More than the sum of its parts: provision of Learning and Academic Skills services through a centralised model.

Lisa Cluett, Student Services, The University of Western Australia

Judy Skene, Student Services, The University of Western Australia

Dr Lisa Cluett
Student Services
M302
The University of Western Australia
35 Stirling Highway
Crawley, WA 6009

(08) 6488 2404
(08) 6488 1119 (fax)
Lisa.Cluett@uwa.edu.au

Author biographies:
Lisa Cluett is a Learning Skills Adviser at UWA with a focus on Science and Applied Sciences. She completed PhD studies in geomorphology and has a background in Science Communication. She has particular interests in enhancing student skills in oral communication, assessment and project management.

Judy Skene is Transition Support Programme coordinator at UWA. She has a doctorate in History and her research interests are diversity and gender equity in organisational contexts, student teamwork and transition to academic learning.
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The role of Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers is an on-going topic of debate in forums of professional practice in learning and teaching. The mode of delivery of services by LAS advisers, their job classifications and their location are all factors in perceptions of their professional status and their role within their institutions. In addition to examining models for provision of learning support at the institutional level, this paper will argue that the organisational context in which the service operates and the composition of the team itself are critically important in the effective delivery of services, but rarely considered.

The role of Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers in universities is regularly raised as a topic for discussion in forums on professional practice in learning and teaching. Practitioners are faced with a fast changing external environment that creates internal pressures to deliver services effectively to a diverse student population whilst facing decreasing funding and increasing demand for quality assurance. Responses to date have identified a range of issues that largely focus on defining the roles that LAS advisers occupy and their professional status within their institution. On closer inspection most issues could be classified into three broad categories:

- Where the team is located and mode of delivery of services – i.e. in central unit or in faculties? (Jones, Bonanno & Scouller, 2001; Percy & Skillen, 2000)
- Scope of the program – i.e. service to students, staff or both? (Chanock, East & Maxwell, 2002)
- Status of the profession – i.e. academic or general staff classification and perception of role within the institution? (Craswell & Bartlett, 2001; Webb, 2001)

In addition to examining models for provision of learning support at the institutional level, this paper will argue that the organisational context in which the service operates and the composition of the team itself are critically important in the delivery of effective services, but rarely considered.

This fourth factor, team composition, is critical because it determines the degree of flexibility and creativity that the LAS team will mobilise to respond to changes in tertiary education. In times of budget shortfalls and the need to justify the existence of LAS programs, analysing the strengths and limitations of our programs helps to focus on the case for retaining LAS services. Garner, Chanock and Clerehan (1995) argued a decade ago that “Our discipline emerges as central to the concerns of higher education”, but this argument must be restated anew, with fresh examples of ways in which LAS services are integral to effective learning and teaching programs. This paper contrasts several models of service delivery at Australian universities but with a particular focus on the model of the Learning, Language and Research Skills (LL&RS) at The University of Western Australia (UWA).
Broad context

The advantages and disadvantages of different models of service delivery are often contested. Any model, however, must be considered in its organisational context, where size, number of campuses, modes of delivery (distance, transnational) and resources available will help determine the location of LAS advisers. The model adopted by any one institution will reflect its organisational structure, budget constraints and student profile and these elements should be considered when advancing any particular model as preferable. Large, multi-campus universities may achieve some economies of scale by centralising services at one campus and providing limited services on smaller campuses. Financial constraints can also dictate location as institutions may choose to shift the LAS advisers to faculties to transfer the costs from central administration budgets, rather than advance a strong argument as to why relocating advisers benefits students.

A common theme in discussion of the benefits of any particular model is the general change away from a deficit model of service delivery to a more systemic or integrated approach that focuses on direct involvement with delivering generic skills at the curriculum level (Nunan, George & McCausland, 2000). Providing individual support for students is an unsustainable model in an environment where resources are scarce: it could be characterised as providing a Rolls Royce for a few rather than a bus for many. Alternate strategies are required to reach more students. For example, LAS advisers often now work in partnership with faculty teaching staff to integrate generic skills and discipline-specific skills (Percy & Skillen, Hicks & George, 2001) into curriculum and sometimes team-teach with unit staff to ensure that students receive a common message: in this way, many more students benefit than is possible in a one-to-one service delivery model.

Models for interaction with faculties can vary. Jones, Bonanno and Scouller (2001) argue for a continuum of collaboration between LAS advisers and faculty staff from 'adjunct', where workshops with a 'weak' discipline focus are offered in a subject area, to 'integrated' which would focus on developing academic literacy within the discipline, and finally to 'embedded' which involves collaborative design of curriculum. Whilst the embedded approach may seem the ideal, positioned as it is at the far end of the continuum, in reality it requires ongoing resources and committed faculty staff to ensure continuation. Jones et al. query its sustainability as a model in the current environment and argue that their experience of all three positions on the continuum (and the variations and mid-points between) has led them to the conclusion that discipline-specific adjunct and integrated approaches are more flexible and practical models that allow maximum exposure to the majority of students. The LLRS team at UWA has adopted a similar approach, recognising that it can provide services for a diverse student population needing differing levels of skills development and still include one-on-one assistance when necessary.

For others, (Chanock, East & Maxwell, 2001) a faculty-based model of LAS advisers may be preferable if it succeeds in raising the profile of LAS advisers with discipline teaching staff within the faculty. Some practitioners have an academic development focus, working within faculties with staff and tutors to develop learning resources
A faculty location can enhance the perception of the LAS adviser as an academic developer with skills in 'the metacognitive analysis of the culture of each discipline...its assumptions, the questions it generates, the kinds of data it regards as evidence...' rather than a remedial service for some students (Chanock et al., 2001). Whilst a faculty-based adviser may well be able to build strong partnerships with discipline-based staff, rarely is there more that one LAS per faculty. Unless there is a very strong network of LAS advisers within the institution, there is a risk that they will have limited opportunities to influence policy beyond faculty level, or develop a cohesive identity as professionals with interdisciplinary knowledge.

Many universities locate LAS advisers in centres that provide staff development, including professional development of teachers in addition to the student learning focus. Such units may result from amalgamations, perhaps underpinned by funding constraints but driven by government demands for accountability and student demand for value for money (Nunan et al., 2000). This model offers many opportunities for collaboration in areas such as flexible learning, assessment techniques and induction of new academic staff and tutors and functions well for some practitioners who work within this model. However, the significantly different activities performed by these groups (staff and students) necessitate differing strategies to fulfil the requirements of these two distinct cohorts. Because these two groups approach the learning process from opposing directions, it is likely that there will be differences in the ways services are promoted, the way the relationships develop (long-term versus short-term, professional staff development versus holistic student learning experience) and expectations of the service. It is also a challenge to create a student-friendly environment within a physical teaching space aimed at serving the professional needs of staff development. On the other hand, a centralised model located within Student Services is very easily accessed by students, including those who are tentative about seeking support or many who initially visit other services and are then attracted to LAS resources and promotional displays.

The ongoing debate within the profession about its status and the extent to which LAS advisers are marginalised within their institutions is integral to most previous published papers in this field (Chanock et al., 2001; Craswell & Bartlett, 2001; Webb, 2001). Most LAS advisers would consider their qualifications and skills, and the demands of their role, on a par with those of their academic colleagues. A doctorate and teaching experience and/or qualifications are entry level requirements for most LAS positions advertised recently. It is an ongoing challenge for LAS advisers to have their institution value their skills and attributes highly and reward them suitably. As academic staff, advisers can face a lack of recognition of their mode of teaching practice in standard promotional procedures. However, for those on general staff awards, there are no options for promotion in existing roles and few opportunities to gain research funding beyond the scope of institutional funding. These are limiting factors for encouraging long-term commitment to the profession.

In reviewing these debates within the literature, we have recognised many similarities in our approach to that of others but at the same time have been led to consider what elements of our own practice might be unique, or work well in our context. Self-
reflective practice is in itself a useful tool to evaluate our services and generate debate about ways in which we can learn from each other.

Organisational context and team composition

Percy and Skillen (2000) argue that the approach taken by LAS advisers is dependent on ‘our university’s organisation, philosophy and policy.’ UWA’s organisational context is a medium-sized single campus university, where the majority of students and key services are located, and two smaller regional centres. Its philosophy is to build on its reputation as a research-intensive university whilst valuing and continually promoting excellence in teaching. As a centrally located unit, the LLRS team has responsibility for all students and must provide services in research education, collaborative teaching and learning support.

The team is made up of five full-time, permanent general staff that provide support to the 16,500 students at UWA. Duties are split between two Learning and academic Skills Advisers (LASs), one English Language Skills Adviser (ELSA) and two Graduate Education Officers (GEOs). Our ELSA is a qualified TESOL examiner and English teacher while the LASs and the GEOs have completed PhDs in a range of disciplines including geomorphology, history, cultural studies and environmental microbiology. This diversity promotes cross-fertilisation of ideas and an understanding of the demands of inter-disciplinary studies, a strength also noted in the literature (e.g. Craswell & Bartlett 2001) and brings a range of knowledges to our practice, to build on what Percy and Stirling (2003) termed a 'genealogy of knowledge in the LAS field'.

At UWA, the composition of the LLRS team differs significantly from LAS units in most other universities. The LLRS team is in the division of Academic Services and the Registrar, and is co-located in the portfolio of Student Services alongside the counselling service, the housing and finance office, the transition and diversity group and the careers service. Line management of team members varies however, with the GEOs reporting to the Manager of the Graduate Research School and the LASs and ELSA to the Director of Student Services. The ELSA also reports to the Director of the Centre for English Language Teaching (CELT), itself a unit within Student Services.

Whilst these varying reporting lines could be viewed as confusing or dysfunctional, in effect this organisational structure delivers important benefits. Team members have inherent links with key University units such as the Graduate Research School, the International Centre, the Scholarships Office, and the broader division of Student Services, which includes Admission and Student Administration. As a result of their organisational affiliations, LLRS team members attend different staff forums and meetings and thus gain access to information and influential networks. They are well positioned within the teaching-research nexus at UWA, particularly in relation to undergraduate research. In addition to teaching generic research skills within their workshop program, the team collaborates with faculties to provide discipline-specific workshops for Honours students on request. Another example is a recent project by
the Library to develop an on-line module in research skills for all commencing students in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. The LAS (Arts) was a part of the team that developed this resource.

Likewise, the differing reporting lines allow LLRS team members to access a range of resources and funding sources, and to have input into policy through various key committees. Members of the team attend the University’s Teaching and Learning Committee, the Board of the Graduate Research School, the Student Services executive, the eLearning standing committee and various working groups convened for specific projects. These networks facilitate collaboration with units such as the Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL). Recent successful joint grant applications with CATL include a project to provide staff development in transition issues for first year students and a project to establish Writing Circles for research and postgraduate coursework students from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds.

We argue that our organisational location enables the LLRS team to be responsive to the changing tertiary education environment. Through representation in diverse forums throughout the university, we are able to identify the possible impact of emerging trends such as the Research Quality Framework or the Voluntary Student Unionism legislation and consider the implications for our practice. In addition, the combination of team composition and a centralised model has meant that other benefits have accrued in service delivery, as detailed in the following sections.

**Centralised model in practice**

The centralised model adopted by UWA has proven to be effective in an environment where student demand for services is increasing and resources are declining. In considering what the particular advantages are for our team in its composition and location, we have weighed up what benefits are derived from our circumstances and whether we could achieve a similar level of service if we had a different institutional arrangement. Overwhelmingly, our response is that we could not: that indeed, as reflected in the title of this paper, that as a unit we are more than the sum of our parts and can achieve much more as an effective team than as individuals.

One unusual feature of team composition is that the team has no designated leader, so all members provide leadership and have a responsive attitude to the challenges and opportunities that present themselves as part of the daily round. Recent benchmarking exercises with three other Go8 universities and other West Australian universities reveal that this arrangement is quite unique (Barrett-Lennard, Cluett & Mayes 2005). This approach also helps us to maintain control of our workloads, setting priorities and being responsive to the varying peak demand periods of both the teaching semester and the research students. In fact, our organisational location and diverse reporting lines actually create a situation where there is a high degree of autonomy, and a supportive environment for innovation, that has direct benefits to LLRS team members.
These significant benefits arise for members of the LLRS team in that the make-up of the team provides a pool of diverse skills and experiences to draw on in offering a comprehensive program. Team members are also able to develop their individual specialities. The cross-fertilisation of ideas is a particularly strong component of the LLRS team and is facilitated both by having the ability to meet informally to respond quickly to any problem or opportunity that occurs and by having diverse networks and sources of information. In addition, the standard tasks of meeting, planning, evaluation and promotion of services are more easily achieved than would be the case if some team members were accommodated in different parts of campus. It is easy to provide continuity of service when any one team member is absent. This flexibility also works well in further developing services as tasks can be shared and thus seem more readily achievable and duplication is avoided.

There have been significant changes in the types of student contact following a broadening of the range of services offered by the LLRS team in 2005 (Fig 1). The proportion of student contact spent in individual consultations fell from 36% in 2004 to 15% in 2005. Attendance at generic (centrally provided) workshops remained relatively similar over the same period (38% in 2004 compared to 34% in 2005) whereas the proportion of students accessing LLRS services through Faculty workshops almost doubled (25% in 2004 and 48% in 2005). Students at UWA’s two regional centres are now supported through visits and workshops from an LSA twice each semester, with phone and email advice available in the interim. These changes form part of the team’s efforts to move from a Rolls Royce for a few to a bus for many.

Figure 1: Changes in student access of LLRS services (student contact in each category) is shown as a percentage of total contacts)
Coordinated promotional campaigns target students directly but also target academic, administrative and library staff who refer students to our services and all marketing activities promote our services to staff and students under the ‘Study Smarter @ UWA’ banner. The team has been very proactive in promoting its services to both staff and students and actively seeks to make partnerships and to control the way we are viewed by other stakeholders. This focus on promotion as a strategy to broaden our client base is also unique in the benchmarking that the team has conducted to date.

LLRS have been able to promote a common identity within the university as a result of their organisational position. Students and staff can find us easily due to our established identity. A team identity is more important than individual advisers as faculty staff will often refer students to the service rather than individual advisers, knowing that the requisite skills are present to meet the specific student’s needs. Referral to a team rather than an individual also ensures that there is more likelihood that someone will be on hand to respond. For example, the LLRS team offers drop-in service for one hour a day and staff can direct students to this service, knowing that their question will be answered or they will be referred on to workshops or individual appointments as necessary.

Efficiency of service and the encouragement to innovate are two key benefits that team members identify from our central location and team composition. Whilst the centralised model has benefits for the team, however, there are also advantages for students and for the institution.

Advantages for students

A co-located LLRS team, comprised of staff from different sections of the University generates significant benefits for all students: both those who directly utilise the services and those that benefit through collaborative practices with other staff. Benefits include the potential for cross-referrals within the team, a unified team identity used in promotional activities and the ability to plan strategically.

The team are able to provide a single location for all enquiries with the result that students have a ‘one-stop shop’ for learning support, provided by advisers that have offices proximate to each other. Cross-referral is therefore easy and can be adapted to individual student needs. For example, it may be the case that an international postgraduate coursework student enrolled in Business may see the LAS (Arts) for assistance in developing an argument, and the ELSA for English language advice. The same student can be introduced to the comprehensive program of workshops and offered advice on selecting sessions that will develop skills in areas where he or she wants to improve skills. Suitable texts from the resource collection in the foyer can also be recommended. This approach also means that students are less likely to ‘fall through the gaps’ of learning support whilst also less likely to develop dependencies on any one adviser. Students can also be easily referred to other services in the building including counselling, careers, the medical centre, housing, finance and the transition program.
The promotion of services to students and staff is achieved using a unified message and a combined advertising/marketing approach. Students therefore hear and see a consistent promotional message across campus and throughout the year from the LLRS team. Students are also offered services under a consistent charter which clearly states what staff will do and what they won’t. This reduces confusion for students who see different advisers and encourages them towards independent learning.

Students also derive the benefits of a well-articulated suite of services that are responsive to student learning needs, as a result of the cycle of planning and evaluation regularly undertaken by the LLRS team. The combination of staff from different sections within the same team encourages strategic planning and frequent review. Group interaction (enhanced by co-location) facilitates the continual improvement of the services offered to students. The recent restructuring of the UWA LLRS workshop program, where 20 topics per semester was replaced by 50 topics based on the generic skills being taught, rather than the student cohort it was aimed at, clearly demonstrates this principle.

**Advantages for the institution**

Whilst LAS advisers based in faculties may provide some advantages for the students and academic staff they support (Chanock *et al.* 2001), there are wholesale benefits to be gained at all levels of the institution from a co-located LLRS team. At the institution scale, the LLRS team can respond to University issues as a single, cohesive unit. For example, the UWA LLRS team has, in the past 3 months, responded to issues that directly or indirectly impact on student learning including voluntary student unionism, teaching policy, assessment tasks and the suitability of on-campus teaching spaces. The advantages of a 'one-stop shop' are not just a benefit to students but extend also to staff, as it becomes very easy for them to contact the team and quickly be referred to the most appropriate person. Other units within the University, when seeking input from stakeholder groups, are able to get a single, considered, combined response from staff providing learning support to students.

Similarly, where faculty based support is provided, it would usually be by an individual staff member rather than a team. It is unlikely that an individual adviser would be able to offer the comprehensive service with the requisite skills in areas such as transition to first year, English language support, academic writing for postgraduate research and coursework students, research planning and the many other subject areas covered by the team at UWA. Faculty-based services would focus on assisting staff with integrating generic skills to coursework units and it is unlikely that a comprehensive workshop program or individual student consultations could be offered to the same degree as the service provided by a team of LLRS advisers who can provide support to all cohorts of students regardless of their degree or level of study.

Economies of scale are enjoyed by a co-located LLRS team which can be passed on to academic staff teaching in Faculties. More specifically, academic staff can tap into the various specialities of a LLRS team. For example, if the UWA Law School
requested a session on oral communication and public speaking for its students, it is likely that that would be presented by the member of the LLRS team with the greatest expertise in that area, whether Law fell under their remit or not. However, the faculty would be offered a range of options: the adviser most familiar with that cohort of students could respond, or an offer to team teach particular lectures or workshops might be appropriate, or it might be that an adviser with expertise in that specific skill responded. The flexibility of the centralised model and the adaptability of advisers enables this comprehensive response.

In addition, faculties can benefit from the input of several LLRS team members in the same unit concurrently. For example, for the past three years as part of a foundation unit in Engineering, a LLRS team member has taught technical communication. The course coordinator has realised that he can also draw on the skills of the ELSA to provide specialised English language support for those students that he identifies requiring it. As of 2006, two members of the LLRS team will contribute to the teaching of this core unit for more than 400 students.

**Challenges of a centralised approach**

Despite the advantages of a centralised approach, it can also pose challenges, chiefly in conveying an accurate perception of our diverse roles with academic staff. Although it is easier as a centralised unit to promote the services to both students and staff as a 'one-stop shop', it can be problematic for the LLRS team at UWA to clarify to academic staff our varying responsibilities. This is foremost a challenge for the GEOs in their role in providing research education training and being viewed as members of the research community, in addition to a role in learning support. The GEOs provide workshops and individual consultations with research students, but also conduct specialist workshops for staff in partnership with Staff Development and with staff in the faculties. To have an effective voice, they need to promote a dual identity within research education and learning support. They achieve this by maintaining a presence at research-related meetings and networking with the Graduate Research Coordinators in each School. In addition, all promotional material from the LLRS team is double-badged with the logos of the Graduate Research School and Student Services to remind staff that the team has responsibilities for all students. The benefits overall of co-location outweigh the disadvantages but also demand innovative strategies to promote the message that the team has a dual role in learning support and research education.

**Reaching beyond the team**

The ongoing debate surrounding the roles of learning and academic skills advisers, particularly our staff status and classification and location within our institutions, highlights the search for a model of best practice and confirms the continuous self-reflection that takes place in an effort for service improvement. This paper has argued that a centrally located team of advisers provides a range of benefits to students, advisers and the institution, superior to those available from faculty-based support. However, in addition to staff status, adviser location and the link to staff support, a fourth key factor influencing the effectiveness of any LSA team is the composition of
the team itself. The combination of staff with different backgrounds, specialities and reporting lines creates strength in a team which has common goals and strategies. It is also essential that a LSA team reflects the institution within which they operate (in terms of student population, organisational structure etc) whilst also providing leadership and guidance in areas of teaching and learning. What is equally clear from the variations between institutions in Australia is that rather than one model being superior over another, the provision of learning and academic skills advice should be adapted to the individual institution and particularly should be adaptable to the changing environment within which they operate.

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