connecting our work to wider educational trends e.g. how do we connect with MOOCs?” (Respondent 6) and considering “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?” (Respondent 6). Universities might “make academic literacy an assessable component of written assignments, with assessment grids (rubrics) that clearly indicate the criteria and ... relative weightings ..., in line with specific learning objectives of that assignment” (Respondent 83). They might also “put AALL work front and centre when marketing the institution overseas” (Respondent 62); “include compulsory ALL modules in foundation or first year” (Respondent 52); “influence government for more funds for our work. Perhaps students get a voucher they can 'spend' with us” (Respondent 49); “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)” (Respondent 27); and (we could not *not* include this) “they should love and cherish their learning centres” (Respondent 41).

Respondents offered a wide range of suggestions for AALL, as the profession’s peak body, and we would like to list them all rather than selectively, mindful that this journal is in some sense a repository for AALL. Respondents thought that AALL might usefully do the following things, which we have assigned to rough categories (and readers will note that many of the recommendations in the first two categories concern activities that AALL is already engaged in; but the survey perhaps highlights that not all members are aware of this, and that they are considered important functions for the Association to fulfil).

Educating 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 (Respondent 102).
- Hold conversations on a national level with accrediting bodies and other professional associations in education (Respondent 24).
- Emphasise the importance of international students globally and in Australia, beyond revenue generators (Respondent 93).
- Try to educate Vice Chancellors (Respondent 94).
- Make representations on these issues to PVCs Learning & Teaching and submissions to policy development (Respondent 83).
- Establish stronger connections with other similar bodies outside Australia - e.g. EATAW; more practitioner research (Respondent 40).
- Support/commission research which connects our work to wider educational trends (Respondent 6).

Professional development for members

- Promote cross-institutional collaborations and projects (Respondent 48).
- Provide evidence of models that work and ones that don't (Respondent 60).
- Offer innovative workshops and research articles in developing areas (Respondent 73).
- Record & share innovative practices (Respondent 1).
- Better understand the STEM disciplines (Respondent 59).

Formal training and certification

- Develop formal qualifications/certification for AALL staff and work to achieve recognition of it (Respondent 55).
- Have a defined and clear PD with a corresponding salary pack (Respondent 53).
- Offer accredited training programs for ALL tutors, training programs for online materials development (Respondent 26).
- Get [ALL] established as a recognised area for Education graduates (Respondent 92).

Finally, one quite new suggestion was offered which fits into no other category but addresses the current fear that our work is being outsourced to people less capable of doing it well:

- Band together to provide our own consultancy, so that when ALL 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 (Respondent 66).

The final question in our survey was "Are there any groups, or types of practitioner, with which AALL should be engaging in the future?" Respondents recommended engaging with external academic and professional staff (28%); people with allied expertise (34%); and strategic collaborators in own institutions (32%). In the first category, they list International ALL organisations, Applied Linguistics; Association of TESOL; Australian Council of TESOL Associations, HERDSA, Transition/ First Year Experience, Peak bodies of educators in discipline areas/ Professional Associations, and the Australian Library & Information Association. People with allied expertise include Numeracy specialists, IT specialists, Educational designers, Educational technologists, and Academic developers. Finally, in the category of Strategic collaborators in own institutions, respondents list University business managers, Administrative managers, Deans, Learning and Teaching committees, Lead educators in Faculties, ESL programs, Peer program

leaders, Counselling services, Student services, Library, Careers services, and Engagement programs.

6. Discussion

What, then, can we make of all this data? First, we must acknowledge that it is far from comprehensive, as we received 105 responses from an AALL membership list of 191 (as of November 2016), plus subscribers to Unilearn. Respondents were self-selecting, and it may be that those with strong views were more motivated to respond. Another limitation is that respondents perceived repetition in some of the questions, where our intended distinction was not apparent to them. For example, question 9 was intended to find out how many respondents had training in the field of education, but many of the answers repeated information about their education in whatever field. In question 12 we asked, “What aspects of your previous experience (e.g. formal education, employment, travel, life experience) do you consider have shaped your work with students and staff in your institution?”, and in question 13, “What do you feel has shaped your contribution to the ALL field and its development?” We intended question 12 to elicit ideas about teaching, and question 13 to elicit ideas about how the individual has helped shaped ALL as a profession. While the focus is not the same in both, some respondents just referred us to their previous answer. Similarly, there was perceived overlap in the questions about frustrations (18), likelihood of departure (19), and challenges foreseen (21). It is possible that we were fishing for a degree of nuance that does not actually exist. Nonetheless, the number of respondents is large enough, and the comments copious and thoughtful enough, at 1,359, to allow some reflections on the state of the profession.¹

When we looked back at earlier papers on this theme, we noted a persistent feeling that ALL practitioners were at the margins of teaching and learning (let alone policy) in their institutions, undervalued, underpaid, and misunderstood by their management. While much of this frustration persists, our results suggest that ALL is more integrated into teaching and learning than it was in the past, insofar as restructuring has brought ALL together with AD to work on embedding development of academic skills into discipline curricula. This is a welcome development for many like Alisa Percy who urged, in 2014, that 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”. For many, however, this shift has been problematic, if it means losing their access to experience with students. The interaction with students face-to-face, and the supportive, collegial culture of ALL, emerge as enduring satisfactions of the job for our respondents.

Apart from increasing collaboration with others concerned with teaching and learning, the greatest change in ALL work has been technological. It is possible to design a wide variety of materials and to place them in discipline subjects as well as more (virtually) central locations online, and communications among teachers and learners have come untethered from time and space (with both good and bad results for, while cyberspace is unlimited, there is no such thing as cybertime, and overwork is a serious concern). The possibilities of working in such spaces, with such tools, are exciting for those who embrace the technology, but alienating and de-skilling for those who do not. It seems likely that the future of ALL belongs to the former, but they will be wise to consider what could be lost in translation. Universities can focus too intently on what can be done

¹ It is important to bear in mind when looking at the questions for which we developed frequency tables, the number of ‘mentions’ each question elicits, may often be over 105. This is because a single respondent may have, and often did, touch on several topics in their single response.

with technology, and neglect to reflect on what cannot. For many confused and vulnerable students, it has been important to work closely with another person – one that they can trust -- who is able to identify and explain the difficulties they are experiencing, and take them seriously as learners while they negotiate the literacies and cultures of the academy.

This brings us back to the underlying question of the viability of ALL in its changing environment. Our questions, and the answers we have received from respondents to our survey, are from the perspective of the ‘polar bear’. However, if we shift to the perspective of the environment, we are helped to make sense of the commonalities and differences in these answers by a Foucauldian analysis offered by Alisa Percy in 2015. In a compact description of ALL, Percy (2015) sketches the confusing multiplicity of expectations that surround us:

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; 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. (p. 882)

Percy sums up: “What marks this field of practitioners is their very ‘in betweenness’ – their diversity, ambiguity and vulnerability – combined with their professional will to tell the truth about themselves in ways that gain authority and stability in the academy” (2015, p. 882). However, there is not one truth to tell, for she argues that 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).

In this analysis, the changes in ALL practice – from teaching individual students to contributing to disciplinary curricula and developing coursework to inculcate generic graduate skills – cannot be seen as developments but as “ruptures” (Percy, 2015, p. 886) engendered by the changing imperatives of higher education as it has adapted to changing visions of the society it serves. In the “welfare society” of the 1960s through the 1980s, universities were conceived of as “social levellers” and ALL was there to mediate the linguistic and cultural differences between “non-traditional” or “equity” students and the academy (Percy, 2015, pp. 886-887). With the shift to a neoliberal environment in the 1990s, and the idea of a learning society, ALL was caught up in the project of equipping the “lifelong learner” with generic skills to operate and adapt in the changing workplace. This called for “the substitution of person-centred teaching with the design of ‘student-centred’ learning” using “self-directed resource[s] ... (preferably online)” (Percy, 2015, p. 888). In the 2000s, with universities increasingly concerned about the quality assurance of their “product” in the context of international competition in the provision of higher education,

the student becomes the indirect object of practice as the focus of the ALL gaze shifts to shoring up the ‘quality’ of curriculum and the learning environment through practices such as curriculum mapping, in response to quality audits from bodies such as the Australian Universities Quality Agency and

notions of standards such as the Australian Qualification Standards. (Percy, 2015, p. 889).

In concluding that “the ethical agency of the ALL educator is an historical and layered phenomenon” (pp. 889-890), Percy (2015) seeks not “to undermine [that agency] but to assist in making sense of the historical conditions that frame and complicate their institutional intelligibility as ethical agents in the academy” (p. 881), (hoping that we will next consider taking a transgressive approach to our work). As our research shows, many ALL practitioners already feel that their agency is undermined by their institutions, and Percy’s analysis sheds light on that relationship between the bears and the environment. For many, the purpose and the ethos that brought us into the profession no longer correlate with the purposes of the institutions in which we work. For others, however, that sense of dislocation is less, and for some it is not salient.

7. Conclusion

A dozen years on from the founding of the Association for Academic Language and Learning, we have sought to canvass members’ perceptions of their own professional identities and how they are located in their work and in the profession. Our enquiry has revealed a range of shared and/or divergent views, and we have tried to make sense of this variety both in terms of the purposes that impelled respondents into the profession and in terms of the changing purposes of higher education. This study is the latest in a line of reflections on who we are, why we are here, and where we going, but we hope it will not be the last, and that a robust ALL profession is able to reflect critically, but hopefully, on itself well into the future.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all who responded to our survey.

Appendix

Questionnaire.

(This has been de-formatted in order to present it in the smallest possible space; with each closed question, the choices of answers to click are indicated; other questions are indicated as “open”).

About the Survey: This survey is part of research by Carolyn Malkin and Kate Chanock into the ALL profession in Australia. 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]. We consider that your answers to these questions, and especially your thoughts on the final theme, may help to sharpen our view of and understanding of any challenges facing us in the future. These insights, along with findings from the wider research project, will serve to define how we, as professionals and as a profession, might seek both to understand, and influence, that future.

Thank you for your participation. We aim to present our findings at the ALL 2017 Conference in Geelong, Victoria.

1. To which age group do you belong? (choices: 20-23; 30-35; 35-45; 45-55; 55-65; over 65.
2. What is your gender? (choices: male; female; other; prefer not to say)
3. In which state do you work? (choices: each state listed)
4. Is English your first language? (choices: yes; no)
5. Do you speak one or more languages other than English? (choices: no; at a basic level; with some fluency; other (please specify)

6. Have you lived (for 6 months or more) in a non-English speaking country? (choices: yes; no)
7. What is the highest level of educational qualification you have achieved? (choices: Advanced Diploma; Undergraduate; Postgraduate Diploma; Masters; Professional Doctorate; Doctor of Philosophy (PhD); list any other educational qualifications)
8. What broad area of study did you study in your Bachelor's Degree? (choices: Physical Sciences; Life Sciences; Health Sciences; Literature; Law; Creative (e.g. art, music, cinema, performance); Social Sciences; Economics; Commerce; Psychology; N/A)
9. List any formal study in Education you have completed (open)
10. What led you to take up ALL work? (open)
11. How long have you worked in ALL? (choices: less than 5 years; 5 to 10 years; 10 to 15 years; 15 to 20 years; 20 to 25 years; over 25 years)
12. What aspects of your previous experience (e.g. formal education, employment, travel, life experience) do you consider have shaped your work with students and staff in your institution? (open)
13. What do you feel has shaped your contribution to the ALL field and its development? (open)
14. Is your role classified as Academic or Professional? (choices: Academic; Professional; Other (please specify))
15. Are you satisfied with this classification? (choices: yes; no; why/why not?)
16. Historically, the work of academic developers (helping lecturers teach better) and the work of AALL professionals (helping students learn better) has usually been done by different people, positioned separately in the organisational structure of their universities. More recently, people from both groups have been teamed together to help lecturers develop students' academic literacies within their subject curricula. In your university, do academic developers and AALL staff work: (choices: separately; collaboratively; some of each; other (please specify))
17. Are you satisfied with this allocation of roles? (choices: yes; no; why/why not (please specify))
18. What frustrates you in ALL work? (open)
19. What might make you consider leaving the ALL field? (open)
20. What sustains and motivates you in your ALL work? (perhaps think about this in comparison with other work you have done) (open)
21. What do you identify as the main challenges facing our profession, now and into the future? (open)
22. Regarding these potential changes, whether positive or negative, is there anything you feel might or should be done to influence or manage change? (open, but answers under 3 categories: individuals; institutions; AALL as peak body)
23. Are there any groups, or types of practitioner, with which AALL should be engaging in the future? (open)

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