

***Consultations, collaborations and
contemporary challenges:
Reflections on language advisory
practice in HE***

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Victoria University of Wellington

December 11th-14th 2018

Outline

1. Background: Reasons and motivations for the project or **the problem**.
2. What we know: Literature review of **key issues** of academic support, i.e. challenges and implications.
3. Data collection/methodology: **Results** to date.
4. Analysis/results: **Making sense** of what is going on.

1. Background

- Universities are complex, diverse and hierarchical places (White, 2015).
- Academic study supports units have an established presence in HE.
 - They provide multiple lenses to teaching, learning and academic language development (Chanock, 2011).
- However, the support lacks coherence.
 - Structurally ambivalent positioning within the hierarchy, and multiple and competing approaches (Budge, 2010, Macdonald, Schneider, Kett, 2013 among others).
- This structure has implications for quality of support and professional identity (Hildson, 2018).

2. Previous studies

Challenges and implications:

- The need for LLAs work to support wider participation in HE (Percy, 2015).
- There are multiple approaches to academic support (one-to-one, adjunct, embedding) (Briguglio, 2014).
- The embedding model is preferred over the adjunct, remedial model (Chanock, 2011; Wingate, 2006).
- The foundation of embedding is collaboration. It requires working in a third space which can be problematic (Wingate 2018; Briguglio 2014).

3. Our data collection and methodology*

- Semi-structured interviews with six novice LLAs in metropolitan Australian universities.
- Interpretive approach to gain rich data and insights.
- Questions and method to elicit views on the role, institutional complexities, challenges in doing the work, and details on what the work actually entails.
- New-to-the-field advisers: Given our own experiences, observations and research, we anticipated this as a rich field of study.

* Ethics approval gained

Interview questions

Sample questions:

- How would you describe your role as an academic LLA?
- In what way/s is your current role similar to or different from your previous (language) teaching experience?
- How does your role intersect with or relate to those of discipline-area academic teaching staff?
- To what extent does your role align with your expectations of being an academic LLA?

4. Analysis and results: Challenges

- LLA work is **complex** and varied. Advisors work in multidisciplinary areas.
- LLA units are structured in such a way that they work in **isolation** and mainly one-to-one with students.
 - Negotiation, networking and professional development opportunities are limited.
- Lack of **opportunities** to work with embedding.
- Aspects of **the role** are unexpected and disappointing.

Example: Complexity

A second example that proved to be a challenge was an international student studying a Masters in Public Health who had been a successful health professional in his country. The student was surprised by being unable to deal with the demands of the course and having to seek assistance. In both these instances, it was not the lack of language or preparedness to study that the LA had to support but the students' own struggle to navigate a professional/student's identity or perhaps returning to being a student.

So the difficulty in supporting this student lay not only in that he was unprepared, but how he saw himself. (Participant 1)

Example: Complexity/isolation

I find it quite difficult to engage with academic staff, unless we are assigned to work with academic staff.
(Participant 2)

I thought it would be a linear approach but I have found it more complex. I enjoy it, but one role I can't accept is that, I wish it could be an academic role like other universities. I think two thirds of unis have this role as an academic but not in my current role.
(Participant 2)

Example: Complexity of the role

*I do a lot of coaching and prompting, and a lot of reading, of what they have written but also what the instructions are. Then I see my role as **not only a coach** but a partner of getting it done ... I see my role as a partnership or **a support** and getting them ready to be lifelong learners. My role is not as an intrusion; I try to give as much encouragement as I can. It is amazing how far that will go, yes you're getting it now, can you see that? And a lot of discussion, and I let the student talk a lot ... I find that that dialogue is the most valuable.*

(Participant 1, our emphasis)

Example: Expectations of learners

I didn't expect to have NNS who had such low levels of English, for example IELTS of 5 in degree courses, that is a big problem. We are a means to an end, we are fixers often. Very few are keen to develop good English skills. I can give them tips, I have studied many languages but they don't, the lack of desire of learn English, in ELICOS and in the degree you see there is not that desire, the low level and lack of interest in developing their English skills. Many other teachers report that.

(Participant 3)

Example: Adapting, responding, developing

In this position, knowing more about the different types of disabilities and autism, and different behaviour, I am interested because it helps me to help my students.

For example, in the UK they are doing writing retreats, on weekends, and it's awesome you know, we should be doing this, I would like to do more of this, it is big in Europe now, and the, the body in writing, it is about where we are sitting ... I met lecturers who are right into this, writing retreats, people share writing and get feedback so they are very supportive. (Participant 3)

Example: The system

... Why would new sessional staff spend so much time working with advisers and invest all the time?

*They need to see the value of what we are doing, so the lack of job security has an impact, often they have more than one job, they are here not every day, so hard to commit you know. **But that is beyond my power, you know.***

(Participant 3, our emphasis)

Example: Division of labour, content vs. structure

*Sometimes students expect us to comment on their content ... it is hard to actually understand, the content is quite embedded. How do you negotiate that? Sometimes they get upset when we say that we cannot advise on the content, and they expect to get the help from anywhere ... it is hard to prize apart ... **So there should be more opportunity to [be] working with the discipline area and talk about the content knowledge.** Sometimes they don't know about us, especially the tutors, they don't know about us.*

(Participant 2, our emphasis)

Analysis and results:

Making sense of the data 1

- **Power dimension:** The LLAs observe problems they can't fix. There is an **emotional labour** side of their work, tied to **professional identity**.
- **Workplace organisation** impacts workplace communication
 - The inability to change things means they are silenced.

Analysis and results:

Making sense of the data 2

- **Learner focused:** To support students, they have to adapt and become apt in new areas (for example, learning difficulties).
- An imagined better place – ‘**if only**’ (cf fantasy of work satisfaction, Clarke, 2012).
- An ongoing sense of being **marginal** is akin to being an early career professional. Is this typical of new professionals in the knowledge economy?

Explanations of the problem to date

- Power structure (Critical Discourse Analysis in Hildson, 2018; Foucault in Percy, 2015).
- Challenges of being a third space professional (Briguglio, 2014; Macdonald et al., 2013).

What else is there to see?

- LLAs' **orientation** towards adapting to and responding to immediate students' needs.
- LLAs are **highly critical** of their context, current structures and practices.
 - Urge to act and drive change.

Critical realism (Archer, 2007)

The critical realist perspective recognises the role and importance of **reflexivity**, which “mediates the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action” (Archer, 2007, p. 5).

“... the regular exercise of mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to the (social) contexts and vice versa” (Archer, 2007, p. 4).

- Communicative = reliant on others, oriented towards consensus
- Autonomous = self-contained, does not seek others, oriented towards outcome
- **Meta = self-critical, self-monitoring, oriented towards values**
- Fractured = disoriented and distressed rather than focused on purposeful action

Focus on reflectivity

“... the subject thus has to confront the structural context in which they are embedded and its causal properties and potential powers, in order to endorse and reconstitute a social network as her own” (Archer, 2007 p. 147).

Internal conversations

The role of the 'internal conversations' to determine the mode of reflexivity.

LA's mode of reflexivity can inform to some extent how LAs responses to their work can be understood.

(cf Brew et al., 2017; Scrambler, 2012)

Meta-reflexivity

Professionals in this category are typically self-critical and who are

- Preoccupied by moral worth of their work
- Question if they are worthy of their work
- Oriented towards 'values'

(Archer in Scrambler, 2012, p. 149)

How does reflexivity lens inform and explain LLA work?

- Provides a **different lens** to see the work.
 - Expecting certain challenges due to positioning and hierarchies?
- Provides a more positive view of the challenges and the culture that new-to-the-field LLAs are entering – **greater agency**, on the margins but in control.
- Meta-reflexive professionals can more ably **provide contribution** to policy in the academy (Brew et al., 2017) and possibly in LLA field too. This has to be harnessed.

Shifting the focus: What is there to see?

In explaining the data/the problem, we want to shift focus and see things differently:

- We move from **deconstruction of the participants' experiences** to **active investigation of a set of dispositions and practices**, i.e. critical reconstruction.

Where to?

Ecologies of professional communication and practice

Multiple approaches to adapt and fit into the changing context of the contemporary (neo-liberal) university:

- (Continue) to adapt and provide support that responds to new needs while resisting the neo-liberal model (cf Hildson, 2018).
- Embrace the third space: See this space as an opportunity to work with interdisciplinary teams, and focus on those who are 'on side', without compromising.
- Promote an interdisciplinary approach to how we work, i.e. collaboration as the norm rather than the exception.

Where to?

Ecologies of professional communication and practice

- Apply a critical social approach to make sense of our own position:
 - Understand our position/s
 - Keep pedagogy firmly in our aims
 - Consider how we describe and position ourselves
 - Think further about professional reflexivity.

To end...

Thank you for listening.

Your comments and feedback are welcome.

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