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Deprofessionalisation in the new university: implications for Academic Language and Learning (ALL)

Regina Sliuzas
Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia
regina.sliuzas@flinders.edu.au

Abstract

The notion of belonging to a profession emerged with capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century, serving as a stabilising force in society and later, as a means for occupational groups to claim power and status in society. Academics are generally perceived as having the four central attributes of a profession: expert knowledge; technical autonomy; an orientation towards serving others; and high status, income and other rewards (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). However some argue that academics belong to their individual professional disciplines rather than academia more broadly (Williams, 2008). Despite the establishment of a professional association, the Association of Academic Language and Learning (AALL) in 2005, academic language and learning (ALL) practitioners have not been perceived externally as belonging to a profession. Recognition of the developmental role of ALL work and the contribution made by ALL practitioners to the student learning experience is more important than ever in the new university where, under neoliberal priorities, upskilling and deskilling strategies are being employed by university management in moves to deprofessionalise many tertiary roles (Macfarlane, 2011). This paper argues that without recognition of the expertise brought to the tertiary experience by ALL practitioners, as well as the academic nature of their work, ALL practitioners are in a particularly vulnerable position in many universities, as both academic and professional roles in universities are reconfigured and new classifications and roles are introduced.

Keywords: academic language and learning; new university**,** deprofessionalisation

Introduction

The notion of the professions emerged out of the rise of capitalism and developments in technology in the mid-nineteenth century (Evetts, 2004; Freidson, 1986, both cited in Williams, 2008). From the 1930s to the 1950s, the professions were seen as a stabilising force in society and by the 1970s, scholars' focus was on the characteristics that differentiated a profession from an occupation. Johnson (1972, in Cheng, 2009, p. 194) saw professionalism as "a successful ideology that has entered the political vocabulary of a wider range of occupational groups in their claims and competition for status", acknowledging the ability of members of a profession to promote their own interests in terms of power, salary and status, still true of many professions today. From the 1970s to the 1990s, there was a shift in views of professionalism away from individual or small practices to large organisations. In addition, transnational markets for professional services increased and traditional professions faced new challenges

in dealing with bureaucracy (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). From the 1990s, theorists like Freidson (1999, cited in Williams, 2008) became more interested in knowledge, workplaces and work roles than in the professions.

The historical development of Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practice

Academic study support for Australian university students was first provided in 1953 by counsellors as part of Student Services at the University of Melbourne and by 1982 it was provided at every university (Chanock, 2011). This was the origins of a fundamentally remedial view of ALL work which remains an issue for recognition as a profession today (Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007; Chanock, 2011, 2018). In 1982, Roe et al. (in Chanock, 2011) questioned whether psychologists were the most appropriately qualified staff to deal with academic issues, and the developmental and educational potential of ALL work began to be recognised (Roe et al., 1982, in Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007; in Chanock, 2011). However, ALL practice was positioned for many years, and in some institutions still is, centrally rather than within faculties, reinforcing the view that ALL work is ancillary, and not equivalent to, the education services provided by faculty academics who are considered by most to belong to a profession (Percy & Stirling, 2003). ALL practitioners, however, "have tended to favour curriculum-integrated approaches in which language development is connected seamlessly with epistemological development in the discipline" (Benzie & Harper, 2017).

The Association of Academic Language and Learning (AALL) formed in 2005. Among its listed aims were to "foster the recognition of the academic nature of the work of language and learning development through individual and collaborative research within and across tertiary institutions nationally and internationally", and to "use publications and conferences to inform the wider academic community about the philosophies and practices of language and learning development in tertiary education" (AALL 2005). The Position Statement of the Association of Academic Language and Learning (AALL), founded in 2005, states that: Academic Language and Learning (*ALL*) educators are part of a nationwide community of professional practice which has a well-established character in Australian higher and further education. *ALL* educators play a valuable role in their higher and further education institutions by providing research-informed teaching both inside and outside curricula to assist students in developing appropriate academic language and learning expertise; by collaborating with other higher and further education staff in the development of curricula so that they provide better learning opportunities for students' language and learning development; and by contributing to the development of policy in relation to academic language and learning. Our work is underpinned by strong theoretical understandings of language and learning pedagogy, and from this we make a crucial contribution to the quality and equity of student learning (AALL 2005).

> Despite the above, it has proven difficult to dispel the widespread perception that ALL practice involves simply fixing students' assignments and language, and while AALL conferences are well attended by practicing ALL practitioners, there are comparatively few attendees interested in teaching and learning from the faculties or other relevant units.

The professions today

There is a general consensus about the characteristics that define a profession, including: a body of theoretical knowledge that requires an extensive period of formal and deep learning; a code of ethics which is adhered to in the practice of the professional activities in order to secure public trust and to protect the vulnerable; and public recognition of the expertise and authority to self-regulate in the application of that knowledge, particularly in relation to other occupations (Evetts, 2003). Cheng (2009) argues that academics should not be considered as

members of a broad profession as they often identify more closely with their discipline than with the academic community as a whole, preferring to be have their performance judged by those within their discipline than by those external to their field of expertise. However, it is generally recognised that academics display many attributes associated with belonging to a profession, such as upholding standards of ethics, undergoing extensive rigorous training to gain formal knowledge and working at high levels of thinking and judgment (Piper, 1994, cited in Williams, 2008). In addition, academics place a high value on academic freedom, peer governance and autonomy.

ALL practitioners, however, are often not perceived as doing academic work, although they must fulfil the same requirements as faculty academics if in an academic position: research, teaching, community service and administration. ALL practitioners have come together at academic conferences for several decades now to share their research and practice. Although ALL practitioners hold a variety of qualifications and their roles vary across institutions, they share common aims. They share a code of ethics as do other academic staff and work with often vulnerable students in a position of trust to improve student learning. ALL's 'weakness' may be that there is no formal training for accreditation as an ALL practitioner, despite there being a body of expertise from which an accredited program could be developed, particularly in the current entrepreneurial climate of the tertiary sector.

Sociological research on the professions has turned from the lines drawn between professions and whether an occupation fulfils the traditional criteria to be considered a profession to the expert knowledge required for the roles (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). Many occupational groups are currently in a state of flux as they respond to rapid changes in technology and changes in political and economic contexts (Brint 1994, in Saks, 2012), including those engaged in the tertiary sector.

The new university

Universities have been described as possibly "the most value-laden institutions in modern society" (Scott, in Winter, 2009, p. 122) and it has been claimed that Australian universities have "been through the most profound changes anywhere in the developed world" (Coates et al., cited in Heath & Leiman, 2017, p. 187). It is no surprise then, that academics' professional identity and values have been greatly challenged (Williams, 2008; Whitchurch, 2009; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010). At the core of academic identity is the notion of academic professionalism and the professional training that instils the skills and values that facilitate self-regulation of work practices (O'Neill & Meek, in Winter, 2009). Counter to traditional academic values which are based on notions of academic freedom, autonomy and an ultimate aim of furthering knowledge, universities are running on market-oriented terms in response to funding cuts, user-pays principles, full-fee paying principles and increased accountability and performance management (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Whitchurch, 2012). Students are increasingly being referred to as 'clients' and even 'customers' (Pitman, 2000). Tensions between traditional and new values are inevitable.

The binary nature of nomenclature used for staff at universities has long been problematic and is bound to staff roles and professional identity. Traditionally tertiary employees have been classified as either 'Academic' or 'Professional' but there is evidence that roles are now blurring, creating a 'Third space' in which new partnerships are being formed (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 378). Whitchurch's 'Third space' is comprised of mixed teams, characterised by hybridity and flexibility, that work on projects that cross professional and academic boundaries (Taylor, in Whitchurch, 2008). Macfarlane (2011) writes of the emergence of para-academics, who specialise in one particular aspect of academic life, for example, a dyslexia specialist or an E-Learning Coordinator, rather than an 'all-round' academic. According to Macfarlane (2011), the "deskilling of academic staff in higher education follows a similar pattern designed

to lower costs of a university education and obtain better 'productivity' of those working to deliver it" (p. 63).

Staff may be either upskilled or deskilled to form new para-academic professions, in what Kinser (in Macfarlane, 2011, p. 60) calls 'the unbundling' of academic roles, which he attributes to the growth in student numbers and the increasing casualisation of the academic profession. Unbundling may be adopted to use para-academics to perform time consuming work that was previously performed by more highly paid academics, who can then focus on income-generating research. McCarthy, Song and Jayasuriya (2017, p. 1020), like Macfarlane (2011) argue that the unbundling of academic roles has occurred to such a degree in Australian universities that the workforce has become proletarianised, and Marginson (2000) posits that the 'all-round' academic has been de-skilled to such a degree that there is a 'dislocation' between management and academics (p. 32).

Implications for academic staff

McCarthy, Song & Jayasuriya (2017) argue that workloads and the constant surveillance of staff performance in the new university are largely responsible for the high level of dissatisfaction in Australian academics. Bexley et al. (2011) found that although Australian academics generally had high levels of interest in their disciplines, the "changing student expectations and abilities, constraints on research funding, increased class sizes and the increasing bureaucratisation of higher education" were a source of high levels of stress (p. 29). Under neoliberal tertiary management priorities, individual academics and researchers' performances are increasingly judged on the amount of research funding that their topic attracts. Universities are increasingly adopting strategies to bring academics more into line with their institution's corporate identity and values rather than their individual academic or professional identity (Harris, 2005).

Corporate image and identity are now paramount and universities sell their 'brand' in their effort to compete in the global knowledge economy (Cunningham et al., cited in Harris, 2005). To take the current branding of a few Australian universities as examples: 'Free your think' (Murdoch University), 'Finding your why' (University of Wollongong), 'Boldly go beyond', and 'Differently think' (Flinders University) and 'Come bright, leave bold' (La Trobe University) are catchphrases that barely make sense, let alone have any reference to 'the teaching, research, community service, cultural values, innovation and commitment to knowledge that underpins our universities historically' (McCulloch, 2017). McCulloch goes on to say that:

> We now have senior management groups that instead of seeing themselves as scholarly leaders with administrative and planning obligations, instead see themselves as chief executive officers of global multi-national corporations, and we have university councils and senates dominated by corporate interests, and the language used discloses the degradation of the intellectual and educational standards in senior leadership … [We] now have a funding and management system that degrades the purpose of universities and degrades the standing of workers who are employed in them (2017).

Many Australian universities are investing much funding in image makeovers and are placing increasing emphasis on staff research output and global rankings, to the extent that many academics now consider how their performance will be assessed and evaluated when making decisions about their work. They are increasingly likely to choose areas that will bring economic benefits to the institution, rather than base their decisions on their own interests (Harris, 2005; Fraser & Taylor, 2016). This is more akin to an entrepreneurial approach to work, which requires a shift in identity for many academics.

Implications for ALL

In the audit culture of today's universities, in which staff performance in teaching and research, in particular, are measured, ALL practitioners often experience difficulty in meeting demands for evidence that they make a difference to student success. As Chanock (2011, p. A-76) points out, often ALL practice is performed with students, "one student at a time", aiming to create insights into university expectations, ways of thinking and academic conventions that the student can take away and apply in their future academic work. The outcomes are difficult to quantify. Management expectations regarding the securing of grants and funding are applied across disciplines, irrespective of the number and size of funding opportunities across disciplines (Shore, 2008), adding to staff anxiety and sense of vulnerability if they fail to meet performance expectations.

In the new university, managers are now more likely to be professional managers, possibly not familiar with the area they are overseeing. In their survey exploring the shifts in the roles and responsibilities of ALL staff, Malkin and Chanock (2018) found that:

- Managers' lack of understanding of the nature of ALL expertise has been
- reflected in the downsizing and downgrading of staff in a number of
- institutions, restructuring their roles into non-teaching central service units,
- and reclassification of their jobs from academic to professional (p. A-17).

To a managers who perceive ALL practice as being remedial rather than developmental, it is more cost-effective to replace experienced and knowledgeable tenured academic ALL staff with casually employed staff, some of whom are students or recent graduates with a good command of the English language, to work with students across literacies, genres, disciplines, cultures, ages and languages on a casual basis. Note that it is not the author's intention here to denigrate the work of casually employed staff but simply to emphasise that the selection criteria for staff providing face-to-face contact with students seeking advice on their learning are being downgraded in many universities, some academic positions are being reclassified as Professional, and that employment conditions are being made less secure.

From 2003-2017, the percentage of ALL staff employed as academics in Australian universities decreased, with positions being reclassified as Professional (see Table 1), with most staff being employed at HEO6 or HEO7.

Table 1 Classification of ALL staff in Australian universities

Year	% Academic	% Professional	% Both academic & professional
2003	55	27	18
2015	45	55	0
2017	39	50	12

Source: Malkin & Chanock (2018)

The trend towards reclassifying academic positions as Professional positions will reduce funded opportunities for research and attending conferences, opportunities which are necessary for collegiality, developing expertise and having input on policy and change in the tertiary sector, all objectives of AALL. More than ever now, ALL centres need managers who recognise the body of expertise that experienced ALL staff draw upon and who will be ambassadors for the academic nature of their work.

In recent years, Third Party providers have also entered the market for the provision of academic learning support for students, with several universities currently employing their services (for example, University of Canberra, Flinders University, University of South Australia). These services fit the 'study skills' model of ALL work, and while they may meet students' immediate needs with their assignments, do little for long-term learning, which ALL practitioners aim to provide (Benzie & Harper, 2017).

Online delivery of programs has also brought about significant changes in roles and expectations for most teaching staff, not only for ALL. While this may open up new opportunities for skills development, it may also involve collaboration with specialised para-academics (Macfarlane, 2011) and a trend which emerged in the UK in the 1990s: that of professional staff being increasingly involved in teaching and learning functions which had previously been performed by academics. In addition, the reduction of face-to-face contact with students reduces the opportunities for ALL practitioners to delve into the gaps between students' understanding of the culture of knowledge production and the means of expressing that knowledge through language, in interactions that few academics have time for given their heavy workloads. This is a space in which many ALL practitioners believe they can effect real change in a student's learning (Malkin and Chanock, 2018).

How to improve the recognition of ALL practice

Recognition of the expertise of experienced ALL practitioners in Australia has been a recurring theme in academic language and learning focused conferences as far back as 1990, and success has been uneven across institutions. Malkin and Chanock's (2018) study revealed that in some institutions, ALL practitioners report that they have been successful in gaining recognition for their expertise: they are collaborating closely with faculty academics and are embedding language and learning in curricula. Others report being/having been restructured and aligned with a range of staff with other expertise, for example, academic developers, learning designers and information literacy specialists (Malkin & Chanock, 2018). How ALL staff are positioned can create barriers for achieving recognition of ALL expertise and potential collaboration but there are a number of possible strategies which may improve the recognition of ALL expertise.

It cannot be claimed that the suggestions below are new but simply that they are more important than ever in light of the vulnerability of ALL staff when universities are frequently restructuring and business principles are being employed. Some suggestions were put forward in early discussions of AALL in the mid-2000s but the discussions appear to have lapsed, possibly due to the loss of key staff, through retirement, restructuring, or simply career change. Interestingly, in Malkin and Chanock's 2017 survey (2018), many of the issues raised a decade ago resurfaced. Suggestions made by AALL respondents to move AALL forward included forging stronger relationships and input with external bodies such as governments and other professional associations, representation on bodies to develop policy related to learning and teaching, developing formal qualifications and certification for ALL staff, creating training programs for ALL tutors and for professional development as roles change, and establishing an Education program with ALL as a specialisation (Malkin & Chanock, 2018).

A tertiary level program focusing on the body of expertise required for successful AALL work, combined with experience that can be logged and gained over time in various contexts would be a useful start for professional recognition. Many existing ALL staff have accidentally drifted into ALL work from a variety of backgrounds and qualifications (Percy, 2011), including education, numeracy, information technology, teaching English as a second language, biology and other disciplines, and have gone on to make valuable contributions to the body of expertise. What binds the diverse ALL profession together is a commitment to demystifying university conventions and expectations, and assisting students to understand them and to

develop their own abilities to interpret and produce them. Having a recognised program and qualification which allows for specialisations within the program would allow the core expertise to be passed on, whilst allowing for the specialised skills and experience that ALL professionals bring to the field.

One of the key aspects currently being discussed by the AALL Executive is the importance of reenergising AALL as an organisation and revamping its website to make it more relevant and accessible to ALL staff. At the inception of AALL, it was decided to make the AALL website and resources open to all, and a Journal of Academic Language and Learning (JALL) is also open access. Although there are small discounts for the biennial AALL conferences for members and only members have access to small grants, wider membership needs to be encouraged, including new managers who oversee ALL staff, those outside of ALL work as well as those new to ALL work who may not be aware of its full potential as a profession. Casually employed ALL staff are less likely to be funded to attend conferences, so that unless conferences are local and registration costs are low, they are unlikely to attend, leading to a plateauing and eventual downward slide of expertise in the field if casualisation continues.

There is no doubt that the collective body of expertise that ALL practitioners have is not generally well recognised and that this causes a sense of vulnerability for many, particularly when universities are tightening expenditure. Many ALL staff also feel that they have little power to stop university management from making decisions that cause the downgrading or loss of positions. However, there are some strategies that could be adopted to make ALL work more visible and receive greater recognition. It is therefore important that ALL practitioners work together and utilise their professional association to seize any opportunity to demonstrate and explain both the importance and nature of their practice.

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