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Invited Article

Student reflections on enabling success and overcoming barriers

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In October 2024, students from five Australian universities participated in a panel session of AALL's professional development series, "Connect. Inspire. Share." (aall.org.au/connect-inspire-share-catalogue-2/). Here, three of them summarise their reflections on how they have succeeded despite barriers to study, and the role of individual consultations with Learning Advisers in their success.

Key Words: student voice, barriers, student success

1. Introduction (Kate Chanock)

On October 9th, 2024, a group of students from five different Australian universities spoke at a session of the Association for Academic Language and Learning's (AALL) professional development series, "Connect. Inspire. Share." (CIS). Each of them responded to prompts from the convenor, Steve Campitelli, asking them to talk about what worked for them in their approach to studying; what barriers they had encountered; and how they had intersected with their institutions' academic skills units. All had met with significant challenges and had found ways to deal with those until now, towards the end of their courses, they could be confident of success. As I listened, along with the rest of the large audience on Zoom, I felt that these students' experiences and reflections were ones that more Learning Advisers should be aware of. And, because working individually with a Learning Adviser in their institution was a strategy that all had used and spoke very warmly about, I thought this Special Issue of the *JALL* could provide us with that opportunity to hear from them.

One thing these students had in common was that they could all be described by the much (over?)-used term "nontraditional". All were older than the school-leaver cohort, and indeed, one was in his sixties. Two spoke of having a "grudge" against education, stemming from earlier negative experiences which had kept them from returning to study for some years. One described herself as neurodivergent, one had a vision impairment, and one was recovering from a stroke. Two were the first in their families to attend university. One was in paid employment while studying. One had four children. One was Indigenous. One was an international student who, although she came from another Anglophone country, found that she needed a "translator" to guide her through the different expectations of the Australian system, and found that translator in her Learning Hub.

Thus, each of the five had not one but a combination of characteristics that we think of as "non-traditional", but they also challenged the idea that we could label a student according to particular characteristics that we might be able to see. As one student put it, every student comes with "baggage", and no tutor can ever know what that baggage is. Each student in this group was carrying

their own baggage; but, importantly for us in the audience, none of them was carrying it alone. Each had found support from peers, teaching staff, and/or services for Indigenous students or students with disabilities, and all had consulted Learning Advisers, whom they credited with boosting their confidence, sharing learning strategies, explaining unfamiliar academic expectations, giving feedback on work in progress, and perceiving who the student was and what they needed in order to do their best. These were not things that could be achieved in larger groups or by outsourcing services or entrusting them to AI. There might be a place for all such offerings, but what they could do was not the same as what could be achieved in an individual consultation.

In response to an audience question about whether individual consultations should be held in an open study hub or private space, all agreed emphatically that a private space was needed to avoid background noise and distractions, and to be sensitive to the vulnerability of students for whom seeking help is an emotional risk. A confessional space should be in a "bubble", as one of the students put it; and someone who may start to cry doesn't want an audience! Open drop-in spaces are handy for quick questions, but longer consultations should be private.

In these paragraphs, I have condensed important common points, but I wanted also to give readers access to the voices of the students, as far as possible. I wrote to each of them, asking if they would like to contribute brief responses to the questions, "What barriers have you encountered in learning at university?" and "What has helped you to overcome those barriers?" to be collated for this Special Issue of the *JALL*. One was too busy with assignments but was happy for me to precis the points he had made during the CIS session. Two others did not respond, possibly as their institutional emails may have lapsed. The other two took up the invitation and have sent pieces which I have collected below.

2. Students' reflections on what works for them in overcoming barriers to university study

2.1. Kali Ivancevic writes:

I'm a fourth-year Bachelor of Arts student at the University of South Australia, majoring in Creative Writing and Performing Arts, with a minor in Screen Studies. As I near the end of my degree, I find myself reflecting on the academic and social obstacles I encountered and the strategies that enabled me to overcome these challenges.

My journey through higher education hasn't been straightforward. I first enrolled in university immediately after high school but soon struggled with academic performance and a sense of disengagement, which led me to withdraw. Several years later, I returned to university with a renewed focus, but I still faced challenges, particularly around confidence and finding a sense of purpose. To address this, I adjusted my goals, shifting my focus from conventional success markers to something as simple as building a meaningful connection within the university community. This shift in perspective played a crucial role in rekindling my interest in higher education.

Two key strategies helped me re-engage with university life: aligning my studies with personal interests and actively participating in the university community. Choosing a program in Creative Writing, Performing Arts, and Screen Studies allowed me to engage deeply with subjects that aligned with my creative aspirations. This alignment not only brought personal satisfaction but also made my academic work feel more relevant and fulfilling.

In addition, becoming involved in the university community was essential to my academic progress. Through joining clubs, forming study groups, and working on campus, I was able to create a supportive social network that provided a sense of belonging and motivation.

The support of UniSA's learning advisers was also instrumental. Through a casual role with the Student Engagement Unit, I collaborated closely with learning advisers on a campaign to promote academic integrity. This experience emphasised the value of seeking help and led to supportive relationships with advisers, who encouraged me to pursue overseas study. With their guidance, I

was able to organise a two-week intensive course in Tokyo, Japan – a unique academic and cultural experience that I consider a highlight of my university journey.

Reflecting on these experiences, I can see how the alignment of my studies with personal interests, proactive community engagement, and the support of university resources have been central to my success. My experience demonstrates how an inclusive and supportive educational environment can help students overcome barriers and thrive in higher education.

2.2. Katie Price writes:

As a third-year Bachelor of Criminology and Justice student, my academic journey began with a foundation in Social Work, which equipped me with valuable systems-thinking skills. My transition to Criminology wasn't a departure but a refinement of my goal to create meaningful social change through the criminal justice system. As a mature-aged, neurodivergent student, my university experience has presented unique challenges. I entered carrying the weight of past educational experiences, initially doubting my capabilities. My neurodivergent thinking pattern, while offering unique insights, created challenges in communicating ideas effectively. I often found myself diving deep into research, becoming engrossed in fascinating tangents that, while intellectually stimulating, sometimes led me away from core assignment requirements. Balancing academic demands with raising four children added another layer of complexity, eventually leading to a period of burnout.

The university's Access and Inclusion team provides Learning Access Plans (LAPs), but connecting with the right support person proved to be the real challenge. In large organisations, there's often a disconnect between knowing a service exists and finding the right person within that service to effectively help you. LAPs, while valuable for accommodations like extensions, are just the beginning – they're a framework that needs human interpretation and implementation to truly support diverse learning styles. My experience highlighted that true inclusion requires more than standardised accommodations – it needs trained professionals who can provide personalised support tailored to individual learning styles.

The turning point in my academic journey was developing a relationship with a learning advisor who understood my neurodivergent thinking patterns. She met me where I was, embraced my capabilities, and celebrated my strengths, significantly improving my confidence and writing ability. Working together taught me to interpret rubrics and readjust my understanding that grades build up from a pass rather than down from 100%. One of my most significant learnings has been separating my grades from my self-worth. Initially, I struggled with perfectionism, viewing each assignment as a measure of my value rather than a stepping stone in my learning journey.

AI or submitting a draft for online feedback cannot replace this human connection. The recent introduction of peer mentoring programs has added another valuable layer of support, providing relatable guidance from other students who have navigated similar challenges. This highlights a fundamental tension for learning advisors and educational institutions: mainstream education's drive for standardisation directly conflicts with genuine inclusion. While systems often aim to create a level playing field, this one-size-fits-all approach can actively disadvantage students with a disability. True inclusion requires an ongoing commitment to personalised services and continuous improvement of support systems. Success comes when advisors take the time to build genuine relationships with students, communicating in ways that align with individual LAP requirements and learning preferences rather than applying standardised solutions. The most effective support comes from advisors who can interpret LAPS through the lens of individual student needs, helping translate diverse thinking patterns into academic success.

The journey to embracing how my brain works has been transformative. Rather than fighting against my natural tendencies to deep dive into research or create complex connection maps, I've learned to harness these traits as strengths. This self-acceptance led to better self-advocacy – I

became more confident in communicating my needs to learning advisers and teaching staff, and in requesting accommodations that would help me succeed.

Working toward a career in the criminal justice system has highlighted how my neurodivergent perspective offers unique advantages. Professional skills such as building rapport, systems thinking, and emotional intelligence aren't easily measured through traditional academic writing, yet they are valuable in criminal justice work. My journey has shown that educational institutions could benefit from diversifying their assessment methods to reflect better the real-world skills needed in human services professionals. The challenges I have faced have become opportunities to advocate for change. By sharing these experiences and working with learning advisers who understand diverse learning styles, we can create more inclusive educational environments that acknowledge and celebrate different ways of thinking and learning rather than trying to standardise them.

2.3. Wesley Appo van Commenee

Our final contributor is Wesley Appo van Commenee, an Indigenous man who returned to study in his sixties after a stroke. Though too busy with deadlines to write a section for this piece, Wesley has approved this summary of the points he made at CIS. Wesley credited all of the support services at his university for their role in de-mystifying expectations and offering practical strategies. The Learning Hub, for example, modelled breaking down assignments and structuring answers. However, Wesley emphasised one kind of provision as being of paramount importance for Indigenous students who were often, like himself, first in family to enrol at university, and could experience barriers including generational trauma, different class backgrounds from their peers, and a lack of family experience with education. Under these conditions, they might just want to go home, and universities should be ready to help by having Indigenous Centres with Indigenous in-house counsellors located in units where students hang out, as they may be reticent to consult separate counselling services in some other location.

3. Concluding thoughts / reflections (Kate Chanock)

The students who contributed to the CIS panel were insightful about themselves, thoughtful about the university environment, and candid about ways in which they thought that environment might be improved. For more detail than this Reflection can accommodate, readers are encouraged to watch the recording of the panel discussion (Association for Academic Language and Learning, 2024). What emerged from both the panel presentation and the summaries here was the importance of individual consultations. Learning Advisers are uniquely positioned to share their knowledge of academic cultures and ways with language, and to work with students in such a way that they feel both cared for and empowered. For readers of the *JALL* who may need to promote, explain, or defend ICs in their own workplaces, this Reflection may provide support from a student perspective.

Reference

Association for Academic Language and Learning. (2024, October 9). *AALL Connect Inspire Share 5.5 2024 Student Panel* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTIUtBYN9nk