HIGHER EDUCATION PEDAGOGIES

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Higher Education Pedagogies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rhep20

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To cite this article: Ben Fenton-Smith & Laura Gurney (2022) Collaborator, applied linguist, academic, expense? Exploring the professional identities of academic language and learning professionals, Higher Education Pedagogies, 7:1, 160-178, DOI: 10.1080/23752696.2022.2130390

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2022.2130390

Published online: 05 Oct 2022.

HIGHER EDUCATION PEDAGOGIES
2022, VOL. 7, NO. 1, 160–178
https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2022.2130390

Collaborator, applied linguist, academic, expense? Exploring the professional identities of academic language and learning professionals

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ABSTRACT

The complex role of academic language and learning (ALL) professionals in higher education is poorly understood, even though it contributes to key outcomes such as improved study skills, academic language enhancement, curriculum development and student retention. In this paper, we explore the multiple professional identities of people working in this field. Ten ALL practitioners employed in Australian universities took part in semi-structured interviews exploring their roles and the contextual constraints and affordances of their work. We elaborate on eight discrete subject positions that emerged from the participants' data: the collaborator, the relationship manager, the applied linguist, the teacher, the content (non) expert, the academic, the strategist, and the expense. We draw on a critical realist frame to articulate the interplay between structure and individual agency within these identities, highlighting the range of expertise that ALL practitioners bring to the role.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 26 August 2021
Revised 03 August 2022
Accepted 15 September 2022

KEYWORDS
Academic language and learning; academic literacy; higher education; identity; agency

Academic language and learning in higher education

A consequence of widening participation in higher education – whether through internationalisation or non-traditional enrolments – has been a turn to language and study skills. A diversity of learners means a diversity of language backgrounds and assumed knowledge, which has forced academic literacy from the shadows. Once taken for granted by universities, it is now explicitly addressed. Of course, it always *was* an issue, but demographic changes have made it more visible, and this has resulted in significant advances in higher education pedagogy for the benefit of all.

A number of approaches to academic literacy have arisen in higher education over the past quarter century, particularly in Anglophone countries where high numbers of international students have drawn attention to the challenges of studying in English, and the political rise of English within higher education has attracted increased scrutiny (Hyland, 2018). These approaches include 'English for Academic Purposes' (EAP) (Ding & Bruce, 2017), 'Academic Literacies' (Lea & Street, 2006), and (in the United States)

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'Writing Across the Curriculum' and 'Writing in the Disciplines' (Horner, 2014; Thaiss & Porter, 2010). In this paper, we adopt Wingate's (2018) overarching definition of academic literacy as:

> the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community; this encompasses reading, evaluating information, as well as presenting, debating and creating knowledge through both speaking and writing. These capabilities require knowledge of the community's epistemology, of the genres through which the community interacts, and of the conventions that regulate these interactions. (p. 350)

For consistency, we use the term 'academic language and learning' (ALL) to refer to academic literacy in the above sense, and ALL 'advisor' or 'practitioner' to refer to higher education staff whose primary role is the achievement of the above competencies in the student cohort.

The location of ALL practitioners in university structures varies, with some embedded in schools or faculties and others centralised in a student services unit. Many collaborate with discipline academics and interact directly with students in workshops and consultations. They provide academic support and formative feedback on students' assessment work, both of which are important for students in higher education (Waring & Evans, 2015). However, the complexities of working across professional groups – and across disciplines of study within institutions – is a recognised challenge (see Malkin & Chanock, 2018).

This paper explores the professional identities of ALL professionals, capturing the challenges, affordances, and individual agency inherent to each. Drawing on interview data with ten ALL professionals working in Australian universities, we seek a more comprehensive understanding of ALL roles than currently exists. This includes a fuller expression of their range of expertise and a clearer mapping of their interconnections with other actors in higher education. This is necessary because any university curriculum that is uninformed by ALL theory and standards is, in our view, inherently flawed. Moreover, the ALL professionals that drive and implement these standards are comparatively unrecognised in the curriculum development stakeholder network. We seek to redress that balance.

ALL identities

Professional identity in higher education has attracted international attention for some time. While research has addressed identity formation amongst academics (Hollywood, McCarthy, Spencely, & Winstone, 2020; Yang, Shu, & Yin, 2021) and students (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021), the identities of other groups, including those on the boundaries of *academic* and *professional* staff domains, are less well understood. The complex identity of ALL practitioners is born of the fact that few other employees range across all domains of the university ecosystem as they do, to the extent that they have been described as inhabiting a *third space* between the academic and the professional (by which is meant, the administrative) (MacDonald, 2016). Hadley (2015) positions these practitioners along a gradation of identities; for instance, they may be seen 'neither as authentic [teachers], nor as full members of administrative management or as tenured faculty' (p. 46). Their work intersects with all disciplines, schools, units, teaching models,

technologies, employment structures, staffing groups and student cohorts. Referring specifically to the EAP movement, Ding and Bruce (2017) argue that practitioners are subject to divergent *discursive constructions* which position them as either a support service or as members of a field of academic study 'framed by theory and informed by a growing body of published scholarly activity and research' (p. 194). While they support the latter, the former remains pervasive in institutions as misunderstandings of this area of work persist.

Professional identities are nuanced and multi-directional. They are not entirely conferred by others, nor are they entirely controlled by the individual. Identities are claimed and *enacted* (Tracy, 2011), and they may be interpreted or projected differently within different interactions. Identities are also layered and manifest in different ways insofar as workplace role, knowledge, experience, age, gender and other factors may be more or less prominent across different situations and interactions (Grossi & Gurney, 2020). Individuals negotiate identities via the enactment of agency within particular circumstances, and, as Schnurr (2012) states, 'we always do identity work when we communicate' (p. 103).

ALL professionals undertake a range of tasks in contemporary higher education. These include group workshops and one-to-one student consultations at all levels of study, as well as collaborative embedding initiatives. Nonetheless, the sustainability of initiatives is often complicated by a range of factors endemic to institutions. The dominant neoliberal logic at the core of institutional governance and its effects on ALL practice are explored by Gurney and Grossi (2019, 2021), who frame ALL work as a mechanism for student retention and accessibility, where advisors may work in ways that are antithetical to students' learning needs. Such institutional agendas may thwart advisory efforts to develop longer-term collaborations. In addition to the instrumentalist appeal of the quick fix, tight budgets and staffing shortages create an unstable basis for collaboration amongst diverse groups of staff. Hadley (2015) discusses these issues within the *massification* of higher education, where student numbers are expected to continually grow and institutions to compete for enrolments, and where teaching becomes 'mass produced' to deal with unfavourable student to staff ratios. The effects of university environments are further explored in a large survey study, recruiting 105 ALL advisors as participants, conducted by Malkin and Chanock (2018). Echoing findings across the literature, many of the respondents expressed concern about a lack of time and resources, poor visibility of ALL contributions, insufficient embedding, low status, undervaluing of their roles by management, and disruptive restructuring (Malkin & Chanock, 2018).

Agency in ALL

While much existing literature positions ALL practitioners as marginalised, a welcome turn to agency illuminates the multifaceted identities and experiences of this group. As an example, we explored categories of practitioner agency in relation to policy and planning for academic language in universities (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2016). We found agency to be exercised, to a varying extent, by university leadership, content and literacy experts, and those who are able to influence and strategically promote academic literacy programmes within institutions. Similarly, Grossi and Gurney (2020) investigated practitioner agency through a case study of an ALL advisor. While recognising the undeniable

impediments to her work, this advisor constructed a strong identity as a critical professional with confidence in the positive impacts of her vocation. Reading these studies together, we note the need to apprehend both structural factors and agentic responses in order to paint a more comprehensive picture of ALL practice.

Critical realism and reflexivity

To appreciate the intersection of structure and agency, we adopt a critical realist approach, primarily drawing on the work of Margaret Archer. In brief, critical realists in the social sciences pursue what drives and determines human behaviour. Humans are not considered passive non-agents, but are powerful particulars due to their natural and acquired powers – those which are materially grounded, and those which are bestowed by social relations (Harré, 2001; Varela, 2001). Rather than being entirely determined by social conditions or external forces, the capacity to act, and to influence, lies with human agents.

The concept of 'reflexivity' is particularly important here. Archer (2007) argues that individuals operate within social structures which set conditions for their actions; however, individuals may choose to react and interact with conditions differently, based on the possibilities they see for themselves and the projects they decide to pursue. While sociocultural narratives for the progression of lives and the undertaking of action, as well as physical resources and environs, invariably exercise varying degrees of influence on possible courses of action individuals perceive for themselves, Archer (2007) maintains that the ability to engage in conscious deliberation through inner conversation 'is an emergent personal power of individuals that has been generally disregarded and is not entailed by routine or habitual action' (p. 3). Subsequently, Archer (2007) provides the following definition of reflexivity:

> . . . 'reflexivity' is the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa. Such deliberations are important since they form the basis upon which people determine their future courses of action – always fallibly and always under their own descriptions. (p. 4)

In other words, reflexivity mediates 'between the objective structural opportunities confronted by different groups and the nature of people's subjectively defined concerns' (Archer, 2007, p. 61). Archer's work informs this paper's understanding of ALL identities. Specifically, we understand practitioner identities as forming at the interface of institutional structures on the one hand, and individuals' goals and relationships on the other.

The study

Participant demographics

Ten ALL practitioners took part in the study. All were employed in universities across Australia through varied workplace arrangements, including permanent roles and contracts of different lengths. Some worked within central learning and development units, and others within schools and faculties. Five participants held doctoral-level

qualifications, and others were active researchers and publishers. Their professional trajectories were heterogeneous, and several participants had worked previously in more traditionally-defined academic roles (for example, as a lecturer in a linguistics department). An important feature of their employment, which we discuss later, was their status as either academic or professional staff. The participant group was mixed in this respect.

Data and analysis

Each participant took part in a one-on-one interview focussing on their involvement in a major ALL programme. We did not design the interviews with a focus on ALL practitioner identity per se. Rather, we sought to understand the role-specific challenges faced by these practitioners when participating in ALL programme development. The following themes formed the interview protocol:

- overall description of the programme(s) in which they were involved
- programme scoping and set-up (e.g. needs analysis or piloting)
- materials development
- working with discipline academics
- institutional affordances and constraints
- programme evaluation and/or research

We were influenced by EAP literature on curriculum development (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001) in constructing the protocol. We also drew on personal experience; both authors have worked in a variety of ALL roles at the university level. This is in line with calls for research into ALL *by* those in the field (Briguglio, 2007; Velautham & Picard, 2009).

We determined that the semi-structured interview was an appropriate tool for generating open discussion, allowing diversity and nuance in each participant's reflections (Burns, 2000) without presupposing their concerns. To ensure that questions were wide-ranging, comprehensible and effective (Maxwell, 2005), adjustments were made to the protocol after running a pilot interview with an ALL practitioner who took no further part in the study. All interviews were conducted in English and transcribed verbatim with the informed consent of participants. Ethical approval was granted by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: LAL/14/10/HREC).

The data analysis began by *indexing* the transcripts, which is the process of 'anchoring content to the interview protocol' (Deterding & Waters, 2021, p. 722). We then read the data independently and documented our initial ideas in 'respondent memos' (p. 727). Next, we came together and compared our memos; at this point, we agreed that 'identity' was an emergent concept that we wanted to explore in depth. Over several meetings, we developed 'analytic codes' (p. 722), which are nuanced codes used to investigate a particular issue or question. These focused on the identities communicated in the data.

The analytic codes equated to eight identities which were communicated by the participants when explaining their roles. Each was associated with particular practices and priorities within the institution, could be understood and recognised in particular ways by other staff and/or students, and carried implications for ALL agency (i.e. it

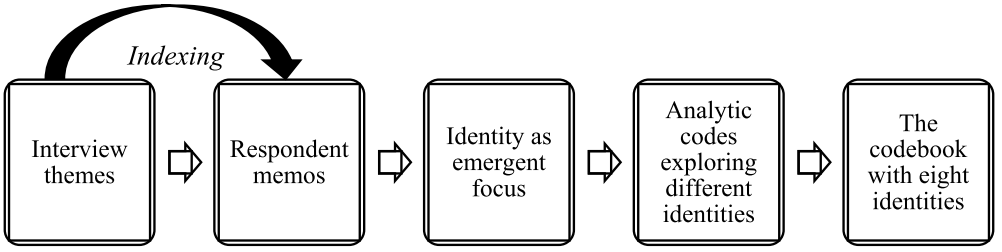

Figure 1. Process of coding from interview themes.

constrained or enabled the exercise of agency). After an iterative process of revision and discussion, we agreed on the parameters of the identities, and labelled them: *collaborator, relationship manager, applied linguist, teacher, content (non) expert, academic, strategist*, and *expense*. To ensure conceptual stability, maximise cross-coder reliability (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011), and construct clear depictions of each identity, we then constructed a codebook that itemised each subject position along with descriptors and sample data excerpts. Figure 1 maps the process of deriving the codebook from the interview themes.

To illustrate the utility of our codebook, let us consider the example of the 'relationship manager'. We began with a general description: '*They establish, build, develop, maintain and/or manage relationships with discipline academics, but also students*'. We highlighted data that corresponded to this, including the relationship types that ALL practitioners encounter, the demands of maintaining relationships with a dynamic mix of stakeholders, the skills needed to do this, and the distribution of ownership and authority within teaching teams. In terms of the value and agency associated with the role, we listed excerpts of interview speech that indicated the extent to which the participants felt their work was valued, and their capacity to make decisions and influence practices. See the Appendix for an overview of the codebook.

While the process was rigorous, we do not claim that the eight identities are exhaustive, nor that they are mutually exclusive – rather, they are overlapping, dynamic and fuzzy. Participants do not occupy all of them all the time or to the same degree. In what follows, we set out the core features of each, using data to illustrate how they are manifested and impact ALL work.

Findings and discussion

The collaborator

Collaboration emerged as a core element of ALL activity. Echoing literature on the proliferation of different models of embedding (Harris & Ashton, 2011; Maldoni, 2017), participants saw collaboration as underpinning virtually every aspect of programme development and delivery. ALL practitioners develop technical and professional know-how to work with partners across multiple disciplines in the domains of literacy instruction ('what' is done) and the efficient use of resources ('how' it is done).

The most significant collaborator is the discipline academic. An experienced ALL practitioner understands effective collaborative models for maximising this dynamic (see

the relationship manager for the relationship-building side of this) and driving the agenda. For instance, Participant 10 conducted focus groups with academics 'to find out what they thought the issues were for the students' and accessed assessment materials to gain a deeper understanding of how student work was graded. Such activities were ideally ongoing: 'that's continued; we've continued to do that, that kind of work' (Participant 10). Participant 5 implemented a similarly ongoing approach to collaborative teaching, stating that

> . . . there were a lot of things that [the discipline academic] didn't know. [. . .] We ended up putting in a regular weekly meeting where we looked at some of things that I'd noticed in class that she may not have seen, and then we started to negotiate about what I thought was going on and what I might be able to offer her.

Participant 7 defined her 'actual work' as 'working with course team members' and 'other academics', and 'not working specifically with students'. Her task was to critically assess partnership programmes and 'come up with a few suggested models that we think could work'.

All these stances characterise the ALL collaborator in an agentive role, replete with specific professional knowledge and opportunities to direct work. Notwithstanding their successes, collaborators are also aware of obstructions to collaborative teaching. These include poor resourcing, lack of awareness on behalf of discipline academics, and ineffective distribution or alignment of expertise. Participant 2 elaborates:

> [T]here's more collaboration than there was but it's still at a very low level. Just because I think people are busy, academics are busy, they've got their own things to worry about and they simply, with the best of intentions, they just don't have time to deal with academic language specialists and sort of talk in detail about what needs to be done and what the students' needs are.

The relationship manager

Whereas collaboration refers to the synthesis of disciplinary and academic literacy expertise, relationship management refers to the personal and emotional skills needed to integrate a range of professional practices. A relationship manager proactively exercises strategies that attend to the affective side of collaborative work, such as networking and open communication. Above all, participants commented on the need to take a sensitive approach when working with academics so as not to be seen as *threatening*: '[Am I there] because they got a poor student evaluation, so I can look like good cop, bad cop? [. . .] You're going to have people who resent, who feel that their [course] is their kingdom' (Participant 4).

An open approach was therefore 'key for gaining trust. And for me not coming in as the expert, telling them what to do' (Participant 4). This participant referred to the benefits of micro strategies, such as holding morning teas, to foster collegiality with academic colleagues. Others stressed the need to proactively seek out and cultivate relationships. Because ALL has a potential role to play in any university department, practitioners spent time networking to uncover opportunities. Participant 8 referred to one such colleague: 'She saw it as her role right from the beginning to go and make contact. She had contacts in every faculty and in quite a few departments within the faculties.'

While all networking approaches entailed agency and 'relationship nous' (e.g. seizing on a chance encounter), there was a degree of fatalism about certain relationship outcomes, with some considered naturally a 'marriage made in heaven' (Participant 9) but 'for other reasons, 10% [of relationships] are just going to be onerous' (Participant 4). As an example, one participant said she had few relationship issues because she came with the recommendation of an academic literacy expert who has 'absolute integrity, she's got a brilliant mind, she does everything based on evidence, no mucking around, no personal agendas' (Participant 6). She did not have to worry about 'connections with people' because 'the groundwork was done' before she started.

The need for ALL practitioners to manage relationships is not a new assertion. For instance, in a 2013 study by Strauss (2013), ALL practitioners in New Zealand universities discussed a certain hesitancy among some academic staff about their involvement in disciplinary teaching. In response, the ALL staff became sensitive relationship managers, adopting a 'servant mantel' (p. 11), also referred to by Raimes (1991) as the 'butler stance'. In remaining attentive to others' emotions and reactions, relationship managers are likely to engage in significant emotional labour, which carries potentially negative side effects (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Ward & McMurray, 2016). This stance also places ALL practitioners in a subordinate position, where they take the needs and sensitivities of academic staff into account, even if not reciprocated. Such imbalances can result from a failure to appreciate that ALL staff, too, are *specialists*.

The applied linguist

Like other higher educators, ALL professionals possess their own discipline-specific academic expertise (Ding & Bruce, 2017). While nomenclature varies (e.g. 'academic literacy', 'English for academic purposes', 'academic language and learning'), the core of an ALL professional's expertise lies in knowledge of language. As *linguists*, they understand the functions and constituents of language at various levels (lexicogrammar, genre, social context, etc.). As *applied linguists*, they extend this knowledge to language learner development, particularly in relation to the macroskills of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

The applied linguist's disciplinary knowledge is not usually possessed by other academics or professional staff, and often it is not fully understood by them. Consider Participant 5′s reflection on an encounter in the Business school:

> I was chatting one day in an open plan area with a staff member, and she was saying, "What do you do?", and I said, well, you know, here's my background. And she said, "Oh, you might be able to help me with my international students. I work in Business and I have these students, and I don't know what to do with them, and they can't seem to write anything. [. . .] And so she basically said, "Look I don't want to do any testing of students. I know I've got a problem. I want you to tell me what you can do about that. It's all about their writing". And I said, "Look, it's unlikely to be just about their writing. I'd like to go back to the beginning of the process and look at what's happening at the information collection stage and the reading stage, and see if we can see a bit of what's going on there".

This reflection illustrates how ALL professionals can educate academic colleagues about the nature of academic literacy, including what is and is not achievable. While participants realised that academic language could be a challenge for discipline academics –

'they can't really be expected to know that in terms of the students' English language needs, they're not experts in applied linguistics' (Participant 3) – they also discussed problematic and pervasive misunderstandings in their institutions. In particular, they highlighted misconceptions about 'fixing' language problems; as Participant 8 lamented,

> . . . they still think that you're there to fix up the students' English, don't they? [. . .] They think all they have to do is send the student to do this course and there's a magic bullet that will turn them into complete grammarians in an instant.

Participant 6 referred to this as the 'clash' that results from 'moving English and language into the disciplines', where there is only a 'lay person attitude to language'. Another myth was that only so-called 'non-native speakers', who were mostly international students, have language problems. Participants were sensitive to the need to work against a deficiency mindset: 'we were very wary of, and sensitive to creating a deficit discourse around English language' (Participant 6). This has been highlighted in previous research; Wingate (2006), for instance, discusses the persistent framing of ALL via the 'deficit model of providing support to weak students' (p. 458).

Overall, the expertise of academic literacy instructors was contrasted with that of institutional administrators and discipline specialists, who were seen to lack knowledge not only of language but also of the pedagogical principles underpinning ALL methodologies and models. Participants discussed staff 'who really didn't understand what this embedding stuff was about' (Participant 5), and who did not realise that 'you can't get language change with one hour a week for 10 weeks' (Participant 6). As this example shows, the applied linguist is not only a language expert but also a pedagogical one. We focus further on the latter aspect in the next section.

The teacher

Another area of expertise is teaching itself. While we referred to instructional models particular to academic literacy in the previous section, here we discuss *the teacher* as a pedagogical expert who understands the relationship between instruction and student learning outcomes, and who is motivated to critically reflect on and develop their practice. The teacher understands how to develop materials, scaffold instruction, diagnose problems, work with learners, and evaluate teaching practice. They usually have a significant amount of classroom experience. Participant 9, for example, reflected that, 'I've been working here for 10 years at this institution, so I've got a pretty good sense of what the demands are'.

Participants positioned themselves as teaching experts in several ways. First, they indexed their own pedagogical skills and expertise. As Participant 5 commented, 'because I'm an ESL background, I would very carefully think about my instructions and try and distil things down to the essence and scaffold things'. Second, they recognised the pedagogical skills of colleagues and employees. Participant 8 discussed working with 'a fellow traveller [who] was able to introduce bits of her theory without it being threatening, which is a real skill, actually', and Participant 6 commented 'we're very, very careful about who we put in there to teach [. . .] that's been a key to the success of the programme, is having top notch educators in there who understand the area, they understand the field, they themselves are engaged in tertiary literacy'. Third, they even

positioned themselves in the agentive guise of professional developer of others' teaching skills – including discipline academics (thus inverting the servant mantel mentioned earlier). Participant 2 provided one such account:

> [H]e was a very experienced lecturer, a good teacher, but he hadn't really made the move to doing much visual reinforcement of what he was saying. [. . .] I was very conscious that there was a massive language learning load in there, not just for ESL students, but for all students. [. . .] I know that the lecturer, since working with me, he has just really thought about what he was doing. Because he had one of those light bulb moments when one of the international students talked about how in lectures they often got lost. If there was a PowerPoint slide that they could catch up on, it was just that visual reinforcement of the language was so helpful and he suddenly realised, okay.

The lack of formal teacher education among many discipline academics was noted, as was the dual roles that university lecturers occupy in respect to disciplinary content and disciplinary communication: 'my big question is whether he could actually be expected to teach? Why should a chemistry teacher have to teach writing?' (Participant 2).

The ALL practitioner as teaching expert carries a significant amount of agency. The teacher is aware of their expertise in classroom and assessment practices, takes a proactive role in development, is able to determine pathways for successful programme implementation, and has a deep understanding of the factors which impede or facilitate student learning. They also centralise teaching as a key determinant of programme success. As Participant 6 concluded, 'I think that the materials that we've developed are great, they're fine, but at the end of the day those materials without a good teacher are a waste of time, they're useless'.

The content (non) expert

Irrespective of their linguistic and pedagogical expertise, ALL practitioners constantly negotiate the parameters of their expertise in relation to disciplinary content. Given their academy-wide purview, ALL practitioners are rarely experts in the disciplinary fields with which they engage. However, according to the participants, this outsider perspective was not necessarily a disadvantage.

Several participants chose to leverage their peripheral position in the discipline to pedagogic effect – specifically, to provide encouragement and modelling to students who also considered themselves non-experts in the academic field. As Participant 5 reflected:

> I guess the thing that I have to manage now is to be clear that I am not the content person, because both with the academic staff member and the students, because my value to the student is I sit out outside the discipline like they do. [. . .] I'd lose touch with where they're at if I allowed myself to be too drawn in for the content side of it.

Such a team-teaching approach can allow teachers to 'bounce off' each another (Participant 5) and provide a multi-perspectival response to student queries (Participant 4). Participant 10 provided a similar reflection on teaching alongside an academic colleague, that 'having the [discipline] academic there is fantastic, because she focuses on all the [disciplinary] aspects, because I can't do that'.

However, at the other end of the spectrum, at least one participant attested to a degree of content expertise born of long-term immersion in the subject matter:

> I've worked with so many students on lit review, I really know the management literature really well. You know, the staff member I work with says, you might as well teach the unit 'cause you know the content pretty well. (Participant 5)

Taking the aforementioned areas of expertise into account (applied linguistics, pedagogy, and discipline content), the question remains: do ALL experts see themselves (or are they perceived by others) as academics? It is to that question we turn next.

The academic

One of the key lines of demarcation in any university is between 'academic' and 'professional' staff. However, the legitimacy of this demarcation is questionable in the ALL sphere. ALL practice problematises a binary conceptualisation in favour of a 'third space' that recognises staff expertise as coalescing around complex institutional activities in non-traditional ways (Whitchurch, 2008). Our interviewees grappled with these uncertain boundaries: did their work constitute, approximate, or complement that of an academic? Has ALL achieved recognition as an academic field in its own right? What are the (dis)advantages of being designated as 'academic' or 'professional'? These questions derive from the various employment arrangements institutions use to address ALL. In some cases, the work is performed by academics specialising in applied linguistics who consult, intervene and collaborate across the university. In others, advisors are embedded as professional staff in schools and faculties, or work within centralised learning and teaching units (such as student services or the library).

A prominent view among the participants concerned the benefits of classifying ALL practitioners as academics. Participant 8 was forthright on this point, stating 'it's incredibly important to have those positions academic positions because [. . .] universities are incredibly hierarchical places'. In short, agency derives from one's position in the university system, in connection with the amount of authority and expertise a practitioner is seen to possess. The necessary 'trust and mutuality' between staff (Barber, 2020, p. 89) was missing where there were discernible differences in hierarchy. The perceived lower status of professional staff is well captured in a small anecdote from Participant 5, a learning advisor within a faculty, who invited an academic colleague to an event at which she was a keynote speaker:

> [E]ven though [the academic had] worked with me for a number of years, it was a bit of a revelation to her that, although I'm general staff, actually what I had designed with her had a strong backing in a literature which she didn't really know.

As explored under 'The strategist' below, ALL programmes and practitioners gain traction when invested with the currencies of academic advancement: publications, grants, conference presentations, canonical literature, empirical evidence, research qualifications, and status titles. Publishing about their programmes was a particularly valuable route to sustainability and recognition – i.e. 'getting it out there, being involved in publishing, presenting about it' (Participant 5), and deciding 'from the very beginning to evaluate it and write a paper' (Participant 10).

There were also advantages to having an insider's understanding of both camps. Participant 7, employed as professional staff but previously an academic, reflected:

> [P]eople in my own team are critical of academics, about what they're not doing, and I think that's because of the workload and the expectations to be publishing, the expectations to do service, that they've divided up into the role. So, I don't think it's just one sided, I think it's from both sides.

As this comment shows, a holistic knowledge of the whole system within which ALL operates is advantageous.

The strategist

A criticism of ALL in both the literature (e.g. Gurney & Grossi, 2019) and our data is that it is often ad hoc and fails to be 'systematic within the university' (Participant 7). Therefore, it befalls ALL professionals to operate as *strategists*, negotiating and navigating institutional cultures, structures and opportunities to ensure the continuity and success of ALL programmes – not to mention their own positions.

One strategy for achieving this is for ALL practitioners to become 'people with power' (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2016), actors with codified authority to implement policies. For example, Participants 7, 8 and 9 all took positions on university or faculty-wide committees overseeing curriculum reform, giving them the agency to enact change. A related strategy was to leverage existing policies – institutional or governmental – for advantage. Participant 4 explained:

> You've got all of these political influences that are in the air [. . .] [M]y philosophy is that it's great to have those macro structures, those policies to give you oomph, to give you power, to give you initiative, to give you legitimacy at the higher level.

A further step, as suggested by Participant 10, was to create an institutional English-language policy to drive and legitimate ALL initiatives. Participants were also conscious of the strategic placement of ALL within university structures, noting the constraints and affordances of, for example, faculty embedding (siloed but discipline-specific) versus centralised academic skills units (university-wide but generic).

As mentioned previously, relationship management is key to successful ALL practice. Such connections require not only interpersonal skills but also strategy. For example, most participants referred to the necessity of supporters – ideally, 'champions' – in high places:

> [Support] comes from the DVC who set up an English Language Working Party which is also comprised of senior members of the university, including a number of the Deans of various faculties that are involved in the programme. And a lot of what we're doing is mandated at that level. (Participant 3)

High-grade support, according to Participant 9, ensures the programme is 'not something that can possibly go away. And if I get hit by a bus tomorrow, it will be a requirement that somebody else fills this space.' However others cautioned that 'that kind of support [. . .] seems to wax and wane [. . .] depending on all sorts of things' (Participant 11), and the sustainability of ALL could be threatened by over-reliance on a powerful champion or the changing priorities of new administrations. To safeguard against this, participants pointed to evaluation reports, publications, public talks, awards and internal grants as strategic tasks that accrue capital and face-validity for programmes.

When carried out in collaboration with discipline academics, sustainability is further enhanced because 'they're prepared to fight for you' (Participant 11). Even the naming of a programme is strategic; for example, the term 'pilot' was considered non-threatening (and therefore more inviting) for discipline academics (Participant 4).

Student reception is another strategic factor. If students like and value a programme, they are more likely to attend and positively evaluate it, leading to sustainability. Participant 6 questioned whether students were 'happy that they were essentially forced to do' academic literacy work:

> [T]hat's really important because no matter what you do in these programmes, if you get bad washback you can't make them go, but if they don't like it, it will not succeed because students will march out in force.

Finally, several participants commented on the consciously strategic manner with which they personally negotiated the employment pathway of higher education Some spoke of the freedom and agency that flowed from working across departments and disciplines in a university, and operating on the edge of pedagogical innovation, as opposed to having a more secure but less dynamic position.

The expense

We conclude with a subject position born of the neoliberal university: the ALL practitioner as expense. The increasing shift towards corporatism in Australian higher education, with its increased focus on efficiency and cost, provides the well-documented ground on which many participants initiated and operated their programmes (see Bosanquet et al., 2020; Connell, 2015). Participants reflected rather fatalistically on how their roles and programmes depended on unstable funding regimes over which they had little control. As funding is controlled and directed by others – governments, institutions, faculties, schools and directors – the ALL professional is deprived of agency; rather, they may be accounted for within the university as an expense.

A discourse of dehumanisation was evident in the participants' projection of this identity. They were aware that their work was not evaluated by those who qualitatively appreciated it (e.g. students and collaborators), but rather by those who conceptualised it quantitatively, through the narrow lens of the bottom line. Participants referred disparagingly to a disembodied budgetary system holding agency over the individual, with the capacity to treat them 'very badly' (Participant 8). The system was usually depicted as a network of powerful forces rather than any particular individual; for instance, Participant 8 identified the system with the government ('the access and equity money funding for this campus could dry up under either government [. . .] they're all a bit gloomy in Canberra. They're expecting big, big budget cuts') as well as the institution (they 'put the numbers in and crunch it and the computer spits it all out').

Other participants reflected that the relative inexpensiveness of ALL staff makes them attractive. Participant 5 commented that 'the university sees me as good value where I am'. However, Participant 2 provided a sharp illustration of how this could be disadvantageous to ALL staff; she had been an Associate Lecturer for 19 years, with no opportunity for promotion: 'we're both ongoing and continuing, but we're extremely cheap is the answer. We don't cost much.'

The ALL practitioner as expense or 'hired hand' was also associated politically with a capitalist discourse of ownership in relation to programmes. As Participant 11 reflected, 'they owned the subject, not us, and I was paid to do the subject'. The intersection of ownership and funding is also evident in Participant 3's description, in which interested parties are akin to company shareholders:

> there are so many people who have their own interest and sometimes there's a conflicting interest as to what the programme should be doing and who it should be focusing on. [. . .] [E]ach school gives up a certain amount of funding coming their way which is diverted to us so there's no way that we could expect that they'd do that without wanting to have input or wanting to sort of see where their money is going and what the results are.

As such, the only way for ALL staff to obtain a degree of agency is to enlist the support of those who control funds. As Participant 4 explains:

> . . . you get a higher course convenor saying, "Well if it doesn't work out, I'll find money for you." [. . .] So that, in case something threatens it, like funding, or changing, you have enough supporters to say "No, we don't change this."

Conclusion

ALL is no more complicated than other domains in higher education, but its multi-dimensionality is poorly appreciated. There is uncertainty about its position, its perceived value, and the amount of control ALL practitioners have. This uncertainty extends to practitioners: who they are, what they do, where they belong, and what their contribution is. While the depiction of ALL practice discussed in this paper is only one element of a larger picture, it captures some key identities and roles that cut across ALL, and it provides insight into structures that constrain and enable ALL activity.

The multiple roles of ALL practitioners can sit contradictorily. The high levels of agency available to the applied linguist and the teacher are not experienced by the relationship manager, who may dissimulate their expertise in order to smooth collaborations, or by the expense, who is coded into budgets. While a degree of contradiction is inherent to any role, it is exacerbated by the need for ALL practitioners to be *many things to many people*. Continually establishing the parameters of one's professional role(s) is not an effective basis on which to develop professional identity or carve out a place within an institution.

For ALL staff, Archer's notion of reflexivity captures the intersection of practitioner agency with structural constraints, reconciling the apparent disconnect between high levels of practitioner expertise and the actual opportunities they have to exercise it. As discussed by our participants, part of their expertise entails the ability to reflect on *how* they present themselves and their professional knowledge. Their roles often involve prioritising the needs and understandings of others, which itself requires a repertoire of practices. This is not to suggest that they are subordinate, as they may also be leaders in teaching, administration, and research.

We commenced this paper by delineating two drivers of the turn to academic literacy in higher education: internationalisation and widening participation. There has since been a third: the COVID-19 pandemic. This event has radically shaken the norms of

higher education pedagogy, particularly the volume of online learning. As a result, the need for academic support, enhancing students' experiences and addressing student retention agendas has only grown. Now more than ever, therefore, it is essential to understand what the ALL professional does, and what they can offer to the changing world of learning.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Association for Academic Language and Learning, Australia, under Grant number 12/06. The authors also thank the participants who generously offered their time to be interviewed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Association for Academic Language and Learning, Australia [Grant number 12/06].

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Appendix

Overview of codebook used for analysis:

Identities	Descriptors	Sample data excerpt
The relationship manager	They establish, build, develop, maintain and/or manage relationships with discipline academics, but also students.	*But we do have a lot to contribute to that curriculum development [. . .] how do you make it sustainable and how do you have it so that it's part of the structure of the university and you don't have to keep on forming partnerships with people over and over that then fall apart when that person goes, you know when you've got a good network happening with a number of people working in a certain discipline area and that goes on for a couple of years but then that person is no longer the unit chair or they move on or something happens and then all that good work is just gone out.*
The collaborator	They possess the skills and expertise to guide collaborative work according to models for effective practice. They also understand the practicalities involved in collaboration (i.e. who does what, and how to approach collaborative work with discipline academics).	*And if we come in it as a collaborative issue together and call it a pilot, then feel free to say, 'This isn't working let's try something else'. And we used that pilot, it gave the sense of creativity, openness and flexibility. And that was key for gaining trust. And for me not coming in as the expert, telling them what to do. It was, do you think this might work. And what's your opinion on it. And deep down, I have experience, I knew [. . .] that it was going to work, but I couldn't sell it that way.*
The content (non) expert	They may position themselves as outsiders to the discipline, which can be advantageous in understanding students' experiences, or as peripheral members of the discipline because of experience working with discipline academics.	*When I first started I, I did get her to sort of send me a few articles now and then that I could use, 'cause I was at that stage going into class and get students to read journal articles to try and see what their knowledge and understanding of the structure of the journal articles, and so I wanted to test their reading skills on discussion topics. I actually, since that time, because our main assignment is a literature review and I've worked with so many students on lit review, I really know the management literature really well.*
The teacher	They are a teaching expert and/or pedagogical specialist, usually established through academic study and experience. They understand links between teaching practice and student learning outcomes.	*And, you know, some of the stuff that's come out of the South Africa literature [. . .] I actually have experienced, I've realised that some of the behaviours I've had with staff actually signal that they see me as a teaching specialist.*
The applied linguist	They understand language learning as an academic field. They can recognise and guide effective practice in relation to students' academic literacy needs.	*And so she basically said, 'Look I don't want to do any testing of students. I know I've got a problem. I want you to tell me what you can do about that. It's all about their writing'. And I said, 'Look, it's unlikely to be just about their writing. I'd like to go back to the beginning of the process and look at what's happening at the information collection stage and the reading stage', and see if we can see a bit of what's going on there. And so that's really how it got started.*

(*Continued*)

Identities	Descriptors	Sample data excerpt
The academic	They see themselves as an academic working within a growing body of research around academic language and learning practice. They may also possess skills to evaluate and provide evidence concerning the effectiveness of pedagogical interventions.	*The other day we were talking about what we were going to put forward in the argument for our presentation at the [name removed] conference, and someone said I think the main argument is that, you know, it needs to be systemic within the university and we're going to say that collaboration is good. And I went, I think, that's what I said in that paper I wrote a while back.*
The organisational strategist	They possess skills and knowledge to navigate institutional cultures, structures, and opportunities. This may be done to further their own position and/or to further the programme in which they work.	*So you need both, from the top end and the bottom end, to make it work. I think you need the top end to start it, but then you have to have that groundswelling from that organic level to say 'This is part of who we are, this part of our culture and we're not going to lose that.' So that in case something threatens it, like funding, or changing, you have enough supporters to say, 'No, we don't change this.' And that's what I found has worked really well in this, and I can compare it to different programs that haven't worked. And I think that was one of the lessons I learned.*
The expense	They see their role through a financial lens. Decisions must be made about the value of having this support within institutions, and these are often justified in relation to budgets.	*Variously when we've got budget cutbacks and so on there's sort of rumblings about what percentage of my time is spent in the embedding, and in my case I'm the only advisor full time for postgraduate students and a lot of my time is tied into this project.*