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Climbing without a ladder: A proposed Professional Standards Framework for Academic Language and Learning Educators

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Academic Language and Learning (ALL) educators work across a variety of Australian higher education institutions, playing a critical role in developing students' academic language. The importance of these roles has been amplified in light of sector-wide efforts to improve academic language and learning, leading to student success. Yet, despite the clear contribution ALL educators make to the student experience, their professional status remains ambiguous, and their career progression pathways are often unclear. The work they do is situated in centralised learning support units, but in some cases, ALL educators are embedded within faculties or work in close collaboration with academic teaching staff. This inconsistency in terms of where ALL educators are situated reflects a broader lack of shared understanding regarding the role's scope and identity. The present study investigates how ALL educators are positioned within the Australian higher education landscape and how the profession is defined, recognised, and supported across institutions, with attention to how expertise is valued, and career progression unfolds in practice. The analysis draws on data derived from 31 Australian Universities' websites, job descriptions and LinkedIn profiles to examine the qualifications, skills, and career trajectories of professionals in ALL educator roles across the sector. The paper finishes with a proposed Professional Standards Framework for ALL educators to support consistent role definition, professional development, and career advancement.

Key Words: Academic Language and Learning Educators, Australian Higher Education, Professional Standards Framework.

1. Introduction

Academic Language and Learning (ALL) has developed in an ad hoc fashion over decades, without a clear definition of the role, or consistent expectations around professional development and career advancement. Consequently, this study investigates how ALL educators are positioned within the Australian higher education landscape and how the profession is defined, recognised, and supported across institutions, with a view to developing a Professional Standards Framework for the field.

Communication skills have been recognised as a core graduate outcome, yet there remains a noticeable gap between institutional intentions to improve these skills and actual teaching practices (Bowles et al., 2020; Kensington-Miller et al., 2018). Academic language is defined as formal,

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discipline-specific language used in educational settings, particularly in higher education, to construct knowledge, engage in scholarly communication, and demonstrate learning (Hyland, 2002). It seems that universities often claim to prioritise the development of such skills across all academic programmes, but that academic language and learning is often sidelined due to institutional challenges, such as academics lacking capability to deliver this type of learning, exclusion of academic language development from higher education policy, heavy work loads, and limited time (McGrath et al., 2023; Williamson, 2022). Oftentimes, these challenges lead to universities adopting generic support options requiring less expertise and literacy support staff working in non-academic contracts that are isolated from academic departments (Hakim & Wingate, 2024). Under these circumstances, ALL educators' ability to engage in scholarly work and their chances of gaining recognition or credibility within academic settings is diminished (Bond, 2020).

Despite research consistently demonstrating the benefits of teaching academic language explicitly within the curriculum at tertiary institutions (Bassett & Macnaught, 2025; Edwards et al., 2021; Hakim & Wingate, 2024; Li, 2022; Veles et al., 2023; Wingate, 2018), many institutions continue to view academic language teaching as a remedial service and only provide support outside students' core programs (Macnaught et al., 2024). Such remedial approaches to teaching academic language tend to be viewed negatively by students and generate low student engagement (Chanock et al., 2012; Harris, 2016). At the same time, research suggests that academic language skills are only developed by students actively participating in meaningful, discipline-specific learning activities (Moje et al., 2008). This view opposes the remedial model of literacy, instead framing academic language as a 'higher order thinking and learning in academic socialisation', where academic language and learning serve as a means for reasoning and is intertwined with cognitive development, knowledge construction and disciplinary communication (Li, 2022, p. 4). This conceptualisation of academic language development has led to the adoption of embedded approaches to teaching academic language. In such models, ALL educators collaborate with academic staff to deliver contextualised learning as part of the core curriculum, which has been shown to benefit students through enhanced engagement, improved assessment performance and reduced resubmission rates (Hakim & Wingate, 2024; Li, 2022; Macnaught et al., 2024; Wingate, 2018). Not only are these collaborations beneficial to students, but they also enrich lecturers' understanding of student engagement with discipline content and assessment expectations (Clarence, 2012; Maldoni, 2018; Zappa-Hollman, 2018), highlighting the value of ALL educators' specialist knowledge in academic communication and student learning.

Academic language and learning is widely recognised as essential to the core curriculum, yet ALL educators continue to operate in a *third space* within higher education institutions. As defined by Whitchurch (2015), the *third space* is a professional liminality between academic and professional domains, a position which has implications not only for role recognition but also for identity formation. Research has suggested that ALL educators face limited professional development opportunities and are required to constantly negotiate their professional identities within complex institutional environments (Grossi & Gurney, 2020). As a result, gaining visibility within their institutions is a common difficulty for many ALL educators, whose career progression is often limited by classifications that position them as professional rather than academic staff (Evans et al., 2019; Malkin & Chanock, 2018). Given these challenges, there is a need to examine how ALL educators are currently positioned within the higher education landscape. Therefore, this paper explores how the academic literacy advisory profession is defined, focusing on the valuing of expertise, impacts on career progression, and opportunities for sector-wide improvement.

2. Recognising and valuing the expertise of ALL educators

2.1. Valued expertise

Despite a growing body of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of embedded academic language instruction, ALL educators continue to be positioned as peripheral support staff in many

universities. Such framing reinforces the invisibility of ALL educators' pedagogical value and contradicts research highlighting the core value and specialist skills of ALL educators (Grossi & Gurney, 2020; Hakim & Wingate, 2024; McGrath et al., 2023). As a result, there have been calls for greater involvement of ALL educators in collaborations that align literacy development with assessment tasks and graduate attributes (Macnaught et al., 2024). Such collaboration would recognise that ALL educators' insights are not merely complementary but foundational to effective assessment preparation. Studies of embedded collaboration consistently emphasise the role of ALL educators in unpacking students' experiences of acquiring disciplinary knowledge and expressing that knowledge in assessments (Macnaught et al., 2024), stressing the interdependence of academic language development and discipline-specific learning (Li, 2022).

In their study investigating the effectiveness of lecturers working with ALL educators to gradually assume greater responsibility for literacy teaching, Macnaught et al. (2024) identified mixed views among participants. Some lecturers valued the process of working with ALL educators because it helped broaden their view of assessments beyond their usual disciplinary angle, to include how students' literacy skills impact their ability to engage with and succeed in assessments. Conversely, other lecturers expressed strong reservations about undertaking literacy teaching, stressing the need to teach within one's area of expertise; and noting that academic language and learning is a specialised domain requiring deep expertise and ultimately valuing the specialised knowledge of ALL educators. Such perspectives align with well-regarded claims of Elton (2010) who emphasised that joint efforts grounded in shared expertise and mutual recognition are essential for innovative teaching that neither party could achieve alone. This resonates with previous research indicating that many academics acknowledge their limitations in supporting academic language development (Bailey, 2010; Jenkins & Wingate, 2015; McGrath et al., 2023; Mostert & Townsend, 2018; Murray, 2022). It also reinforces the ethical responsibility of institutions to embed literacy development within disciplinary contexts and to support student transitions into higher education (Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency, 2021).

As a result, recognising the interpretive role of ALL educators in clarifying academic expectations and bridging disciplinary learning highlights their status as co-educators with legitimate academic expertise. Their ability to scaffold academic language and learning within courses, decode assessment tasks, and respond to students' diverse learning needs is critical to the goals of inclusive, high-quality higher education. Embedding ALL educators into teaching teams, rather than marginalising them as auxiliary staff, is thus a necessary shift toward recognising their true academic value.

2.2. Roles and responsibilities of ALL educators

ALL educators' roles and responsibilities vary from one institution to the next – ranging from direct one-on-one consultations to embedding academic language materials within the core curriculum. As such, ALL educators play a key role in the complex university ecosystem, supporting students throughout their academic journey (Falten & Lambert, 2020; Dollinger & Lodge, 2020). Briguglio (2009) reported that in-reality, the central role of ALL educators is not remedial and is more often focused on facilitating the development of students' active learning skills. Although one-to-one consultations are often seen as remedial, such consultations are a key mechanism for providing tailored support on a wide range of academic skills, from reading strategies to unpacking assessment tasks (Evans et al., 2019). This form of advising is often described as both a constructivist approach that actively builds students' own understanding and developmental because it focuses on facilitating long-term academic growth and independence (Golding et al., 2015; Moore, 2011). Nonetheless, according to Barber (2020), there has been a shift in ALL educators' roles from individual consultations to embedded support.

This shift toward embedded academic support has brought significant benefits and is generally accepted as the most effective approach to providing academic support (Evans et al., 2019). In support of this claim, Joubert (2024) argues that it is vital for institutions to move beyond the

outdated misconception that ALL educators' roles are limited to supporting the development of language skills outside of the curriculum. In reality, the work of ALL educators is becoming increasingly shaped by research-informed, embedded approaches (Wingate, 2018). As a result, there have been calls for the integration of academic language and learning development into the curriculum to address persistent challenges posed by students' poor academic language skills (Botha, 2025). However, despite the demonstrated value of embedded academic language and learning support, ALL educators continue to face structural challenges. University managers have shown a reluctance to formally recognise academic language development in educational policy, and there has been little commitment to investing in the recruitment and training of English language specialists (Hyland, 2002). The author further states that many institutions have implemented lower-cost alternatives for language support, such as generic skills courses that often lack student engagement, academic rigour, and are not delivered by ALL educators (Hyland, 2002). This indicates a lack of understanding of the expert role ALL educators play in contributing to the academic success of students at the university level.

2.3. Tensions between professional and academic classifications

The evolving role of ALL educators within university teaching teams has raised important questions about professional identity and recognition. This is reflected in reports of ALL educators working in the *third space,* whose roles and activities blur the boundaries between academic and professional domains (Whitchurch, 2024). This issue is particularly evident among ALL educators who hold doctoral qualifications and whose experience and responsibilities align with academic appointments, yet who are often employed on professional contracts (Whitchurch, 2015; McGrath et al., 2023; Hakim & Wingate, 2024). In such contexts, staff are expected to contribute their expertise to learning objectives determined by disciplinary academics, which can create ambiguity around their professional identity (Veles, 2022).

To enhance recognition of their education and skills, as well as to acknowledge any truly academic work they undertake – such as research or lecturing – there is a need to recognise academic language and learning as a core element of tertiary curricula (Dison & Moore, 2019; Wingate and Tribble, 2012). Jacobs (2007) suggested that not only is a collaborative approach between ALL educators and disciplinary experts necessary to achieve successful integration of academic language and learning development into core curricula, but that embedding academic language development is closely tied to the professional identities of both ALL educators and disciplinary specialists. In support of this view, Barber (2020) asserts that to develop the professional capacity of ALL educators, they should be integrated as discipline-based academics and participate in academic professional development. In this regard, higher education should establish a clear professional identity for academic language and learning work and to legitimise its academic value (Joubert, 2024).

However, while recognising ALL educators as academics may address some issues, it is also important to note that academics themselves encounter ongoing barriers within the profession. For example, academics have faced several challenges in terms of a clear career progression route due to the evolving complexity of the profession, with a lack of time for research activities, curriculum development and assessment design cited as some of the key challenges faced by academics (Whitchurch et al., 2023). The authors also identified ambiguity around career progression from alternative academic career tracks, and the need for clearer career pathways – especially for early career academics. Despite such challenges, Australian universities are governed by a national standardised set of skills, knowledge and abilities to be possessed by academics at five levels of academic appointments: 1) Level A (Associate Lecturer, Tutors); 2) Level B (Lecturer); 3) Level C (Senior Lecturer); 4) Level D (Associate Professor); and 5) Level E (Professor) (Department of Education and Training, 2020).

In conclusion, there is a need to reposition ALL educators as integral contributors to academic development, rather than peripheral support. Within the current institutional structures,

professional staff who undertake work equivalent to that of academic colleagues are often afforded lower status and consequently have less influence in academic governance; moreover, there is typically no formal progression pathway from professional to academic appointment. Therefore, recognising their expertise, standardising their roles, and acknowledging the academic nature of embedding academic language and learning into the curriculum are essential steps toward achieving greater equity and effectiveness in higher education teaching and learning.

3. Research questions and methods

To address the understanding of ALL educators' qualifications, skills, and career trajectories within the Australian higher education context, this study adopts a qualitative approach. The research aims to map common qualifications and pathways, identify core competencies, and explore the nature of career progression for ALL educators, guided by three research questions:

1. What qualifications do ALL educators in Australia hold?
2. What skills and career pathways are typical for ALL educators?
3. What characterises the career progression of ALL educators?

LinkedIn and website data were chosen as the primary data sources due to their capability for mining biodata (Klassen & Russell, 2019), which can provide insights into past experiences and is generally considered resistant to faking (Aguado et al., 2019). The present study utilised an adapted version of methodologies from prior studies involving LinkedIn and website data mining to generate a convenience sample of profiles (Ecleo & Galido, 2017; Gilmore & Nguyen, 2024).

In April 2025, a search was conducted on LinkedIn using the term, "academic learning advisor," with results filtered to include only profiles located in Australia. It is important to note that LinkedIn's search algorithm retrieves results based on any mention of the search term within a user's profile, not just the current job title. As such, the initial convenience sample of 109 user profiles included a range of roles. Manual verification was therefore undertaken to confirm that each individual was currently working in a role aligned with the ALL profession. Based on this review, 29 profiles were excluded using two criteria: (1) a transitionary ALL role, indicated by holding the position for less than six months, and a current role unrelated to academic advising; and (2) since this paper focuses on academic language development, profiles with an advisory focus not related to academic language and literacy (e.g., mathematics advising) were also excluded. This left a final dataset of 80 LinkedIn profiles.

In addition, 106 additional ALL educators were identified through a comprehensive search of university websites and other reliable web sources. The collection of ALL educators' biodata in Australian universities involved a systematic and manual process of utilising various internet sources, primarily focusing on university websites. Each official university website was manually navigated to collect data from Academic Advising, Learning Support, or Student Services pages. The data was also obtained from the staff directory listing related to learning advisors, and subsequent information regarding research outputs was obtained from Google Scholar.

To complement the analysis of this data, 16 job descriptions for ALL educator roles were obtained via a manual online search. The thematic patterns identified in the LinkedIn and website profiles were cross-referenced with these job descriptions to examine how the competencies and qualifications of educators align with those presented by employers in formal recruitment materials. The final dataset comprised 80 LinkedIn profiles, 106 profiles from institutional websites, and 16 job descriptions. Data from all sources were securely stored in a spreadsheet accessible only to the researchers, and all excluded profiles were permanently deleted. This combined dataset was analysed according to nine attributes aligned with the research questions (refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Coding framework for LinkedIn/website profiles and job descriptions of ALL educators.

Research question	Attribute from LinkedIn and website Profiles	Attribute from Job Description
1. What qualifications do ALL educators in Australia hold?	(a) Level of education (e.g., Bachelor's, Master's, PhD) (b) Discipline studied	(a) Level of education required (b) Desired discipline
2. What skills and career pathways are typical for ALL educators	(a) Current job title (b) Previous two job titles	(a) Previous experience (b) Demonstrable capabilities
3. What characterises the career progression of ALL educators	(a) Number of years employed in an ALL educator role (b) Three skills with the most endorsements on LinkedIn profile or outlined in website profile (c) Research outputs	(a) Job title (b) Role responsibilities

4. Findings and discussion

The findings indicate that there is a great deal of variation in the role title and little consistency regarding professional and academic classifications across institutions. Findings also show that ALL educators primarily come from education and TESOL backgrounds, with variation in the level of qualifications held. Additionally, patterns of career progression were unclear, highlighting a lack of standardisation regarding how individuals typically advance into and through ALL educators' roles. Each research question is addressed in turn, together with a broader discussion of implications for evaluating ALL educators' capabilities and career development opportunities.

4.1. Question 1: What qualifications do ALL educators in Australia hold?

This section explores the professional landscape of ALL educators by examining LinkedIn profiles, universities websites and job descriptions. It highlights prominence of education-focused qualifications among professionals in these roles. Together, these findings offer insight into how the field is positioned within higher education and the most valued qualifications.

As shown in Table 2 there is a diverse nomenclature used for roles supporting the development of students' academic language skills in the LinkedIn, website profile and job description dataset. Three career levels were identified in the dataset: early-stage, mid-career, and senior. These career stages were coded based on both job titles and the status of academic appointments. Firstly, job titles that contained specific words indicating seniority were used to determine career level. Titles containing *Lead* or *Senior* were coded as mid-career, while those including *Manager* or *Head* were classified as senior-level positions. The inclusion of terms such as *Senior, Lead*, *Director* or *Deputy* reflects opportunities for increasing leadership, academic responsibility, and institutional influence with career advancement. Then, academic role classifications were also used to identify career level. Any positions at academic Level A (e.g., *Associate Lecturer*) were classified as early-stage, academic Level B appointments (e.g., *Lecturer*) as mid-career, and academic Levels C and D appointments as senior-level.

The analysis revealed considerable variation in role titles across career stages, with seven distinct titles at early-stage, six at mid-career, and six at senior level; notably, senior-level titles more clearly signalled distinct role functions, unlike those at the earlier stages. This variation in terminology is not unique to this dataset; such inconsistency in role titles has also been observed internationally, including South Africa, Canada, Europe and the USA (Joubert, 2024). At the same

time, the presence of both academic and professional classifications across all three career levels reinforces existing literature on the blurring of boundaries between ALL educators' categorisations (Evans et al., 2019; Malkin & Chanock, 2018). This hybridisation of ALL roles may reflect varying institutional interpretations of legitimacy in the work of ALL educators, where credibility is influenced not only by expertise, but also by assumptions about academic status and qualification (Whitchurch, 2015).

Table 2. Alternative job titles in LinkedIn, website profile and job description dataset.

Career stage	Job Titles
Early-stage	Academic Learning Advisor
	Learning Advisor
	Associate Lecturer Academic Literacies (Academic Level A)
	Learning Skills Advisor
	Academic Skills Advisor
	Language and Learning Advisor
	English Language Advisor
Mid-career	Lecturer, Languages and Literacies Education (Academic Level B)
	Lecturer, Language and Communication Skills (Academic Level B)
	Senior Discipline Coordinator (Academic Level B)
	Lecturer, Academic Skills (Academic Level B)
	Senior Learning Advisor
	Learning Advisor Lead
Senior-level	Senior Research Coordinator (Academic Level C)
	Head of Academic Literacy
	Manager Academic Skills
	Associate Director
	Associate Head of School (Academic Level C)
	Deputy Associate Dean (Academic Level C)
	Associate Professor (Level D)

Such tensions between legitimacy and classification are closely tied to the qualifications and disciplinary identities that ALL educators bring to their roles. Analysis of the qualifications held by ALL educators, alongside the requirements listed in job descriptions, can offer further insight into how expertise is constructed and valued within the field.

Table 3 presents an overview of qualifications and disciplinary focus across the professional sample. At the undergraduate level, the majority of ALL educators hold a Bachelor's or Honours degree, with 100% represented on LinkedIn and 73.6% on the website, highlighting the foundational role of formal higher education in this population. The most common disciplines at this level are within the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS), with Education remaining prominent in both datasets, emphasising the importance of pedagogical expertise in early professional development. Master's qualifications are held by a substantial portion of the sample, with 61% represented on LinkedIn and 47.2% on the website, indicating that many professionals pursue further specialisation. Dominant disciplines at this level include Education and TESOL, reflecting a focus on educational practice and language expertise. PhD qualifications are reported by 35% of ALL educators on LinkedIn and 50% of ALL educators listed on university websites,

suggesting a presence of advanced research training, with Education continuing to represent the leading disciplinary focus at the doctoral level.

Table 3. Qualifications and top disciplines of ALL educators' LinkedIn (LkIn) and Website (Wbst) Profiles.

Level of Qualification	**Cohort-size (n=80 - LkIn n=106- Wbst)**	**Top three disciplines**	
Bachelor / Honours (LinkedIn)	100% (80)	TESOL	26% (21)
		Education	25% (20)
		Science	6% (5)
Bachelor / Honours (Website)	73.6% (78)	Education	10.4% (11)
		Psychology	6.6% (7)
		English Language and Literature	2.8% (3)
			2.8% (3)
		History	2.8% (3)
		Science	2.8% (3)
		Social Science	
Master's (LinkedIn)	61% (49)	Education	43% (21)
		TESOL	35% (17)
		Creative Writing	6% (3)
Master's (Website)	47.2% (50)	Education	10.4% (11)
		Applied Linguistics	7.5% (8)
		TESOL	3.8% (4)
PhD Completed / In Progress (LinkedIn)	35% (29)	Education	31% (9)
		TESOL	14% (4)
PhD Completed / In Progress (Website)	50% (53)	Education	13.2% (14)
		Applied Linguistics	3.8% (4)
		Creative Writing	3.8% (4)
		History	2.8% (3)

Overall, the data indicate a progression of qualifications from undergraduate through doctoral levels, with language and education expertise consistently prominent. Graduate and doctoral stages reveal increasing specialisation and research-oriented focus, demonstrating how professional development in this sample balances applied expertise with scholarly inquiry. Despite this finding, the percentage of Australian ALL educators in academic positions declined from 67% in 2007 (Tran et al., 2018) to 17% in 2021 (Ashton-Hay et al., 2021), suggesting a structural shift away from academic recognition. Even though 36% of ALL educators in this dataset hold or are pursuing a doctoral qualification, and institutions typically prefer PhDs (Evans et al., 2019), Tran et al. (2018) argue that the growing professional classification of ALL educators has diminished institutional recognition of their contributions to developing students' academic language.

Data presented in Table 4 indicates a clear trend in peer-reviewed research output across career stages. Early-stage ALL educators show relatively low engagement, with only 12% reporting publications, suggesting that research activity is just beginning to develop at this stage. Mid-career ALL educators demonstrate a marked increase, with 31% producing peer-reviewed outputs,

reflecting growing research experience and professional consolidation. Senior-level participants have the highest output, with 50% contributing to peer-reviewed journals, highlighting strengthened research activity among more experienced professionals. Overall, these patterns suggest that research output from ALL educators increases with career progression, aligning with expectations of accumulated expertise and greater access to research opportunities over time. Anecdotal reports from the industry suggest that some long-serving educators may have initially held academic positions with research expectations, but over time, their roles were reclassified as professional, with less emphasis on publishing.

Table 4. Research outputs of ALL educators obtained from LinkedIn and Google Scholar profiles.

Career Stage	Cohort-size (n = 186)	Peer-reviewed research output
Early-stage	101	12% (12)
Mid-career	45	31% (14)
Senior-level	40	50% (20)

When considered alongside the finding that 36% of individuals possess or are pursuing doctoral qualifications (as presented in Table 3), these patterns point to the growing academic character of ALL educators' roles, despite their frequent classification as professional staff. However, this academic identity is not always institutionally supported. When ALL educators are employed as professional staff, their work time does not allow for research activity. This limitation is especially concerning because research is vital not only for ALL educators to broaden their knowledge and improve their teaching methods but also for contributing to the development of the field's professional knowledge base (Craswell & Bartlett, 2001). Manalo (2008) further highlights the importance of explicitly linking teaching and research in the roles of ALL educators, observing that much of their understanding of teaching and learning arises directly from interactions with students. This close integration of practice and inquiry is essential for contributing to and extending the shared body of professional knowledge. This tension reveals how organisational constraints limit ALL educators' ability to engage in valued research activities, exposing a misalignment between professional classifications and the evolving academic contributions of their role.

To further explore how disciplinary backgrounds shape role expectations, an analysis of job descriptions was conducted. The findings, outlined in Table 5, show that *applied linguistics*, *TESOL*, and *education* were the most sought-after disciplines. This aligns with the LinkedIn and website data of the present study and broader evidence of a demand for education and English as an Additional Language qualifications (Evans et al., 2019). This finding suggests a strong institutional preference for candidates with qualifications closely related to language, teaching, and learning support.

Table 5. Disciplines preferred by employers as listed in job descriptions.

Top disciplines	Frequency (*n* = 16)
Applied linguistics	43% (7)
TESOL	43% (7)
Education	31% (5)

4.2. Question 2: What skills and career pathways are typical for ALL educators?

This section synthesises data on career pathways, skills, and role responsibilities to provide an overview of the diverse trajectories into ALL educators' roles and the key expectations that define the field.

Drawing on the combined dataset for the full cohort of 186 ALL educators, Table 6 presents an analysis of the pathways into ALL educators' roles. The university pathway, encompassing professionals who have navigated various roles within the higher education sector, is the most common, accounting for 31% of the cohort. The applied linguistics pathway, which reflects those who come from language instruction backgrounds such as teaching English as a Second Language or related roles, emerges as the next most prominent entry point and represents 26% of professionals. The academic language and learning pathway, defined by sustained experience in ALL educator roles across multiple positions, comprises 18% of professionals, highlighting a segment who have developed specialised expertise within the ALL domain. The education pathway, accounting for 13% of the cohort, reflects professionals with experience in teaching or educational development outside of the university sector. Finally, the "other" pathway, representing professionals from fields unrelated to education, comprises 12% of the combined dataset.

Table 6. Pathways to ALL professional from LinkedIn and website profiles.

Career Pathway	Pathway Definition	Cohort-Size (n = 186)
Applied linguistics pathway	ALL educators who came from teaching English as a Second Language or similar language instruction roles.	26% (49)
Education pathway	ALL educators with backgrounds in teaching or educational development in non-university settings	13% (24)
Academic language and learning pathway	ALL educators who have worked in an academic language-based role in all three most recent positions	18% (33)
University pathway	ALL educators who have navigated through the university sector in various professional and academic roles.	31% (57)
Other	ALL educators with backgrounds in fields unrelated to education.	12% (23)

Taken together, these distributions indicate that ALL educators enter the field through a range of pathways, with disciplinary expertise in language, education, and university-based roles dominating the cohort. Such findings further reflect the crucial link between academic language and discipline-based learning (Li, 2022), highlighting the need to position ALL educators as disciplinary specialists who bridge gaps in academic language and learning support and validate their role within institutional structures. Evidence from the literature further supports this positioning, showing that ALL educators contribute to the design and delivery of pedagogical approaches that integrate formative feedback, peer assessment, and reflective activities to help students navigate and master the language demands of their disciplines (Olsson et al., 2024; Jacobs, 2007).

Building on the insights gained from the LinkedIn and website profiles related to ALL educators' qualifications and expertise, Table 7 summarises the specific responsibilities outlined in 16 collected job descriptions. Responsibility descriptors were systematically coded to capture the range and emphasis of duties across career stages, highlighting patterns of role progression from early-stage through to senior positions.

The job descriptions reveal a pattern of evolving responsibilities for ALL educators. Early-stage roles focus heavily on direct teaching activities, resource development and identifying student learning needs. At the mid-career stage, resource development remains to be a priority, although there appears to be a shift toward embedded teaching where activities aimed at generic language development are delivered by specialist units across universities (Dunworth, 2013), compared to other types of teaching. Other key duties of academics at mid-career states included broader academic contributions, such as subject coordination, postgraduate supervision, and curriculum advice or evaluation. In contrast, senior positions prioritise strategic and operational leadership, with all senior roles demanding strategic leadership and most involving curriculum influence, research leadership, and governance or risk management. Notably, direct teaching responsibilities decline significantly at this level, indicating a focus on shaping institutional strategy and policy rather than instructional delivery.

Table 7. Role requirements listed in job descriptions.

Responsibility	**Early-stage (*n* = 8)**	**Mid-career (*n* = 4)**	**Senior-level (*n* = 4)**	**Academic (*n* = 9)**	**Professional (*n* = 7)**
Teaching:					
a. One-to-one consultations	75% (6)	50% (2)		33% (3)	71% (5)
b. Embedded academic teaching	63% (5)	100% (4)		67% (6)	43% (3)
c. Standalone workshops	63% (5)	50% (2)		33% (3)	57% (4)
Subject Coordination		50% (2)		22% (2)	
Design / develop teaching and learning resources	88% (7)	100% (4)		67% (6)	71% (5)
Supervision of postgraduate students		50% (2)		22% (2)	
Identify and assess language and learning needs	50% (4)	50% (2)		33% (3)	43% (3)
Engage with current pedagogical research and use data to inform and enhance learning support practices	38% (3)	50% (2)	25% (1)	33% (3)	43% (3)
Engage in scholarship activities	25% (2)	50% (2)	25% (1)	44% (4)	14% (1)
Lead research initiatives and enhance institutions profile at national and international level			75% (3)	33% (3)	
Provide advice on or evaluate curriculum		50% (2)	75% (3)	44% (4)	14% (1)
Develop processes and strategies to implement governance, academic risk management and operational frameworks			50% (2)	22% (2)	
Budget development and monitoring			25% (1)	11% (1)	
Strategic leadership			100% (4)	33% (3)	14% (1)

In addition, the analysis of job description data revealed several differences in responsibilities between academic and professional appointments. Firstly, one-to-one consultations are more prominent in professional roles (71%) than academic ones (33%), indicating a stronger emphasis

on direct, individualised support in professional appointments. Conversely, embedded academic teaching is more common in academic roles (67%) than professional ones (43%), reflecting the deeper involvement in curriculum-integrated delivery for ALL educators who are in academic appointments. At the same time, responsibilities in academic appointments tend to have a stronger focus on scholarship and on providing curriculum advice or evaluation than professional appointments do. Overall, it appears that professional staff have a stronger presence in areas such as individualised support and resource development, while shaping curriculum and operational frameworks appears to be more predominantly associated with academic role descriptions. Interestingly, previous research has suggested that candidates with curriculum development experience are more difficult to find than those with teaching experience (Evans et al., 2019). This distinction highlights the complementary functions of academic and professional appointments within the field, yet also points to potential gaps in expertise, particularly in curriculum development.

4.3. Question 3: What characterises the career progression of ALL educators?

The previous research question examined the skills and qualifications of ALL educators. This next section focuses on how these factors present within different career stages, offering insights into opportunities for the career progression of ALL educators.

Patterns in qualification requirements and role classifications suggest a structured and somewhat linear progression from early-stage to senior-level appointments. As shown in Table 8, within the dataset of analysed job descriptions, early-stage positions are skewed towards professional classifications, with 75% classified as HEW 7 professional appointments and only 25% classified as academic appointments (Level A). However, at what we have defined as the mid-career stage, all roles are classified as academic (Level B), highlighting a turning point in career progression where academic classification becomes standard rather than optional. This trend continues at the senior level, where the majority of roles (75%) are academic appointments (Level C), and only one role is classified as a senior professional (Senior Manager 1). This finding suggests that ALL staff in professional appointments may encounter limited opportunities for advancement unless they transition into academic roles. In effect, there appears to be a career ceiling for those remaining in professional streams, with few pathways beyond the early-career level. This situation is reflected in research that has highlighted the lack of recognition of academic language development in higher education policy (McGrath et al., 2023). Such structural constraints not only inhibit individual career development but also reinforce the findings of Bruce and Ding (2017) that the marginalisation of ALL educators shows the lack of vision among university managers regarding the value of academic language and learning in student success.

Table 8. Classification of roles as outlined in job descriptions.

Career stage	Professional	Level	Academic	Level
Early-stage (n = 8)	75% (6)	HEW 7	25% (2)	Academic Level A
Mid-career (n = 4)			100% (4)	Academic Level B
Senior (n = 4)	25% (1)	Senior Manager 1	75% (3)	Academic Level C

The discussion of ALL educators' qualifications is summarised in Table 9. The combined LinkedIn and website data shows that 50% of early-stage professionals hold a master's degree, increasing to 58% at the mid-career level and 60% at the senior level. For PhD qualifications,

36% of early-stage, 53% of mid-career, and 58% of senior-level professionals hold a doctorate. These combined figures highlight the progression of advanced qualifications across career stages, with both master's and PhD qualifications becoming more prevalent at mid and senior levels, reflecting the academic orientation and expertise expected of ALL educators.

Table 9. Summary of qualifications for combined profiles (LinkedIn and website profiles).

Career stage (*n* = 186)	**Masters degree**	**PhD**
Early-stage (*n* = 101)	50% (50)	36% (36)
Mid-career (*n* = 45)	58% (26)	53% (24)
Senior-level (*n* = 40)	60% (24)	58% (23)

This interpretation is further supported by job description data, which shows that qualification expectations increase with seniority. As illustrated in Table 10, 75% of early-stage roles explicitly require only a bachelor's degree, while 25% of mid-career roles require a master's degree, 75% require a PhD and 25% desired a PhD. At the senior-level, half of the roles require a master's degree, while half list a PhD as required and a quarter indicate that a PhD is desirable. These findings align with the profile data and reinforce that higher qualifications are increasingly valued for progression beyond early-stage positions (Evans et al., 2019).

Table 10. Qualifications level listed in job descriptions.

Career stage (*n* = 16)	**Bachelor**		**Masters**		**PhD**	
	Required	**Desired**	**Required**	**Desired**	**Required**	**Desired**
Early-stage (*n* = 8)	75% (6)					
Mid-career (*n* = 4)			25% (1)		75% (3)	25% (1)
Senior-level (*n* = 4)			50% (2)		50% (2)	25% (1)

5. A Professional Standards Framework for Academic Language and Learning Educators in Australian Universities

Building on the findings in this paper and on existing literature, we propose a framework to address the ambiguity and lack of progression pathways within roles specialising in academic language and learning. This paper has focused specifically on the skills and experience of educators in academic language and learning, a term which is used to refer broadly to both discipline-specific literacy and general learning skills, including study strategies, time management, and self-regulation. Despite this focus, the framework has been developed to be applicable more broadly across the profession, encompassing other areas such as mathematics, science and computing skills development. Given the strong evidence in this study of scholarship and research expertise across career stages, we strongly recommend that ALL educators be recognised through academic appointments rather than general professional classifications. Accordingly, the proposed framework is designed explicitly for academic appointment structures, providing a basis for equitable recognition, career progression, and alignment with institutional academic standards. Figure 1 outlines the proposed Professional Standards Framework for Academic Language and Learning Educators, structured around two dimensions – Core Capabilities and Core Knowledge.

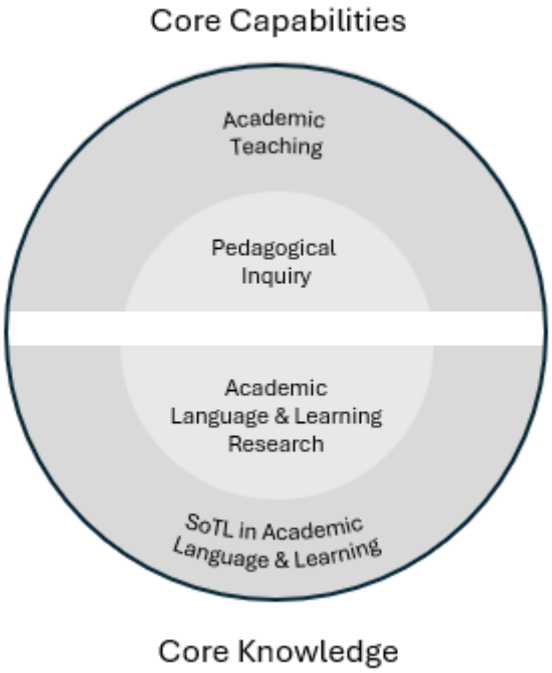

Figure 1. Overview of Proposed Professional Standards Framework for ALL educators.

5.1. Dimension 1: Core Capabilities

Figure 2 reflects the Core Capabilities dimension of the proposed framework and highlights what ALL educators *do* in their key day-to-day practices, at each of the career stages. Progression within this dimension of the framework demonstrates an expanding engagement with academic language and learning development.

Core Capabilities

	Early stage	Mid Career	Senior
Academic Teaching	Contributes to the co-design and delivery of academic language learning programs and embedded teaching; supports teaching staff in aligning support with learning outcomes.	Co-develops academic language learning programs and embedded teaching; collaborates with academics to embed scaffolded teaching across curricula.	Leads strategic curriculum-level initiatives; influences teaching practice and assessment design through academic partnerships.
Pedagogical Inquiry	Engages with current methodologies in academic language and learning and reflects on practice; explores opportunities for development.	Applies key academic language and learning methodologies to evaluate and enhance learning development practice.	Leads institution-wide evaluation of academic language and learning programs; builds communities of practice for continuous pedagogical improvement.

Figure 2. Core capabilities of ALL educators.

5.1.1. Academic Teaching

This capability describes a shift from supporting the integration of academic language development within individual subjects to shaping curriculum-wide approaches to teaching and assessment. It encompasses both embedded academic language teaching within courses and one-to-one consultations that provide additional, individualised support for students. At the early stage,

specialists would begin by contributing to collaborative teaching efforts, helping ensure that academic language and learning support aligns with subject learning outcomes. As they progress, their role would become more developmental, involving sustained collaboration with academic staff to embed scaffolded learning opportunities across programs. At the senior-level, they would take on a leadership role in curriculum renewal, influencing institutional teaching practices and assessment design through strategic partnerships and pedagogical expertise.

5.1.2. Pedagogical Inquiry

This capability outlines the evolving scholarly engagement of ALL educators as they build academic identities and contribute to research-informed teaching. In the early stages, they would engage critically with existing methodologies and critically reflect on their own practice, developing a foundation for scholarly practice. As they progress, they would apply established academic language and learning methodologies to evaluate and enhance their teaching approaches, contributing to improved student learning outcomes and strengthening the scholarly basis of their work. At the senior-level, their role would evolve into one of institutional leadership, in which they drive large-scale evaluation of academic language and learning education and foster communities of practice that promote continuous pedagogical innovation and sector-informed improvement.

5.2. Dimension 2: Core Knowledge

Figure 3 illustrates the Core Knowledge dimension of the proposed framework and reflects the essential *knowledge* required to perform effectively as an ALL educator at each of the career stages. Progression within this dimension echoes an evolving understanding key pedagogical concepts that underpin academic literacy development, ultimately contributing new insights and knowledge that advance the field of academic literacy and learning development.

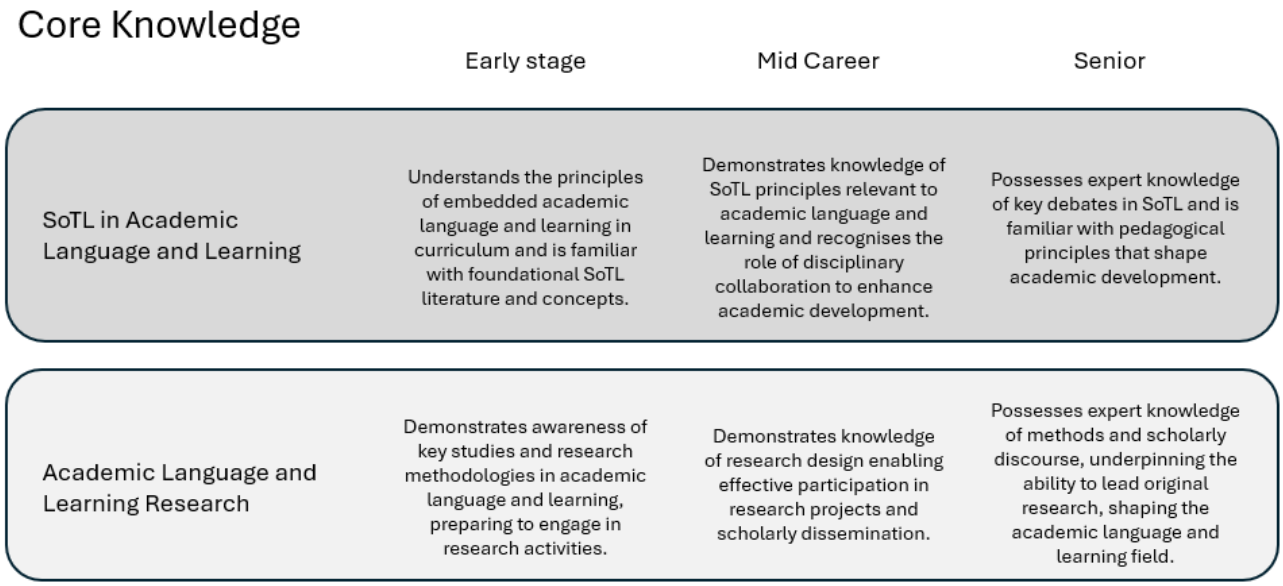

Figure 3. Core knowledge of ALL educators.

5.2.1. SoTL in Academic Language and Learning

This knowledge domain highlights the growing scholarly understanding that underpins research-informed approaches to embedding academic language and learning in higher education. At the early stage, ALL educators would develop an understanding of principles of embedding academic language learning and engage with foundational SoTL literature to inform their academic practice. As they progress, they would build a more nuanced knowledge of SoTL frameworks and recognise the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in shaping curriculum to enhance academic language and learning development. At the senior-level, they would demonstrate expert

understanding of key debates and emerging research in SoTL, drawing on this expertise to inform institution-wide academic language and learning strategies and contribute to scholarly discourse in the field.

5.2.2. Research in Academic Language and Learning

This knowledge domain highlights the importance of advancing academic language and learning development within higher education. At the early stage, professionals would cultivate a foundational understanding of key studies and research methodologies, positioning themselves as emerging contributors in the research landscape. As they progress, professionals would deepen their expertise in research design and methodologies, reflecting a transition toward contributing to scholarly conversations through dissemination and collaboration that impact both disciplinary knowledge and practical application. At the senior-level, they would initiate and lead original research that not only pushes the boundaries of academic language and learning knowledge but also influences how academic language and learning is understood, taught, and integrated across disciplines.

6. Conclusion

The Professional Standards Framework for ALL educators proposed in this paper addresses a critical misalignment in the expectations of ALL educators. While institutional documentation often conflates professional and academic roles, our findings support structures which position ALL educators as experts that bridge language, teaching, and disciplinary practice, actively designing and facilitating educational programs that help students meet the language requirements of their disciplines. By recognising the expertise of ALL educators as specialised academic contributions, the framework emphasises the necessity of sustained scholarly engagement and embedded teaching of academic language and learning. It provides institutions with a practical structure to support ALL educators in fulfilling these academic responsibilities effectively, offering clear, transparent pathways for career progression that acknowledge the distinct expertise required in these roles.

Ultimately, adopting this framework legitimises the specialised contributions of ALL educators, supports their ongoing academic development, and reinforces their vital role in advancing student learning and academic success within the broader academic ecosystem.

AI Declaration

ChatGPT was used in the editing stage to improve the clarity, coherence and cohesion of the text. The authors have reviewed all content and wordings created by the generative AI tool used, edited this content as needed, and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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