ASSOCIATION FOR
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Student success and retention: What's academic skills got to do with it?

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As the importance of student success and retention in higher education increases, the need for academic support is also crucial to assist the growing number of students from diverse backgrounds. This study assessed whether the attendance of students for an Academic Skills consultation made any difference in terms of performance, success, GPA, and attrition. Over 13,000 student consultations with Academic Skills in 2017, 2018 and 2019 were matched in the University Management Information System to allow derivation of metrics. The findings indicate that students who attended Academic Skills performed better than those who did not attend Academic Skills and the difference is greater for those who attended more consultations. Student GPA was also higher and more students completed their degree as a result. A recommendation is made for universities to strategically position and resource academic language and learning support services in order to enhance the student experience.

Key Words: academic language and learning, academic support, student success, student retention, learning analytics.

1. Introduction

The growing diversity of students in higher education requires an increasing need for academic support to ensure students' study success as well as retention. Students from a wide range of demographics face the challenge of adjusting to academic culture and meeting the required academic standards for success (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Academic Language and Learning (ALL) units and ALL specialists bridge this gap commendably and are "integral to university support programs" (Gurney & Grossi, 2019, p. 940). Yet ALL units are continually challenged with "administrative agendas underpinned by performative and instrumentalist discourses" (Gurney & Grossi 2019, p. 941) and called to provide evidence-based metrics to prove impact, although the uptake of learning analytics has been slow and limited in education (West, 2019). As a step towards addressing this deficiency, this study tracked 13,239 students who booked consultations with Academic Skills in the years 2017–2019 in order to analyse any difference in terms of performance, study success, Grade Point Average (GPA) and attrition between these students and students enrolled in comparable courses who did not attend Academic Skills consultations.

Research studies reveal that students withdraw from their studies for a variety of reasons including the quality of the program, as well as psychosocial, financial, practical and other academic factors (Coates, 2014). In particular, students from equity groups frequently leave their studies due to

financial and family obligations (Edwards & McMillan, 2015), and first-year attrition is almost double that of second-years (Kift, 2014). With a variety of challenges, student engagement is essential to student achievement and retention (Krause & Coates, 2008), as are other factors such as self-efficacy beliefs (Shunk & Mullen, 2012), the need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Thomas, 2012) and a sense of well-being (Stallman, 2010; Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015). Bohlmann and Kelly (2021) claim that learning developers are often viewed by students as 'safe figures' who are able to respond to students in a unique way by normalising failure, listening actively, facilitating peer/tutor feedback, building online communities, and collaborating with counselling. ALL support plays an important role in bridging these challenges by developing students' academic literacy skills, as well as building student confidence and self-efficacy (Habel, 2009) in order to support retention and reduce attrition. ALL support assists in meeting basic student needs in order to avoid negative experiences which can lead to a loss of confidence, failure and withdrawal (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Although ALL support is vital to developing academic literacy and self-regulation skills which impact student success[1] and retention, it is inherently difficult to prove causation. Improvements in academic performance may be intrinsically linked to ALL learning support, however the education context is broad with many intervening factors which ALL practitioners have no control over and may know nothing about. Nevertheless, this observational study compares the relative performance in terms of student success, GPA and retention of similar cohorts of students who did and did not attend Academic Skills consultations. Unsolicited qualitative feedback from students supports an interpretation of this data as indicating that attending Academic Skills sessions do have meaningful, positive impacts on all these metrics.

2. Academic language and learning

Academic Language and Learning (ALL) is a relatively new field in higher education. Prior to 1990, academic support was a remedial service, often linked to counselling and at-risk students. During the 1980s, this deficit approach progressed through a greater recognition of academic culture and the significance of language that linked disciplinary content, context and vocabulary (Devlin, as cited in Garner, Chanock, & Clerehan, 1995). John Clancy, an educator from this time, began to conceptualise the interrelatedness of language and learning:

> the transition from school to university is most usefully seen in terms of cultural adjustment. Language, which is perhaps the most potent and tangible expression of culture, is both the biggest obstacle to successful integration into an alien culture and the most powerful means for unlocking it. (Association of Academic Language and Learning, 2019)

The recognition of integrating academic language and learning development in the context of a discipline and embedding academic language and learning skills in curricula has come to be considered best practice for sustainability and wider student reach. Within this context, the individual consultation still has a key role as studies advocate a dialogic approach (Wintrup, James & Huntrip, 2012), the tailoring of instruction to meet student needs (Murray, 2019), and the use of individualised academic skills writing intervention or "itutes" in the first semester of graduate academic writing (Campitelli, Page & Quach, 2019). Chanock (2007, p. A1) values individual consultations as "input into the development of other modes of teaching". Student consultations provide insight on troublesome assignments, curricula challenges and disciplinary literacy practices that may confuse students. Individual consultations thus have the ability to inform better teaching and learning practices in an institution if communication channels are open.

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[1] In the context of this study, "student success" is defined as the proportion of units passed in a given year by students who did not withdraw.

In addition to individual consultations, ALL services are expanding to curriculum work, yet perceptions of ALL advisory practice "are not particularly well understood by university administrators, teachers and students" (Roberts & Reid 2011, p. A70) and have led to tensions. In some institutions, ALL continues to be widely "marginalised as a remedial exercise designed to fix-up students' problems" (Hyland 2002b, p. 386) and regarded as a "bolt on provision" (Wingate 2006, p. 457) of extracurricular study skills rather than embedded learning through disciplinary teaching. Some studies (e.g., Gao & Reid 2015, p. 34) suggest ALL work is done "in the shadows" due to the need to justify and quantify learning support work (Breen & Protheroe, 2015; Strauss, 2013; Walkinshaw, Milford, & Freeman, 2015). Few studies have been able to successfully establish a link between ALL work, student success and retention. As a result, ALL units are vulnerable to limited resourcing and may become the target of neo-liberalist economic rationalisation and restructuring.

As more universities move online, particularly in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the role of ALL specialists has also been transforming, yet still remains marginalised within many institutions (Evans, Henderson, & Ashton-Hay, 2019). According to Evans et al. (2019), ALL recruitment advertisements prefer skills in eLearning development, eLearning teaching, and curriculum development, as well as experience in general teaching, EAL/ESL, and one-to-one advising. The study found that ALL specialist work has moved beyond remedial by responding to change, gaining knowledge across a range of disciplines, and broadly using constructivist learning approaches which are indicative of a changing sector, skillsets and the ability to meet diverse learning needs. ALL is increasingly integral to student success and retention in Australian higher education today, and this study highlights the positive impact that Academic Skills one-on-one learning support can exert in a small regional university.

3. Context of the study

The study took place in a small, multi-campus regional university. The university's student demographics include mature students who are returning to study after an extended time away, school leavers who may not have solid foundations for tertiary study, and students with financial and/or caring commitments that may take priority (Fleming & Grace, 2017). The diversity also includes Indigenous, migrant and international students. The proportion of students with these "non-traditional" demographics are comparatively higher than sector averages (McAuley, 2016) and points to the need for greater support. In addition, traditionally, students from regional areas are less likely to complete high school or finish tertiary studies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Panizzon & Pegg, 2007). This is partially due to low socio-economic upbringing and students who are the first in their family to attend university (Wilks & Wilson, 2012). Patfield, Gore, and Weaver (2021, para. 1) assert that the "odds are against 'first in family' university students but equity policies are blind to them".

In 2017, 2018 and 2019, the Academic Skills (AS) team created curriculum for learning support across a broad range of services, including team teaching approaches, assessment-specific academic skill development lectures and tutorials, embedding academic skills in curricula, modelling texts, and training for referencing. The AS team also presented targeted and generic workshops, individual and small group student consultations in face-to-face, phone, and zoom/skype formats, as well as providing online assignment feedback. The Academic Skills team design teaching and learning resources such as assignment scaffolds, worksheets, quick guides, videos, recordings, visual maps with assessment prompts, present professional development webinars and run peer support programs. Despite the range of AS services, the focus of this study is only on the sustainability and efficacy of individual student consultations and whether these consultations were instrumental in positively influencing student success, GPA and retention.

4. Method

In this context, an internal program evaluation was conducted to analyse the efficacy and sustainability of one-on-one student consultations over a three-year period. Ethical approval was not required for an internal evaluation, but as the results are of interest, a publication might enable practitioners and administrators to glean similar meaning in their own institutions. As will be seen in Section 5, on average, students attending Academic Skills consultations had higher levels of success and GPAs and lower levels of attrition than did those students who did not. However, as we could not control for other factors which can positively influence students' performance on these metrics, it is uncertain how much of any differences seen can be attributed to the Academic Skills consultations and how much to these other factors. Nevertheless, the unsolicited feedback from students provided in Section 5.3 supports a belief that Academic Skills consultations do positively impact these metrics.

Academic Skills provided the University's Office of Planning Quality and Review (PQR) with details of all the students who had booked consultations in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The student name, ID number, course of study and enrolment details were extracted from Career Hub, the university's online booking system. The student details were matched to files available from the University's Management Information System (MIS), which include demographic and enrolment details of all students for the relevant year. These data allow the derivation of student performance metrics such as GPA, success and attrition.

Each year had a total in excess of 4,000 individual Academic Skills consults held with students. For example, in 2017, the total number of consultations was 4,076, while in 2018, 4,896 consultations took place. In 2019, booked consultations numbered 4,267, making a total of 13,239 student consults over the three year period. The average number of sessions each student attended in each year was either three or four, with a small number of students attending more than 10 sessions, up to a maximum of 40 in 2018 and 76 in 2019.

The Career Hub output included some students who had used the Academic Skills service but had no enrolments in the relevant year. These students had either withdrawn early or were completing units from the prior year, and therefore these student names were excluded from the analysis as there were no appropriate enrolment records available for matching as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of AS use 2017-2019.

	Total Consults	(Unique) Students Consulted	Students with no enrolment details in year	Student records available for analysis
2017	4076	1199	36	1163
2018	4896	1292	39	1253
2019	4267	1405	61	1344

Source: Data from Career Hub, student bookings only (excluding time booked by staff members for own work).

For a selection of courses (i.e. degree program such as a bachelor of Education), the performance of students who attended Academic Skills was compared (across these metrics) with the group in the same course who did not attend Academic Skills in the relevant year. These courses are some of the larger courses at the university and selected across a range of schools. Of the total number of consults, some students had repeat consultations, so the number of unique student consults was determined.

One of these courses (Bachelor of Business) has a number of students enrolled at partner metropolitan locations in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, and offshore. As these partners provide their

own academic skills support services, these students do not use the main Academic Skills service. Consequently, analysis of the student performance for this course was therefore restricted to the main campus locations in Lismore, Gold Coast, Coffs Harbour and Online.

The performance of students was measured by the metrics of success, GPA and attrition, and compared to other students in the same courses across the groups:

   a) Students who attended Academic Skills in the year
   b) Those who did not attend Academic Skills in the year.

Five courses were selected for comparison as these have some of the university's largest enrolment numbers representing various schools and are most common for students attending AS consults. In general, these selected courses were first year units, although the evaluation focused mainly on the student's success, GPA and retention after the consults. By comparing the metrics of success, GPA and retention for those who attended AS and those who did not attend in that year, the observation and evaluation was intended to inform the impact of AS consultation services as a learning metric. However, as we could not control for other factors influencing these metrics, qualitative feedback from students is also used to support the interpretation of the data.

5. Findings

Focusing on distinct students rather than consults, the total number who attended AS consultations each year has increased over these three years to 1405 in 2019, representing approximately 7% of the entire (onshore) student population. The proportion is 9% of the students enrolled at main campus locations as the partner sites in metropolitan areas have their own learning support services. Table 2 below shows the breakdown of attendance per student.

Table 2. AS sessions attended by students.

No. of sessions / student	2017	%	2018	%	2019	%
1	473	39%	462	36%	671	48%
2	258	22%	279	22%	247	18%
3	116	10%	137	11%	151	11%
4	89	7%	102	8%	92	7%
5	48	4%	62	5%	58	4%
6	58	5%	62	5%	40	3%
7	34	3%	32	2%	18	1%
8	29	2%	28	2%	24	2%
9	18	2%	20	2%	19	1%
10	14	1%	18	1%	18	1%
More than 10	62	5%	90	7%	67	5%
TOTAL students	1199		1292		1405	
Average no. sessions	3		4		3	
Maximum no. sessions	38		40		76	

The pattern of student use of the service changed a little in 2019 compared with prior years. Almost half of the students attended for a single session, a higher proportion than seen in prior years, whilst 17% of students had 5 or more consults compared with 22% and 24% in the prior years. More than 500 students attended Academic Skills over two of these years and 112 attended at least one consultation in each of the three years. Table 2 shows that in 2017, 71% of students had 1–3 sessions with Academic Skills and 2018 was comparable with 69%, although the number increased to 77% in 2019.

The averages of 71%, 69%, and 77% indicate that most students choose three or less consultations. Consequently, they may be using AS as a 'top up' or adjustment service and they might otherwise be progressing satisfactorily. Table 2 also indicates that some students who have higher need use a greater number of consultations (38, 40, 76) each year. The need for more consultations could be indicative of the university's demographics and higher than sector averages of non-traditional students. The patterns of attendance are thus a combination of low need or take-up combined with excessive need or take-up. Some of the students may be self-selecting, while others may have been referred by lecturers as high-risk, for assignment resubmission or may benefit from other services such as Counselling or Equity and Inclusion.

5.1. Profile of students attending Academic Skills

Tables 3 and 4 below provide a profile of the students attending Academic Skills during 2017-2019. Roughly half of all the students attending AS are enrolled in courses in the School of Health and Human Sciences. After Health, the next largest groups of students are those enrolled in the Schools of Business and Tourism, and Education in 2018 and 2019. Comparing this pattern of use to the Southern Cross University (SCU) student population shows an over-representation of students from the School of Health and Human Sciences, with students from the School of Business and Tourism, School of Law and SCU College not using the AS service in proportion to the overall student numbers. The proportions of student enrolments by school in 2019 are shown by way of comparison.

Table 3. AS usage by School.

By School	2017		2018		2019		2019 enrol %
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Health and Human Sciences	509	44%	581	46%	661	49%	29%
Business and Tourism	230	20%	197	16%	170	13%	19%
Education	112	10%	154	12%	161	12%	16%
Arts and Social Sciences	142	12%	125	10%	145	11%	9%
Environment, Science and Engineering	46	4%	72	6%	83	6%	8%
Law and Justice	32	4%	36	3%	47	3%	8%
SCU College	49	3%	40	3%	47	3%	7%
Miscellaneous (e.g. study abroad)	38	3%	44	4%	25	2%	3%
College of Indigenous Peoples (Gnibi)	5	0%	4	0%	5	0%	0%
TOTAL STUDENTS	1163		1253		1344		

Note: enrolment numbers are shown for students enrolled at SCU main campus locations only.

Across each of the three years 2017-2019, the largest courses represented in AS consults were Bachelor (B) Nursing and B Midwifery. Amongst the top 10 courses who accessed AS in 2019, six are courses in the School of Health and Human Sciences (see * below). Students in B Midwifery in particular are heavily represented in the AS numbers compared with the overall course size. The comparative numbers of students from these courses are shown in Table 4.

Groups of students who are more active users of the Academic Skills service compared with the proportion enrolled are females, undergraduates, international and commencing students. Students studying online are under-represented in the users of AS compared with their overall enrolment numbers. Similarly, students enrolled at metropolitan partner locations are under-represented in the users of AS compared with their overall enrolment numbers. This would be expected as these locations have their own learning support services available. The student demographics are shown in Table 5.

Table 4. AS usage by Course.

Courses (top 10 in 2019)	2017	2018	2019
Bachelor of Nursing*	228	208	242
Bachelor of Midwifery*	72	87	66
Bachelor of Community Welfare	53	41	64
Graduate Certificate in Australian Nursing (EPIQ)*	4	53	61
Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Education (Primary)	44	40	61
Bachelor of Business	46	49	56
Bachelor of Psychological Science*	22	32	54
Bachelor of Nursing (EN pathway)*	22	52	53
Bachelor of Business in Tourism & Hospitality Management	50	43	35
Bachelor of Clinical Sciences (Osteopathic Studies)*	40	35	33

Table 5. AS users – Student Demographics.

Student Demographics:		2017		2018		2019		2019 enrol %
		n	%	n	%	n	%	
Residency:	Domestic	908	78%	945	75%	1069	80%	87%
	International	255	22%	308	25%	275	20%	13%
Gender:	Female	888	76%	967	77%	1052	78%	66%
	Male	274	24%	286	23%	291	22%	34%
Age Group:	< 20	155	13%	160	13%	169	13%	14%
	20 - 24	310	27%	354	28%	347	26%	28%
	25 - 29	193	17%	213	17%	223	17%	16%
	30 - 34	120	10%	150	12%	178	13%	12%
	35 - 39	118	10%	114	9%	120	9%	9%
	40 and above	267	23%	262	21%	307	23%	21%
Student	Commencing	613	53%	682	54%	653	49%	46%
Group:	Continuing	550	47%	571	46%	691	51%	54%

Table 5 continued.

Student Demographics:		2017		2018		2019		2019 enrol %
		n	%	n	%	n	%	
Course	Non Award	61	5%	69	6%	62	5%	9%
Level:	Postgraduate	187	16%	237	19%	260	19%	28%
	Undergraduate	915	79%	947	76%	1022	76%	63%
Prior SCU	New to SCU	686	59%	795	63%	847	63%	65%
course:	Not New to SCU	321	28%	287	23%	306	23%	25%
	Not New to SCU (Post PSP)	156	13%	171	14%	191	14%	11%
Locations:	Coffs Harbour	146	12%	127	10%	143	10%	7%
	Gold Coast	560	48%	619	49%	684	51%	35%

Note: enrolment numbers are shown for students enrolled at SCU main campus locations only.

5.2. Performance of these students

The five courses indicated in Table 6 were selected for comparison as these are some of the university's largest enrolment numbers representing various schools, and are most common for students attending AS consults. Table 6 shows the respective sizes of the groups compared in this analysis with Health and Human Sciences predominant.

Table 6. Key courses and AS attendance.

	Sample Sizes					
	2017		2018		2019	
Course	Attend AS	Not Attend	Attend AS	Not Attend	Attend AS	Not Attend
B Nursing	228	1172	208	1259	242	1305
B Midwifery	72	180	87	162	66	215
B Business	46	701	49	662	56	582
B Community Welfare	53	371	41	379	64	376
B Arts/B Education (Primary)	44	659	40	735	61	710

Figure 1 shows the distribution of student GPAs for one course in one year for those who attended Academic Skills compared with those who did not attend. Those who attended AS have proportionally higher average grades (above 5 being Credit / Distinction / High Distinction) and fewer fail grades below 4. Perhaps Academic Skills was able to engage the students with ways to improve their understanding of assignments or coach them on learning strategies. Attending AS consultations may have helped to boost grades or students who attended could be self-selecting and wanted to do even better. The higher results for more students could encourage weaker students to attend AS in order to boost their results or avoid the perception of stigmatisation by attending AS as a remedial service. Figure 1 shows that some students who attended AS still failed and this could represent students who had repeated consultations in a year, may have been underprepared for higher education study or who may have benefited from other services. Failure could also be indicative of regional or first in family students facing complex disadvantages.
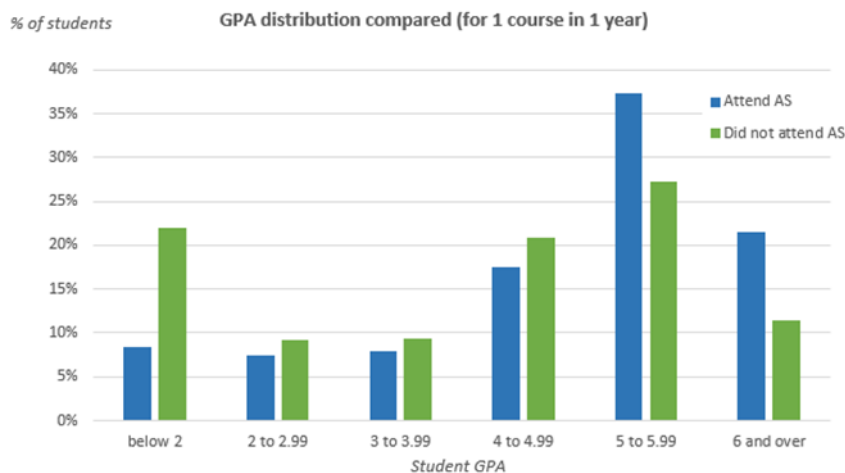
Figure 1. GPA Distribution Compared for one Course in One Year.

Table 7 shows student performance by course for those attending Academic Skills and for those who did not attend. The table relates to student success, student GPA and course attrition for each year in the analysis. The metrics were derived as follows:

1. *Student Success* % is the ratio of units passed / units attempted only in the relevant year; the pass rate of students not withdrawing from studies;

2. *Student GPA* is the grade point average achieved only in the relevant year. High distinction is 7; Distinction is 6; Credit is 5; Pass is 4;

3. *Attrition* is the % of students who neither completed this course in the year or following year nor continued study in this course in the following year.

As seen in Table 7 for each of these five courses, in each of these years, the performance for students attending Academic Skills is better than those who did not consult the support service. Student Success in Table 7 shows an average ten percent higher rate of success in 2017, a 12.6% higher average in 2018 and 12.8% higher average for 2019. Nursing and Midwifery students who attended Academic Skills had consistently 10-14% higher student success percentages across the three years. Likewise, Community Welfare students who attended AS consultations had a 13% higher success rate in 2017/ 2018 and a 21% higher success rate in 2019. The Student Success metric also shows an increase across the three years from 10% average in 2017, 12.6% average in 2018 to 12.8% average in 2019.

The GPA difference amongst students attending AS consultations was again substantial with an average of .53 in 2019, .57 in 2018 and .60 in 2017 higher GPAs as shown in Table 7. With a general trend toward higher GPAs, some specific courses had more significant differences such as Nursing with almost a grade point difference. Community Welfare students attending AS also received higher GPAs as well as Arts/Education, particularly in 2018, than those students not attending.

Again, Table 7 shows an average increase in retention percentage across the three years for those students attending Academic Skills. In 2017, an average 8.8% more students completed their courses in the year compared to 9.8% average in 2018 and 12.6% average in 2019. In specific courses, the completion rate is much higher for Nursing, Business and Community Welfare in 2019 for those attending Academic Skills consultations.

Table 7. Key courses and student performance.

PERFORMANCE BY COURSE	2017			2018			2019		
	At-tend AS	Not At-tend	OVER ALL	At-tend AS	Not Attend	OVE RALL	Attend AS	Not At-tend	OVER ALL
Student Success % not withdrawing									
B Business	77%	71%	72%	82%	72%	73%	88%	76%	78%
B Nursing	89%	77%	79%	92%	80%	82%	93%	79%	82%
B Midwifery	96%	86%	90%	93%	80%	86%	92%	82%	85%
B Community Welfare	80%	67%	69%	79%	66%	68%	84%	63%	66%
B Arts/B Education (Primary)	94%	85%	86%	97%	82%	83%	89%	82%	83%
Student GPA									
B Business	4.05	3.69	3.72	4.22	3.82	3.86	4.63	4.11	4.18
B Nursing	4.86	4.09	4.24	5.15	4.38	4.51	5.03	4.41	4.53
B Midwifery	5.38	4.76	4.99	5.29	4.81	5.02	5.20	4.69	4.83
B Community Welfare	4.02	3.30	3.42	4.27	3.72	3.79	4.31	3.61	3.74
B Arts/B Education (Primary)	4.87	4.33	4.36	5.06	4.41	4.45	4.77	4.45	4.48
Attrition %									
B Business	17%	27%	27%	24%	29%	29%	9%	24%	23%
B Nursing	19%	27%	26%	15%	24%	23%	8%	23%	21%
B Midwifery	7%	26%	20%	22%	32%	29%	18%	27%	25%
B Community Welfare	25%	30%	30%	12%	35%	33%	25%	38%	36%
B Arts/B Education (Primary)	14%	16%	16%	18%	20%	20%	10%	21%	20%

Note: the comparative data for B Business relates to the main SCU campus locations only. The student performance at metropolitan locations is generally weaker. This does not apply to the other courses which are only delivered through the main campus locations.

5.3. Student voice

As noted above, since randomisation to attendance and non-attendance at individual AS sessions was not possible, it is uncertain how much, if any, of the observed differences can be attributed to the impact of AS sessions. There are many intervening factors, however, comments made by students on Pulse, the university online student forum, suggest that at least for some students, AS sessions supported both retention and increased grades. For example, regarding retention, we have the following unsolicited comments:

> *Without help, many of us would never have made it through the unit … I am so thankful for this amazing service* (2019 Pulse post 111164)

> *Just wanted to say thank you to the Academic Skills team for suggesting ways in which I can improve my essay with structure, spelling and gramma [sic]. And also explaining the Nursing formula for my maths exam. Thank you, I appreciate the work you do.* (2018 Pulse comment 106557)

> *The Academic Skills unit have been my lifesaver at SCU. They are so helpful and patient.* (2018 Pulse comment 106737)

> *Academic Skills – amazing.* (2017 Pulse comment 85993)

It is unknown what percentage of students attending AS sessions share the above views, although the student voice does support a conclusion that AS sessions do provide the sorts of support many students are seeking, as discussed previously. In addition, regarding the impact of AS sessions on grades, we have the following unsolicited comments:

> *Thank you thank you thank you sooo much …*
>
> *I got my grades back from the assessment you helped me with. The grade exceeded my expectations 23/25, I would have settled for a pass. I really appreciate your help.*

An international student was "*quite happy with my grades and much appreciate*" the help. This student continued that, "*everyone is highly recommended to make use of the available services*". Another student emailed, "*thank you for your help with my assignment as I got credit for assessment 3 and overall as well, looking forward to session 2. Thank you so much!*" A postgraduate student emailed to say how he lacked confidence which was supported by AS:

> *Believe or not, I successfully finished the final exam for MBA program and am awaiting the result now. Without having your kind assistance, I would not be able to complete my MBA. It was not easy. I never forget your kind assistance and encouragement.*

The student voice expresses appreciation for learning support, greater confidence and anticipation for continuing studies. As discussed in section 1, AS supports students' increased confidence (Habel, 2009; Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015) and retention (Krause & Coates, 2008), although it does not constitute proof because the student cannot know for sure that they would not have been able to complete without the support. Nevertheless, while this positive impact is unquantifiable, the quotes above suggest it can be far reaching in a student's higher education experience (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), and certainly appears to positively impact students' futures (Woolf, Zemits, Janssen, & Knight, 2019).

6. Discussion

The data compares the performance, the GPAs and attrition rates for students attending Academic Skills with those who did not attend. The clear trend is that students who did attend Academic Skills consultations performed better than those who did not in each metric of student success, student GPA and attrition. The difference in student success rates in the five large courses shown in Table 6 is substantial, with a 10–14% average higher rate for those who did attend Academic Skills consultations. This difference is certainly relevant to administrative considerations on policy, resourcing and the nexus of successful teaching and learning.

Although it is impossible with an observational study to establish how much of any differences seen can be attributed to students obtaining AS support, the nature of such support strongly suggests it should have a positive impact. This is because students who choose to attend Academic Skills do so for a variety of reasons, including coaching, topping up results[2], and referrals. The key focus for many students who attended Academic Skills consultations was consulting about academic writing and the successful completion of an assessment task. Students benefited from assignment scaffolding strategies, improving the structure of their writing, and seeing how their written work matched against the rubric. Benzie and Harper (2019) discuss how academic writing educators understand the socially situated nature of writing and have worked to implement models of writing development that are embedded and integrated in the core curriculum (Benzie, Pryce, & Smith, 2017; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Hathaway, 2015; Thies et al, 2014). The socially situated

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[2] By "topping up results", we mean that students hope that AS support will help them overcome various barriers to their achieving their academic potential, such as an incomplete understanding of Western academic writing conventions.

nature of writing is a space that ALL educators are well aware of by dealing with student writing from many disciplines on a regular basis and having knowledge of the expectations of specific course assessments at their own institution. ALL educators intrinsically know when students are unclear how to proceed and have a repertoire of strategies to help them progress their assessments by linking academic language and literacy skills, building self-confidence and self-efficacy to acculturate students to academic standards. The academic skill development is transferable to other assessments and assists student self-regulation. The GPA difference is thus consistent with a belief that the work ALL educators do is integral to encouraging and facilitating student success (Bohlmann & Kelly, 2021).

The attrition percentages shown in Table 7 are compelling, with students who attended Academic Skills consultations achieving a higher course completion rate, clearly seen in the statistics for those attending Academic Skills consultations. Student retention is increasingly important in the current higher education climate with one study (Prentice, Collins, Couchman, Li, & Wilson, 2009, p. A87) reporting that the retention of 25 students is equivalent to "approximately $350,000" in annual university income, assuming 18 domestic and 7 international students. The study reported on a pilot Academic Skills intervention program for students on probation which was successful and now embedded into university practice. High non-completion rates provide a strong incentive for universities to provide more support.

Longitudinal studies could follow up the data in future years after embedding academic literacy skill interventions, especially in large first year courses. By measuring the impact of academic support, integrated and more sustainable assistance can be provided to all students, especially those from equity groups and those at risk. Further data analysis could move from descriptive to predictive to better support specific cohorts. The value of such data informs university policy makers and administrators in better resourcing learning support and the student experience in the future. This data demonstrates the difference ALL support can provide for student success as well as the impact on retention. The value of learning analytics is particularly useful in highlighting areas for specific academic literacies development curricula in order to acculturate students in higher education. A positive learning experience has a far-reaching impact, not only on student futures, but also compels greater integration of university academic language and learning resourcing.

7. Limitations and conclusion

It is important to interpret the data with some caution, although the overall trend clearly shows that students with Academic Skills language and learning support experienced more success, received higher GPAs, and completed their courses to a greater extent than those who did not. However, this observational study resulted from an internal evaluation of AS services and did not establish equivalencies of attending and non-attending groups of students, which makes it difficult to claim any causal relationship. As stated in Section 3, students have many intervening factors that affect their transition in, through and out of university. Students who do book Academic Skills consultations may be 'self-selecting' and may also already be high achievers or those who wish to perform even better. They may have sought other help, formed study groups, use other complementary university services, or even be enrolled in a course that offers extra help. Those who did seek Academic Skills support are a relatively small percentage, and consequently may not represent all students enrolled in the course in terms of engagement and aspirations. Nevertheless, the student quotes presented in Section 5.3, along with the observation that AS provides support in areas known to be challenging for students (Section 6), together support a belief that AS support does have a positive impact on student success at university.

This evidence-based data, together with the anecdotal student feedback, are consistent with a belief that Academic Language and Learning support improved course retention rates and significantly affected student performance and GPAs during 2017–2019. With a trend for such positive

impact, more integral resourcing of Academic Skills in higher education would not only be valuable and beneficial to overall student success, but also in decreasing attrition rates in higher education. University administrators could reflect on the benefits that academic language and learning specialists contribute through curriculum for learning support, particularly in the first year of transition to higher education. Collaborative ALL work in academic acculturation, team teaching the required academic literacy skills for assessments, intervention programs for at-risk students, embedding academic skills in curricula, and development of resources, in addition to student consultations, are strategies to enhance student performance in and through the higher education transition. With more strategic positioning and resourcing, Academic Language and Learning specialists can influence student futures more positively as well as university success and retention rates.

Acknowledgements

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