

# Preface

## Critiquing and reflecting

On 24-25 November 2005, The Australian National University hosted the biennial Language and Academic Skills (LAS) Conference, *Critiquing and reflecting: LAS profession and practice*. Every two years, the LAS conference brings together academics and professionals from Australia and New Zealand, while also regularly attracting international participants. The LAS2005 Conference, as with previous LAS Conferences, proved directly relevant to people researching, teaching or interested in the teaching of academic, language and learning skills at a tertiary level. Over 140 participants attended the conference.

We chose the title *Critiquing and reflecting: LAS profession and practice* because the LAS2005 Conference marked an anniversary of sorts. In 1994, just over ten years ago, Kate Chanock of La Trobe University hosted the first national conference under the Language and Academic Skills banner; this, together with the development of the Unilearn discussion list, was a breakthrough in terms of communicating what we do, why we do it, and how we do it. The LAS2005 Conference aimed to provide a forum at which to critique and reflect on the development of the Australasian LAS profession since 1994; to exchange ideas, research and experiences in academic skills teaching; and to contribute to the growth of a network of national and international LAS practitioners.

The LAS2005 Conference was a watershed in the development of the Australasian LAS profession, as we laid the foundations for creating a professional association. Thus, the conference theme of 'critiquing and reflecting' invited LAS practitioners to foreground many of the issues that LAS professionals face as individual practitioners, as part of a team, as a centre/unit within the academy, and/or as a profession. In response to the conference theme, LAS practitioners produced papers on a range of issues, including how to advise students in virtual space, how to use e-learning to encourage students to be independent, how to coordinate peer mentoring programs, how to develop a knowledge management framework to organise what it is we know, how to remain creative in the face of routines, and how to resist the dreaded 'remedial' tag. The implications of online learning on LAS practice were considered by many writers, as was the issue of how we evaluate and assess what we do. Others drew on the work of particular theorists, for example, the work of Michel Foucault or of Viktor Shklovsky, in order to reflect on LAS knowledge and practice. Workshops, too, were held on the challenges faced by those new to the LAS profession, on the need to initiate a nationwide study to evaluate the provision of LAS services, on strategies for working with graduate coursework students in one-to-one consultations, and on interrogating the 'LAS Position Statement 1999' so as to consider how the LAS profession can initiate institutional change rather than react to change. In addition to giving papers and running workshops, LAS practitioners presented posters that focused on, among other things, the role LAS centres can play, in an age of diminishing resources, in providing LAS services to an increasingly diverse student body; the challenges associated with evaluating the effectiveness of LAS programs and interventions; and the use of developing technologies to enhance student access to LAS provision. The LAS2005 Conference also provided an opportunity for heads of LAS centres to identify what they considered to be the issues that we as a profession need to confront.

## Reviewing process

In her Keynote address, Kate Chanock, who has had experience editing LAS conference proceedings, cautions editors and reviewers against taking on 'the mantle of gatekeepers' and suggests instead that our 'expertise is more usefully employed in helping less experienced writers to shape their papers for publication'. With *Critiquing and reflecting: LAS profession and practice* we hope we have managed to strike a balance between gatekeeping and being supportive. Indeed, we took the view that both the process of writing the paper and the process of reviewing papers provided LAS practitioners with a professional development opportunity.

To support peer reviewers we put in place protocols that would help those new (and those not so new) to the reviewing process. For writers, we put in place a reviewing process that provided feedback to writers at every stage, from the abstract to the final draft. For this conference, the LAS2005 Conference Steering Committee reviewed the abstracts. If we could not see how the proposed paper was related to the conference themes or how the paper was grounded in the literature, then we contacted the authors and asked them to re-consider and re-write their abstract. In total, 46 abstracts were accepted by the steering committee. Of these, 28 authors wanted their papers to go through the double-blind peer review process.

Some authors received consistent recommendations from their anonymous reviewers; for example, both reviewers might have deemed the paper acceptable for publication subject to minor revision or they may have believed that the paper needed to be revised and resubmitted. Other authors received differing recommendations; for example, one reviewer may have said a paper was acceptable for publication as is, while the other reviewer may have said it needed to be revised and resubmitted. After the peer-review process, most authors acted on the reviewers' feedback and, after negotiating changes with the editorial committee, chose to re-submit their papers for consideration for the proceedings. A number of authors found this reviewing feedback process to be very beneficial. One author said: 'I . . . feel grateful for the initial reviewers' reports which helped me a great deal'. Another said: 'We would like to thank the referees for their time and care. Other pairs of eyes are essential in producing good quality writing'.

In the end, the editorial committee reviewed 24 papers for the proceedings. Using the reviewers' feedback, we read the revised drafts and assessed them against the following criteria:

- The paper addresses the conference theme of 'critiquing & reflecting';
- It engages with issues/problems of significance to the LAS profession;
- It is grounded in theory/scholarship;
- It is logically argued to a well-supported conclusion;
- It evidences coherent development and appropriate academic style; and
- It conforms to format guidelines, including appropriate referencing style and proofreading.

At the end of this process, 16 papers, as well as Kate Chanock's Keynote address, were considered appropriate for the proceedings; one of these papers was subsequently accepted for publication elsewhere and was therefore not included in the final proceedings.

Authors of papers that were not included in the proceedings were given detailed feedback as to why the editorial committee made that decision. On this process, an author commented: 'Thanks for all your hard work in bringing together the feedback on our paper. Far from feeling depressed we feel we have learnt a lot from the process'. Of the 15 papers that appear in this proceedings, some required minor revisions and, in some cases, cuts to the word length. During this stage of the process authors were consulted about changes to their paper. Again, at the end of this process the editorial committee received positive feedback from authors: 'We thank both the reviewers and the Committee for the commitment to high standards, and all of their feedback'.

Other papers presented at the conference will appear on the conference website. We feel it is necessary to do this in order to make LAS knowledge available to the LAS community. Unrefereed papers from the 'Changing identities' LAS2001 conference are on the University of Wollongong website; over the years I have often had cause to refer to them. As a conference attendee, I have attended excellent presentations that were not included in the proceedings. Therefore, having the conference presentations available on the web provides the LAS community with a valuable resource.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Stephen Milnes

## Peer reviewers

Alex Barthel, University of Technology, Sydney  
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Kate Chanock, La Trobe University  
Fiona Cotton, University of New South Wales  
Helen Drury, University of Sydney  
Gail Craswell, The Australian National University  
Alison Cumming-Thom, The Australian National University  
Julianne East, La Trobe University  
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Deane Fergie, University of Adelaide  
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