Journal of Peer Learning

Volume 7 Article 3

2014

Academic Skills Rovers: A just in time peer support initiative for academic skills and literacy development

Peter Copeman
University of Canberra, peter.copeman@canberra.edu.au

Polly Keightley
polly.keightley@canberra.edu.au

Peter Copeman and Polly Keightley are the principal authors of this article. The other authors listed on the first page of the article are Academic Skills Rovers who pioneered the program. We gratefully acknowledge the support of Dr Jonathan Powles, Director of Teaching and Learning, Prof. Nick Klomp, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education, and the staff of the University of Canberra Library for their support, cooperation and patience in the establishment of this program.

Academic Skills Rovers: A just in time peer support initiative for academic skills and literacy development

Cover Page Footnote
Peter Copeman and Polly Keightley are the principal authors of this article. The other authors listed on the first page of the article are Academic Skills Rovers who pioneered the program. We gratefully acknowledge the support of Dr Jonathan Powles, Director of Teaching and Learning, Prof. Nick Klomp, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education, and the staff of the University of Canberra Library for their support, cooperation and patience in the establishment of this program.

Journal of Peer Learning (2014) 7: 1-22

Academic Skills Rovers: A just in time peer support initiative for academic skills and literacy development

Peter Copeman and Polly Keightley, with Sarah Crawford, Lucy Ellen, Reuben Fox, Tania Hadlow, Kimberley Hall, Sharee Hodge, Katherine Kemp, Jayde Kominiarski, Alidia Lee, Kirra Lehman, Lisa Parsonage, Kentaro Takagi, and Rebecca Tedeschi

ABSTRACT

In 2013 the University of Canberra (UC) initiated a program of peer-assisted academic skills help, the Academic Skills Rovers program, with the goal of providing drop-in peer learning support to students at campus locations where they congregate to study. The Academic Skills Rovers were initially recruited from the teacher education discipline, but the pool was subsequently extended to include students with high-level literacy skills from other fields. The program has proven to be a successful addition to the scope of learning development support offered at UC, as measured by a rapid increase in the number and reach of consultations, enthusiastic evaluations by students, and the positive experiences of the Rovers themselves. This article outlines and analyses the features of the program to provide a road map for other institutions contemplating the introduction of a similar service and proposes possible further directions for the future.

INTRODUCTION

In Semester 1, 2013, the Academic Skills Centre (ASC) at the University of Canberra (UC) initiated a program of peer-led, one-to-one academic skills assistance for students to supplement and expand the individual consultation capacity already available from staff academic skills advisers. The goal of the Academic Skills Rovers program was to provide non-threatening frontline advice on academic skills—especially writing—at campus locations where students congregate to study. This paper outlines a theoretical and practical rationale for the program and traces its trajectory from a somewhat hesitant start to its present position as a leading element in UC's student learning support landscape. It then analyses and evaluates the program's features and contributions and suggests possible future directions for the program.

Program rationale

Historically, Australian universities tended to be unapologetically selective in recruiting students, with an expectation that those selected students would arrive sufficiently prepared for effective post-secondary study. Any further development of their skills and literacies was incidental to the subject content that was the primary focus of university teaching (Wingate, 2006). With the post-1989 increases both in numbers of students and the diversity of their educational backgrounds, universities found it necessary to introduce

Published by the University of Wollongong
ISSN 2200-2359 (online)

student learning support programs, and further impetus for this came from the rapid growth of international students in the 1990s, with all universities obligated to provide learning support to meet legislated national standards (Wilson, Li, & Collins, 2011). In the following decade, with even wider access to university by students from previously excluded demographic groups, provision of appropriate skills and literacy development became a matter of urgency (Horstmanshof & Brownie, 2011).

Limitations of traditional learning support practice

Traditionally, most student learning support has been extra-curricular, provided by specialist academic staff in dedicated centres, with a mainstay of support being one-on-one consultations in which staff provide advice to individual students about specific study tasks (mostly drafts of written assignments). These consultations provide a safe environment for scaffolding student learning about learning and may often be the only directly personalised help that many students receive in their university life (Huijser, Kimmins, & Galligan, 2008). Unsurprisingly, therefore, such consultations are consistently highly valued by students who participate in them (Berry et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2011). For the staff advisers, they are also a valuable source of information about patterns of learning problems and of poor educational design that can potentially be addressed in other teaching contexts (Chanock, 2007a).

However, for resource and equity reasons, this model is not ideal. It has become impossible for academic skills centres to meet the ever-increasing demand for individual consultations without greatly increasing their staff resources. Moreover, a concern has arisen that many students may shy away from this service because they lack the skills or confidence to surmount the basic hurdles of self-identifying as needing help and organising an appointment. Some may also perceive a stigma attached to seeking help (Goldingay et al., 2014). In this context, and in times of financial constraint, individual consultations have come to be seen by university managers as “an expensive luxury” (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 139).

In response, learning support centres have endeavoured to move the focus of practice away from “bolted-on” remedial approaches towards more “built-in” curriculum-embedded models (Bennett, Dunne, & Carré, 2000), working from a recognition that disciplinary content knowledge is hardly separable from the knowledge required to acquire, express, and deploy it. Academic skills advisers have been encouraged to recast themselves as consultants less to students and more to faculty colleagues, providing expert advice on the integration of appropriate academic skills and literacy development within disciplinary curriculum design and teaching practice (Chanock, 2007b).

However this has met with some resistance. Faculty teaching staff protest that they have neither the expertise to do the integration properly nor the time to acquire such expertise even with help from their academic skills colleagues; they demonstrably prefer the convenience of having student learning support addressed by others rather than having to do it themselves (Tapper & Gruba, 2000). There is also aversion from long-term academic skills advisers, whose expertise and professional identities are closely associated with individual student consultations and who lack the skills and inclination to proselytise their faculty colleagues (Chanock, 2007a).

So despite acknowledged limitations, staff-led individual consultations have continued as a cornerstone of academic language and literacy support. They remain valued by students who use them because they address immediate learning needs in the context of particular assessment tasks in their own subjects, and so are discipline-integrated, student-centred, and highly personalised. This is likely to remain so until universities can devise viable means of integrating learning support more directly into the curriculum.

Peer Assisted Study Sessions—an alternative model

One way in which many universities have attempted to address the need for curriculum integration of student learning development has been to introduce peer-led learning support, mostly in a form that originated as Supplemental Instruction in the USA but is commonly known in Australia as Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) and sometimes (including at UC) as PALS (Peer Assisted Learning Sessions). Offered in subjects that tend to have high failure rates, these sessions are collaborative, active, group study workshops facilitated by students who have recently completed the subject successfully and who are trained not to re-teach content material but to use "the subject content as a vehicle for developing learning skills" (Australian National Centre for PASS, n.d.). The PASS model is supported by three classic educational theories: behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore these theoretical connections in detail; however, a limited overview is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
The PASS model: Classical theoretical influences[a]

Learning Theory	Learning Process	Learning Characteristics
Behaviourism e.g., Skinner, Bandura	Affirmation of apt behaviour Complex tasks are broken into component parts Focus on cause-effect relationships	Show–tell–practice–reinforce-repeat
Cognitivism e.g., Bruner, Piaget	Use of prior knowledge when learning new knowledge Learning constructed through organisation and integration of new information and experiences	Active learning and problem solving
Social Constructivism e.g., Vigotsky, Geertz	Knowledge produced not distributed Knowledge actively built by learner dialogue with others in zone of proximal development (difference between learner capacity working alone versus collaborating with more able peers) Social interaction induces positive conflict that stimulates an intrinsic need for learning	Integration of "new" information with "old" to form a conceptual framework

[a]Adapted from McGuire (2006, p. 6)

The PASS paradigm also aligns with the more recent learning theory of connectivism, which introduced the concept of learning communities in which participants are stimulated to connect with "similar areas of interest that allow for interaction, sharing, dialoguing, and thinking together" (Siemens, 2003, "What is a community?", para. 1), and with the emerging theory of paragogy (also known as peeragogy), which sees peer learning as a collaborative sharing of power, responsibility, meaning, and knowledge with co-responsible others (Arenas, 2012).

Arguably, most of the processes and characteristics of learning under these theories describe what should be standard practice not just in extra-curricular PASS workshops but in mainstream university teaching practice. Ideally, for example, the student-centred, collaborative, non-directive, task-based, problem-solving approach that characterises PASS workshops would also characterise tutorials and other classes, and the only significant difference would be that one is led by academic staff and the other by student peers. However, we know that this is often not the case; student evaluations of PASS frequently assert that tutorials should be more like PASS and that if PASS is available there is no need to attend tutorials. This is perhaps unsurprising, as PASS leaders receive rigorous educational training and ongoing supervision and support, whereas many academic staff have neither of these.

Yet even if the approach to teaching and learning were similar in both, there could still be justifications for the PASS model. This is because of the remaining significant difference: facilitation is not by content experts but by peers, who as fellow students have recently completed a similar learning journey with success. The workshop cohorts are thus framed within what Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development: "the distance between the [student's] actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving … in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). This allows for negotiation of meaning and understanding that is less likely to occur with a lecturer, tutor, or academic adviser, as peer facilitators are perceived as providing a non-judgmental environment that enables students to ask questions that they might be afraid to ask academic staff for fear of exposing their ignorance (Williamson & Goldsmith, 2013).

Two related questions arise:

1. Could the principles of the PASS model be successfully deployed outside the constraints of high-fail-rate subject units to address a common cross-disciplinary area of learning difficulty—academic language and literacy development?
2. Could the same principles be adapted to create peer-led individual language and literacy support consultations and thus refresh the paradigm that has become so besieged in its staff-led form?

Peer-assisted development of academic literacies

Notwithstanding the fact that the SI/PASS model originated in the USA four decades ago, it seems that no attempt has been made there to adapt it beyond the "difficult subject" application to other specific learning support needs, such as language and literacy. This is perhaps because SI was predated

in America by university writing centres, with their century-old history of tutoring of undergraduate student writing by postgraduate students (O'Neill, 2008). More recently, with widening participation, many universities in the USA have also developed a model of undergraduate Writing Fellows (sometimes called Writing Associates), who "serve as sympathetic readers, providing informed, constructive criticism directed toward the argumentation, analysis, organization, clarity and style" of student writing in formal, pre-scheduled, discipline-focused, one-on-one, peer consultations staged in a standard pattern (Brown University, 2014, "The Writing Fellows Program," para. 2). These programs have been widely evaluated as successful (Devet, Orr, Blythman, & Bishop, 2006), and some UK universities have begun to adopt them (O'Neill, 2008). However, there seem to be no peer-led collaborative group literacy workshops, nor any just-in-time, peer-led, one-on-one, generalist, literacy support offered at US or UK universities.

Adapting the PASS model to language and literacy support

It appears that the first attempts at adapting the PASS model to support student academic literacy development may have happened in Australia (e.g., Adam, Skalicky, & Brown, 2011). In 2012, the University of Western Sydney began developing a program called PASSwrite under the auspices of a grant from the federal government's Office of Teaching and Learning. This program was comprised of peer-facilitated group workshops with the emphasis on learning discipline-contextualised literacies and discourses rather than on discipline-based subject content (Williamson & Goldsmith, 2013). In the same year we, the primary authors of the present article, developed a pilot project at the University of Canberra in two foundation units in the Faculty of Arts and Design, consisting of group literacy workshops based on non-directive PASS-like principles but facilitated by staff academic skills advisers as a means of testing the workability of such an adaptation. Following the moderate success of this trial, a student peer-led group academic skills and literacy support program, Academic Literacy Peer-led Sessions (ALPS), was initiated for five large first-year foundation units covering all UC faculties.

ACADEMIC LITERACY PEER-LED SESSIONS (ALPS)

The ALPS leaders were recruited from upper-level students in teacher education courses and selected on the basis of their literacy and interpersonal skills. This cohort was chosen because we felt we could assume (correctly, as it turned out) that they would already have competencies around matters of literacy. We also believed they would be likely to embrace the proven PASS principles of not re-teaching the unit content but acting as model students and facilitating learning by involving participants in active tasks designed to integrate the learning of both content and processes, including the process of learning itself. The personnel thus recruited were provided with training and were supervised by the Peer Learning Manager via weekly debriefing and planning meetings as well as regular workshop observations.

Students in the designated foundation units were given a diagnostic reading and writing test as a unit assessment task, from which they were categorised into three levels of likely need for support. Students who scored at the weakest level were particularly encouraged to attend the weekly ALPS workshops, but all students were welcomed. Attendance was self-selecting and voluntary. Students who regularly attended scored higher than the

average for those who did not attend; they also evaluated the workshops very positively. However attendance was low. It was low again when the ALPS program was continued in Semester 2, 2012, notwithstanding a greater effort to promote its benefits. The program was disbanded.

ACADEMIC SKILLS ROVERS (ASR)

Despite the disappointing student up-take of the ALPS program, it had demonstrated that trained student peers with good literacy and interpersonal skills could provide quality academic learning and literacy capacity-building for their less-experienced peers. What is more, we were left with three peer leaders with no program in which to exercise their skills, motivation, and experience. Thus the Academic Skills Rovers (ASRs) program was conceived, with the goal of providing peer learning advisers in places where students congregated to study (such as the library and Student Commons areas), over extended hours, without having to pre-book an appointment. The program was grounded in a similar theoretical frame to that of the PASS model as outlined in Table 1, although with a slight shift of emphasis away from behaviourist approaches towards the cognitivist and particularly the constructivist, on account of the fact that the consultations are not between commensurate peers but between students of close but unequal experience, with the more experienced Rovers providing the conditions for Vygotsky's zone of proximal development as discussed earlier.

From the outset, the ASRs were conceptually different from their closest antecedents, the American Writing Fellows, whose consultations with their peer students are pre-booked and staged to a pre-determined agenda. We chose to make this distinction on the grounds that: a) our students tend to enter more directly into their disciplinary studies with less benefit than their American counterparts from preparatory subjects focused heavily on skills and writing, and b) evidence from our own Academic Skills database indicates that literacy support is required at all student levels, not just first year. We also felt that the just-in-time nature of the ASR help would also obviate the previously mentioned hurdle of having to book an appointment.

A successful application was made for pilot funding from UC's Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) revenue, under the allowable purpose of "helping students develop skills for study, by means other than undertaking courses of study in which they have enrolled" (Higher Education Legislation Amendment [Student Services and Amenities] Act, 2011).

The library already had a Rovers program in which students were employed to help staff the loans desk and provide student support with basic information literacy, research, and referencing; this necessitated some negotiation to ensure clear demarcation of the respective duties of the Library Rovers and the ASRs. To make the difference clear to the student population, it was decided that the ASRs would wear distinctive red shirts with "Academic Skills Rovers" emblazoned on them, as opposed to the blue shirts of the Library Rovers.

Scope of ASR service

The duties of the ASRs were delineated as providing timely, on-the-spot advice, roughly equivalent to a staff-led drop-in consultation, on academic skills issues of a relatively simple nature:

- helping students understand unit outlines,
- helping students understand assignment task requirements,
- checking task fulfilment of short written assignment passages, blog posts, presentations, journal entries and so on;
- offering "glance therapy"[1] feedback on structure, coherence, and cohesiveness of longer written assignments,
- identifying problematic patterns of English language usage in student writing passages and suggesting means and resources to help address them,
- giving advice about:
    - study planning and time management,
    - reading and research strategies,
    - referencing, and
    - exam preparation, and
- referring more complex and longer requests to other ASC or wider student support services.

A limit of 20 minutes was imposed both to encourage students to focus on their most pressing needs and to discourage the Rovers from straying into areas outside their designated scope. Furthermore, it was made very clear that the scope of the Rovers' services did not include proofreading, editing, or rewriting of student assignments.

Promotion of the service

The service was promoted throughout the university via all-student email flyers, banners on the online learning management system, notification of faculty academic staff with requests for them to encourage student use of the service, and posters around the library, Learning Commons, Academic Skills Centre, refectory, and other places of student congregation for study. Nonetheless, initial interest from students was low. As a new service with only three Rovers covering a somewhat erratic initial schedule of 20 hours per week, there was an average of only two consultations in each three hour shift, with a total of only 60 consultations in the first six weeks of operation in the second half of Semester 1, 2013. In response, the Rovers themselves began to circulate pro-actively among the students, introducing themselves and distributing flyers explaining their role. They also decided to increase their visibility by occupying a single workstation in the busiest student area, the Library Commons, rather than diluting their already small numbers over all the learning commons areas.

Accelerating from a slow start

The number of consultations started to increase in the second semester of 2013: 31 in August, 279 in September, 240 in October, and 355 in November. This growth was bolstered by the recruitment and deployment of three more Rovers in August. By the end of Semester 2, the total number of Academic Skills Rovers' consultations had reached just under 1,000—around three times the average number of students seen by each ASC staff adviser in the same period and a 40% increase in individual student consultations for the ASC as a whole.

[1] "Glance therapy" is a term coined by our UC colleague Ros Byrne to describe a quick and expeditious analysis, diagnosis, and prescription for action on a text at structural, constitutive, and discourse levels rather than at the level of greater detail.

This was sufficient take-up to enable a second successful application for SSAF funding (an increased amount) for 2014. By the start of Semester 1, 2014, the number of Rovers had increased to 10 and the coverage had increased to 10 hours per day on weekdays and four hours per day on Saturdays and Sundays (58 hours per week), with an average of 110 consultations per week. The new Rovers were also selected from a wider base, including students in psychology, law, and physiotherapy, some of whom were studying at postgraduate level. This enriched the diversity of disciplinary and educational perspectives within the Rover group and was made possible by including some literacy testing in the recruitment process rather than assuming literacy skills would only reliably reside in education students, as had been the original practice.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Three tools were used to assess the Academic Skills Rovers program up to the end of Semester 1, 2014:

1. *The Academic Skills Centre Online database (ASCO)*
   ASCO is used to collect data on all Academic Skills Centre advisers' consultations, including Rovers' consultations. Rovers enter their consultation data themselves, and ASCO provides reports on student demographics and the number of consultations in any given time period. Screenshots of the data entry portal and the reports page are provided in Appendix 1.
2. *Student Evaluations (SEs)*
   Student Evaluations were conducted over a period of three weeks via a 12 question paper form given to students after they had completed a Rover consultation. Completing the evaluation was optional. The forms were anonymous and collected in a sealed box. Questions were both demographic and attitudinal, with students asked to identify what they had expected and received from the consultations, together with their opinions on the experience of the service, using a 5-point scale. The survey design largely mirrored the one used for student evaluations of ASC staff advisers, thus allowing comparisons between the two groups.
3. *Academic Skills Rovers online survey*
   The Rovers completed an online survey seeking comments about their experiences in the job. They identified the pertinent skills they felt they possessed and needed, the challenges they faced, and some suggestions for the future of the program.

Screenshots of the ASCO data entry reports pages (Appendix 1), as well as blank forms for both the SEs (Appendix 2) and the ASR online survey (Appendix 3), are included at the end this article.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

ASCO

The ASCO database provides a record of the number of students seen by the Rovers, along with some demographic information about them. It also provides similar information about the student consultation activity of the ASC staff advisers, which is a primary baseline for the evaluation of the effectiveness and reach of the ASR program.

So, for example, ASCO tells us that in Semester 1, 2014, ASC staff advisers recorded a total of 938 consultations (drop-ins and longer sessions, including specialised ones for higher degree by research [HDR] students), while in the same period, Rovers recorded 1186 (only drop-in-type sessions, with none specialised). However there are different demographic characteristics of each cohort, such as the relative numbers of domestic and international students seen by each service (Figure 1).

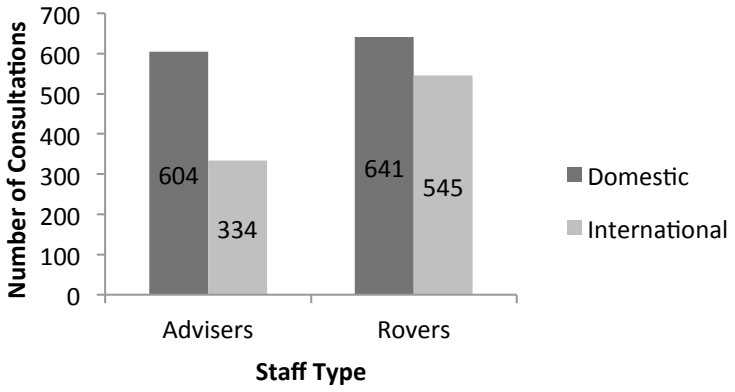


Figure 1. Number of consultations in Semester 1, 2014, of domestic and international students by Academic Skills Advisers and Academic Skills Rovers.

The high proportion of international students conferring with Rovers is significant, especially when considering that the international students seen by staff advisers include specialised HDR consultations that typically have a high percentage of such students. ASCO also reports that compared with the ASC staff advisers, the ASRs seem particularly attractive to certain student cultural cohorts, especially those from Africa (Nigeria, Sudan, and Zimbabwe). We currently have no research evidence to explain this phenomenon but will seek it in the next phases of program evaluation.

Comparative numbers of consultations of staff advisers and Rovers with undergraduate and postgraduate students (Figure 2) reveal that the Rovers are seeing nearly as many postgraduate students as the staff advisers.

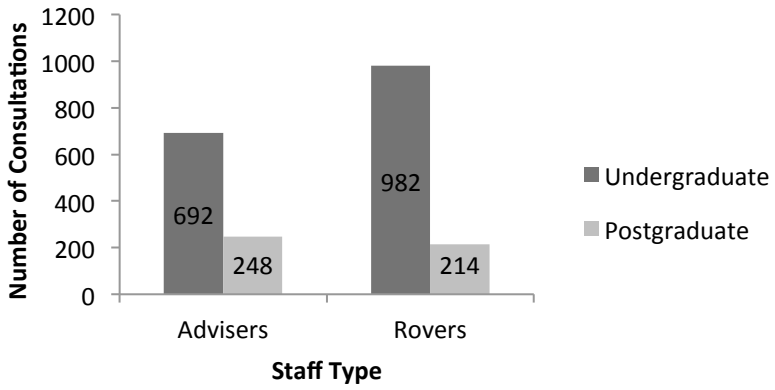


Figure 2. Number of consultations in Semester 1, 2014, of undergraduate and postgraduate students by Academic Skills Advisers and Academic Skills Rovers.

The fact that postgraduate students accept the ASRs as genuine peers who can help them, without needing to know what level of qualifications the ASRs are studying, bears witness to the notion that the literacy and learning support needs of students do not necessarily correlate with their level of study and that well-trained, sensitive peer advisers can adapt to each student's personal learning context.

Student evaluations

A total of 159 students handed in SEs (see Appendix 2 for a copy of the evaluation form). This represented 49% of the students recorded in ASCO as having seen Rovers in the survey period. Of the students completing the SEs, 84% were undergraduates and 60% were international.

The main three things they said they hoped to learn (out of 11 possible options – see Appendix 2) were:

1. "understanding an assignment question and what I have to do to answer it" (47.2%),
2. "checking the structure and /or task completion of all or part of my draft assignment" (43.4%), and
3. "referencing" (43.4%).

The most important thing they said they actually learned from the consultation (an open question) fell into four main categories:

1. referencing (26% of answers),
2. grammar and writing (24% of answers),
3. how to approach the assignment (18% of answers), and
4. structure of the required genre (16% of answers).

Students were also invited to comment, via a 5-point scale (*strongly agree*, *agree*, *neutral*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*) on whether:

1. what they learnt would help them to do the same task they sought help with in the future,
2. the advice would help them with similar tasks,
3. the Rover helped them identify their learning needs,
4. the Rover was easy to understand and talk to,
5. they would recommend Rovers to other students, and
6. they would be likely to use other Academic Skills services.

Between 92% and 98% of respondents selected strongly agree or agree for these questions, with "I am likely to recommend AS Rovers to other students" receiving the highest number of positive responses. Fewer than 0.5% selected disagree or strongly disagree, with only 4% selecting the neutral option.

The student responses to these questions on the Rover SEs differ in some illuminating aspects from student responses to the same questions in the most recent SEs of consultations with ASC staff advisers, as shown in Figure 3. For instance, the relatively low ranking given "checking the flow, consistency and quality of writing" by Rovers compared with staff advisers suggests that the greater expertise of the latter is more likely to be sought for more complex and detailed tasks. The corollary is also indicated in the relatively higher demand on Rovers for advice on less complex or more mechanical topics like unpacking assignment questions and referencing.

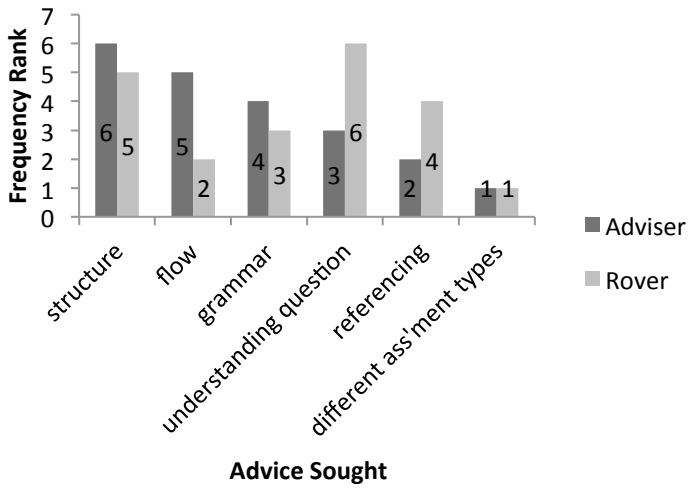


Figure 3. Advice sought from Academic Skills Rovers compared with Staff Advisers (by frequency rank).

The student evaluation form also invited students to make "any other suggestions or comments." Of the 48 students who provided answers (30% of total respondents), three suggested that the time limit be extended beyond 20 minutes. However, the fact that these represent fewer than 2% of all evaluation respondents indicates that the 20 minute time-frame is generally accepted by students as sufficient.

Of the other open responses, 36 (75%) used the opportunity to express their appreciation, with statements such as "I believe it was a very great idea that university has put this kind of system that these great people are helping student" and "very friendly and made me feel more confident in myself to complete my argumentative essay. I feel like I have support which is really nice." There were no negative responses to the "any other suggestions or comments" question.

Academic Skills Rovers online survey

All the Rovers responded to the 20 question online survey (see Appendix 3 for a copy of the form). Overall they were very positive about their role; 100% were satisfied or very satisfied with the training, and 90% were satisfied or very satisfied with the job in practice.

They identified the most important skills they felt they required (in descending order of importance) as:

- communication and empathy,
- meticulousness and attention to detail, and
- high level capabilities in academic literacy,

while also expressing a desire for further training (by frequency rank) in:

- referencing, particularly in discipline-specialised forms such as law, and
- common grammar issues.

The most frequently reported skills they already possess but feel are underused revolve around information technology and a sense that the Rover service could be expanded to encompass a web presence and the use of e-learning technologies.

They also perceived some challenges, the most common of which was balancing the constraint of the 20 minute timeframe with the high needs of the students. As one Rover put it, the most difficult aspect of the job is: "Dealing with students wanting so much, in such little time - trying to meet students' expectations when it can't be done all the time". The fact that the Rovers perceive the 20 minute limit to be more of a problem than the students do probably reflects the fact that the Rovers can see more language and literacy problems in students' work than the students themselves and have an understandable desire to help address them all rather than just the most pressing ones.

Other common Rover concerns were about the high demand for grammar help and pressure from students to edit their work.

It is noteworthy that the Rovers themselves have developed ways of addressing these challenges. For example, one of the survey respondents outlined a strategy for dealing with both the limited timeframe and the demand for editing:

> In this situation 1) I am up front about telling them that I won't edit their work but I will look at it to see if there are any major grammar issues or if they have answered the question. 2) I tell them I can only

> spend 20 mins with them and I remind them of the time about half way through a consultation. 3) I focus on big picture issues (i.e. structure and whether they answered the question) rather than getting bogged down in specific grammar rules which they are never going to remember anyway. 4) I question them to get them actively involved in revising their work (which also allows me to gauge their personalities and whether they are looking for a quick 'grammar fix' and are reluctant to other suggestions or whether they are shy students who need some encouragement and practical strategies). 5) I give them a pen to write changes down and I will frequently prompt THEM to write it down instead of me.

Indeed, we find that as the Rovers become more experienced, they are not only fulfilling their originally designated duties but also working as active agents to grow and fine-tune the job description in response to their frontline experience of how best to address student needs.

Academic Skills Rovers as change agents

The concept of students as change agents in higher education involves engaging them as "co-partners and co-designers in all university and department learning and teaching initiatives, strategies and practices" (Healey, 2014, p. 1). Dunne and Zandstra (2011) also assert that students are change agents when they can have a direct role in producing change, rather than just being asked their opinions. By these lights, the Academic Skills Rovers at UC have become change agents. Although the program was initiated by staff, it has been the Rovers themselves who have implemented, adjusted, and improved on it, by:

- developing a system of shift scheduling on Google Drive,
- relocating their services to one highly visible space in the Library Commons,
- identifying common student misperceptions of Rovers' roles and promoting a more accurate explanation of the service,
- developing and sharing strategies responsive to particular student needs,
- analysing their own technological needs and providing a rationale for the purchase of appropriate devices and software,
- proposing additional topics for training,
- presenting training sessions to each other,
- providing input into the design of both the Student Evaluation form and their own online survey, and
- providing feedback by answering the online survey.

As one Rover stated in that survey: "What I love about this job is that Rovers are allowed to and are encouraged to come up with new design solutions to improve the service we provide."

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Prospects

The growth in the number of students using the service, together with their positive evaluations of it, suggest that it is already perceived as a significant element in learning support at UC. Initial teething problems have been

addressed, and the original program goals are being achieved if not exceeded. Most of the challenges perceived by the Rovers can and will be met with further adjustment and training.

The appeal of the service to international students will be investigated in detail, especially its popularity with the African cohort underrepresented in other kinds of learning support. Understanding the reasons for this may open up potential avenues of connection with other groups currently disinclined to seek help, such as students from a refugee background.

Notwithstanding frustrations with the 20 minute timeframe that have been felt by some students and most of the Rovers, it is unlikely that we will relax it. This is because it is vital to ensure equity of access by not allowing Rover availability to be monopolised by particular students and to minimise the temptation for Rovers to correct or edit student work. There are, however, occasions when more than one student wants help with the same assignment and Rover-facilitated group work takes place. This model can potentially be built on to enable longer, more structured group sessions to be held—a potential return, via a different path, to the original concept of ALPS from which the ASR program emerged.

Rovers have already teamed with UC PALS leaders in a particular subject unit to provide group workshops addressing both unit content and literacy issues simultaneously. Moreover, one Rover has served as a consultant to a faculty unit convenor to help her develop the curriculum and a full suite of activities for weekly literacy workshops to be facilitated by the convenor herself. Both of these trajectories present possibilities for further development.

A further expansion of the ASR concept has been the introduction of an evening service to students living in campus residences, with the support of the residence administrators. This trial program has been evaluated as successful, so the “Resi-rovers” program will be extended in coming semesters.

We are actively investigating ways in which the ASR service can be expanded to include an online presence.

Cautions

The cost of the Rovers service, including the casual wages of the Rovers, the provision of materials, uniforms, and mobile computer devices, and a proportion of the Peer Learning Manager’s salary to cover the fraction of her time devoted to coordinating and supervising the Rovers, amounts to roughly the same as it would cost to employ one full-time Level B academic staff adviser. This arguably represents high value for money. However, the service so far has been funded only from SSAF revenue, requiring an annual application in competition with other UC services, with no guarantee of success. To ensure continuation and further development of the service, there is a need to “mainstream” the funding in central budgetary processes.

Another concern has been an initial perception by some UC academic staff advisers that because of the Rovers’ relative lack of formal qualifications and experience, they would be unable to provide advice of sufficient substance to be genuinely useful to the students they serve. This view is reinforced by Williamson and Goldsmith (2013, p. 3) who argue that the only viable model

of peer-led student literacy development support is that of group workshops. They dismiss the idea of peer-led, one-to-one, writing support programs as deficit-model "fixing" rather than "contextualised, discipline-specific writing development" and assert that such programs "can inculcate remediation and dependence in place of self-reliance and resourcefulness," while also carrying "the risk of becoming little more than editing and proofreading services." Williamson and Goldsmith present no evidence to support these claims, which are contradicted widely in the literature (e.g., Devet et al., 2006; Lillis, 2006; O'Neill, 2008). The discipline-integrated, student-centred, and highly personalised nature of individual consultations need not be automatically diminished because the consultant is a trained student peer rather than a staff adviser, and trained peer consultants are no more intrinsically likely to resort to simple proofreading and editing than are staff advisers.

Our way of attempting to address the misgivings of our own UC staff colleagues has been to set in place structures that bring the staff advisers and Rovers into closer understanding of each others' roles, such as by inviting Rovers to observe and ask questions about staff consultations and by inviting staff advisers to observe and give feedback on Rover consultations. Some Rovers have also attended student workshops conducted by staff advisers. Through such processes, the concerns about service quality appear to have been somewhat allayed.

Other concerns remain, however. Staff advisers accept in principle that an adjustment of their duties to include more collaboration with faculty colleagues to develop curriculum-integrated models of skills development is a logical response to the changes in student demand brought about by the introduction of the ASRs, but in practice they have experienced some difficulties with the transition. Any institutions contemplating introducing a peer-led academic language and literacy support program similar to UC's ASRs will need to be mindful of the inherent change management implications for existing academic skills staff, particularly the possible need for formal programs to reskill and refocus them towards new balances of tasks and functions.

Addressing such concerns and any others in the wider academic skills and peer learning communities will need to be underpinned by hard evidence of success of the program. We acknowledge the limitations of the evidence presented here, derived as it is mostly on evaluations based on student opinions rather than objective measurable outcomes. As the program develops we will investigate other measures such as interventional studies comparing the quality of a student's work before a consultation and again after they have incorporated changes based on the consultation, and comparing final grades of students who sought Rover support with grades of a control group who did not. Yet even such evaluations as these are also likely to have limitations, as it is almost impossible to eliminate the influence of other variables when measuring something as multi-faceted as learning. It will be the amassing of a range of evidence from different angles that is likely to provide the most persuasive case in the longer term.

CONCLUSION

Thanks in no small part to the active agency of the Rovers themselves, the scheme has exceeded its original anticipated benefits. It has:

- extended the effectiveness (including cost-effectiveness), availability, and visibility of ASC services,
- supplemented staff-based individual consultations and reduced demand for staff-based drop-in consultations, thus releasing the lecturers to provide services that better use their expertise levels,
- made learning advice and support available to greater numbers of students than had been available just from staff-based services,
- provided just-in-time advice for extended hours in places where students congregate for study,
- provided a peer-based avenue of learning support for students who feel uncomfortable in approaching an academic staff member, at least initially, and
- developed the skills and personal attributes of the senior students recruited as Rovers, with potential benefits to their future employability.

These benefits have been recognised institutionally with the bestowal of a 2014 University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's Excellence Award in the category of Programs that Enhance Learning.

Notwithstanding such achievements, the process of refining the service, including the assembly of more varied and rigorous evidence of success, will continue with the collaboration and engagement of the Rovers and the students they serve.

REFERENCES

Adam, A., Skalicky, J., & Brown, N. (2011). Planning sustainable peer learning programs: An application and reflection. *The International Journal of First Year in Higher Education*, *2*(2), 9-22.

Arenas, M. (2012, January 28). What is peeragogy? [Web log post]. Retrieved from http://arenastudies.wordpress.com/2012/01/28/what-is-peeragogy/

Australian National Centre for PASS. (n.d.). *PASS: Peer Assisted Study Sessions.* [Booklet distributed in PASS Supervisor Training]. Wollongong, Australia: University of Wollongong.

Bennett, N., Dunne, E. & Carré, B. (2000). *Skills development in higher education and employment.* Buckingham, England: The Society for Research into Higher Education.

Berry, L., Collins, G., Copeman, P., Harper, R., Li, L., & Prentice, S. (2012). Individual consultations: Towards a 360-degree evaluation process. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning, 6*(3). 16-35.

Brown University. (2014). The Writing Fellows Program. Retrieved from http://www.brown.edu/academics/college/support/writing-fellows/

Chanock, K. (2007a). What academic language and learning advisers bring to scholarship of teaching and learning: Problems and possibilities for dialogue with the disciplines. *Higher Education Research and Development, 26*(3), 269-280.

Chanock, K. (2007b). Valuing individual consultations as input into other modes of teaching. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning, 1*(1), 1-9.

Devet, B., Orr, S., Blythman, M., & Bishop, C. (2006). Peering across the pond: The role of students in developing other students' writing in the US and

UK. In L. Ganobcsik-Williams (Ed.), *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education* (pp. 196-211). Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dunne, E., & Zandstra, R. (2011). *Students as change agents: New ways of engaging with learning and teaching in Higher Education.* Bristol, England: ESCalate.

Goldingay, S., Hitch, D., Ryan, J., Farrugia, D., Hosken, N., Lamaro, G., … Macfarlane, S. (2014). "The university didn't actually tell us this is what you have to do": Social inclusion through embedding of academic skills in first year professional courses. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, *5*(1). 43-53.

Healey, M. (2014). *Students as change agents in learning and teaching in higher education.* Retrieved from: www.mickhealey.co.uk/resources

Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Act 2011, Section 19-38 (4). Retrieved from http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2011A00130

Horstmanshof, L., & Brownie, S. (2013). A scaffolded approach to discussion board use for formative assessment of academic writing skills. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 38*(1), 61-73.

Huijser, H., Kimmins, L., & Galligan, L. (2008). Evaluating individual teaching on the road to embedding academic skills. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning, 2*(1), 23-38.

Lillis, T. (2006). Moving towards an "academic literacies" pedagogy: Dialogues of participation. In L. Ganobcsik-Williams (Ed.), *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education* (pp. 30-45). Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

McGuire, S. (2006). The impact of Supplemental Instruction on teaching students how to learn. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 106*, 3-10.

O'Neill, P. (2008). Using peer writing fellows in British universities: Complexities and possibilities. *Across the Disciplines: A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing, 5*(1). Retrieved from http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/fellows/oneill.cfm

Siemens, G. (2003). *Learning ecology, communities, and networks: Extending the classroom.* Retrieved from http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/learning_communities.htm

Tapper, J., & Gruba, P. (2000). Using a 'conference' model to teach communication skills in a communication across the curriculum program. *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines, 4*(1), 55-65.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds. & Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williamson, F., & Goldsmith, R. (2013). PASSwrite: Recalibrating student academic literacies development. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice 10*(2). Retrieved from http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol10/iss2/5/

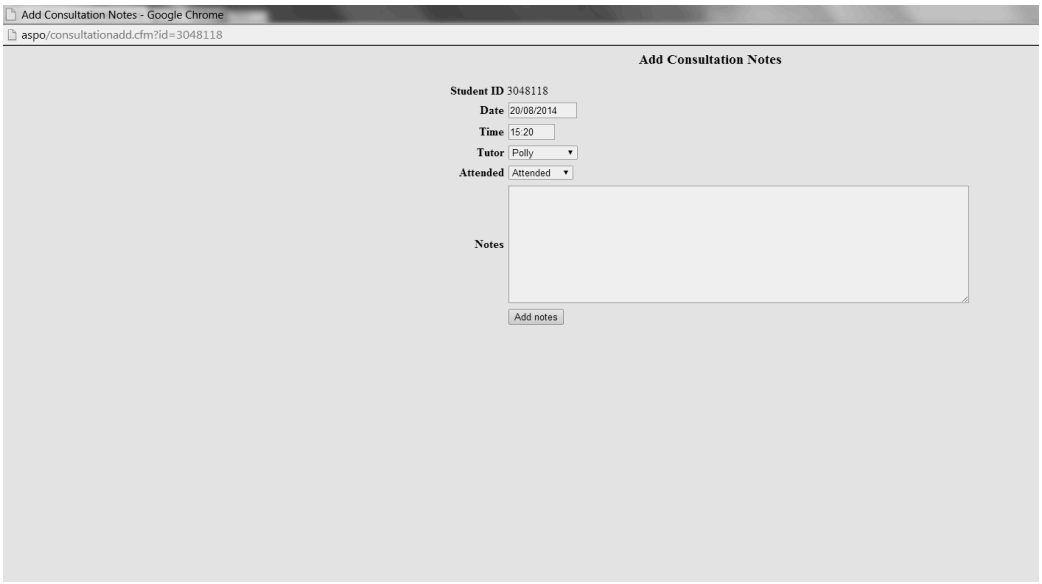
Wilson, K., Li, L., & Collins, G. (2011). Co-constructing academic literacy: Examining teacher-student discourse in a one-to-one consultation. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning, 5*(1), 139-153.

Wingate, U. (2006). Doing away with 'study skills'. *Teaching in Higher Education, 11*(4), 457-469.

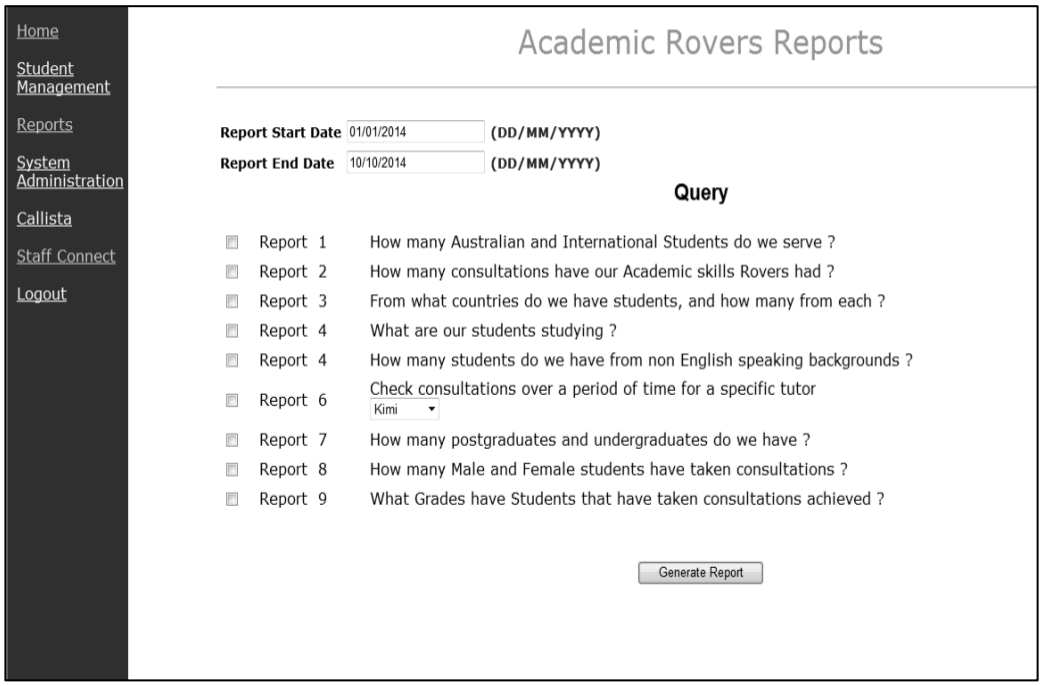
APPENDIX 1:

Screenshots from Academic Skills Centre Online (ASCO) Database

ASCO Consultation Notes Entry Page



ASCO Academic Rovers Reports Portal



APPENDIX 2:

Student Evaluation Questionnaire for Academic Skills Rover Consultation

This questionnaire is designed to help both you and the Academic Skills Rovers reflect constructively on our consultations so that together we can maximise their effectiveness as learning opportunities. Your responses are anonymous and confidential.

1. My student status is (*tick one in each row*):

☐ domestic ☐ international;

☐ undergraduate ☐ honours

☐ postgrad. coursework ☐ postgrad. research

2. I am: ☐ part-time ☐ full-time

3. The main thing I hoped to learn more about in this consultation was (tick all categories below that apply):

☐ general academic skills (e.g. time management, lecture note-taking, study planning, exam preparation, working in groups, etc.)

☐ understanding an assignment question and what I have to do to answer it

☐ academic reading/literature research strategies

☐ what is needed for different kinds of assignments (e.g. essays, reports, case studies, annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, reflective journals, research proposals, theses, etc.)

☐ checking the structure and/or task completion of all or part of my draft assignment

☐ checking the flow, consistency and quality of my writing

☐ grammar

☐ referencing

☐ lecturer requirement for resubmission of assignment already marked

☐ information about other ASC services such as individual consultations, workshops, etc

Other (please specify)

_____

_____

4. Name of the Academic Skills Rover advising me

_____

5. The most important thing I learned from the consultation was:

_____

_____

6. With what I learnt in this consultation, I will be better able to do the task I sought advice about (*circle one*).

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. With what I learnt in this consultation, I will be better able to do similar tasks in the future (*circle one*).

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. The AS Rover helped me identify and address my learning needs (*circle one*).

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. The AS Rover was easy to understand and talk to (*circle one*).

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. I am likely to recommend AS Rovers to other students (*circle one*).

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

11. I am likely to use other ASC services, eg. individual consultations with ASC advisers, workshops, etc.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

12. Other suggestions or comments:

_____

_____

_____

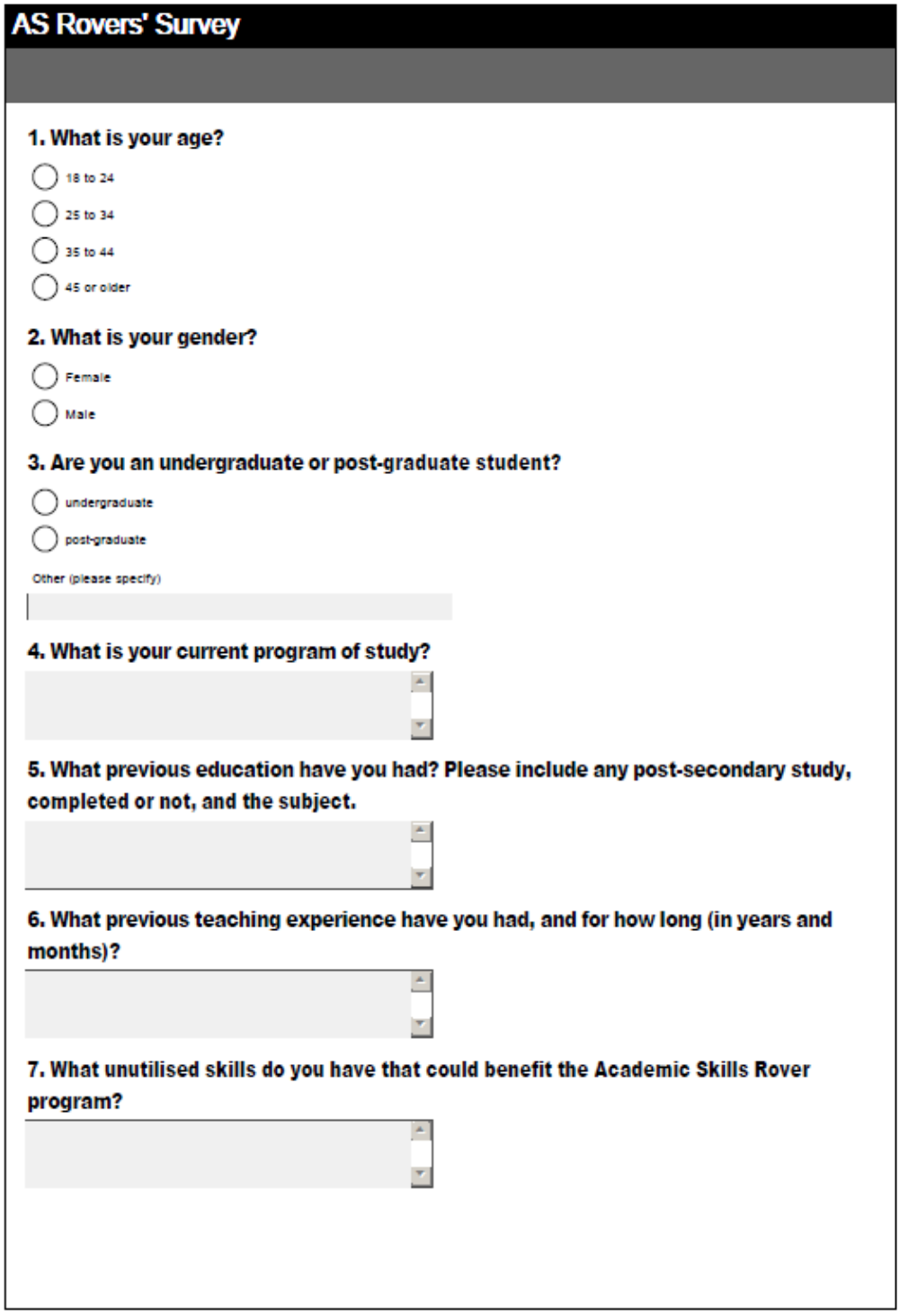
_____

Thank you for participating in this evaluation.

PLEASE PUT THE COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE BOX.

APPENDIX 3:

Questionnaire for Academic Skills Rovers online survey



AS Rovers' Survey

1. What is your age?

- ◯ 18 to 24
- ◯ 25 to 34
- ◯ 35 to 44
- ◯ 45 or older

2. What is your gender?

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male

3. Are you an undergraduate or post-graduate student?

- ◯ undergraduate
- ◯ post-graduate

Other (please specify)

4. What is your current program of study?

5. What previous education have you had? Please include any post-secondary study, completed or not, and the subject.

6. What previous teaching experience have you had, and for how long (in years and months)?

7. What unutilised skills do you have that could benefit the Academic Skills Rover program?

AS Rovers' Survey

8. How long have you been an AS Rover?

- ◯ 0-3 months
- ◯ 4-7 months
- ◯ 8-11 months
- ◯ 12-15 months
- ◯ 16-19 months
- ◯ 20 months or more

9. How would you rate the training you received for this job?

- ◯ very satisfied
- ◯ satisfied
- ◯ neutral
- ◯ not very satisfied
- ◯ not at all satisfied

10. How have you found the on the job training through observing academic advisers and being observed by them?

- ◯ very helpful
- ◯ helpful
- ◯ neutral
- ◯ not very helpful
- ◯ not at all helpful

11. What further training would you find helpful?

12. How satisfied are you with your position as an AS Rover?

- ◯ very satisfied
- ◯ satisfied
- ◯ neutral
- ◯ not very satisfied
- ◯ not at all satisfied

13. What do you feel is your greatest skill as an AS Rover?

AS Rovers' Survey

14. Do you believe that the peer learning aspect of the service is an asset or not? Why?

15. What do you find most difficult about the job?

16. How is the job different from your expectations before you started?

17. How has the job changed since you started?

18. In your opinion, what initiatives have AS Rovers taken in changing and developing the job? Please give examples.

19. Please describe a situation in which you faced a problem and developed a strategy to solve it. Think in terms of providing a helpful tip to other AS Rovers.

20. What changes or new directions would you like to see in the AS Rovers program in the future?