

# TRAVELLING UP THE LIFELONG LEARNING CURVE: A REGIONAL ODYSSEY

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Providing language and learning support on a regional campus of a metropolitan-based university over the past twelve years has entailed witnessing and responding to myriad changes: in the support unit structure and nomenclature, the institution, the campus, the student body, the region. There has been a continual rethinking of role and focus for the campus itself and its staff. Changing layers of discourses have included: equity, inclusivity, student-centred learning, flexible delivery, internationalisation and economic rationalism. The paper considers the impact of these changes in emphasis on work in language and academic skills support and the tensions between competing discourses. It highlights the importance for those involved in academic skills development to be lifelong learners, able to respond to new needs in changing circumstances. This is, in an imperative, if they are to continue to assist students to be engaged in a transforming learning experience.

**Keywords:** *Organisational change; Lifelong learning; Regional campuses*

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to give an insight into the context of language and academic skills support at a small regional campus of a large metropolitan-based university, from the perspective of someone who has been a participant observer in the many changes of the past decade and more. The characteristics of such a campus are visited, together with the joys and trials of academic staff there. Changes in the campus and its focus, the university, the student support unit, the language and learning support position, and the student body are described briefly. The implications for the teaching and learning environment of changing dominant discourses are sketched, along with the accompanying implications for support. These changes emphasise the need for those who support others in their learning to themselves be committed to a life of continual learning, with new learning requirements coming in increasingly more frequent 'chunks'. Reflections on a personal learning journey are also included.

The last twelve years, the time of my work within a university staff context, have seen changes in that context in all four identity areas of the conference theme: my position in language and learning advising, the unit of which I am a part, the campus student profile and the technologies that are a part of its teaching and learning environment.

Before the establishment of the University of South Australia (UniSA), Whyalla Campus was one of the three campuses of the South Australian Institute of Technology (SAIT), the other two being situated 400 kilometres away in the capital, in the Adelaide city centre and in the northern metropolitan area. These three campuses joined with three campuses (all metropolitan) of the South Australian College of Advanced Education (SACAE) to operate as the new University from the beginning of 1991. The University currently has six campuses (a second campus having been established in the Central Business District, and a suburban campus closed), with over 25000 students. Only 620 of these are enrolled in Whyalla programs, and of this number 245 are now off-campus, mainly in the flexibly delivered Nursing program. The other Whyalla programs are in the Social Work, Computer and Information Science, Business, Engineering, and Communication and

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Media Management areas. There is a Bridging Program, which has run in various forms for well over a decade, and a newer PhD program.

## **The regional campus context**

Regional campuses of metropolitan-based universities share some features that distinguish them from metropolitan campuses and from regionally-based universities. For this reason, UniSA's Whyalla Campus has engaged in bench-marking activities with regional campuses of universities such as La Trobe to compare performance and investigate areas of mutual concern and interest. Some collaboration has evolved, for example the journal *Rural Social Work* (Whyalla and Albury/Wodonga). A collaborative research project on the working life of rural academics has increased awareness of their situation and also of metropolitan academics' perceptions of their regional counterparts. It has also shown the interrelationship of these academics with their regional communities (Ellis et al. 2000). The vital current and potential role of this community-university partnership in regional development has been explored further in an Evaluations and Investigations Program (Garlick 1998). Garlick summarises the ways in which universities contribute to their local and regional community (and vice versa) and the benefits that could come to both university and community 'through their greater engagement' (Cumpston et al. 2001, p. 13). (See also Harvey 1999; for a glimpse of this connectedness at a regionally-based university, see Moses 2001.)

Working in language and learning support at such a campus has meant that I have had a role not only in that area (and collegial links with metropolitan language and academic skills staff) but also in Campus-wide concerns: I am a member of the Whyalla Campus Board and Academic Committee, was at one time a member of a marketing committee and am involved in two research groups. As commented by several participants in the rural academic study referred to above, in our setting there is a lot of inter-disciplinary conversation and more formal collaboration and cooperation. For me this has meant working with staff and students from a number of different discipline areas. My research has included collaborative work relating to: the Bridging program; flexible delivery of the Nursing program; and international graduates of the Campus. It has also included individual work relating to Indigenous

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student participation and to a community service avenue of the Campus, the local branch of the University of the Third Age. Other community involvement connected with my UniSA work has included some presentations to Year 12 students from other towns, and involvement with the Whyalla Reconciliation Network.


## **Changing times**

The increasing frequency of changes over the past twelve years is certainly not confined to Whyalla Campus or UniSA. In particular, government funding cuts have had implications for all Australian universities. Units seen as providing a service, rather than obviously bringing in student fees, have been particularly vulnerable to downsizing or outsourcing proposals. While in some cases Whyalla Campus has been forced to react to influences from outside the Campus and from outside the University, it has also initiated significant changes and developments. This section considers: changes relating specifically to the student support area with regard to location, positions and nomenclature; changes to the student profile of the Campus and program availability, along with surrounding regional issues; the influence of the uptake of new technologies on course delivery and research and other opportunities; and shifts to underlying discourses and philosophies.

### ***Changes in the position, unit and University***

At the beginning of 1990, the Whyalla Campus Counsellor and I moved to a suite of offices and tutorial room constituting the Educational Support Centre of the Campus. We were both members of the Institute of Technology's Educational Support Services. During that year, merger preparations were advancing, and these included meetings with our counterparts in the three SACAE campuses that were soon to join us. Their student learning support staff were lecturers called Study Advisers, and belonged to a unit called Student Services, whereas SAIT Language and Learning Advisers held senior tutor positions. It was resolved that there needed to be consistency in the new institution. The former SAIT Language and Learning Advisers were reclassified (mid-1991) as Level B, in a unit called Educational Support Services (ESS) and subsequently also came to be called Study Advisers. In 1994 the Study Advisers were moved to a new unit, the Centre for University

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Teaching and Learning (CUTL), which amalgamated the following year with the Distance Education Centre and Visual Productions to form the Flexible Learning Centre (FLC). The Educational Support Centres, where Counsellors and Careers Advisers were colocated with Study Advisers, were renamed Student Support Centres (SSCs) in 1996. In 1997 these various professional groups all became part of the new student support section of the FLC: Student Educational Services. Yet more structural and nomenclature changes included a division in the Study Advisers' ranks, with some becoming part of Faculty and University Learning Services (FULS), the others remaining as the Student Learning Support (SLS) section of Teaching and Learning Advisory Services (TALAS). By 1998 SLS and Counsellors and other advisory staff had become Student Support Services. Meanwhile, in response to budgetary constraints, the Whyalla student support positions were transferred (all but 0.1 of the Study Adviser's fraction) to Whyalla Campus cost centre and a contract Careers/International Adviser 0.4 position was not renewed. Some further FLC restructuring resulted in metropolitan Study Advisers' applying for a lesser number of new positions as Learning Advisers. Metropolitan counsellors became known for a time as Student Advisers. Meanwhile, back at Whyalla, we continued as Study Adviser and Counsellor (the latter also being the disability contact person, and taking on a careers and international students role), reporting directly to the Dean: Whyalla, later having the Deputy Dean (a position since gone) as line manager for an interim period. So, while occupying one office for most of the last twelve years, I have been part of two institutions, had two position levels and job titles, been part of a location with two different names and belonged to four university units (ESS in both SAIT and UniSA, CUTL, FLC and finally Whyalla). During this time the University also moved (early 1999) from a faculty structure to having four divisions (Business and Enterprise; Education, Arts and Social Sciences; Engineering and the Environment; and Health Sciences). Whyalla and the FLC (along with the Library and some other areas) are now part of the portfolio of Access and Learning Support.

### ***Changes in the Campus and its environs***

With its much smaller student body, compared with the metropolitan campuses, Whyalla Campus has always been a fairly close-knit community, with students having easy access to most lecturers, and the ability to get to know people in other


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disciplines than their own. Once a campus with a focus on providing heavy industry professional needs and with a consequent preponderance of males, the gender balance has improved with an increase in the range of disciplines. Internal students are both full- and part-time, and include school-leavers and people of mature age. They come not only from Whyalla and surrounding areas, but also from farther afield. The opening of on-campus student accommodation in 1994 provided additional opportunities for students from outside Whyalla.

As indicated in the introduction, a large percentage of Whyalla students are now based off-campus. This has been one of the significant changes of the decade. The offering of the Bachelor of Nursing off-campus as well as on has provided new opportunities for many rural and isolated students, including some Indigenous students, and opened up opportunities for the Campus to expand its role in regional South Australia and beyond. However, it has also contributed to changing the Campus character, as have changes in the range of programs offered. Engineering, which catered for some of the human resource needs of the city's largest employer, BHP, was affected by downsizing there (Martin & Petkov 2000); some programs and year levels moved to Adelaide. The hiving off of OneSteel has not resulted in new intakes of Engineering students. Other program changes have included: a generic Whyalla Bridging Program replacing other enabling programs having a more specific focus, the abandonment of the Applied Science degree, and involvement for just a few years with an Early Childhood Education program. Some double degrees are offered (Business combined with either Social Work or Computer and Information Science). A growing postgraduate program has added to Campus research strength. One of the study centres of the University's Aboriginal and Islander Support Unit has been located at the Campus since 1997, providing additional support and resources for internal and external Indigenous students. (In 2001 I have been working there on a temporary basis one day a week). In recent years the establishment of the South Australian Centre for Rural and Remote Health (SACRRH) at the Campus (a UniSA, Adelaide University and the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care collaboration) has opened up more opportunities for Campus staff. SACRRH's recent incorporation into the Spencer Gulf Rural Health School has meant further changes to Campus facilities.

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The Campus has, over the years, faced a number of threats to its very survival. The 'savings targets' forced upon higher education in 1997 led to UniSA's *Changing the budget profile* document, to which all areas of the University had to respond. Rumours were rife, and the Whyalla community was strongly supportive of the 'Whyalla University' as many called the Campus. The Campus response to the budgetary exigencies was set out in *Whyalla Campus: Towards the Year 2000* with proposed changes and developments outlined. The Campus has proved that it has a significant role to play in regional development and provision of higher education, it being the only regional university campus in South Australia. (Current questions about the role and functions of the Campus library mean that complacency is an unwise luxury.) From having very much a focus on teaching activities, the Campus has come to have as well a greater role in research and consultancy activities. In the past, there was great reliance on what the corresponding schools in Adelaide were offering, using in many cases materials prepared there. More recently Whyalla has taken the initiative for preparing new courses and program developments. Some of its initiatives, such as the flexible delivery of Nursing, have subsequently been taken up by metropolitan campuses.

The implications for the Campus of changes in the steel industry have been mentioned. However, new developments have compensated, including increases in tourist enterprises, aquaculture, and experimental work in sustainable energy resources. Whyalla is not parochial, but looks for opportunities outside of its bounds. Apart from involvement in organisations such as the Upper Spencer Gulf Common Purpose Group, it has also formed a sister city relationship with Ezhou a "little" city of a million people in Hubei Province, China. There has been a decline of population: Whyalla once had a population of well over 30000 – it now has about 23500 residents.

However, the Campus students do not come only from Whyalla and the surrounding region. Internal students include some from Adelaide as well as a small number of international students, and off-campus students are situated in most states of Australia. The current number of international students also indicates a change over the years; in the mid-nineties numbers were greater, with numbers of mainly Malaysian and Hong Kong students in Business and Engineering. At the moment



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we have a small number from Bhutan completing Certified Practising Accountant requirements, one from Malaysia and one from Hong Kong in Business, and a Computer and Information Science student from Israel. Our links with China led to student exchanges in 1999 and also staff exchanges and are being explored as a conduit for future students. (Other relationships are being developed with institutions in India and Canada.)

### ***Changes in technologies***

New technologies have contributed to many Campus changes over the years. The development of videoconferencing facilities meant more opportunities for minimising isolation. The establishment of telelearning centres in a number of South Australian locations in the north and west made access for isolated students much more feasible (Hinter 1996). A telephone tie-line means that Whyalla staff can communicate by telephone with staff at metropolitan campuses just as cheaply as metropolitan staff can with each other. Improved computing resources (e-mail communication and Internet research for both staff and students) have reduced isolation from research colleagues, necessitated staff development and meant that computer literacy has become part of the learning support staff repertoire for teaching as well as a tool of trade. This applies equally, of course, to such staff wherever they may be situated. University moves towards online course delivery only serve to emphasise this.

### **Changing discourses**

Over the period described, different discourses have become dominant, or 'flavour of the month'. These have included: equity; inclusivity; lifelong, student-centred learning; quality; flexible delivery; internationalisation; graduate qualities; and economic rationalism. As new foci have emerged, the old have persisted in their influence on those committed to them. So we have multi-layered higher education discourses – the earlier ideologies are still there underneath or beside the later. Those reflected in institutional policies and official foci are not necessarily reflected in the teaching priorities of institutional staff or the learning goals of students.



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## **Equity**

When I set out on an academic pathway, late in 1989, the very rationale for the newly-created Language and Learning Adviser position was to provide for equity of participation for a range of students from non-traditional "equity groups" that had been under-represented in higher education. Groups originally targeted were Indigenous students, students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, socio-economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and women in non-traditional disciplines. (Some learning support had been informally included in the past in the Counsellor's role.) My position, along with another half-time and one full-time position at SAIT metropolitan campuses, was funded under a Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP) allocation for a Language and Learning Skills Project at SAIT. The Project aimed 'to assist disadvantaged students in developing language and learning skills appropriate to tertiary study' (from the Project information sheet). Such provision of support personnel was a response to the Commonwealth Government's 1990 paper, *A Fair Chance for All* (DEET). Elsewhere, HEEP provided for a range of equity initiatives (DEET 1993). A 1996 review of progress towards the goals of *A Fair Chance for All* found that, while there was evidence of equity in access, there was still considerable room for improvement in the areas of participation and outcomes (NBEET 1996). Ramsay et al. (1996) look particularly at the UniSA's situation with regard to equity group progress and attrition. Equity featured strongly in the mission and goals of the University of South Australia. However, a CUTL-initiated study involving Study Advisers as researchers (Moore et al. 1996) found some mismatch between official University documents and what the study revealed: 'the notion that equity is integral to learning is not widely shared in the University community' (p. xiv); there was a consequent need for staff development in this area so that equity should become truly 'embedded in the learning itself' (p. xiv). In the early days in my job, I spent time learning about the Campus equity group profile, and planning how the needs of these students could be met, advertising my services (to all students), and teaching mainly in one-to-one situations. My work in the early years, similarly to that of my metropolitan colleagues, included orientation/transition activities, workshops and one-to-one appointments, with some informal staff developing concerning the focus of my position and equity issues.

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## ***Inclusivity***

From a focus that tended to provide support to enable a more diverse range of students to enter and "cope" with higher education, by developing their skills to allow them to fit in, providing various bridging or foundation programs (e.g., Cooper, Ellis & Sawyer 2000, for Whyalla Campus; Beasley 1997, for Flinders University) and targeted orientation programs, the institutional emphasis changed to inclusivity. This involved making changes in language and course content so as to be more inclusive of all students, irrespective of gender, culture, learning styles, disability, and so on and 'turning a view of diversity as an obstacle to seeing it as an asset' (Kaucher 1994, p. 3). From initial concerns to promote the use of gender-inclusive language, the aims broadened to encompass inclusivity of cultural background, students with disabilities and so on. A UniSA inclusive curriculum research project that explored 'pedagogical issues and strategies associated with student diversity' (Barnett 1994, p. 5) was but one institutional response to this endeavour to cater for the needs of an expanded student profile; others were the holding of workshops and the development of guidelines. (See also Hollinsworth & Zakaria 1997). Support staff at all campuses had a role to play in disseminating these emphases, as well as themselves working with the groups and individuals that were the targets of such strategies.

## ***Lifelong, student-centred learning***

Student-centred lifelong learning (implied in the University's first goal) shared these aspirations of inclusivity. A range of pedagogies such as problem-based learning and experiential learning shifted the focus of the teaching/learning environment. More emphasis was placed on the need for all to learn throughout life, not only by reason of changing professional requirements but also as part of a fulfilling life, and for university education to prepare students for this (Candy, Crebert & O'Leary 1993). This reinforced the necessity for support practices that developed student autonomy. In some cases this involved "weaning" students from dependence on the Study Adviser, a dependence that may have been a bigger issue at Whyalla with its smaller numbers of students and greater ease of making multiple one-to-one appointments. It also involved encouraging others who had been struggling on their own to seek assistance in developing effective learning skills.

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## ***Quality***

Emphases on quality assurance and 'customer service' meant that support personnel were perhaps more conscious of a need to evaluate their work and reflect on their practice. Record-keeping to enable this evaluation and the demonstration to others in the University community of the quality of services provided became essential. For some, this also entailed the development of the new IT skills required for entering and collating information on databases. Some learning support staff on various campuses had involvement with activities associated with faculty Quality Improvement Plans for Teaching and Learning. This provided opportunities for encouraging an acceptance of the importance of embedding academic skills development within courses.

## ***Flexible delivery***

The increase in flexible modes of delivery brought new challenges for learning support. Support for off-campus students has increasingly involved e-mail and telephone contact. Occasional face-to-face discussions, for example when Nursing students come for residential workshops, are much appreciated by the students, and also by the Study Adviser who thereby gains a better understanding of their concerns. These are often practical matters to do with e-mail access problems, and emotional ones to do with a sense of isolation. Encouraging students to network with others in a similar situation is important, and the basis for this is often arranged at on-campus workshops, including the transition day held for external students early in the academic year in Adelaide and at Whyalla. The increasing need for students to have good online access to communications and course materials raises new equity issues. For an insight into the experiences of staff and students, with widely varying degrees of access to computer facilities, involved in Whyalla's flexibly delivered Nursing program, see Miller and Ellis (1999). The increasingly online learning environment, along with pressure of numbers in some cases, has led to new strategies to support students: My UniSA Learning Connection colleagues have developed a range of online learning guides and generic and course-specific workshops (and others related to other Learning Connection professional areas such as careers). These have been a valuable resource for both students and staff and

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have enabled metropolitan language and learning staff to reach a wider audience than their numbers would otherwise allow.


### ***Internationalisation***

Internationalisation has become a University imperative (Luong et al.1996). Whyalla Campus graduates have received exposure to diverse perspectives over the years through the presence of staff and students from many cultural backgrounds. This has been augmented by the lessons learned by those who have been on student exchanges or study tours to China, Canada, the Philippines and Indonesia, lessons that they have been able to share with others on their return. In addition, a group of ten students from our sister city's Ezhou University, brought more inter-cultural learning. Staff exchanges, scholarships, consultancy opportunities and study leave have contributed to further broadening of international perspectives at the Campus, as has the implementation of the seventh graduate quality in courses (see below). This semester, a lecturer has been teaching off-shore students in Hong Kong, with intensive teaching spread over two visits there – further broadening the collective Campus international experience.

### ***Graduate qualities***

In 1996 the University adopted a set of generic qualities, the 'Qualities of a University of South Australia Graduate'. The University has also been involved in a project with fellow Australian Technology Network members on 'generic capabilities' of graduates (Australian Technology Network 2000). The seven UniSA graduate qualities relate to: knowledge needed for a profession, lifelong learning skills, problem-solving ability, teamwork and autonomy, ethics and social responsibility, effective communication, and international perspectives. Course outlines indicate the proportion of units (credit points) that are allocated to developing each quality. Students are also guided in recording their achievement of these qualities through their programs, thus developing a useful resource for job applications. Language and learning staff were involved in developing leaflets explaining the qualities, and have an obvious role to play in helping students to become autonomous lifelong learners as well as effective team members and communicators. Currently an information literacy project within the University is focusing on mapping within

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courses the ways in which they enable the achievement of the second graduate quality (lifelong learning). At Whyalla this, along with the other graduate qualities, has been mapped through the whole Social Work program (*Mapping Graduate Qualities through the Bachelor of Social Work* 2001), and the same procedure is being followed with the Nursing program.

### ***Market forces***

Since the mid-nineties we have been increasingly confronted by the influence of market forces on the world of higher education. Corporate financial imperatives have called into question the existence of various services and have affected whole campuses. Institutions had to respond to what the government referred to as 'the savings task', if they were not to jeopardise their role in higher education. The Vice-Chancellor referred to 'the first stages of an ideological and economic battle about the shape of education in this country in the future' and warned that this battle could be lost

... if institutions like ours which are the outriders for a changed way of viewing both the community's right to tertiary education and the approach and content of that education fail to recognise early enough that they must reshape themselves in every way if they are to continue to carry out their mission.  
(Bradley 1997)

For language and learning support staff this had implications of downsizing and consequent workload consequences. It also brought to the forefront the need for considering ways of contributing to University revenue, and the frustrations of long waits for up-to-date equipment.

### **A personal journey**

Over the years my teaching and learning philosophy and practice, my attitudes to research, and my skills have evolved. A period of great change has also been a period of considerable growth.

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## ***Learning and teaching***

Most of my pre-1989 working life was as a school-teacher, in Australia and abroad, mostly but not exclusively in secondary education. I saw myself as a facilitator or scaffolder of learning, but still felt responsible for getting across to students a body of knowledge in a given time. In the tertiary context, I saw myself still in this role in some part-time lecturing within courses, while recognising that students were expected to take more responsibility for their own learning. I saw (and see) the university as a learning community of students and staff who ideally found intrinsic rewards in learning, as well as professional pre-requisites. (I felt great delight once when an Engineering student told me that he was giving up his course to go and study English literature – it showed me that there were still people in the younger generation interested in other than financial rewards for their study.) I still cling to the 'all learners together' notion, disliking the language of 'customers' and 'clients'. In my language and learning support role, I saw myself as working to assist students to learn to adapt to the university culture, and adjust to its expectations regarding assessable work. While my current stance is not opposed to this, it has broadened to a greater awareness of the need to seek opportunities to work with other lecturers, and to not take the institutional culture for granted when there are aspects that need critiquing, if the institution is to meet the needs of its diverse student body and its community. (Some of these issues were explored in research into institutional influences on Indigenous student participation; see Ellis 1998.) The financial climate has also made it apparent that practicalities have to be dealt with, such as ways of earning revenue for the University. (In my case so far this has been confined mainly to whatever published papers have earned for the institution.)

## ***Practice***

My practice as a provider of language and learning support has moved from mainly one-to-one appointments at the start to include small group lunch-time workshops, presentations in course classes, orientation and transition activities and computer literacy. I have also become involved in related Campus activities such as the English classes for the Chinese exchange students in 1999. While there is always more to learn, I feel that I have built up some of what the social workers call 'practice wisdom' over the years. The lack of others in the same field at the Campus has

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been compensated for by the opportunity to work collaboratively with staff from other discipline areas. The unilearn e-mail list has been a great remover of a sense of isolation from colleagues in other institutions.

### ***Research***


Along with probably the majority of staff on the Campus, I did not see myself in the early years as having much involvement with research projects, although I was happy to participate when requested, such as the CUTL project mentioned above (Moore et al. 1996), or helping out in minor ways with others' projects. I saw research not as something that I should be doing as part of the job, but rather as something that should be done when there was a definite need for a particular project – not what often seemed to me then as "research for the sake of research". My return to study motivated me to delve into new areas, and to write again. When I eventually completed my Master of Education, I wanted work that I had done to be of some use to others, and so I had the incentive to aim for conference and journal publications. The fact that my position was still only classified as half-time also meant that I had uncommitted hours that could be spent on other research projects, as well as what was reasonable within my position. This continues. The support of a retired spouse and minimal travel time to work have also given me extra time. The cross-fertilisation of conversation with staff in various disciplines provides inspiration and opportunity for collaborative projects (see above). The research itself is enjoyable, and then there are findings to be disseminated. There is also the pleasure of crafting something (or at least of having done so when it is finished). Research for me now is part of my personal lifelong learning journey.

### ***Identity issues***

A continuing issue for me has been academic identity. Lecturers within programs often seem unwilling to regard as fellow academics people who are not course lecturers. My teaching often seems not to be regarded as "real" teaching. When I was involved in other hourly-paid teaching at the Campus in the early 1990s, it tended to be on that basis that I was regarded as a part-time academic, not by reason of the language and learning support; yet the latter was the focus of a position classified as academic since its establishment. Starting to build a research



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profile seemed to make me somewhat more visible as part of the academic community. However, as some of my research activities were carried out separately (on an hourly-paid basis) from my Study Adviser work, while others were included in it, it was not always clear to others that some of the research was being done as the expected research component of the Study Adviser position. Such identity matters have been a concern of colleagues in many Australian institutions, as reflected in a position statement compiled in 1999 (Carmichael et al. 1999).


The 'Study Adviser' title of my position proves to be misleading to some students; some seek me out for consultation on their proposed course or program changes and related administrative matters, belonging rather to Campus Central (the central student administrative unit on each campus) or their program directors and course coordinators. The 'Student Support Centre' title for the location also attracts some enquiries more appropriately directed to the Student Association, but this happens less frequently than when there was an incorrect 'Student Services' sign over the door (finally changed only this year).

Identity issues have also accompanied the structural changes. I felt part of the Student Learning Support team when I belonged to the same unit, despite the distance. It was hoped that collegial links would continue when I was attached to Whyalla instead of the FLC, and they do to some extent; however, there is not the same close association as previously, when we shared a computer folder and regular meetings. In 2000, the metropolitan SSCs launched a new identity as Learning Connection. This change underlined the separation. Before that all the campus units had been called Student Support Centres, even though Whyalla's was separately funded. We often feel 'othered' when we see references to Learning Connection offices 'on each campus' – there seems to be a constant need in this as in many areas of Campus life to put the question, 'What about Whyalla?' The University community does not seem to have sorted out the matter, as mail items are frequently addressed to Learning Adviser or Learning Connection, Whyalla.

### ***Areas of my growth***

There has been considerable skills and knowledge development in my time in the position. The last twelve years have seen me change from someone who had barely

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used a computer – and I still wrote in pen my early coursework assignments in my master's – to being unable to face the process of writing anything of reasonable length without a word processor. I have also added to my experience in teaching students of other language backgrounds, a highlight being the opportunity to be on a brief exchange to Ezhou University in China in 2000. There have also been many opportunities for my own development in research skills areas and other areas related to the University's goals. This semester, with other Whyalla colleagues from various areas, I have been engaged in a series of Creating a Collaborative Learning Environment workshops; these have provided great opportunities for discussing learning and teaching in the university context.

## **Conclusion**

I have endeavoured in this paper to give an overview of how a regional campus provider of language and learning support has been involved in the total life of the Campus community, extending beyond the core business of the position. This has been against the background of the changes in higher education that have affected all of us over the same period. I have given, albeit at a fairly shallow level because of the twelve-year timeframe involved, my perspective of the way these changes have affected learning support, particularly at a regional campus. What is most important with regard to our lives as language and academic skills advisers is that we ourselves recognise our need to be lifelong learners along with our students, as we develop "practice wisdom" and respond to the never-ceasing changes in our environment. One thing I am sure that we have learned is the need for flexibility, not only in order simply to stay working in the situation we have chosen, but also to be able to rise to new challenges and take advantage of opportunities to implement strategies to improve the learning/teaching environment for all students. Just as students who engage whole-heartedly in their university education find it to be a life-changing experience, so we often experience transformative learning as we perform our professional activities (Mezirow 1991). Just as students experiencing change in their 'meaning perspectives' need support through that process (Cranton 1994), so we need support from our colleagues and institution.

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The University of South Australia's positioning statement is: 'educating professionals; creating and applying knowledge; serving the community'. Language and learning support staff have an important role to play in all of these aspects of university life.

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