

The good, the bad and the interesting: Integrating a third-party provider into ALL services at a regional university

Rachel Barber

The Learning Centre, James Cook University, Cairns QLD 4878, Australia

Email: rachel.barber@jcu.edu.au

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Supporting students in their learning while transitioning into university has always been a key responsibility of academic language and learning (ALL) professionals. However, the changing demands for ALL support in the contemporary tertiary environment has required a shift in practice. Over the last eight years, one regional university has redefined the role of learning advisors by taking a whole of institution approach to ALL development and pursuing a multilayered model for practice that builds staff capacity and develops confident, agentic learners. As part of a diversified suite of activities, the university has engaged the services of a third-party provider to provide after-hours, online tutorial support to students. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study conducted by the university in 2018, which evaluates the impact of the diversification of ALL services on the practices of ALL professionals, including the benefits and challenges of using third-party providers. The study revealed that while there are some benefits, learning advisors and academic staff expressed reservations about the provider's effectiveness and usefulness. Findings suggest that students need clarification about the different feedback services available to them and guidance on seeking, interpreting, and applying feedback. The study highlights the need to carefully plan the integration of third-party services within a broader framework of feedback processes and offers insights into how ALL practitioners can best guide students and staff to appropriately use third-party services while avoiding the pitfalls.

Key Words: third-party providers, online academic support, academic language and learning, academic literacies, learning advisors, student support, tertiary teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

The regional university in this study takes a whole of institution approach to academic language and learning (ALL) development that builds staff capacity and develops confident, agentic learners (Briguglio, 2014). The model of support is multi-layered and offers a range of services, from generic, self-access resources to highly targeted, discipline-specific activities that are embedded into curriculum (Briguglio & Watson, 2014). To assist with the diversification of ALL practice, the university's Learning Centre has engaged the services of a third-party provider to provide after-hours, online tutorial assistance to all students. By implementing the service, the aim was to complement existing services by broadening digital offerings, providing a service that is available after-hours and for students unable to access on-campus programs, while also taking up greater student loads in peak periods (Lynch, 2017). As a result, learning advisors have reduced time

spent on individual consultations and have consequently had greater capacity to focus on the development of discipline-based language and learning activities (Evans et al., 2019; Lynch, 2016).

In 2018, the Learning Centre received an Association of Academic Language and Learning (AALL) commissioned research grant to conduct a qualitative study investigating how the diversification of ALL services, including the integration of third-party providers, has impacted on the practices of the university's learning advisors (Barber, 2020). The research questions pursued in the study explored how the key responsibilities of ALL practitioners have shifted and, therefore, placed new demands on the professional skills required of learning advisors; and how discipline-based academic staff perceive the role of learning advisors in the contemporary ALL landscape. Learning advisors and academic staff at the university were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews and focus groups and were asked a series of questions relating to their experience and perceptions of ALL practice, including their views on the benefits and challenges of using third-party providers. The findings from the study are presented here as they relate to the integration of the third-party provider into ALL services at the university, thereby contributing to the emerging body of literature and expanding the evidence base regarding the use, role and efficacy of third-party providers in the work of ALL. As learning advisors at the university are professional staff, the term 'academic staff' in this paper refers to discipline-based academic teaching staff.

2. Background

2.1. Transforming ALL practice

Supporting students to develop their academic writing, language and learning while transitioning into university has always been a key responsibility of ALL practitioners. However, the demands for ALL support are changing due to the massification of higher education and widening participation imperatives, thereby increasing the diversity of students' language and learning backgrounds and preparedness when entering university (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020; Hattie, 2015; James, 2007). Managing these new demands in a climate of economic rationalism has required a shift in ALL practice to enable the provision of ALL services which are scalable and sustainable.

This regional Australian university has responded by transforming ALL practice over the last eight years with the aim to foster independence, competence, and confidence in all students through the provision of a variety of support services (Lynch, 2016). ALL programs are coordinated through the university's Learning Centre and offer a suite of services from self-access resources via the Learning Centre website, orientation programs and generic workshops, through to the development and assessment of discipline-specific communication skills and numeracy within courses (Arkoudis et al., 2012; Baik & Greig, 2009; Briguglio & Watson, 2014). This multi-layered model of support draws on a distributed expertise model of ALL development (Arkoudis, 2014; Arkoudis et al., 2018), and is designed to engage and meet the needs of the university's diverse cohorts across all disciplines and to provide continued academic language development throughout a student's course of study (Arkoudis, 2014; Dunworth 2013; Gale, 2009). To achieve this goal, learning advisors work collaboratively with academic colleagues to build academic staff capacity and offer ALL development which is embedded into curricula (Briguglio, 2014; Cleary et al., 2017). This transformation in practice deliberately shifts focus away from remedial understandings of ALL work, where students who 'lack' academic skills are referred to learning advisors to be 'fixed' in individual consultations (Chahal et al., 2019), to a developmental understanding of ALL practice that is more scalable and strategic, focuses on the first-year experience and transition pedagogies, and scaffolds ALL development across the curriculum (Baik et al., 2015; Kift et al., 2010; Lea & Street, 1998). This is a whole of institution approach that steers learning advising practice towards discipline-based projects that embed ALL into the curriculum to enhance learning and teaching, alongside the provision of a range of self-access resources and peer support for students (McWilliams & Allan, 2014; Percy, 2014; Wingate, 2006, 2018).

2.2. The role of third-party providers in ALL

At times, the need remains for students to access advice or feedback on-demand and after hours, particularly where the student's question concerns a technical writing issue such as grammar, punctuation, or structure. Attending to such issues adds to the consultation load for learning advisors who are prioritising feedback for students on higher order writing skills (Gurney & Grossi, 2019; O'Neill & Russell, 2019). Consequently, a third-party provider was made available to all students at the university in 2016, from 3 pm – midnight, Sunday – Friday, and now takes up greater student loads in peak periods, thus allowing learning advisors to focus on the development of discipline-based language and learning activities.

The integration of a third-party provider at the university is positioned as a complementary service, which expands digital offerings and provides an online, on-demand and after-hours avenue of support for students unable to come to campus. Within this frame, the third-party provider offers generic and foundational support in academic writing, with the aim to normalise help seeking and add value to an already supportive learning environment, especially during periods of high demand (Lynch, 2017). While the decision to integrate a third-party provider was made at higher levels of management, learning advisors were consulted regarding the implementation of the service and led communication to students and discipline-based academic staff about the use of the service. Learning advisors welcomed the extra assistance as demand for individual consultations was high and the presence of an external offering allowed learning advisors to focus on more strategic and scalable embedded support. The offerings from the chosen provider consist of live personalised help by chatting with a tutor, and writing feedback on an assignment draft within 24 hours. The service offers support in foundational concepts, including academic literacy, as well as a range of academic disciplines.

To evaluate the success of the third-party provider at the university, data is periodically collected and reviewed, which includes usage, transcripts, satisfaction survey data, student demographics and grades. The overall uptake of the service in 2016 was high with 1384 (22.9 %) first year undergraduate students accessing the service (Lynch, 2017). In total, 4529 sessions were completed, of which 79.8 % were 'Writing Feedback' sessions, with the largest proportion of those students being from the Social Science discipline (Lynch, 2017). While the university's data indicates a high level of student satisfaction with the service and an improvement in student achievement for students who used the service, evidence from Benzie and Harper (2019) suggests that students have mixed experiences when engaging with the provider. Similarly, a study conducted by Ashton-Hay et al. (2018) into students' use of online academic skills support found that students were dissatisfied with the feedback they had received from a third-party provider, which they perceived to be too generic and subsequently sought further advice from in-house advisors. Their findings reinforce the literature surrounding the importance of embedded language and learning support that is contextualised to the student's course, institution, and discipline. Students need regular feedback for learning that is related to assessment so that they can develop their academic literacy in a timely manner, in the context of their discipline (Carless & Boud, 2018; Hattie, 2015; Sutton, 2012).

Recent literature on developing feedback literacy asserts that feedback is socially constructed within peer-to-peer and learner-teacher relations and contextually situated within disciplines and institutions (Carless & Boud, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019; Molloy et al., 2020). Feedback literacy is defined as "the ability to read, interpret and use written feedback" (Sutton, 2012, p. 31) and has four features as set out by Carless and Boud (2018, p. 1316): "appreciating feedback; making judgments; managing affect; and taking action." Taking a learning-centred approach to feedback literacy develops all these dispositions across a range of feedback processes (Molloy et al., 2020).

Benzie and Harper (2019) further argue that the use of third-party writing feedback services reduces and fragments an otherwise complex, highly contextualised writing process. By only re-

ceiving generic feedback on the technical aspects of writing, such as grammar and structure, students struggle to make sense of decontextualised writing feedback. As such, Benzie and Harper (2019) contend that these services “have very limited value where they are used to outsource or automate aspects of writing development” (p. 2) and that students may receive conflicting writing advice, which confuses the process of learning to write academically within the situated discourse practices of their discipline. To counter this, teaching staff and students need to understand the role and purpose of the third-party provider and learn how it works and what it can be used for, so that the service can be used appropriately. Benzie and Harper conclude that universities cannot rely on external providers to fully outsource all learning support and writing development and that universities should “make use of – but not rely upon – third-party products” (Benzie & Harper, 2019, p. 12).

3. Research methods

In 2018, the university’s Learning Centre received an AALL commissioned research grant to conduct a qualitative study investigating how the diversification of ALL services, including the integration of third-party providers, has impacted on the practices of learning advisors (Barber, 2020). In the study, qualitative methods were used to gather textual data with a view to understanding more deeply how learning advisors and academic staff understand ALL work in the contemporary higher education setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Lodico et al., 2010). This qualitative data adds insights into the quantitative data collected around student usage of ALL services at the university, including student usage of the third-party provider (Lynch, 2017). Ethics approval for this study was granted from the university’s Human Ethics committee in February 2018, Ethics Approval Number H7292.

3.1. Data collection

Qualitative data was collected in semi-structured interviews and focus groups and were conducted by the author, either face-to-face, via phone or video conference (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Lodico et al., 2010; May, 2001). Prompts were open-ended to stimulate discussion and centred around current ALL practices, external factors that influence practice, and perceptions around the changing roles of learning advisors. Academic staff had additional prompts on the benefits and challenges of working with learning advisors and integrating external providers. Over 800 minutes of digitally recorded data was collected and then transcribed verbatim, using an external, professional transcription service.

3.2. Participant selection

Purposive sampling (Palys, 2012) was used to invite all nine of the university’s learning advisors and 89 of the university’s discipline-based academics to participate in the study. Academic staff were invited based on their teaching a subject in which there had been an integrated learning advisor (ILA) or curriculum enhancement activity in 2017. Associate Deans of Learning and Teaching (ADLT) were also invited as they had been involved in discussions and negotiations around which subjects were identified for ALL input. All participants were invited to join focus groups. Where the participants were unable to join the focus groups due to time clashes or other commitments, they were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview at a mutually agreed time. In total, eight learning advisors participated in one of three focus groups. Meanwhile, 29 academic staff members participated in the study; 16 of whom participated in one of four focus groups, and 13 of whom participated in a semi-structured interview.

3.3. Data analysis

The textual data was thematically analysed in NVivo, a software package for storing and organising qualitative data (QSR International, 2020). A deductive approach was used to code data initially to the interview prompts that related to the third-party provider (Nowell et al., 2017). These main themes were recorded as parent nodes in NVivo. Dominant themes from this data set

were identified where multiple participants made similar comments. Anomalies were also noted to provide a broader perspective to dominant themes. An inductive approach was then used to analyse and group the dominant themes into subthemes, through multiple readings of printed, coded data (Fox, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017). Child nodes were then created in NVivo for these subthemes. Subsequent targeted readings were conducted via text and word frequency searches to provide further insight into the data.

4. Results

Findings from the study were initially organised thematically according to the participants' perceived benefits and challenges of integrating a third-party provider at the university. From these broad themes, three subthemes emerged. Responses related predominantly to the emergent sub-theme of feedback literacy, and are presented firstly from the perspective of academic staff, followed by that of the learning advisors. The additional subthemes of staff workloads and diverse learner needs were not voluminous responses but are included here as they provide an important perspective when considering the integration of third-party providers.

4.1. Feedback literacy

4.1.1. Academic staff perspectives

Academic staff had varied understandings of how the third-party service works, and also had diverse views on its value, largely dependent on the way in which students had used the service in their respective disciplines. Academics reported higher uptake of the service in Business and Nursing, for example, and noted that the uptake relied upon the academic's awareness and promotion of the service, as well as teaching students how to use it effectively. Some of the benefits stated by academic staff were that the third-party provider is "*broadly effective*" as another support to build capacity in students around seeking feedback. In one example, the third-party provider was embedded into a first-year business communication subject, with students having to submit their essay to the service for feedback and respond to that feedback as part of an early written assessment.

Academic staff further stated that the service gives students confidence and provides another set of eyes on their drafts to get independent feedback when this cannot be offered by the lecturer. As one academic explained:

I can't look at draft work, because it... would put that student or group at an advantage over others, so we actively discourage the lecturer from looking at draft work, prior to submission... [the third-party provider] is a really good way of helping them to get that feedback, I think.

However, academic staff expressed concern that students were using the service as a last-minute support and were "*not learning how to learn ... to create understanding*", particularly when feedback from the service had been inconsistent, causing confusion for students: "*it's a bit hit and miss. It depends on who picks up the call I think in terms of the quality of the service*". According to some academics, students were not happy with the support or feedback they received from the third-party provider as some wanted proofreading (students from non-English speaking backgrounds, in particular) but were told by the provider's tutors that they would not do this, while others had their assignments proofread but they wanted feedback on overall structure or understanding an assessment.

Some additional challenges mentioned by the academic staff were that the third-party service is not used well and feedback from the service could easily be misinterpreted, "*lost in translation*", and result in "*miscommunication*", especially with less traditional assessment pieces, or in disciplines such as IT and Law with discipline-specific or technical language, which cannot reliably be outsourced to external tutors. For example, one academic reported:

It's been a mix of positiveness where the feedback from the students was it was very timely, and they felt confident that the feedback helped them but then I had the conflicting feedback where they felt the person in [the third-party service] had failed them and dropped their grades. I really felt that those types of feedback were more about students misinterpreting what [the third-party service] was about ... and you know how they highlight it's not about content, it's about structure.

Academic staff supported the view that the third-party service needs to be promoted and integrated to be of any real benefit, and also stated that students need guidance on how to use the service early in semester so that they are not panicking at the last minute and then not getting the feedback they need. As one academic said:

if they start engaging with it near the beginning of semester, start developing an awareness of how they tutor, when they tutor, getting help on many questions frequently ... they won't end up ... panicking, two days to the test ... in the first week, they're happy to engage in that process and get over the hump.

Academic staff concluded that students valued the learning advisors more than the third-party provider, for their situated knowledge of the University and their nuanced understanding of assessment items, subject context and the discipline in which they practice: “*students would submit something, get not a very good mark and then come back and say, but I submitted – this is what they told me to do ... I haven't ever had that experience ... with the learning advisors on campus.*”

4.1.2. Learning advisors' perspectives

Learning advisors similarly held mixed views on the integration of the third-party provider, voicing the caveat that staff need to “*clarify its role and purpose*”, and stating that third-party providers could be used wisely to complement the suite of ALL services, but that this necessitates guiding students and staff in how to use the service. When intentionally integrated into the curriculum, seeking feedback from the third-party provider seemed to boost help-seeking behaviour overall. The learning advisor involved in the first-year Business project reflected:

We had a really big usage of that external service at that time, obviously, because it was a requirement and I found that there was a flow-on effect that the students would be more likely to come and access our services because they were aware of what we offered because in their first assessment, they had to use that service.

The main challenge noted by learning advisors was that students' feedback literacy was underdeveloped, resulting in uncertainty in how to seek and interpret feedback from the third-party service, which essentially only offers foundational support: “*that has created some problems because they didn't have a good understanding of what [the third-party provider] meant. They thought it was going to edit all their work and give them referencing and they were going to buy time.*”

Learning advisors also commented that students needed support to interpret the feedback that they had received from the third-party provider. They reported that students had brought their feedback to the peer or learning advisors for interpretation, while also observing that students seemed to be seeking learning advisors' feedback in addition to or instead of from the third-party provider, as they perceive the embedded learning advisor's advice to be more relevant: “*I feel like ... students would ... always be more happy if a learning advisor provided the support as compared to just a referral to [the third-party provider]. That's my impression.*” Learning advisors expressed concern at this behaviour as it had the tendency to create confusion for students as they sought feedback from multiple sources that was potentially conflicting.

4.2. Staff workloads

While learning advisors held mixed views on the use of a third-party provider, they agreed that external providers “*have their place*” in doing “*all the grunt work*” but are seen largely as an “*add-on*” service, which has not had any major impact on their practice. Learning advisors acknowledged that the availability of the third-party services had reduced demand for individual consultations: “*just knowing it's there ... is a massive help for students and has certainly reduced my workload in terms of individual consultations and requests.*” In particular, the presence of the external service was useful in handling requests for writing feedback in large first-year cohorts with a high proportion of external students. As one learning advisor commented:

being able to promote... [a third-party provider] in nursing has been a massive support for me as the only learning advisor working with such a big cohort, particularly with the external cohort and ... with students doing a lot of after-hours work. Without that, I think we would have been completely snowed under with requests.

Consequently, learning advisors stated that the reduction in individual consultations had allowed them to focus more on curriculum enhancement projects and develop embedded resources.

4.3. Diverse learner needs

Learning advisors saw the value in a third-party provider for students to get additional, after-hours feedback: “*being able to refer them to [a third-party provider] and not feel like I'm leaving a student hanging is really ... beneficial*”. Similarly, academic staff stated that the third-party service was useful for after-hours support and particularly helpful for external students, students in pathways programs or who are using English as an additional language and may require additional assistance with academic writing and language.

Interestingly, one academic staff member noted that that the anonymity and independence of the service are useful for students with “*social problems*” or who feel some stigma attached to asking for advice:

We have a lot of students with social problems, and they don't go to the Learning Centre because they don't like this face-to-face activity. So, if because it's on the computer they don't actually have to deal with the person, they like it for that purpose.

5. Discussion

Findings from the study revealed that learning advisors and academic staff have mixed views on integrating the third-party provider. Both learning advisors and academic staff have experienced some benefits of integrating the third-party service, as it has relieved some workload pressures and provided an avenue for staff to direct students to support where they otherwise would not have had capacity. This has been particularly relevant for meeting the diverse needs of large cohorts of students, external students who require access to support afterhours, or students who prefer the anonymity of an online service. However, the most significant finding relates to the development of feedback literacy. The integration of the third-party provider has worked particularly well when the service has been integrated and actively promoted in a subject with a learning-centred focus (Molloy et al., 2020). In such cases, seeking feedback on writing from the third-party provider has been included in the assessment cycle with clear instructions given on how to access and evaluate feedback. Students are then given the opportunity to take action on their feedback by feeding forward and resubmitting an assessment (Molloy et al., 2020). The scaffolding of how to seek feedback from the third-party provider within subjects, as well as how to interpret and apply that feedback, has improved the students’ feedback literacy and their experience of using the third-party services.

Adversely, the data reveals that where students have a limited understanding of how to use the third-party service, combined with limited feedback literacy, students will potentially misinterpret feedback, be misled or get confused by conflicting or insufficient feedback. Interpreting feedback from an external source can be particularly problematic for students as the advice is decontextualized and fragmented (Benzie & Harper, 2019). Academic staff expressed concerns that students need to learn how to access feedback via the third-party service at the start of semester so they are not pushed into using it in ‘panic mode’ and make misinformed decisions about how to apply the feedback. In this study, both learning advisors and academic staff indicate that students needed guidance to interpret and apply the feedback within the context of their discipline. Additionally, students need to be made aware of the contextual nature of feedback and understand that the third-party provider is external to the discipline and institution. As Sutton (2012) asserts, students may require “explicit guidance” (p. 37) to make sense of their feedback and apply it to future assessments.

Given that many students are new to higher education and are learning how to navigate myriad new systems, including how to decipher the various student support and advice services, it may be asking too much of students to have the critical awareness required to discern the difference between externally provided feedback and the nuanced requirements of their institution, discipline, or subject lecturer. This may add to the transition burden for students in an already unfamiliar environment (Gale & Parker, 2014; Kift et al., 2010), particularly for those from diverse backgrounds who may experience feedback differently (Henderson et al., 2019). Indeed, the comments by academic staff in Law and IT demonstrate that for some disciplines, the feedback from the third-party provider has been inadequate, yet students are not able to successfully discern the differences between generic writing feedback and the requirements of the discipline, where a situated understanding of disciplinary norms is required. Findings from the data show that students need assistance to interpret the feedback or are seeking more nuanced feedback by taking their third-party feedback reports to peer and learning advisors for further explanation. This demonstrates that some students are seeking clarity in how to apply what is relevant in the context of their discipline, and consequently they would benefit from guidance in how to develop their feedback literacy in a way that is intentionally integrated into the first-year of their disciplinary learning experience (Kift et al., 2010; Sutton, 2012; Tinto, 2009).

It is also interesting to note the concerns raised by academic staff that using third-party providers as a quick fix is not teaching students how to learn or engage in the complex cognitive processes and social discourses for developing writing within their discipline. ALL best practice is founded on the evidence that students can more successfully develop their feedback and academic literacy when taught in the context of their discipline (Lea & Street, 1998; Sutton, 2012; Wingate 2006), and that learning advisors have greater reach when embedding ALL into curriculum in ways that situate learning within disciplinary norms (Cleary et al., 2017; McWilliams & Allen, 2014; Percy, 2014; Wingate, 2018). In this way, students can engage in the discipline discourse of their learning community of peers, lecturers and learning advisors. From this perspective, the integration of third-party services contradicts the aims of embedded approaches to ALL development and learning-centred approaches to developing feedback literacy. If integrating third-party services is a necessary response to meeting student demand for feedback in economically constrained times, then they need to be situated within a broader ecosystem of support services (Hill & Harper, 2020; Lawrence, 2020). It also needs to be made clear to students that feedback from the third-party provider is complementary to the range of feedback processes available to them; it is generic and foundational, focusing on text and writing mechanics rather than providing context-driven feedback.

The current economic climate and the persistence of neoliberal approaches to higher education management have opened the way for under-funded internal support services to be outsourced to third-party providers. The question remains of how to integrate third-party services responsibly while minimising any unintended negative impacts. The solution could lie in developing students’

overall feedback literacy. The critical factor seems to be in clarifying the purpose for integrating the third-party provider and how it is situated within the broader feedback processes available to students. Within this broader frame, third-party services can play a role in students' feedback for learning, if provisions are made for concurrently developing students' feedback literacy. For example, to support students' appreciation of feedback, learning advisors might include instruction on what to expect from the third-party provider and how the service differs from the more developmental advice from ALL units and contextualised feedback on content from academic staff. To better interpret, evaluate and apply feedback, students might need support in making informed academic judgments so that they can take action to feedforward feedback into their future studies (Carless & Boud, 2018; Molloy et al., 2020; Sutton, 2012).

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations draw on Sutton's (2012) dimensions of feedback literacy, Carless and Boud's (2018) features of feedback literacy, and Molloy et al.'s (2020) learning-centred framework for feedback literacy. The recommendations are provided as a guide for ALL units to consider when integrating the services of a third-party provider into the suite of ALL services.

6.1. Clarify differences between the ALL unit and third-party services

Students need to be informed that an institutionally endorsed third-party service is an additional, external service with genuine, qualified tutors, but that they are external to the institution, which means that the tutors will not be familiar with institutional, discipline or subject expectations in the same nuanced way that learning advisors are. Students need to be made aware of all the available and legitimate feedback processes and support options (including automated feedback providers; third-party services; the ALL unit and academic staff) to cater for the different levels of student enquiry or types of feedback that students are seeking. In this way, students' appreciation for feedback processes can be developed.

6.2. Guide students on how to seek feedback.

Students then need to be guided towards actively seeking feedback that is more targeted, regardless of which service they use. This would avoid the 'shopping list' approach to asking for feedback (Ashton-Hay et al., 2018) and support learner agency. To this end, examples can be provided of the types of questions that students can ask about their learning and assessments and how to ask for specific feedback on aspects of academic writing or task response, and when it would be most appropriate to use the various services available. This would also serve to develop students' general feedback literacy, may reduce stigma associated with help-seeking, and support a shift to a more developmental dialogue about their learning.

6.3. Guide students on how to interpret and apply feedback.

Once they have the feedback, students may need to be supported to make academic judgments about their feedback, so that they can interpret and apply their feedback meaningfully. This may include reminders to always refer back to subject requirements and university expectations (for example, in referencing or formatting), and to ask for clarification if needed so that they can make informed judgments about how to use the feedback from the third-party provider. In this way, students can be encouraged to feed forward and incorporate the feedback into their critical thinking and learning cycle.

6.4. Engage in ongoing dialogue with third-party providers for service improvement

By developing a constructive relationship with third-party providers and regularly reviewing usage data, ALL units can provide critical input into improvements in the students' use of the service and decisions about access arrangements. Students and academic staff could be encouraged to

record any feedback complaints and communicate these to the ALL unit, to feed back to the provider for continuous improvement. If the decision is being made to outsource services to third-party providers, then there is a duty of care that accompanies that decision. A willingness to engage in ongoing dialogue is required from all parties to ensure that the outsourced services are adequately meeting the intended student learning needs and are fit-for-purpose within a broader suite of feedback processes.

7. Limitations

Several limitations to this study are acknowledged. Firstly, the qualitative data is only representative of one university's experience of integrating a third-party provider. As such, this study may not be generalisable or transferable to other institutional contexts. Future comparative research could investigate alternative third-party providers in other institutions, comparing student and staff experiences in an 'eco-system' approach to learning support services (Hill & Harper, 2020; Lawrence, 2020). These qualitative studies could complement further quantitative studies to ascertain how many students use third-party providers, their satisfaction with the service, how many return to the service, and how that quantitative data compares with student usage of in-house ALL services.

The second limitation relates to participant selection, as only academic staff working with the ALL unit and learning advisors were invited to participate, therefore, results are potentially biased in favour of embedded ALL work. Future studies could aim to seek perspectives from students and those outside of targeted ALL programs to gain insight into others' experiences of third-party providers. Expanding the participant pool to include third-party providers (particularly the tutors giving feedback) and students would expand the data available and allow for the exploration of additional themes. The inclusion of the third-party provider as a participant in future research would provide insights into the feedback practices in an externally provided tutorial or live chat service. This study did not investigate samples of feedback received from the third-party provider and did not observe student-tutor interactions, so any claims made in this study are made from the perspective of the university's learning advisors and academic staff. Finally, a potential for researcher bias exists as the study was conducted by the author, also a learning advisor at the university. The author's subjectivity is acknowledged and understood within a qualitative, post-structural epistemological frame. Feedback on initial findings was sought from colleagues and critical friends. Further independent research and member checking would be beneficial in future qualitative studies.

8. Conclusion

In the context of massification and widening participation, students in transition to university have varied learning needs that are best met by a program of support services that is multilayered and multi-modal, ranging from generic self-access resources to discipline-specific activities that are embedded into curriculum. However, in financially constrained environments, ALL units must think innovatively and creatively to operationalise ALL programs and meet the diverse learning needs of students. One university's response has been to implement a multi-layered model of support that is scalable across larger cohorts and sustainable financially, which includes the integration of a third-party provider to offer an online, after-hours tutorial service to students. Findings from a qualitative study investigating the impact of diversified ALL services on learning advisors, suggest that the third-party services offer a useful tool for meeting student demand in peak periods, particularly for foundational feedback on generic aspects of academic writing, but there are limitations to their use. Views about the service from students and staff have been mixed, and while clear benefits were voiced, learning advisors and academic staff expressed reservations about the effectiveness and usefulness of decontextualised writing feedback from an external source which could cause confusion for novice learners and possibly distance them from the dis-

course practices of their discipline. Recommendations from the findings are to: provide clarification to students about ALL unit and third-party services to support the appreciation of feedback; guide students on how to seek feedback to foster learner agency; guide students on how to interpret and apply feedback to support students' academic judgment; and engage in ongoing dialogue with third-party providers for service improvement. The study highlights the need to carefully plan the integration of third-party services and to situate them within a broader framework of feedback processes and practices across the curriculum that support the development of learner feedback literacy. In so doing, students and staff can be guided to use third-party services appropriately while avoiding the pitfalls.

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