

“Ask a Question”: Student use and misuse of online academic skills support

Sally Ashton-Hay

Academic Skills, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Southern Cross University, Gold Coast, Queensland

Email: sally.ashton-hay@scu.edu.au

Zihan Yin

Teaching and Learning Support, University of New England, Armidale, NSW

Andrew S. Ross

Academic Skills, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Southern Cross University, Gold Coast, Queensland

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Online academic skills support in higher education and the ways that students use such support is seldom researched. “Ask a Question” is part of one Australian university’s online academic support service for students to upload assignment documents for review or to ask a specific question about their work. With a view to fine-tuning the online academic support service, this study investigated the types of questions students ask and the ways that students use and, at times, misuse such online academic support. A mixed method corpus analysis of 600 student questions showed frequency patterns in ten categories of question types. An Academic Skills staff survey identified three main challenges in meeting the needs of online student learning support. The findings revealed that students most sought general feedback about being on track for an assignment and secondly, referencing assistance. Academic Skills staff challenges related to time constraints as well as some students misusing the service through unrealistic expectations and repeated requests for assistance. One unanticipated finding was that some students voiced dissatisfaction with generic feedback from an outsourced after-hours online tutoring service and returned to Academic Skills for detailed in-depth, focused feedback. Further research may help to clarify the differences between generic and unit-based feedback in an online academic support environment provided for students. Recommendations to improve the in-house service include extending staff/student consultation time, limiting repeat appointment availability and promoting clearly the type of academic support services provided.

Key Words: academic skills, online academic support, technology in higher education, academic language and learning.

1. Introduction

Academic language and learning (ALL) support is an important key to a successful student experience in higher education. Extensive studies have detailed the widening agenda in Australian higher education, yet less has been written about how growing student diversity is actually being academically supported. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (2015)

claims universities are accountable in supporting student transition into tertiary study in the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards). Common support includes various orientation programs, peer mentoring as well as the flexibility and convenience of online support (Kim, Kwon, & Cho, 2011; Lear, Li, & Prentice, 2016). Further research into the student experience and learning needs can inform enhanced support from academic language and learning especially in the rapidly changing online environment.

Many universities are expanding the use of technology and between 2002-2014, online learning enrolment developed at an annual rate of 16.4% (Mehta, Makani-Lim, Rajan, & Easter, 2017). The online environment is increasingly used to deliver course content, communicate between lecturers and students and also to provide academic support for students. The university offers students an in-house online academic support service called Ask a Question in addition to an outsourced after-hours service. In keeping pace the third party providers also proliferate a range of opportunities for students from online tutorial support to web sites which may lead to assignment contract cheating. This study aimed to investigate the in-house online academic skills support space and examine how students used the university's Ask a Question service with a view to fine-tuning and improving the quality of support provided. A better understanding may enable continual improvement in the provision of academic support services and particularly in the online environment. The study also explored aspects of what constitutes 'overuse' or 'misuse' of an online support service and when support should ease back and learner autonomy (Cotterall, 2008) begin in using feedback and advice previously given.

Three members of the university's Academic Skills team analysed the types of questions students asked online over two 13-week study sessions and took a closer look at some of the ways students use and, at times, misuse such an online support system. The term "misuse" relates to some of the ways students tried to use the Ask a Question academic support system that were not intended such as repeating requests for assignment feedback, assuming that multiple questions would be answered immediately and having unrealistic expectations of what academic skills support actually involves. The study provides a snapshot of online academic language and learning support at a time of significant change in Australian higher education. The impact of online academic skills support is far reaching in building student confidence, resilience and achieving a successful study experience. Study success leads to retention and more positive outcomes for the student and the university overall.

2. Literature review

Academic literacy support is a critical component of the student experience in universities and although the concept varies (Henderson & Hirst, 2007), most ALL specialists agree that academic literacy is related to sets of practice (Lea, 2004). These may include critical thinking, database research, and academic discourse conventions such as referencing, generic features of assignments and register as well as the use of discipline-specific vocabulary, just to name a few. With increasing diversity in higher education, supporting the development of academic literacy is a key factor in student success as well as retention and attrition.

If students are perceived to possess weak or insufficient academic literacy skills, learning development support is often seen as a "quick fix" (Strauss, 2013) rather than an equitable institutional priority. Also commonly known as a "remedial approach" (Cottrell, 2001), at-risk students often receive a majority of attention. This approach has been known by various names as the "bolt-on" approach (Bennett, Dunne, & Carre, 2000) or "deficit model" to student support (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009) as well as "adjunct" support (Jones, Bonanno, & Sculler, 2001). With attention directed to students with the most significant problems in their academic literacy and to particular generic academic skills, practitioners argued that there existed a lack of focus on other important academic literacy skills such as those related to specific disciplines – the disciplines to which students belonged.

This led to the development of an “embedded” approach to academic literacy support which shifted the focus away from the relatively narrow (although not unimportant) concentration on students experiencing difficulties in their university studies related to weak academic literacy skills. Specifically, the embedded approach is concerned with student learning being “developed through subject teaching” (Wingate, 2006, p. 457) which, as Chanock (2013) points out, is directly related to the discipline and even the particular course the student is involved in. This is an important development as, for example, it does not need to be argued that the type of academic writing required for students of a business-related degree is quite different from that required by a student of cultural studies. However, if these are separated it can have a detrimental effect and result in what Gamache (2002, p. 277) sees as the student viewing knowledge as an “external, objective body of facts”.

Prior to the embedded approach, the belief was that this knowledge could be mastered as long as the respective academic skills were also acquired such as essay writing, report writing, or debate/presentation skills. This is not the case as content knowledge must necessarily be integrated into the generic skills previously taught in the remedial approach. Although some studies have noted that embedding strategies are resource-intensive and not as sustainable (Kokkinn & Stupans, 2011; Roberts, 2008; Scott & Moses, 2011), the importance of connecting language skills and content to provide a more holistic and integrated approach is widely considered to be best practice (Chanock & Horton, 2011; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Harris & Bretag, 2003; Jones, 2009; Stappenbelt & Barrett-Lennard, 2008; Thies, 2012; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009). Fenton-Smith and Humphries (2015) ranked nine academic language and learning strategies according to survey results from postgraduate English as Additional Language students and found team teaching to be one of the most effective, when a content lecturer and an academic language and learning specialist combine forces in the classroom.

The arguments for a move towards a more embedded approach are strong, yet it can equally be debated that academic literacy development and support is necessary both as a quick fix and embedded in curricula. At times students will benefit from a guidance approach (McWilliams & Allan, 2014) to gain insight into how the content knowledge acquired can “fit” with the different academic genres of writing, for example. On the other hand, there will also be times when students can demonstrate orally a solid understanding of content, but lack the awareness of writing genres or presentation skills required for course assessment. In recognition of this, Percy (2014, p. 1206) supports fostering collaborations in “educational development that promote student learning and language development simultaneously”.

2.1. Technology in Higher Education

The provision of academic literacy support to students in Higher Education (HE) in Australia is taking on innovative forms in contemporary education settings. Universities are increasingly internationalising (Alexander, Argent & Spencer, 2008) and accommodating “changing and heterogeneous” student populations (McKenzie & Scheweiter, 2001, p. 21), partly as a result of the Bradley Report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Student cohorts not only include groups from lower socio-economic status, mature age and first-in-family but also international students comprising an increasingly diverse clientele with varying levels of academic preparedness. Universities are under increasing pressure to retain enrolments, provide quality learning experiences and expand offerings in higher education through the use of technology. These offerings may be in the form of short training modules, academic self-access resources, online study opportunities and online academic support.

One of the major moves in higher education is toward multimodality with an expanding range of literacy domains required to be successful including institutional, digital, social and cultural, critical, language and academic literacies (Miller, 2015). Educational “anywhere, anytime” (Geddes, 2004) technology utilises blended e-learning, Web-enhanced instruction, learning management systems, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), text-based matching software and other forms

of instructional technology. Australian universities are increasingly incorporating spaces that advantage learning with technology built into the architecture (Johnson, Adams, Becker & Hall, 2015; Russell, Malfroy, Gosper, & McKenzie, 2014). This challenges the relevance of traditional lecture formats and theatres (Miles & Foggett, 2016) as well as what it means to embed academic language and learning development.

Although the use of technology in education is flourishing, Nora and Snyder (2009) claim that it is difficult to establish whether or not electronic technology has made a difference in the classroom because there are so few studies on technology-enhanced instruction. According to the authors, this gap is particularly linked to student achievement and how it relates to student outcomes. Nora and Snyder (2009) further highlight several studies which, despite the infusion of technology, found students achieved better results from in-class active approaches. The Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001) emphasises the need for cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence particularly in a distance-learning environment. Mehta et al. (2017) found that some students wanted more interaction and instruction from faculty. Another study found that students' "abilities and agilities in a technology-enabled learning environment were sometimes overestimated" (Taylor & Newton 2013, p. 56). This was particularly true for international students who may be savvy with technology for mobile phones, social media and video games but less familiar with using technology for learning partially due to the lack of technology used in students' prior education (Ashton-Hay, Wignell & Evans, 2016). Technology is impacting higher education although not all students may be able to use it effectively for learning.

2.2. The online environment – a place for academic skills support?

Recent trends include a proliferation of online tutoring companies offering after-hours live chat academic support and quick turnaround for assignment feedback. Pennington (2016) reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* that tutoring has become Australia's "shadow education system" (para. 2) and that one company is "bullish about the opportunities the market presents" (para. 26). These services are sometimes promoted as complementary to institutional in-house academic support services offered during business hours. The complementarity of an online academic skills support service is useful to online students and those who are working on assignments in the evening, however the depth of feedback may not be as comparable (Snowball, 2016). Outsourced online tutoring services may enhance the student experience by providing after hours support convenience for students who are employed or those who have family responsibilities.

At present, the literature pertaining to online learning support relates to within-discipline materials (see Ashton-Hay & Roberts, 2012; Evans, Tindale, Cable, & Mead, 2009; Murray, 2012) rather than support provided from learning service units such as Academic Skills (AS). With the need for academic support of all kinds increasing, services such as Ask a Question have an important niche although online academic support needs to be better understood in order to be refined for future use. It is this understanding that the current study aims to investigate.

In the contemporary education environment, the role played by technology is impossible to ignore. Course and subject lecturers increasingly utilise online resources in learning management systems, and provide an avenue for students to engage with materials virtually through the use of recorded lectures and provision of online readings, to name two basic examples. This is invariably known as 'blended learning'. When academic support is delivered online, this provision can be seen as a form of "blended support".

3. Context of the Study

Southern Cross University (SCU) is a multi-campus regional university with a diverse student population. At a recent symposium, the former Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) outlined SCU demographics in comparison to higher education sector averages: 25% lower socio-economic

status students compared to the higher education sector average of 15%; students from regional communities comprising 60% of enrolment compared to 20% in the sector; higher percentages of Indigenous students than sector averages and 40% first-in-family students at SCU (McAuley, 2016). The diversity in the SCU demographic places greater emphasis on supporting satisfaction in the student experience which is directly related to retention and attrition (Clarke, 2011). As a means of enhancing the student experience, SCU is focusing on the use of technology to provide students with academic support through online systems.

Academic Skills is part of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at SCU and offers a variety of services to support academic literacy development for coursework students studying both externally and internally. The main support strategies include team teaching, embedding, resource development, workshops, student consultations and email assignment reviews. The value of both guidance and embedded approaches are evident due to the fact that, as Blythman and Orr (2002, p. 46) point out, the majority of students require learning support “for successful achievement and progression within the education system and beyond”, and this need is amplified in SCU demographics. As mentioned previously, the university provides outsourced after-hours online tutoring services for generic feedback related to foundational concepts, sentence structure, and grammar. Students access the after-hours service via a link in their learning management system.

Academic Skills at the university operates during business hours and students book appointments online for face-to-face, phone or Skype options as well as being able to utilise the Ask a Question online service. This service is part of Career Hub and captures quick fixes as well as embedded unit-based feedback for students. Typical appointments are scheduled for thirty minutes although this is at the discretion of the staff member. The Ask a Question online option is advertised:

This service is for you if you want some feedback on your assignment or have a question for us. We will endeavour to reply within 72 hours (Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm). Please note that this is not a proofreading or editing service.

The intention is that a question can be lodged related to, for example, how to cite a YouTube clip, or to ask for feedback on a more complex assignment related to overall structure, alignment with marking criteria and response to the assignment task. Students may upload files such as an assignment draft, the assessment task and marking criteria. Ask a Question emerged as part of a dedicated response strategy to meet the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population. It has increased in popularity recently and provides the context for this study. At the completion of Session 1 and 2, 2016, 600 questions were analysed to investigate how students used and misused ‘Ask a Question’ and to explore ways to enhance this service in the future.

The specific questions this study seeks to investigate are:

- How do students use and misuse Ask a Question online academic support?
- What are the challenges for AS staff?
- How can the service be improved in the future?

4. Research approach

A mixed methods research approach used a corpus analysis of 600 student questions to analyse common queries, and then matched the themes with typical example questions. AS staff were also surveyed in relation to expectations and challenges in responding to the student questions. These steps in the research approach are described in the next sections. Ethics approval was provided by the institution for this study.

4.1. Corpus-based analysis

In order to investigate how students use the Ask a Question online service, corpus linguistics as “a method of using computers to investigate patterns of language use within a large, principled

collection of authentic texts”, or a corpora was chosen (Egbert, Staples, & Biber, 2015, p. 119). Corpus research findings assist in understanding how words and grammatical features are actually used and, in particular, concordancers can also generate frequency counts for words and linguistic patterns. Egbert, Staples, and Biber (2015) note that learner corpora do not identify proficiency levels or linguistic correlates of learner development so the main focus in this study was on word category and frequency patterns used in the student questions.

A corpus consisting of 600 questions from Session 1 and 2, 2016 was built, which contained 40,457 word tokens. Corpus-based analysis was preferred to manual analysis for its effectiveness in identifying patterns in data sets of a large number of words. Anthony’s (2016) AntConc was used as the analysis tool. The Word List function was first used to create a list of function and content words. All the function words such as *I* and *the* were removed. Content words were then carefully examined to identify the potential key words and emergent themes for the corpus-based searches. All the inflectional forms, derivational forms and synonyms of a head word were included in the key word list. For example, if reference is the head word, then all its inflectional forms (e.g. references, referencing) and synonyms (e.g. APA/Harvard style) were included.

After the establishment of the key word list, Concordance was used to search for the immediate context of the key words to refine and increase the reliability of the research findings. For instance, the phrase *marking criteria* occurred 75 times, but only 18 occurrences were considered valid for the theme of meeting/addressing the marking criteria. In other cases, *marking criteria* co-occurred with *attaching/attached*, where the theme is not about whether the students have addressed the marking criteria. Instead, they needed some general feedback on or asked a specific question of one aspect of their assignment such as grammar or punctuation, but had attached the marking criteria. Following this procedure, questions in the corpus were categorised into different themes and the relevant frequencies were counted accordingly.

4.2. Email reflections from staff

Next, it was necessary to identify the expectations and challenges that the service presents to AS staff at SCU. As one of the primary aims of the study is to identify challenges in order to be able to then remedy them and improve the quality of support provided by the service, this staff input was essential.

To gather this information, the following two questions were emailed to 10 staff, who were advised of the goal of the study and informed that their participation was entirely voluntary.

1. As an Academic Skills staff member, what is your understanding of the Ask a Question service provided to students and associated expectations?
2. What are the main challenges you see for staff members in the provision of support to students through the Ask a Question service?

Of 10 AS staff emailed, nine replied. Each author separately read the responses and noted the main challenges mentioned. Then, notes were compared as a means of peer-checking to ensure that the staff responses had been interpreted in the same manner. All challenges noted by each researcher were the same.

After identifying the main challenges put forward by staff participating in the study, we returned to the Ask a Question data to locate sample questions that were representative of the challenges staff suggested. Agreement was reached between the researchers that these questions actually represented the challenges. Following this, the challenges identified were relayed to participating staff members and once they agreed with these as being the main challenges, they were confirmed as the key ones to be presented in the study.

5. Findings and results

Overall, there are three main aspects to the results. First, the overall manner in which students use the Ask a Question service was determined through the corpus analysis as described above. Second, the input from staff members was used to establish the main challenges. Third, representative questions were selected from the data set to provide a broad overview and highlight the categories and comments from staff regarding the challenges. The corpus analysis revealed a range of reasons or topics for which students utilised the service as outlined in Figure 1 below.

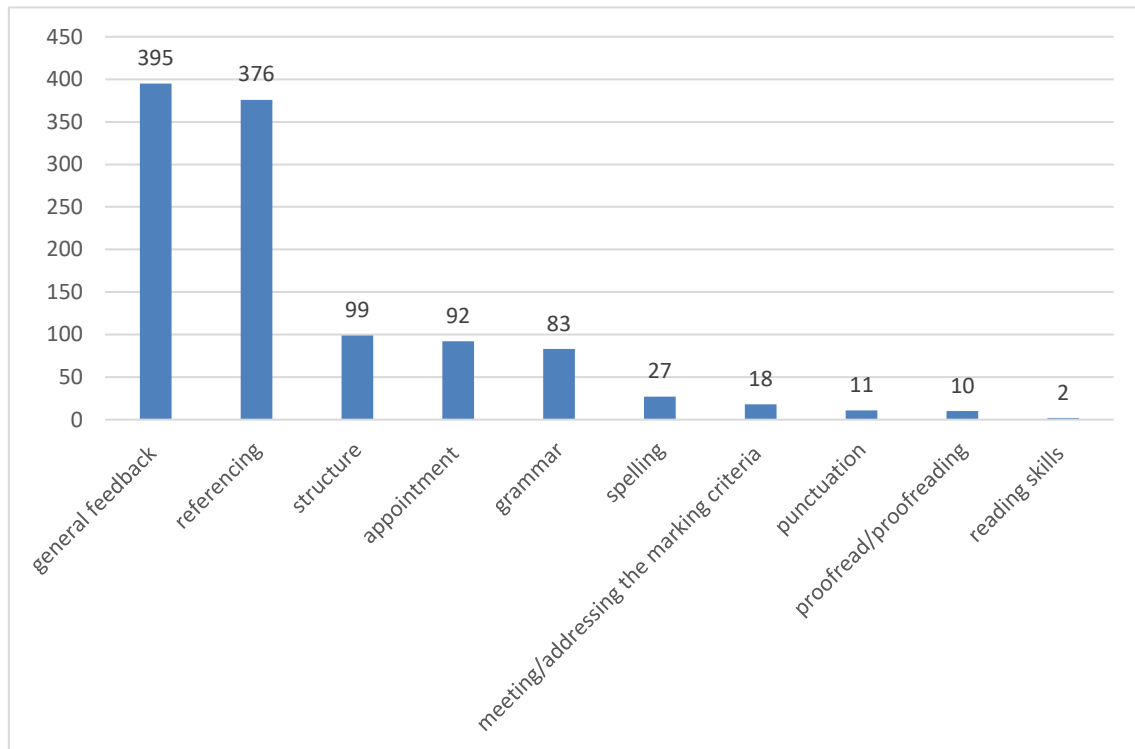


Figure 1. Categories and frequencies of question types.

General feedback and referencing were the most frequent keywords in the corpus analysis and featured in 66% and 63% of the questions respectively. The next most common categories included questions related to written structure, how to make appointments (not necessarily related to academic skills) and grammar. Table 1 demonstrates the type of question from each category. Some of the questions overlapped multiple topics.

After the researchers had noted and compared the challenges from staff responses, three main challenges were established, and these are presented in Table 2. Alongside the challenges, sample comments were taken from the AS staff survey to demonstrate how these challenges are manifested in the student use of the service.

Table 1. Sample student questions for each of the categories.

Category	Frequency	Sample student questions
General feedback	395	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like some general feedback about this assignment • Can you review my essay and provide general feedback? • Hi there I was just after some general feedback on this assignment in regards to meeting criteria, spelling, grammar and flow.
Referencing	376	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would it be possible for someone to review my assignment which has been submitted to advise if the referencing is correct or is classified as plagiarism, please? • Hello, I have completed my essay could you please advise me: Is my referencing correct? Have I met the criteria and answered the questions? Is my layout correct and does it make sense?
Structure	99	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have I structured this critical review correctly and do my paragraphs work? • Can you please review the structure and the flow of my essay? • Hello, I am making statements in my introduction for my essay that need referencing. Is it ok to reference in your introduction or is that something you only do in the body of the essay? Sorry, this is the first essay I've written in 20 years and my first academic essay ever.
Appointment	92	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to cancel my appointment on Friday at 2pm with STAFF on X campus and rebook the appointment for Thursday at noon? • I would like to know when the appointments for the remainder of the session may be available and if there is a certain time period that future appointments are made available.
Grammar	83	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you please check for any grammar mistakes I have made? • Could you please provide feedback on the flow of my writing and use of grammar? • Plz guide me through English grammar, references and sentence structure
Spelling	27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hi there, I would love for someone to check over my essay for any grammar, punctuation, spelling and referencing, along with anything else that needs work.
Meeting/addressing marking criteria	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is my assignment meeting the marking criteria? Could you please check my assignment, and please give me some advice of my critical thinking and whether it covers all the marking criteria. Thank you very much. • Please check the answer is it according to question assignment 3 because I need 30 marks out of 40 and help me to improve my assignment I am attaching the answers and question together please help me thanks for kindness
Punctuation	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hi I would be very pleased if you could review my assignment. Due date: this Friday the 24th July. Subject: English 3: Issues Area of concern: Grammar, spelling and punctuation. Thank you
Proofreading	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would it be possible to hand in a report or email it to academic skills and get it proof read? • May you please review my assignment and let me know any feedback before I submit it. As I am very new to uni I wanted to have this proof read before I submit my final draft. • Dear tutor, kindly proofread my essay and advise if I am on the right track, pls check it whether I have covered everything. And if there is any improvement required pls advise. Please check my reference as well I will be very thankful to u.
Reading skills	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would also like to understand the best method of reading large volumes of works that are relevant to the units I have chosen.

Note: Questions about spelling and punctuation never appeared in isolation.

Table 2. Challenges of Ask a Question identified by SCU Academic Skills staff.

Challenges for staff	Representative qualitative data from AS staff members
Time – (30 minutes allocated per review is inadequate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thirty minutes is often too short to cover all the aspects to the level required. • Time spent downloading and reading through documents and then writing replies, attaching resources and uploading marked up assignments leaves very little time to actually focus on the student's work and provide adequate feedback. Inability to communicate with the student in real time can also be a challenge when clarification of information and understanding is required. • The challenge of time inefficiency when you have to contact the students to get info or decipher through poorly presented info to figure out what it is they really want you to do • The only real challenge to answering the questions is time. If the day is fully booked with face-to-face/phone sessions, there is no possibility to assign yourself a question and be able to do it properly as it can take 30 minutes or more (depending on the assignment).
Unrealistic student expectations of the service including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students expecting proof-reading or corrections • Asking for feedback on too many aspects • Uploading too many files 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The main challenge I've seemed to face is a misunderstanding of the service by some students who think it's a copy-editing service • It's not a proofreading service so students need to be specific in their request for feedback • Students being "lazy" submitting work that is nowhere near complete but wanting feedback on end of stage writing stuff and asking about flow and organisation of ideas and coherence and cohesiveness, for example. • Multiple attachments without reference to what they are and how they want us to use them – students not taking the effort to organise their work/request
Asking for assistance more than once on the same assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students double, triple, quadruple dip and repeat requests for things they have already been provided feedback on and have not changed. • Sometimes the same names keep coming back and making the rounds again and again • The same MBA student has been asking the same question about referencing for two years now

After presentation of the results of the data in this section, we are now in position to answer the research questions.

6. Discussion

This study analysed how students use and misuse the Ask a Question service and found that there were two foremost topics requested by students as well as a range of common topic queries. AS staff responded to the survey with three key challenges as well as general praise for the service because of its convenience for supporting busy or isolated students. Some students misused the service by asking multiple complex questions, rushing to obtain feedback just before an assignment was due, pleading for help to gain more marks and submitting their assignment for review multiple times. These findings will be discussed in the next sections.

6.1. Student use and misuse of online Ask a Question academic support

Students use Ask a Question most frequently to ask for general feedback on assignments and for referencing support. Although the name of the online academic skills support service implies asking one question, not all students actually did that. While some students did ask a single question regarding general essay feedback or a review of their assignment draft (see Table 1), some took more of a “shopping list” approach with multiple requests and great expectations of AS feedback. The shopping list requests may be indicative of the expanding range of literacies required to be successful in higher education (Miller, 2015) and the student demographics discussed in section three.

The single-question students commonly expressed concern in relation to whether they were on track for an assessment or had referenced correctly. The frequency of these questions demonstrates the value of a guided approach (McWilliams & Allan, 2014) if and when a student is unsure. The guidance approach was also useful if students had not studied in some time, lacked confidence and needed some reassurance to develop autonomy (Cotterall, 2008). These examples demonstrate the need for AS staff who are familiar with the curriculum so that their guidance to the students is accurate. The examples also show a reasonable use of the online academic support from sincere students who endeavour to successfully meet the standards and criteria required. The service is provided for the convenience of students studying online and who may need some assignment feedback after work and family or home responsibilities when face-to-face support is not available.

On the other hand, the students requesting a shopping list of multiple items such as essay structure, grammar, meeting the marking criteria, paragraphing and spelling, were obviously asking for feedback on far more than one question. Since AS staff allocate 30 minutes for appointments, extensive email feedback on a complex assignment is a challenge for staff even if they are familiar with the curriculum. Some students uploaded a 3,000 word draft assignment with task, marking criteria and lecture slides. Before providing any feedback, the AS lecturer needs to read and understand the assessment expectations and discipline standards prior to reading the student’s work. Thus the time required is often longer than 30 minutes because of the background reading on the assignment and this can be exacerbated when students ask multiple questions.

One particular student uploaded an excessive nine files to his question and that question lingered in the queue, perhaps because staff were busy and did not have time to read extensive files or perhaps staff could perceive that it would not be a “quick fix” (Strauss, 2013). Finally, one of the authors accepted this question and phoned the student because the actual question was not clear. The distance student was delighted to have someone to speak to about the assignment because of feeling a bit lost. A 30-minute phone call connected an anxious and misguided external student with live academic support and resulted in a positive outcome. The student was possibly lacking the teaching presence in the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001) discussed in the Literature Review and really wanted faculty interaction to discuss their work and give some assurance they were on track. Thus, a potential student example of misuse resulted in a positive outcome due to staff discretion.

Another misuse of the system occurs when students expect an assignment review just two or three hours before the assessment is due and plead for special assistance to gain marks. Such expectations constitute an unreasonable use of the system because it can disadvantage students who do plan ahead and book their appointments accordingly. AS staff often have other commitments related to team teaching (Chanock, 2013; Wingate, 2006) as well as in-class and online workshops (Percy, 2014) and consequently are unable to assist latecomers. Other students try to leverage AS for content ideas in their assignments because they may not have read the study guide, researched the topic or attended class regularly. For example, in Table 2 a staff member commented that some students expect feedback on work that is incomplete and underprepared. AS staff are academic language and learning specialists and not necessarily content experts in each discipline. As

discussed in the literature review, best practice in academic language and learning support is now considered to involve team teaching and embedding academic skills in the curriculum (Chanock & Horton, 2011; Fenton-Smith & Humphries, 2015; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Harris & Bretag, 2003; Jones, 2009; Stappenbelt & Barrett-Lennard, 2008; Thies, 2012; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009). Greater use of these strategies could help to scaffold developmental steps in assessments and overcome desperate students pleading for more marks.

Referencing was the second most frequent request and a source of confusion for many students despite a variety of online library guides and tools readily available. Some referencing requests related to avoidance of plagiarism, so again students appeared to be trying to demonstrate academic integrity in a positive way by checking. Some unreasonable use of the referencing requests was that many students requested a referencing check as part of their shopping list feedback. Often staff will point out common errors with such tools as Microsoft Word's Track Changes feature and then suggest the student checks for similarities throughout the document. This strategy aims to develop student autonomy (Cotterall, 2008) and academic skills by not providing all the answers (Nora & Snyder, 2009). Unfortunately, some students returned in a few days with the same draft and uncorrected errors despite the feedback previously given. A student may upload their assignment draft and receive feedback from several AS staff, thereby substantially improving an assignment. It is also disappointing to AS staff when the same errors appear that have already been addressed. One distance MBA student asked the same referencing questions from one of the authors throughout two years of the postgraduate program although the academic writing did improve.

Many students used Ask a Question appropriately and appreciated the feedback given, particularly when the comments were related to their unit of study, marking criteria and meeting the academic standards. Most students demonstrated respect and courtesy online with polite greetings, gracious requests and thankful appreciation. On the other hand, some students generated a superficial courtesy before a more imperative need was expressed such as the student who wrote "I need 30 marks out of 40 so help me improve my assignment". This student may or may not have planned sufficiently, however it is not the duty of Academic Skills to ensure students have enough marks to pass a unit of study.

One of the unexpected results of the Ask a Question analysis was students returning to AS after using the after-hours outsourced online service. The AS unit-based support was perceived by students as a strength in comparison to the outsourced service's generic feedback. As part of their question, one student wrote that the outsourced service "offered no constructive feedback at all" and was found to be "most vague and not helpful with the response". Another student asked if AS could review the first essay after the outsourced service "did not give me much useful feedback at all". One particular student wrote that her essay had been reviewed twice by the outsourced academic support service and had been 'given the all clear' but she still wanted another opinion before submission. These unanticipated findings indicated that students noted a difference in the academic support offered by the in-house university support service and the after-hours outsourced company.

6.2. Challenges for Academic Skills staff

One of the most common challenges AS staff faced was students with unrealistic expectations for feedback. Although committed to assisting students and enhancing learning, staff felt at a loss when students sought assistance too late, expected feedback on too many aspects, uploaded multiple files and/or asked for proofreading and corrections on all parts of their assignment. Staff believed that some students misunderstood the Ask a Question service and/or were sluggish about submitting work that was not ready and then expected advice about coherence and flow. AS general practice is to comment on the introduction, a few body paragraphs and the conclusion. Staff also look over referencing, the abstract, formatting and check marking criteria as well as the adequacy of response to all parts of the assignment. The pressure on staff to focus on all these aspects

of an assignment every 30 minutes is intense, particularly when assignments vary from Midwifery nipple distress to postgraduate shareholder reports on building female leadership in corporate governance.

The challenge of a 30-minute response time was a constraint which staff agreed was too short to cover all the aspects requested or the level of the work in sufficient depth. Part of the appointment time was spent downloading documents related to the assignment or to chase the student for missing documents that should have been included. Sometimes students uploaded their draft essay without a task, unit code or marking criteria so staff needed to contact the student for missing information required to provide relevant disciplinary feedback. The lack of student organisation demonstrates studies mentioned in the literature review relating to the overestimation of students' "abilities and agilities" in technology-enabled environments (Taylor & Newton, 2013, p. 56) as well as the lack of familiarity with technology for learning (Ashton-Hay, Wignell, & Evans, 2016). Perhaps the students do not read directions carefully enough or else lack a clear understanding of the purpose of the Ask a Question service. It is also likely that some may try to gain as much feedback as possible in order to leverage better results. At the same time, staff are committed to enhancing learning and developing academic skills but need complete information in order to deliver optimal advice and support.

6.3. Recommendations for the future

In order to improve the Ask a Question service, several recommendations arise from this study for the future. These are:

- Allow more time for staff to consult on Ask a Question queries related to unit-based support and particularly on a postgraduate level
- Market the service on a broader level across the university campuses so student expectations are clearer
- Limit Ask a Question queries so students do not overuse the system
- Differentiate generic feedback related to grammar, spelling, and punctuation to the outsourced after-hours online academic support service
- Concentrate in-house Academic Skills Ask a Question support for students with unit-based assignment questions rather than generic feedback
- Offer students more support with referencing resources.

Although these recommendations aim to improve the Academic Skills online service, other universities using a third party provider in addition to an in-house academic support service may wish to differentiate between the services provided. As a result of this study, student testimonial videos were produced and digital marketing outlined differences between grammar, spelling and punctuation feedback offered by the third party provider as opposed to more specific unit-based support delivered by Academic Skills. The University promotes both services as complementary and useful for different student purposes.

7. Conclusion

The recommendations are aimed to enhance the Ask a Question online academic support service. If students are better aware of how to receive optimal quality of advice and the most efficient way to use the service, they may be more inclined to ask AS specialists to focus on one main part of their assignment rather than taking a shopping list approach for feedback. Students also may be more likely to upload the necessary documents required for feedback if their query is returned with insufficient information so that staff do not have to chase after students to request these documents. Guidelines for AS staff may require some adjustment according to time allocation for appointments and the number of questions that students can reasonably ask in an online feedback

review. The number of reviews could also be capped so that some students do not overuse the system.

The study highlighted how referencing was a high frequency question that students asked and pointed to the need for more referencing resources. Since the study was completed, one of the authors has undertaken recording a suite of referencing videos. The videos are short, focused on specific need and take a conversational tone just as in a guided approach to learning. This suite of APA and Harvard referencing videos is available to students now and has been popular. The use of such resources demonstrates the need for effective quick fix approaches in areas of high student learning needs as well as embedded approaches where students can ask for meaningful unit-based feedback on their assignment drafts. The complementarity of face-to-face, online and after hours study support offers a range of purposeful and productive strategies to enhance student learning experiences.

One of the unexpected and surprising outcomes was the unsolicited student feedback regarding the outsourced after-hours online academic support service. Although many students were satisfied, some students expressed disappointment with the quality of the feedback and returned to AS during business hours because the depth and detail in the feedback were more helpful than generic feedback. Such student feedback highlights Chanock's (2013) and Wingate's (2006) point that student learning should be developed through subject teaching and linked to disciplinary content and language. As Academic Skills expands its repertoire of online approaches to support diverse learners across the university, the educational needs of students to develop content knowledge alongside language skills is paramount.

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