

THE POSITION OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE & LEARNING SKILLS ADVISERS / LECTURERS IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES, 1995-1999

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most Australian universities employ staff in centralised academic advisory services, or in faculty based positions, to provide academic language and learning skills development to both undergraduate and postgraduate students in degree programs. During the last decade, many of these academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers have become increasingly involved in academic staff development, as well as in the provision of academic language and learning skills tuition to students. In order to provide academic skills tuition to large groups of students, efficiency has dictated that academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers work cooperatively with academic staff in a wide range of disciplines, and provide discipline-based academics with support in applying strategies to integrate a range of academic core skills into subject curricula.

Because of the centralised position of many of these academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers, the employment conditions of these academics are often difficult to compare with faculty-based academics or support staff.

This position statement (1995-1999) outlines the perspectives of academic skills advisers from 19 institutions in Australia on the range of knowledge, professional insights, and expertise necessary for such positions.

It is a statement which highlights the common threads affirmed by academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers within this diversity, with respect to their roles, their value systems and objectives, and the qualities they share. In particular, it emphasises the academic role of their positions and makes recommendations on the integration of their work into the institution's teaching and learning structure.

ACADEMIC ROLE

In this document the term academic language and learning skills adviser (and the shorter forms of academic skills adviser / lecturer) are used interchangeably and denote any academic adviser, including in English language to overseas students, literacy skills lecturers, numeracy lecturers, general learning skills advisers, and advisers of students with learning disabilities, employed in a tertiary institution.

The current employment status of academic language and learning skills advisers includes both academic positions and general staff, or professional officer positions.

However, it is the experience of Australian academic language and learning skills advisers that effective work with undergraduate and post graduate students and other academic staff requires that academic skills lecturers are personally engaged in academic work, both to advance the theoretical basis of their field and to have advisory credibility within an academic environment. It is essential that academic language and learning skills advisers are integrated within the academic structure of their institution.

VALUES

Academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers share a common ethos which is based on the following values:

1. equality of opportunity for all students, irrespective of their age, gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity or physical ability, to access the educational processes of tertiary courses in Australia;
2. equality of opportunity for all students, irrespective of their age, gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity or physical ability, to achieve their full academic potential and to become lifelong learners;
3. cultural diversity, in which all students are encouraged, to contribute equally to, and benefit equally from, the skills and knowledges available at tertiary level.

PRINCIPLES

Academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers are guided by the following principles:

1. that the enhancement of tertiary students' academic language and learning skills and the development of lifelong learning strategies in students is encouraged and supported;
2. that the dual nature of the role enables academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers to work with students and staff in improving the teaching and learning culture within tertiary institutions;
3. that the diversity of professional expertise of academic skills advisers / lecturers is acknowledged, so that a holistic, responsive and interactive approach to student learning can be established in relation to discipline based learning issues;
4. that the variety of teaching situations available to them—including one-to-one consultations, group work in both general and disciplinary contexts, collaborative teaching with faculty staff, as well as distance learning and open learning modes of delivery—are accepted as appropriate modes of teaching academic skills;
5. that it is acknowledged that the work of academic language and learning advisers is developmental and intended to enhance students' academic potential, rather than remedial, and that, therefore, the development of academic skills is seen as an ongoing aspect of the learning process for tertiary students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level;
6. that academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers collaborate with faculty staff on curriculum, teaching and assessment issues;
7. that the opportunity to increase their understanding of relevant issues is provided to academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers in a structured, established way, through the provision of opportunities for research, and through participation in appropriate professional development programs;
8. that the role of academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers is seen as being integral to the ongoing process of improving the quality of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions.

CORE OBJECTIVES

Academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers have the following **core objectives**:

1. To enhance the capacity of students to develop as successful independent learners both within their disciplinary contexts, and in transferring core academic language and learning skills outside their disciplines;
2. To work towards an institutional environment which provides access to the highest quality of learning experiences for all students and for all staff;
3. To support all disciplines in the development of core generic skills in all students; that is, that all graduates will be supported in developing literacy skills, numeracy skills, critical reasoning skills, information literacy skills, and research skills, and

- that students are supported in transferring these skills within and beyond their discipline of study;
4. To contribute to the development of the profession of academic skills advising, and undertake research in areas relevant to teaching and learning in higher education;
 5. To foster the recognition of the academic nature of the work of academic skills development, through individual research and collaborative research with faculty staff and with academic skills colleagues in other institutions in Australia and abroad;
 6. To disseminate information to the wider academic community through publications, conference presentations, and in the practice of the profession within tertiary institutions.

QUALITIES

Academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers are from diverse and various discipline backgrounds. Within this diversity the following qualities are considered as essential to the profession:

1. an ability to identify and address the changing needs of tertiary students and staff in respect of their academic skills, and the ability to utilise a range of delivery modes to enhance these skills;
2. effective communication and interpersonal skills;
3. awareness of, and sensitivity to, the diversity of student populations and to cultural issues;
4. an understanding of a wide range of issues related to adult learning in tertiary education.

QUALIFICATIONS, EXPERIENCE AND RESEARCH

To ensure that these qualities are fostered, the following considerations are appropriate in appointment of academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers:

1. tertiary qualifications in a relevant discipline such as education, language tuition, linguistics, psychology, numeracy, information literacy, or any other discipline, provided that the other criteria are met;
2. TESOL qualifications for literacy skills lecturers who are appointed to support students from language backgrounds other than English;
3. postgraduate qualifications or progression towards a higher degree;
4. proven experience in teaching learners in tertiary institutions;
5. understanding of appropriate strategies for analysing discipline-specific discourses, information literacies, or discipline-specific numeracies, and proven experience of teaching others to master the skills needed to engage effectively in academic discourses, literacies, or numeracies;
6. proven research ability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers to fulfil their role adequately and to provide ongoing educational programs for students and staff, it is recommended that:

1. academic language and learning skills services be established as an integral and on-going part of the institution's environment;
2. each institution provide a secure funding basis for academic skills services appropriate for the student population, and that appropriate attempts are made by the institution to supplement these core operating funds from additional fund sources on an annual to triennial basis;

3. institutions recognise the academic nature of the position of academic language and learning skills advisers;
4. institutions encourage academic skills staff to engage in active research in relation to tertiary student learning, literacy, and numeracy;
5. institutions develop appropriate mechanisms for performance appraisal and appointment conditions of academic language and learning skills advisers / lecturers that reflect the unique nature of the work in both centralised academic skills development services and within departments or faculties, and that are fair and equivalent in nature to the appraisal and conditions of other staff in the institution

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