LAS2005 ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: ABSTRACT

LAS: from remedial support to drivers of change

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This roundtable explores the relationships between the core objectives of academic language and learning skills advisers/lecturers as outlined in the ‘LAS Position Statement 1999.’ Participants will reflect on and evaluate how far we have come in achieving these core objectives and where we can go from here.

Given that the student is at the centre of our efforts, how will we balance these objectives to ensure that we are drivers of change rather than a remedial service no matter how widely pitched? How do we ensure that a stop-gap / reactive approach (as embedded, for example, in the practice of needs analysis) is not carried over into each objective? How do we identify and undertake proactive strategies for change? For example, in promoting our professional services how do we avoid merely offering a service (as if we don’t have enough to do, a message that automatically undermines our status) and instead promote our expertise as an advisory resource for academic staff? To take this a level further: how do we then negotiate a more substantive role in teaching and learning matters with a view to informing change rather than simply responding to it?

We invite participants in this round table to engage in broad discussion of these key issues at both theoretical and practical levels. Outcomes include a better understanding of the core objectives (strengths, limitations, gaps), and identification of workable strategies to drive change.
Rationale

The LAS2005 theme of 'critiquing and reflecting' prompted LAS advisers not only to think about specific aspects of our practice but also to consider broader elements of our profession. LAS advisers shared ideas on a range of challenges that influence our working lives, challenges which link to issues of forging an identity as a profession and how we and others perceive our role.

This roundtable aimed to recognise a perceived common objective amongst LAS advisers to achieve a credible presence in their institutions and to more strategically support student learning whilst also recognising the lack of uniformity in LAS units across Australia (including organisational structure, staff status, student demographics and institutional setting). This roundtable also aimed to devise a series of practical strategies to raise our profile and increase our influence in teaching and learning matters over the short- and long-term. Outcomes were intended to promote a sense of optimism about and control of the future of the LAS profession.

Overview

The session was opened by Robyn Mayes who introduced the team from UWA and explained the rationale behind the roundtable topic. Siri Barrett-Lennard then presented an explanation of how the team had taken the 6 core objectives from the ‘LAS Position Statement 1999’ and translated them into a model based on concentric circles (see below). The structure of the roundtable was outlined by Lisa Cluett who assigned the 29 participants into 5 discussion groups and explained the two main activities:

1. Individuals to assign a percentage of time/effort spent on each of the core objectives over 4 timeframes (1 year ago, now, 1 year from now and ‘eventually’) and then to discuss similarities and differences in groups and report back any trends or notable findings; and
2. Each of the 5 groups to focus on a different objective and to discuss ways of spending more time and effort on achieving this objective (objective #1 was omitted because we agreed that it overlays all other priorities) and to report back to the whole group.
As each discussion group reported on their findings, other group members contributed ideas which were recorded and are presented in this summary document. It is hoped that LAS professionals will add to these lists through a discussion board on the AALL website.

The model

The LAS Position Statement (1999) outlined 6 core objectives for the LAS profession. These objectives can be summarised as follows:

1 – To enhance students’ academic potential;
2 – To improve the institutional environment – T&L culture;
3 – To support disciplines to develop core generic skills;
4 – To contribute to the development of the profession;
5 – To foster recognition through research; and
6 – To disseminate information to the wider academic community.


The UWA team translated this list into a model comprised of a series of concentric circles to reflect that these objectives form part of a cohesive whole, with the student at the centre. This model also demonstrates that enhancing students’ academic potential can be achieved in a range of ways including indirect methods that may require advisers to think more strategically about how time and effort is expended.

With objective 1 in the centre (and overlying the other 5), objectives 2 and 3 form the next circle with LAS advisers having the potential to influence student learning through faculties and the institution as a whole. Objectives 4 and 5 form the next circle and deal with issues of professional identity and research activities. Objective 6 forms the largest and final circle, and whilst furthest from the centre provides a much broader method by which LAS advisers can enhance students’ academic potential by creating and communicating with the wider academic community, however that may be defined.
Discussion Part 1 - Past, Present and Future

Findings from the discussion on time and effort spent on each of the core objectives over time, from the past through the present and into the ideal future, were:

- Currently and in the past, advisers have been spending most time directly on #1, enhancing students’ academic potential. This has involved, in many cases, large amounts of time and effort working in face-to-face modes with students one-on-one and in groups;
- This objective is the core of what we do and overlays all other objectives;
- Other objectives can assist us to achieve the first objective;
• We need to aim to spend more % time further up the scale and to be more visible, without taking the primary focus off the student;
• There are many ways of fostering recognition, only one of which is research. Research is not always a possible a desired goal - it depends on the context; and
• Strategic decisions about how our time and effort is spent need to be made to reach the outer circle and to ensure that our influence is as far-reaching as possible.

Discussion Part 2 - Strategies for change

The strategies listed here were developed during group discussions in the roundtable. The core objectives in the LAS Position Statement (1999) are necessarily broad and discussion groups typically spent some time in the roundtable clarifying their meaning for this context. Ideas generated have been grouped into common themes.

Objective 2: improve the institutional environment – T&L culture

Group 2 clarified this objective to mean improving the institutional environment via structural provisions for attention to T&L and the consultation by faculty areas on T&L matters with LAS advisers. The group also noted that 15 years ago T&L was a product of management level decisions and academic activity and there was a top-down emphasis on T&L. Now LAS advisers want to be involved with a ‘bottom up’ process, talking with lecturers about how learning is facilitated within their subjects. But there are problems and challenges such as faculty staff ‘casualisation’ which may lead to delivery of classes without sufficient planning and understanding and T&L processes.

The group then devised a series of strategies that can be summarised as:
• Find ways to disseminate findings and ideas on T&L, e.g. through email lists and development of resources such as generic toolkits for tutors to put on the web and CD Roms for students (that tutors can also use); and
• Serve as a resource for faculty areas, e.g. through representation on T&L committees and by assisting lecturers and tutors at subject/course level with qualitative evaluations about T&L in specific contexts.
Objective 3: support disciplines to develop core generic skills

Group 3 focused on interaction and collaboration between LAS advisers and faculty staff, and compiled strategies including:

- Use our knowledge of the student learning experience in teacher training to influence student assessment, e.g., by compiling and analysing completed assessment tasks to identify problems and illustrate patterns, providing an editorial service for academics to better design and articulate assessment tasks, and giving/contributing to staff development sessions on assessment methods;
- Promote ourselves to faculty staff, and through staff to students, e.g. through personal contact (by hanging around staff rooms and chatting), distribution of leaflets to advertise the LAS service in staff mailboxes, and speaking to students for a quick 5 mins within their first lecture in subjects
- Show solidarity with faculty staff, e.g. by fighting their casualisation
- Improve formal mechanisms for liaising with staff on students at risk, through a trans-disciplinary model that involves liaising with and coordinating a committee of ‘stakeholders’ involved with such students (i.e. student, all their teachers, parents etc) once a major problem is identified by the LAS adviser, running workshops with students who repeatedly fail, and having lecturers write a referral to us on student feedback, rather than just an oral referral; and
- Improve on-line resources for supporting students and tracking this support, e.g. by developing a (mandatory) WebCT academic skills unit, and monitoring hits on on-line resources so that names of users are recorded and patterns of use are evident.

Objective 4: contribute to the development of the profession

The meaning of this objective was interpreted in this instance to mean contributing to the development of the profession by devising strategies that promote ourselves as professionals. These strategies might include:
• Exchange visits with faculty staff and others, e.g. by hosting morning teas for new faculty staff, asking divisional directors to LAS staff meetings, visiting all discipline schools, and holding a ‘relaunch’ of our services;
• ‘Keep on keeping on’ the outward communication, e.g. by developing and distributing promotional materials (fridge magnets, bookmarks, banners, email handouts), and distributing our annual report as widely as possible); and
• Display and share our professional knowledge, e.g. by being on all relevant committees and working groups, fostering links to do research with faculty staff, taking opportunities to present research within the institution, and organising speaker series.

Objective 5: foster recognition through research

Group 5 considered how LAS advisers might foster recognition through research on topics of LAS practice. An important consideration was the intended audiences which range from our own profession to the wider academic community across all disciplines and administrative areas. Strategies include:

• Develop a research culture within our centres, e.g. by see research as valuable to the needs of our clients, including research as part of new (and existing) position descriptions, lobbying for change of LAS positions from support to academic status, encouraging small ‘r’ research, allocating space to do research without distractions, being disciplined in our use of time for research, holding regular research meetings, having think tanks to nurture research ideas and topics, running research retreats to focus on projects, engaging in professional development through T&L (needs management support);
• Be proactive in looking for external research and professional development opportunities and funding, e.g. by promoting staff exchange through AALL, and applying for scholarships and grants (Rotary and Fulbright); and
• Use the AALL website to promote research and professional development, e.g. by developing and continuing to update a register of grants and scholarships and a list of conferences and journals for publications and putting these on AALL website.
Objective 6: disseminate information to the wider academic community

Group 6 looked at 3 aspects of information dissemination (to whom, how and why) and their findings included:

- Disseminate information to colleagues (local, national and international), promotion committees, university administrators, faculty academics, students and the wider community;
- Use methods such as gaining awareness of how institutional systems work, evaluating, reflecting and reporting on practice, putting information on websites, producing flyers and brochures, developing teaching resources, writing books, producing videos, engaging in social and professional networking, engaging in joint projects, conducting research, communicating via Unilearn, publishing in journals across disciplines, presenting at and participating in conferences, establishing a professional association, strategic planning and strategic placement of reports; and
- Do this in order to improve practice, knowledge and understanding, develop expertise, better support student learning, increase job satisfaction, achieve individual promotion, contribute to T&L, and develop a profile of ourselves and our services.

Conclusion

This roundtable provided a valuable opportunity to network with colleagues and to generate practical ways to support student learning in a series of direct and indirect ways. As coordinators of this session, the UWA team did not formally contribute to the discussion during the roundtable. However, we have formulated a range of questions in response to the issues raised. Reflecting on these questions may help LAS advisers make progress towards a more strategic position within their institutions:

- Do we meet often enough to discuss our ideas and make enough time for team strategic planning?
• Have we established a team and unit identity that all members understand before we attempt to promote it to others?
• Is there a range of promotional materials we can use to establish a credible, ongoing presence in our institution?
• Do we have a list of key ‘stakeholders’ and potential collaborative partners we can make contact with over a given period of time?
• Are we aware of the relevant committees within our institution that we could either observe or participate on?
• If we publish research, do we know where the DEST funding and points go?

Strategies outlined in this summary document range from short- to long-term and their applicability will vary between institutions. However, the common desire expressed by attendees at the round-table to make progress in all 6 of the core objectives suggests that LAS advisers have a keen interest in adapting working practice to increase our effectiveness on both operational as well as more strategic levels. These strategies will be added to a page on the new AALL website to which contributions can be made at any time. Notices will be distributed via the UniLearn mailing list when major updates have been completed.