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## Supporting student wellbeing as an academic language and learning advisor: Challenges and opportunities

Laura Gurney

University of Waikato, New Zealand, [laura.gurney@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:laura.gurney@waikato.ac.nz)

Vittoria Grossi

Deakin University, Australia, [vittoria.grossi@deakin.edu.au](mailto:vittoria.grossi@deakin.edu.au)

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## Supporting student wellbeing as an academic language and learning advisor: Challenges and opportunities

### Abstract

The provision of academic language and learning (ALL) support to undergraduate and postgraduate students has been a staple across higher education institutions in Australia and New Zealand for some time. However, research has established that there are multiple challenges inherent to working across institutional spaces in the ways that ALL staff do. This has included ambiguity about the parameters of their roles and how they connect with staff and students as support professionals. Furthermore, how advisors respond to student wellbeing as part of the support they offer, and how their own wellbeing is accounted for at work, are not well understood. We draw on data from two recent surveys to explore how ALL advisors in Australia and New Zealand understand and respond to student wellbeing within their practice, how ALL work has been affected by COVID-19, advisors' needs for support, and the views of managers in relation to these matters. The participants highlighted tensions related to student wellbeing, staff wellbeing, and academic support, which have either been brought about or intensified by the pandemic. As we move towards living with the pandemic, these tensions will need to be addressed by higher education institutions.

### Practitioner Notes

1. Many higher educators, including academic language and learning advisors, are expected to attend to student wellbeing. However, what this means in practice is often unclear.
2. Staff have different understandings of what attending to student wellbeing involves.
3. In considering how to respond to students' wellbeing needs, institutions should take into account staff workload, the boundaries of professional roles, and staff support.

### Keywords

Academic language and learning advisors, wellbeing, support, higher education, COVID-19

## Introduction

The provision of academic language and learning (ALL) support to undergraduate and postgraduate students has been a staple across higher education institutions for some time. ALL practitioners operate in universities across the world, although their roles and titles may differ according to their country and institution. ALL work has undergone many changes in the last three decades (see Chanock, 2011a, 2011b, for a detailed trajectory in Australia; Hildson et al., 2019, in the United Kingdom; and Paré, 2017, in Canada). In this paper, we focus on ALL work in Australian and New Zealand higher education.

In these contexts, the ALL field has experienced numerous changes in response to widening participation policies that have led to more linguistically and socially diverse institutions, as well as an increased focus on online teaching and resource development. ALL advisors support the development of students' academic language and communication skills, study skills and, increasingly, online learning. However, the boundaries of the ALL role, particularly concerning how advisors account for student wellbeing, are not currently well understood.

Institutional concern for student wellbeing intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this background, and considering the mounting pressures faced by staff, we saw a need to better understand how advisors understand student wellbeing to relate to their practice and responsibilities. In this paper, we address these questions, drawing on the findings of two surveys involving advisors and their managers. Through examination and discussion of the data, we aim to better understand changes, challenges and developments in ALL work, including the parameters of the ALL role. We are motivated by the need to safeguard both student and staff wellbeing in contexts where the boundaries of professional roles – in particular, what staff should do and what is beyond their roles – may become ambiguous.

### Context: ALL work

The ALL role has changed significantly since its inception in the 1970s. This is well documented in research in the field. When the role began, practitioners were situated as part of counselling services, and study support was considered remedial and individual-based (Chanock, 2007). In the ensuing decades, ALL units have become more widely visible on campuses, categorised as professional or academic staff, and have undergone significant changes to their structure and practices. Their work has evolved from primarily offering individual-based support, which has long been regarded a key aspect of the role, to facilitating adjunct generic study skills workshops, and later embedding study support within discipline curricula (Hitch et al., 2012; Thies, 2012). More recently, practitioners have begun to adopt blended learning approaches (Evans et al., 2019). ALL work supports the realisation of multiple institutional strategies, including widening

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participation in higher education, transition pedagogies, internationalisation, and flexible online learning arrangements.

ALL professionals are highly qualified teachers from diverse academic backgrounds who can be called upon to work in a range of contexts and disciplines (Evans et al., 2019). Contemporarily, their work predominantly involves supporting academic literacy development and English language development, embedded within disciplines of study, in internationalised university contexts (see Briguglio & Watson, 2014; Thies, 2012). They may also work with teaching teams in schools and faculties to enhance teaching, learning and feedback practices (Podorova, 2016; Tsedendamba et al., 2020).

ALL work is underpinned by pedagogical frameworks which are constructivist and developmental (see Evans et al., 2019, for a review), made possible by moving away from a generic approach to study skills to a more nuanced one focused on teaching within disciplines (Maldoni, 2017; Wingate, 2009). Embedding is informed by an academic literacies approach, as outlined by Lea and Street (1998, 2004), which sees traditional higher education practices as disfavoured less privileged newcomers to the academy, and that academic literacies are best taught explicitly, as students engage in their fields of study, rather than acquired through exposure only. Through the embedded approach, academic communication is also complexified – it is not treated as homogeneous, and it is not artificially divorced from the contexts and communities of practice in which it is negotiated. It moves ALL support away from a remedial, deficit model offered to students considered ‘at risk’ and towards a fully integrated aspect of study for all students.

In order to put in place such support, ALL practitioners must draw on their soft skills to ensure successful collaborations (Macdonald et al., 2013). As ‘third space’ professionals, ALL practitioners move along a continuum of embedding support and interlinking with other practitioners in tertiary contexts (Briguglio, 2014). Collaboration is now recognised as a central part of the role (Malkin & Chanock, 2018), as is negotiation (Gurney & Grossi, 2021). Given the complex hierarchies and power structures that these practitioners face in the process of negotiation – and the managerial approaches that stymie their efforts (Ashton-Hay & Chanock, 2023) – this can be a significant challenge (Grossi et al., 2021). Furthermore, while the group is highly responsive to change (Evans et al., 2019), the genus of change has evolved over time, as have the agendas which underpin higher education, from serving a social welfare orientation to facilitating neoliberal policies of massification (Malkin & Chanock, 2018).

In spite of the adaptability of the ALL profession and the important work that they do to support students, studies continue to report a sense of being misunderstood and marginalised within institutions (Evans et al., 2019; Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007; Strauss, 2017). ALL practitioners report feeling low status, among other frustrations (Malkin & Chanock, 2018), and there is no doubt their professional identity could be strengthened. As we explore in this paper, the parameters for providing support within the ALL role are also characterised by ambiguity, including how practitioners account for non-academic matters – such as wellbeing – when engaging with students.

Research reveals student wellbeing as demonstrably worse than that of the general population (Larcombe et al., 2016). Universities across the world have responded with institution-wide approaches to support student health and wellbeing (Crawford et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2022).

However, the roles of higher educators to understand or respond to student wellbeing are not always clearly defined, particularly given that wellbeing itself is multidimensional and defined inconsistently (Dodge et al., 2012). For educators whose role it is to support students academically, it can be challenging to separate the ‘academic’ from other aspects of student experience, including concerns which students share during teaching and learning activities (Huyton, 2009). These issues manifest in a context characterised by increasing change and transitions, which have been accelerated by the pandemic (Kniffin et al., 2021). More than ever, workplaces and professional roles are defined by their transitory nature and the impetus for mobility and flexibility (Angouri et al., 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to intensification of efforts in higher education institutions to centralise student wellbeing in teaching and support activities. At the same time, teaching and support services recurrently moved fully online in Australia and New Zealand, and the expectation to offer flexible learning arrangements increased. The higher education workforce subsequently faced a range of demands to account for student wellbeing, while also grappling with new ways of working and their own experiences in relation to the pandemic and beyond. As we argue in this paper, unclear expectations concerning how student wellbeing is accommodated – including the manner and the degree to which this applies to particular roles – may intensify workload and role ambiguity for higher educators, particularly for those in support roles.

### **Wellbeing and institutional responses**

Student wellbeing has been a concern of higher education institutions for some time (Baik et al., 2019; Brewer et al., 2019). Larcombe et al. (2016), surveying over 5000 students at a metropolitan Australian university, found that 13% reported high levels of depression, and 18% reported high levels of anxiety; accordingly, the authors contended “that the mental well-being of tertiary students is a serious public health issue” (p. 1084). A health concern in its own right, impairing quality of life and cognitive performance (Marin et al., 2011), mental distress can have flow on effects across students’ experiences and may contribute to attrition (Naylor et al., 2018). Per Baik et al. (2019), given “a substantial proportion of students will experience mental health difficulties during their time at university, it is important to ask: how can universities ensure they provide supportive and ‘health-promoting’ environments?” (p. 676).

However, institutional responses to student wellbeing have lacked precision. Barkham et al. (2019) argue that many initiatives have focused on student wellbeing as a “population-based term targeting positive feelings about oneself and reflecting an inner capacity—a resourcefulness—to deal with the pressures and challenges of student life and learning” (p. 352). While such programs address resilience and/or mindfulness, they are not targeted at the mental health challenges experienced by ‘at risk’ students (Barkham et al., 2019). Ultimately, Barkham et al. (2019) point to a plethora of “disconnected survey-based reports yielding differing estimates of student wellbeing/mental illness” (p. 352) which, when combined with negative coverage in the press, have placed pressure on institutions to respond with a “rush to action by implementing policies and actions that are well-intended but not necessarily evidence-based” (p. 352).

The concern for student wellbeing is likely to increase. Recent research has established the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for students. Dodd et al. (2021), who

surveyed 787 students at Australian universities, argue that the shift to online learning has had a significant negative effect on students' learning experiences as well as their wellbeing. In another recent Australian study, Crawford and Dowe (2021) argue that curriculum and study-related matters impact student wellbeing and provide guidelines for ALL advisors to accommodate students' needs through inclusive practices. External factors, including the effects of the pandemic on employment, have also detrimentally affected student wellbeing. These issues are not restricted to a particular context; for example, Shin and Hickey (2020) highlight the negative effects of emergency remote teaching on students in the United States, including on motivation, mental and physical health, and balancing care responsibilities with study. Marler et al. (2021) found that socioeconomic status was associated with COVID-related distress amongst their participants in the United States, and that greater distress was associated with lower academic motivation and social disengagement. While institutions have begun to respond, the pandemic and its effects on institutional finances continue to present significant challenges.

In relation to safeguarding the wellbeing of higher education staff, institutional responses have not been as apparent, despite calls for more attention to be paid even preceding COVID-19. Literature has charted high rates of stress amongst teachers across education sectors, including in higher education (Bezuidenhout & Cilliers, 2010; Kizilci et al., 2012; Watts & Robertson, 2011). Characterised by hypercompetition, massification, and entrepreneurial commercial expansion (Amsler & Shore, 2017; Edwards & Roy, 2017), the sector has witnessed the reconfiguration of practitioners' roles in response to commercial objectives, the implementation of accountability measures for performance, insecure employment arrangements, and reductions in funding, all of which are prevalent and significant stressors (Lorenz, 2012; Pick et al., 2012). Student to staff ratios have also changed, meaning that staff may be required to support larger numbers of students in the same or less time (Thomas & Bennett, 2002).

A small number of studies has explored stress and wellbeing amongst ALL advisors in Australia and New Zealand, all preceding the pandemic. High contact hours, little time to prepare resources and undertake research, work conducted out of hours, and the expectations of academics and students of the ALL role in Australia – including “who is responsible for student learning and what can be achieved given limited resource” (p. 19) – were amongst the stressors experienced by the 38 ALL advisors in Thomas and Bennett's (2002) research. These authors also raised role ambiguity – which is recognised to be a stressor across professions (see Bowling et al., 2017) – as an issue of concern, variously describing the ALL role as a job “with no boundaries” that “never feels finished” and is “ever expanding” (p. 21). Later, Cameron (2018) conducted a study exploring the rewards and challenges of the role for ALL advisors in New Zealand, surveying 106 advisors. Despite high levels of reported job satisfaction, mostly due to intrinsic factors, Cameron's (2018) participants reported a number of challenges which were largely derived from external pressures. These included lack of recognition, few opportunities for career progression, and poor resourcing. Malkin and Chanock (2018), who surveyed 105 ALL advisors in Australia, found that key challenges included lack of time and resources, the poor visibility of their work, and being undervalued by management, also suggesting a lack of clear boundaries to their roles.

Working closely with students, advisors observe and are made aware of a range of matters that may impact student success. Nonetheless, *how* and to what extent advisors can or should respond to student wellbeing, as well as how their own wellbeing is accounted for at work, are not

well understood. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has presented significant challenges for all higher educators, has had a strong bearing on how these issues played out in the past few years, particularly considering the close contact that ALL advisors have with students. To better understand this situation, we conducted two separate surveys with ALL advisors and managers in Australian and New Zealand higher education institutions to respond to the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of ALL advisors and managers in Australia and New Zealand on how to respond to student wellbeing within their practice?
2. What are the work changes and challenges of ALL advisors and managers as a result of the pandemic?
3. What are ALL advisors' own needs for wellbeing support?

## **Methods**

This paper draws on the findings of two surveys carried out in 2021 to explore how ALL advisors in Australia and New Zealand understand and respond to student wellbeing within their practice, how ALL work has been affected by COVID-19, advisors' own needs for support, and the views of managers in relation to these matters. Although this is a small-scale study, it provides insights into the experiences of ALL advisors, and addresses impacts of the pandemic on the roles of higher educators in relation to the provision of student support beyond academic matters in a unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The idea for the study began with our own observations of rapidly changing practices within our work, including how higher educators were managing changes arising in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We could see that some of challenges we had observed for several years in our respective roles were becoming more visible and possibly urgent. We were motivated to begin to explore these challenges more closely and to gain others' views as the changes were taking place.

In designing the study, it was important to gather perspectives of both the ALL advisors and the managers, recognising that differences of perspectives could be challenging for how the role is negotiated. Provision of wellbeing support is an area that receives university-wide support, but its implementation may be unclear and may impact on professional boundaries. ALL managers are in the position of linking policy to practice, and they are faced with the everyday challenges on the ground.

A number of considerations influenced our choice to opt for online surveys. Considerations included the timeframe, and the multiple and fast changes that were taking place around us. The surveys contained closed, Likert-scale questions as well as open-ended questions inviting reflection on the themes addressed to provide a snapshot of experiences and challenges being faced. It was not anticipated that we would receive a large enough number of responses to allow statistical analysis; rather, we intended that the surveys would capture salient experiences and challenges which may inform further research.

Online qualitative data-gathering instruments can provide numerous benefits. As well as capturing rich data, they may access diverse perspectives from different groups, as well as encourage

honest responses to sensitive matters (Braun et al., 2021). Braun et al. (2017) make compelling arguments to include online forms of data collection for these reasons. As well as the relative accessibility and convenience that the surveys offered participants, we were aware that some of the questions could be considered sensitive. These include questions regarding the role of the ALL advisors to provide wellbeing support to students, and whether they had been suitably supported in their own wellbeing by their institutions. Given the power structures in educational settings, it cannot be assumed that ALL advisers can openly share views that differ from those of management. For example, for the survey respondents who disagreed that attending to student wellbeing should be part of the ALL advisory role, and for those who did not consider themselves well prepared to undertake such a role, the anonymous survey allowed open expression of views. To protect anonymity, minimal participant information was sought, limited to country, length of service in the role, the type of institution in which participants worked, where they were placed within the institutional structure, and the broad groups of students they supported.

The first survey involved ALL advisors. It contained two key focus areas. The first focus area addressed wellbeing and ALL practice. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they considered student wellbeing a part of the ALL role, expectations for advisors to attend to student wellbeing, the extent to which they felt prepared or capable to do so, and the ways in which they attended to student wellbeing (if applicable). The second focus area addressed ALL work and COVID-19. This concerned changes to the provision of ALL support as a result of COVID-19, observations that the participants had made about providing support to students during the pandemic (for instance, levels of student engagement, how students presented in their interactions with advisors, and the nature of the support they required), and the support which the participants had received and/or needed from their institutions.

The first survey was shared online in 2021 through professional bodies in Australia and New Zealand and via our own networks. The survey received responses from 36 ALL advisors, 19 of whom were based in Australia and 17 in New Zealand. Of the group, 24 participants were employed in metropolitan universities, eight worked at polytechnic institutes, three worked at regional universities, and one worked at a private training establishment. Many respondents ( $n=14/36$ ) were highly experienced, having worked as advisors for more than 11 years. Others had worked in the role for up to three years ( $n=9/36$ ), between seven and 10 years ( $n=8/36$ ), and between four and six years ( $n=5/36$ ). Our motivation for including a question about length of experience was to discover if the challenges perceived were a result of being new to the role. It is significant when experienced advisors observe and face the changes reported. The group was relatively homogenous in terms of work responsibility; most respondents supported both domestic and international students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The second survey involved managers of ALL teams. Participants were asked to indicate, from their perspectives as managers, the extent to which ALL advisors could expect to attend to student wellbeing, the skills and capacity of the advisors in their teams to do this, any changes to how their team offered support since the beginning of the pandemic, and whether the ALL advisors with whom they worked needed extra support during this time. The survey comprised Likert-scale, closed- and open-ended questions. Participation was anonymous, and demographics were collected in five questions at the end of the survey.

The second survey was distributed online a few months after the first survey. Although it was shared through professional bodies in Australia and New Zealand, we received 12 responses from New Zealand managers. It is difficult to know the reason for the absence of responses from Australian managers, but we can assume that the timing of the survey, in a year of multiple changes, including job losses and restructuring in many Australian universities, may have impacted the number of responses received. The respondents were relatively homogenous in terms of their level of experience and familiarity with the role, and they worked with teams of advisors who supported domestic and international students from undergraduate to postgraduate levels. The participants mostly worked within polytechnic institutions ( $n=6/12$ ) and metropolitan universities ( $n=4/12$ ), with one based in a wānanga and one in a private tertiary institution. They had mixed levels of experience in the manager role; two participants had worked in the role for over 11 years, two for between seven and 10 years, five for between four and six years, and three participants had been managers for under three years. While 12 managers completed the survey, as shown in the findings sections, some questions received more than twelve responses (indicating that some only partially completed it).

### **Data analysis**

As stated above, in designing the surveys, our aim was to collect responses that provided insights into the participants' experiences and attitudes towards the changes they were observing in their work. According to Saldaña (2016), quantitative data may point to issues of concern across a group of participants, whereas qualitative data can provide deeper insights into these issues. In this section, we provide summaries of the data from each survey as well as our analyses in relation to patterns in the data. Analyses take into account responses to closed questions as well as open-ended questions, which provided quite extensive data in this study.

In the surveys, open-ended questions were designed to allow participants to elaborate on their responses to the closed questions. Many participants in Survey 1 took the opportunity to do so; for example, we received fifteen responses to an open-ended question asking participants to comment on the ALL role in relation to student wellbeing. Their reflections were in-depth and thoughtful. They responded with open accounts of their experiences, some of which were more akin to professional reflections written in a reflective journal. It is possible that the anonymous nature of the online survey reassured participants that they could reflect openly on sensitive matters. To us, their responses also indicated their willingness to contribute to research being conducted in their area of work, and an appreciation of being able to air their views, challenges, and perspectives of their work at this time. It is worth pointing out that, in comparison, the open-ended responses in Survey 2 were brief and succinct, often consisting of one-line explanations which, while informative, did not go beyond the question.

Quantitative data from both surveys were collated and put into graphs by the Qualtrics program, which was used to prepare and distribute the surveys. To analyse qualitative data from the open-ended questions, we used a thematic approach. As Clarke and Braun (2017) state, thematic analysis aims "not simply to summarize the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question[s]" (p. 297). We followed the six-phase process recommended by these researchers: data familiarisation, systematic coding, generating initial themes, developing, and reviewing these, refining themes, and then

writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Participants' responses were read and reviewed by both researchers separately to gain familiarity and generate initial themes, and we brought our analyses together to refine the themes. As anticipated, this process was lengthy and generated discussions and revision of initial themes. It was useful during this stage to reflect on what findings we had expected and what was novel in the responses.

## Findings

Corresponding with the research questions, the findings from both surveys are presented under the three categories below. This allows us to establish a more comprehensive picture and determine convergences and disagreements between the participant groups.

1. Student wellbeing and ALL practice
2. Changes to ALL practice due to COVID-19
3. ALL staff wellbeing and support

### Student wellbeing and ALL practice

Most advisors ( $n=32$ ) and managers ( $n=11$ ) either strongly agreed or agreed that *understanding* wellbeing is part of the ALL advisory role. However, in relation to the participants' self-reported preparedness or capability to attend to student wellbeing, the responses were more stratified. Only five of the 36 participants in Survey 1 strongly agreed that they felt well-prepared or capable to attend to student wellbeing. Notwithstanding, the managers in Survey 2 either strongly agreed or agreed that advisors could expect to attend to student wellbeing in their work. When subsequently asked whether the advisors in their team(s) had the skills and capacity to attend to student wellbeing, only one Survey 2 participant somewhat disagreed and one strongly disagreed. The others either strongly agreed ( $n=4/14$ ) or somewhat agreed ( $n=8/14$ ). This divergence in responses between the two participant groups suggests a possible misalignment of role expectations, understandings of advisors' responsibilities, and definitions of what might constitute attending to student wellbeing; where advisors overall felt less prepared or capable to attend to student wellbeing, the managers affirmed that they had the skills and capacity to do so. This misalignment is explored further below.

A strong theme identified from Survey 1 was that attending to student wellbeing is *not* part of the ALL role. For some participants, this was attributed to a lack of preparation or confidence to address wellbeing: for instance, one advisor commented, "I tend to keep the conversation about study rather than wellbeing as I don't feel equipped/confident to handle wellbeing or mental health issues". Another stated that "[a]s I'm not trained to counsel students, I do my best to direct them to support services; however, often students treat us as counsellors and sometimes I'm faced with challenging conversations where the student is quite distressed".

Others felt that, while understanding wellbeing and listening to students were important, the advisory role focused on other matters. There was explicit reference to the parameters of the advisory role in the responses and acknowledgement of the complexities of student wellbeing – for example, "I tend to take the approach of referring on to other more specialist services and colleagues who are more skilled in this area", and "[t]he priority is the academic writing, time

management etc. and I do focus on that". One participant's response covered a range of these points – that wellbeing did not fit easily into the ALL role description, but that advisors' interactions with students often exposed them to wellbeing needs:

*I am not a counsellor and general guidelines would be to refer students to appropriate support services. However, being aware of student concerns, especially during Covid, is really important and with 1-1 consultations we are in a privileged space to encourage students.*

In relation to *how* participants attended to student wellbeing, most ( $n=33/36$ ) of the Survey 1 respondents indicated that they referred students to other support services, such as counselling. Discussing wellbeing during one-to-one consultations and workshops with students was another common option ( $n=25/36$ ), as was providing students with digital and other resources related to wellbeing ( $n=12$ ). Two participants responded that they did not attend to student wellbeing in their role as ALL advisors.

Some of the Survey 1 respondents adopted a holistic notion of wellbeing that did not separate student needs. One reflected that "[w]ellbeing and study skills are entwined so I will try and ascertain the extent to which motivation/anxiety/other stresses manifest in questions on time management or disorganization". Another commented that, "[o]ur service philosophy is to provide holistic approach for students – academic and wellbeing or pastoral care and support cannot be separated". Others mentioned that wellbeing support was offered to consider the needs of specific cohorts. One reflected that their role was "specific to working with indigenous groups, thus we function to deliver our services in an indigenous way. Wellbeing is an integral part of our practice in action and thought". This response is a reminder that there are multiple paradigms that support students, which may merit further exploration and learning for practitioners.

While the advisors' responses were mixed in relation to how and whether student wellbeing should be considered a part of the ALL advisory role, the responses from managers in Survey 2 did not show variation. Rather, the responses suggested that understanding and attending to student wellbeing was part of the role. Rather than questioning *whether* teams should attend to wellbeing, the managers raised concerns about their teams' preparedness to support student wellbeing and the adequacy of training provided to them. Sample responses are provided below:

*The training we are given is rudimentary, and the trainers run the session/s that they are paid to run, but which are not modified for the ALL context. Although we can refer students to various services in our institution, the capacity of those services to respond is limited, so urgent well-being enquiries provide a confronting challenge. We covered emergency crisis response, but because the training was generic, I came away from it without what I would consider useable/practical information.*

*We are proactively engaging staff in capability development to recognise and support learners with mental health issues, in the context of getting them to a place where we can support their learning issues. We are aware of gaps in knowledge of how to support and refer learners in crisis, which is the focus of discussion at the moment.*

*[R]eferral to the support areas within our wider student support team is the process we follow, as members within those teams are the experts, have the appropriate training to best manage the wellbeing 'concern'. Our team are clear and confident about listening to student concerns, and know when to take a student to one of the specialist support areas.*

These responses indicated a clear understanding of services available for referral, attributed to ALL teams working in close collaboration with these services. However, these comments lead us to consider what constitutes appropriate training, how gaps can be bridged, and how 'mental health issues' are attended to during student consultations. While one manager respondent stated that "the team are clear and confident about listening to student concerns", we would query the impacts of doing this work while also attending to academic support. For instance, is it expected that there may be instances where wellbeing takes over the academic support, and how prepared are advisors and institutions to deal with the diversity and demand for wellbeing support? In a context where university funding is impacted by declining demand, are such services also in danger of being reduced?

### **Changes made during COVID-19**

Unsurprisingly, nearly all participants in Survey 1 ( $n=34/36$ ) confirmed that their institutions had made changes to the ways they worked because of COVID-19. The changes implemented related to delivery mode ( $n=34/36$ ), amount of time dedicated to student-facing support ( $n=12/36$ ), and the pace of interactions with students ( $n=7/36$ ). A few participants indicated other measures, including supplying devices to students, providing extra online resources, and the use of masks and sanitising procedures. One highlighted a reduction in ALL staffing "due to perceived budget pressures".

Most participants in Survey 2 ( $n=9/14$ ) also confirmed that changes had been implemented by their institutions to support students during the pandemic. They highlighted new online resources and support, technology funding and lending programmes, financial hardship support, resilience and wellbeing sessions, regular online engagement, extensions, and more pastoral referrals. When given the opportunity to comment on these, one wrote that quick changes were "necessary to help reduce student anxiety – e.g. some students did not have laptops or connectivity online (highly dependent on institutes computers/data)". Another stated that it was:

*Great while it happened but now lockdown is over the financial and other challenges have remained as a result, and there is no more tech being given out. My team and I have done substantial data analysis of the current and ongoing main issues for support and a lot are still COVID related.*

In relation to changes to the ways they provided support, participants across both surveys drew attention to the fact that everything had moved online as a result of lockdowns and campus closures, which presented significant challenges. There were numerous comments which confirmed that extra support was needed by students to adapt to online learning. Participants struggled with greater student demand for online appointments as well as responding to the difficulties students experienced with digital technologies and online learning systems. They also

reflected that online support could be less effective than seeing students on campus.

One of the Survey 1 participants succinctly summarised that “students were extremely stressed during COVID. In our team, we often discussed the level of emotional turmoil we were taking on during our normal academic skills support appointments”. Another listed several interlocking and compounding factors affecting both students and advisors:

*Students reporting feeling overwhelmed, especially when in the first semester of their course. Students missing being on campus and missing seeing people face-to-face. Students finding it harder to focus and be engaged when solely online compared to being and studying on campus. Harder for advisors to sense if students may need additional support, feel overwhelmed. Harder for students to open up to advisors online than when in consultations in a physical space, unless they already know and feel comfortable working with specific advisors.*

Student motivation and engagement were also highlighted as having worsened during the pandemic by Survey 1 respondents:

*I feel many students are less engaged if they have to study online (some have articulated this). They are often saving their lectures till the weekend and then binge watching them like they would a Netflix series, often at double-speed to get through them faster. This is not how to learn. Then they wonder why they're not motivated.*

However, the continued uptake of online ALL support services was also read as a positive by some, even with the challenges of communicating online: “It is less effective than face-to face, but it is still helpful. Students are very grateful to half an hour with a real person who is interested in them and cares for their welfare and academic success”.

Most of the Survey 2 respondents ( $n=10/14$ ) also indicated that their own teams had implemented extra support for students during the pandemic. This included having a wellbeing officer onsite, moving online, developing resources to assist students with online learning, communicating regularly with students identified as ‘high risk’, training and development for advisors, more pastoral care, and offering support outside normal working hours. In relation to these changes, participants noted the uncertainty of the situation; the changes had created “more work for the ALL role. I am spending more time with students, particularly those online, and am now organising activities which promote wellbeing”.

### **ALL staff wellbeing and support**

In relation to how their own wellbeing was supported at work, the Survey 1 responses were mixed. Nineteen of the 36 participants agreed that their wellbeing was supported at work, while the remaining 17 were mixed between somewhat agreeing and strongly disagreeing. When asked to provide detail, participants’ responses highlighted the following kinds of support:

- Practical support and flexibility (e.g., funding for equipment, technical support, flexibility with working hours and location, extended sick leave)

- Resources to provide wellbeing support (e.g., links to specific and dedicated web pages)
- Team-based support (e.g., more informal meetings to facilitate discussions, social sessions)

Some respondents reflected positively on their immediate environments and teams, such as “I work in a very cohesive and supportive academic language and learning team”, and “I feel that I am given permission to take time out when needed [...] I am given the opportunity to discuss my workload and I feel comfortable asking for less or more or a change in focus”, and that “[m]y team leaders and national manager emphasise self-care and encourage us to communicate about any issues”. Others felt supported by institution-level policies and procedures, such as “I have monthly supervision sessions with a psychologist provided by the [institution] to help me process the sometimes upsetting things that students tell me”, and “[g]uidelines are clear from the VC down through the whole university to our team. Any concerns I may raise are listened to. I have adequate leave available and access to support services”.

Other Survey 1 participants commented that their wellbeing was disregarded or treated inadequately. For instance, one commented that “in the current COVID climate I think universities don’t really care about our own wellbeing”, and another that “I have a very heavy workload and the university response is ‘Do less’, which is rarely possible”. One participant simply stated that “[t]his is not a priority at our institution”, and another that “[t]here is often lip service to wellbeing, but I don’t think my manager (or indeed the senior leaders of the institution) know what wellbeing is”.

Survey 1 participants were also asked whether they required extra support in dealing with the changing context of their work. The 36 respondents were split on this – 19 responded that they did require extra support, and 17 responded that they did not. Participants also made recommendations concerning the types of support that would be useful to them. Recommendations included effective communication, support for working from home, counselling workshops and wellbeing resources specifically for staff, more time to share experiences and debrief with colleagues, social opportunities, assistance with facilitating online learning, and mentoring or buddy systems. Some affirmed the support they already received; for instance, one reflected that “I am so glad that I have a regular supervision appointment each month or otherwise I don’t think I could cope”. Another confirmed that, “[w]hat I needed has been made available. If I need more then I could make a request”.

## **Discussion**

Responding to student wellbeing is not a simple matter for higher educators, although research has pointed to the value of doing so (Baik et al., 2019). Many staff, including ALL advisors, experience high workloads and an increasing range of tasks which fall under their remit, without adequate preparation and support to deal with these and without the clarity of what exactly the role entails. Adding pressure to attend to student wellbeing – especially when clear guidelines for doing so do not exist across the sector, as suggested by the participants’ varied responses – may increase workloads and role ambiguity, as well as requiring a significant amount of emotional labour from staff.

Staff preparedness to deal with student wellbeing was queried by both advisors and managers.

As one participant in the managers' survey confirmed, "there is professional practice in many areas of wellbeing support, that is outside the professional training and scope of our learning facilitators". A number of those who responded to the advisors' survey shared this stance. The shared views may be because the managers were or had previously been practicing advisors, and there may also have been closer collaboration between the managers and advisors due to the pandemic. However, there was some misalignment between the two groups, as the managers' responses showed more concern for *how* advisors responded to student wellbeing matters, rather than *whether* they should do so as part of their role. The ways in which advisors and managers work together, and how both groups understand the boundaries and responsibilities of the advisory role, is a relevant area for further research.

It was also confirmed that students can present with multiple and interconnected challenges; for example, struggling with study requirements may result in students feeling distressed or anxious. Therefore, although the role of the advisor may be to assist with academic matters, the expectation that these are neatly bracketed off from the rest of a student's experiences relies on a simplistic depiction of how interactions play out (see also Earwaker, 1992, for a discussion of the complexities of providing academic support).

In terms of *how* advisors could respond to student wellbeing, responses from both surveys suggested a general sense that advisors could be friendly, approachable sources of overall support. This implies that advisors may be expected to engage in a high degree of emotion work. The need to engage in frequent emotional labour can have negative impacts on staff wellbeing (King, 2015); chronic stressors such as this contribute to poor physical and mental health, absenteeism, impaired performance, and employee attrition (Kyriacou, 1987; Zhong et al., 2009). Roche (2019) argues that advisors experience "both positive and negative emotionally charged learning interactions when working with students—particularly in one-to-one consultations when students share their emotional responses to their learning" (p. 18). However, it is likely that this work involves the suppression of advisors' negative emotions (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004; Gkonou & Miller, 2019; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). Huyton (2009), using the frame of emotional labour to understand how student support professionals manage interactions with students, states that inauthentic emotional performances – for instance, the consistent display of only positive emotions – may become normalised in higher education (see also Ogbonna & Harris, 2004) and "could be viewed as a key factor in the consistent delivery of effective learning support" (p. 4).

For all participants, these matters were caught up with the intense and unexpected challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Kniffin et al. (2021), who conducted a review of the emergent changes in work as a result of COVID-19, point to several changes in practice which affect workers such as our participants. These include the need to work from home with very short notice – which both accelerated "recent remote work trends facilitated by the rise of connectivity and communication technologies" (p. 66) and also placed workers in a challenging situation where they needed to deal with work/nonwork separation – as well as isolation and confinement due to lockdowns, and the lack of communication richness that working virtually affords. In order to counter the burnout that this situation may generate, Kniffin et al. (2021) recommend that resources such as access to counselling, therapy, training, feedback and support will be highly important going forward. These needs were echoed by the participants in the surveys.

## Conclusion

The participants highlighted tensions related to student wellbeing, staff wellbeing and academic support, which have been brought about or intensified by the pandemic. Given that COVID-19 is ongoing in many ways, and has already wrought significant changes to how tertiary education is conducted, we agree with Kniffin et al. (2021) that these matters will require ongoing research. Although the study reported here has captured key challenges and experiences of ALL advisors, due to the timing and the increased workloads that many higher educators are currently experiencing, other advisors may have opted to not participate due to time constraints.

The need to work from home, the management of online systems for working and interacting with students and colleagues, increased levels of anxiety and stress amongst students who consult with advisors for support, and decreased contact with colleagues all indicate that staff need support to manage the changes, and managers need to respond to this need. While working online has been one of the major changes in higher education in the past decade, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged educators to maintain effective learning online under rapidly changing, adverse conditions (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2022). Such an intensified move to online work has not been without challenges; competent and experienced educators have found themselves in a novice spaces, giving rise to negative emotions and further emotion work (Naylor & Nyanjom, 2021; Nyanjom & Naylor, 2021). Lockdowns may now have ended, but there is no indication of institutions stepping away from online learning as a way to increase student recruitment and retention.

The pandemic and the conditions that it has brought about will inevitably have ongoing impacts on staff and students alike. It is paramount that institutions offer appropriate and sufficient support for both of these groups going forward. However, whether institutions are clear about what wellbeing *means* – and how staff are expected to respond to it – is unclear. The concern is that without clear guidelines for staff, this matter will be determined by individuals, which in turn may lead to a widening of core staff responsibilities without sufficient preparation or training.

Our findings from this exploratory study suggest that teaching and learning in our contexts underwent many changes from the onset of the pandemic, with some higher educators adapting more readily than others. The growing focus on wellbeing in the tertiary sector will need to be accompanied by consideration of how the ALL role intersects with student wellbeing. Recent indications, such as the upcoming 2023 Association for Academic Language and Learning Conference 2023, in which student wellbeing and ALL is a key theme, suggest that these matters are beginning to be grappled with seriously.

Going forward, it will be important to track how these changes are managed over time by professionals across the university. We would also argue that having agreed definitions of what is meant by wellbeing, having role clarity for advisors, and providing clear options to refer students and staff appropriately will be critical for this area of work. Where roles are blurred, expertise may be overlooked or assumed, which can negatively affect individuals and professional groups (Malkin & Chanock, 2018).

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university.

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