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Article

Helping students see the throughline: Exploring the affective dimensions of Individual Consultations

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Individual Consultations (ICs) form a core part of Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practice. They both supplement and inform other areas of ALL practice, including the support provided at unit and course levels. This paper reports on a specific area of ICs, the affective domain. In doing this it draws on data generated in a broader research project conducted at one Australian university. That project sought to better understand ICs by exploring student and ALL-practitioner perceptions, including how and why students engage in this form of learning, and what they believe they gain through the IC process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 students and 5 ALL-practitioners, with all interviews recorded and transcribed.

For this paper we adopted Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This included both a process to gradually identify key themes emerging from the data, with our particular focus on the affective aspects of ICs, as well as an opportunity for the authors (both ALL-practitioners) to reflect on a relevant aspect of their practice.

Universities often evaluate programs based on the academic performance, success and retention of their students. We suggest that the opportunity afforded through ICs for students to identify and address the affective dimensions potentially impacting their learning significantly contributes to their success and retention. For that reason, the importance of addressing the affective dimensions of learning, and the role of ICs in doing this, needs to be more fully understood and acknowledged.

Key Words: ALL practice, individual consultations, affective dimensions.

1. Introduction

> *They suggested things that I hadn't realised that I needed help with …, they actually helped me to get a flow of ideas … you need to be able to see the through line. So that was super helpful.* [Melissa]

Individual Consultations (ICs) form a core part of Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practice. While specifics of availability, appointment length, and staffing vary across institutions, ICs have consistently been shown to extend benefits to students (Campitelli et al., 2019), as well as

acting as a valuable touchstone for understanding and mediating student need (Chanock, 2007). Within the contemporary Australian higher education (HE) landscape, the one-to-one consultation conducted by an ALL-practitioner (commonly referred to as an IC) represents a unique learning space for students. In a learning environment largely dominated by massification (Bradley et al., 2008), with increasingly unwieldy and challenging student to teacher ratios (Coates & Ransom, 2011), it remains one of the few spaces where students and teachers engage in real time and sometimes have extended dialogues on learning. In this regard, we borrow from the field of Language Advising (as distinct from ALL Advising) the notion of ICs as presenting a "privileged space" (Tassinari, 2016), both within ALL and within the tertiary institution.

Much of what is associated with and expected of the IC from the institutional perspective concerns instrumental outcomes. That is, the provision of explicit guidance regarding requirements related to specific assignments, disciplinary expectations and conventions, including the intricacies involved in referencing and structuring assessment task responses. Examinations of ICs have additionally shown that students also see them as having less tangible benefits in terms of affirmation and reassurance, or in other words, outcomes pertaining to the affective domain (Gonzalez & Donnelly, 2022). While such outcomes have quite often been mentioned in studies alongside the more instrumental findings, few studies to date have focussed solely on the affective domain of such interactions. At the same time, most such studies have tended to consider either the student or the ALL-practitioner perspectives, with few taking both into account.

This paper presents some of the findings from a broader study titled, "Understanding the Individual Consultation in Study Support: Students' and Learning Advisers' Perspectives". Specifically, we draw on interviews with 21 students and with 5 ALL practitioners regarding ICs, and analyse their responses from the perspective of the affective domain. Our primary interest is to explore this dimension of the student experience, but we would like also to take the ALL-practitioner perspective into account. The reason for considering both perspectives is that we seek less to contribute to the understanding of what "works" in ICs, although that forms part of our interest, but more to foreground the IC as an educational form providing (as stated) the opportunity for dialogic encounters.

The approach we take in this paper is informed by Braun and Clarke's (2019; 2020) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Consistent with the appeal in this approach to acknowledge researcher positioning, we draw on our own experience as ALL practitioners, partly through inclusion of specific practitioner reflections, and partly through reference to some of the wider tensions under which ALL practice occurs in contemporary HE in Australia. Such tensions include the blurring of distinctions between teaching and service delivery in the face of the commodification of university education and a subsequent emphasis on "customer service" (Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2009). This tension is potentially exacerbated within the field of ALL by distinct differences among institutions in terms of the work classification for ALL practitioners (i.e. academic versus professional classifications), and differences in what ALL practitioners conceive to be their remit and responsibilities.

What emerged from the interviews with the students was a sense that they quite often had not anticipated or identified the extent to which the affective dimensions of learning were acting as stumbling blocks for them. By the same token, what emerged from the interviews with the ALL Advisers was a common awareness of the value of finding efficient ways of alleviating and managing the anxieties and uncertainties of the student in front of them, as the quickest way to achieve the more instrumental outcomes desired by both the practitioner and the student. In exploring and highlighting the former in this paper, we seek to build on the observation of Gonzalez and Donnelly (2022, p. 15) that addressing the affective domain often "paves the way to deal with students' academic writing issues related to the specificities and technicalities of academic writing." And similarly the suggestion by McCormack (2014, p. A57), drawing on Gadamer, that as ALL-practitioners, we concentrate on "cultivating our 'tact' and judgement, our practical wisdom

(*phronesis*), through experience" and ensure our practice does not become "the application of some kind of generalised or templated reiteration, but a nuanced judgement of the particularity of students and their distinctive 'take' on what they are learning and its potential meanings".

With the above in mind, we suggest in this paper that while instrumental supports can be shown to translate into greater student success and retention, the affective impacts of effective learning support programs on these indicators are sometimes underestimated or overlooked. We also suggest that examining these dimensions can contribute to a greater appreciation of the complex educational nature of the IC, what can be at stake for the student, and the types of specialised judgments called on by the ALL-practitioner.

In the next section, we present some background on ICs as academic language and learning practice, with a focus on issues related to the affective domain. Following this background, we outline the research project, including how the data was gathered, along with an account of our use of Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

2. Individual consultations

2.1. General findings

We conducted a targeted literature review to better understand what has been written on the topic of the one-to-one ALL-practitioner consultation, and as far as possible situate our research within that literature. It became apparent that while there is considerable literature on the linguistic aspects, particularly in the English as an Additional Language (EAL) context, there is less written on other aspects of ICs, such as their nature as a learning event. Wilson et al. (2011), for example, do explore the dynamics of the consultation including the ways in which adviser and student interact. They examined a single consultation in detail, focusing on how the consultation occurred and what was covered. They identified three stages in the consultation – orientation, co-construction and resolution – and noted the language used by both the adviser and student in moving through these stages (Wilson et al., 2011). Wilson et al. also examined the positioning of the adviser in relation to the student's academic discipline, noting the observation by Chanock (cited in Wilson et al., 2011, p. A146) that "the learning adviser stands outside the student's discipline without the power to allocate a grade". In their case study, it became clear that in relation to the discipline topic, the student was positioned as the "discipline insider" and the adviser explicitly positioned himself as external to the discipline. This enabled a more collaborative approach to discussing the discipline and task content than may have been the case otherwise, providing a safe space for the student to "voice ideas and gain ownership of the disciplinary discourse" (p. A150).

Stevenson and Kokkinn (2009) note that the construct and context of one-to-one consultations is largely determined by the institution rather than individual advisers or departments. This includes the degree to which ICs are viewed as a key role for advisers, as well as the practical aspects of how programs are run (such as location, duration of time available to students, and how student access is determined and organised). They note that programs vary significantly from one institution to another, and that there appears to be no shared understanding across the sector in terms of how programs are best run, what they are seeking to achieve, and how they mesh with the broader disciplinary learning process. Stevenson and Kokkinn (2009, p. A38) also note a tension between (and often also within) institutions regarding whether one-to-one advising is viewed as a product or commodity, as opposed to a developmental learning process. They highlight a potential gap in the research into one-to-one advising in terms of the extent to which the student perspective has been explored; in particular, they advocate research to gain a deeper understanding of what students most seek in accessing one-to-one adviser support. In relation to this gap, they suggest that students may hold quite different expectations to advisers.

Several researchers (e.g. Gonzalez & Donnelly, 2022; Ntereke & Ramoroka, 2015) have explored perceptions of the writing support offered to students through individual consultations from both student and Faculty perspectives. Gonzalez and Donnelly (2022) note a perceived gap between

students and discipline teachers on how best to help students to develop their disciplinary writing and thinking (Clarence, cited in Gonzalez & Donnelly, 2022). They also note "uncertainty" on the part of discipline teachers (across multiple disciplines) on the extent to which their role includes the teaching of academic writing (Gonzalez & Donnelly, 2022, p. 5). Gonzalez and Donnelly (2022, citing Ntereke & Ramoroka) observe that challenges in academic writing are not restricted to commencing students or the first year of study, and are evident at postgraduate level as well as at undergraduate. The Academic Writing Centre at their institution encourages attending students to think in terms of longer-term development and the creation of learning opportunities, as opposed to "quick fixes" to address "writing emergencies" (Gonzalez & Donnelly, 2022, p. 6).

Like Stevenson and Kokkinn, Chanock (2007) has explored the relationship between the individual teaching occurring in one-to-one consultations and the teaching of larger student cohorts conducted by language and learning advisers. She argues that the individual consultation provides a window into student thinking and decision-making in relation to their academic writing (Chanock, 2007), and that the knowledge gained through individual consultations informs the development of content and resources for other modes of teaching. Huijser et al. (2008) note that this knowledge gained through learning adviser dialogue and interaction with individual students also provides insights of value for curriculum development within Faculties, where an avenue or process exists to facilitate this.

It has been argued that teacher perceptions of the role and value of feedback often differ from those of students (Pitt & Norton, 2017). Further, while teachers may view an intention of feedback as to help students "close the gap" between actual and desired performance, it may not in reality achieve this closure in many cases (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). From the student perspective, the motivational effect of positive feedback may at times be preferred or more greatly valued than the critical feedback designed to highlight potential areas for improvement. Nash et al. (2015) go so far as to describe a kind of "academic paralysis" that can occur in the face of "constructive feedback" as a result of anxiety and low self-efficacy. With the above factors in mind, an interesting question is to what extent might the interaction students have with ALL-practitioners act to mediate the potentially negative impact of critical feedback, perhaps providing another avenue to enable students to both "receive" the critical advice offered by their discipline teachers while simultaneously receiving a degree of positive motivation through their interaction with the ALL-practitioner. Although beyond the scope of this paper, this question is worthy of closer examination.

2.2. The affective domain

Johnson et al. (2020) have surveyed a range of perspectives on emotions in the context of international student engagement and learning. While not focusing on individual interactions, they point to the importance of academic emotions. In a study focusing on a Higher Education institution setting in Ireland, Gonzalez and Donnelly (2022, p. 8) found three key motivations for engagement with academic adviser support specifically, which were: (1) pro-actively seeking input on assessment task requirements and instructions, (2) seeking "reassurance and support to address uncertainty", and (3) seeking advice on writing of a more "technical nature". They identified "positive affirmation" as a significant enabling characteristic of learning adviser consultations, with such affirmations helping students to persevere through the process of completing and submitting written assessment tasks even when experiencing doubt, lack of confidence or feelings of inadequacy (Gonzalez & Donnelly, 2022).

Tassinari (2016, p. 73) notes that "affect" is a multidimensional construct that has been explored across a range of disciplines. She proposes in relation to affect in learning contexts that individual learner differences in "motivation, learner beliefs, attitudes, personality features and identities" may all be considered relevant. Blanchard and Haccoun (2019, p. 4) give examples of what they term affective support as including "the calming of anxieties, displaying respect and sensitivity,

and treating errors as learning opportunities", leading to enhanced "self-confidence and auto regulation". For the purposes of this paper, we use the term "affective" to refer to the emotional responses to learning contexts and endeavours, including aspects such as confidence, sense of self-efficacy, degree of anxiety, sense of belonging, and other related factors that either directly or indirectly impact on both learner efficacy and learner comfort. As such, we use the term "as an umbrella term for a set of more specific concepts that include emotions, moods and feelings" (Zhang, 2013, p. 247).

One related area in which the role of the affective domain has received attention has been the area of Language Advising (as distinct from ALL advising). More common in Europe, one-to-one language advising consultations are centred on learning the language of study, but also extend to issues of negotiating higher education learning more broadly. Ciekanski and Tassinari (2015, p. 118) have noted that the issue of affect is "of growing interest in the field of self-access language learning (SALL), in accordance with a shift from (socio)cognitive to socio-cultural theory in the conception of autonomy in applied linguistics research". They argue that "the expression of emotions and subjectivity in language advising are areas that should be integrated into the research agenda and into the training of language advisors to identify ways of supporting the 'self'" (2015, p. 127).

3. Methods

3.1. Research context and approach

The larger project from which this study stems (the 'IC project' in short form) has been undertaken at a single, mid-tier university co-located in regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne. The project involved eight members from the Study Support team and was designed to accommodate multi-methodological approaches. The fact that members come from various discipline backgrounds was taken into account in the project and was reflected in divergent approaches and viewpoints regarding the purposes of ICs and how they are best conducted. Partly due to limited workload capacity for research of the team members, and partly to allow for thinking and deep engagement, a long view was taken and five years of ethics clearance applied for (Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee, HAE-20-007).

As a first step, the research team were each encouraged to generate a 500 word "motivation" statement outlining their interest and aims for the project. Listed among these statements were the opportunities to:

1. move beyond measuring or evaluating, particularly under conditions tending to reduce ICs to a service encounter
2. understand ICs in their own right
3. explore how "as soon as you scratch below the surface [of ICs] all sorts of things open up"
4. appreciate how "ICs help us to see with a student's eyes, to hear in their own words how they are approaching their learning, how they learn and how they write."
5. critically reflect on the evolving field of ALL in a changing tertiary education context.

Among the more surprising motivations listed was the "conversations" the project would generate. As one researcher noted, their experience with a previous practitioner-researcher project by the same team had created a generative momentum within the team. The collaborative multi-methodological design of the IC project was directly drawn from this previous project (for details see Fraser et al., 2023). For the purposes of this study, the notion of a "generative" orientation was felt to align with Braun and Clarke's (2019; 2020) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach, which was subsequently taken up. RTA and how it informed this project will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.2 below.

The data this paper draws on was collected in the next step of the larger IC project. Interview questions were formulated through a collaborative process by the team. Questions were devised

for students and for LLA participants (see Appendix A). Invitations to participate were sent to students who had attended an IC in the past calendar year. Twenty-three students responded and 21 took part in semi-structured interviews of approximately 45-60 minutes, conducted between May and September 2021. The interviews were allocated to various team members, ensuring they were not interviewing a student they had seen in an IC themselves. For the practitioner interviews, invitations were sent to all 14 members of the Study Support team. Given the small numbers, one member of the team undertook to conduct all the practitioner interviews, which were conducted in 2020. Pseudonyms have been used in this paper in referring to all illustrative quotations from both student and practitioner participants, to ensure confidentiality. With participant consent, real names have been used for the brief quotations from practitioners included in the Researcher Motivation Statements.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Anonymised transcriptions were made available to the entire research team. Following a collaborative conversation, and having had time to examine the overall data, the authors of this paper felt it would be of interest to explore what the data might reveal regarding the affective dimension of ICs.

3.2. Reflexive thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2019; 2020) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was adopted in this paper. An approach to qualitative analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2019), RTA ultimately offers "an adventure, not a recipe" (p. 591). Within RTA, "the researcher's role in knowledge production is at the heart of [the] approach" and there is an onus on the research(ers) to proceed with what they describe as "theoretical knowingness and transparency; the researcher strives to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of Thematic Analysis" (p. 594). It is an approach within which, in other words, "researcher subjectivity" is "understood as a resource" (p. 591). This approach was seen by the researchers as aligning with the sensibility that underpinned the original collaborative team-based design of the IC project. It was an orientation that allowed us to view other members of the research team as resources with existing knowledge and experience, and potential catalysts for the creative generation of new knowledge and understandings. The anticipated collaborative energy produced by the project – offering the team a side-interest over and above their practical everyday "doing of their jobs" – was part of a generative orientation in research design that valued creativity. Braun and Clarke (2019) explain that for them, qualitative research is "about fun, play and creativity" which is generative and productive. In their view,

> qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated, and qualitative data analysis is about telling 'stories', about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the 'truth' that is either 'out there' and findable from, or buried deep within, the data. For us, the final analysis is the product of deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness and reflection, something that is active and generative. (p. 591)

Consistent with this view, the diverging experience and interest of the two authors of this study is likewise framed as an asset, particularly in the attempt to foreground the potential complexity of what can occur in ICs. To this end, it is relevant that one author works primarily with the Faculty of Health and the other more with Arts and Education.

In keeping with the RTA principles espoused by Braun and Clarke, our orientation towards the coding process was "fluid and recursive, rather than rigid and structured" (2019, p. 591). The tasks were divided up with Author 1 responsible for an initial sweep of the data in which he focused on creating "I statements" in relation to the student interviews. In this context, an "I statement" briefly expresses what the researcher sees as the feeling underlying students' utterances. Author 1 also looked for any mentions by the ALL-practitioner participants of attending to the affective domain within ICs. Author 2 subsequently examined the data and then several

discussions regarding interpretation were held. The data was examined less with interest in coming to a consensus view, than searching for ways that the data opened up the complex nature of the educational interactions that take place in ALL-based ICs. In this process, consistent with the RTA approach, we viewed the individual background experiences and practitioner understandings of the researchers as an asset.

4. Practitioner reflections

As mentioned above, in acknowledgement of the extent to which researcher experience and positioning influences the research process, and that in conducting this project we are acting as practitioner researchers, we have included brief practitioner reflections by each of the authors. These reflections also highlight that while we share many experiences as ALL practitioners, there are also inevitably significant differences in perspectives, perceptions and emphasis from one researcher to another.

4.1. John Hamilton reflection

In my role as a Language and Learning Adviser (LLA) working with Health disciplines, I have seen students on clinical placement from Occupational Therapy, Radiography, Nursing and Medicine. These students are most often referred due to perceived issues on placement with their language proficiency, communication skills and/or interpersonal style; most are international students, some local students with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Clinical placement is a stressful time for most students. For these referred students, this is particularly so, their performance having been flagged as problematic in some way and with them often facing the prospect of failing their placement or receiving a less than satisfactory evaluation. They often present as vulnerable, anxious, concerned and confused. They may be experiencing low self-esteem and dented confidence.

Perhaps more so than with some other types of Individual Consultation, it is self-evident that for these students the affective dimension needs to be addressed before progress can be made on other areas. Exploring the situation from their perspective is important, as is establishing the extent to which they share the reservations held by their supervisors regarding their capabilities and readiness for the learning context. It is important to speak openly and frankly, but equally important to avoid too much challenging feedback. A first step often involves identifying their strengths as well as potential areas for improvement, as well as helping them to better understand the expectations of learners within the clinical learning environment.

As a Language and Learning Adviser, these consultations act as a useful reminder of how important the affective dimension is in working with *all* students, regardless of the reason for them seeking assistance. Whereas in the examples above the affective dimension is front and centre, in an email exchange relating to a draft assessment task response, for example, it may be easy to overlook the extent to which the affective impact of feedback needs always to be considered in our practice.

4.2. Tao Bak reflection

One of the privileges of my work as a Language and Learning Adviser (LLA) with students in Arts and Education faculties is helping them engage with theory, and to understand what is expected of them in providing critical analysis in their work that draws on the literature. Of course, what these things look like can differ according to the subject or discipline they are working in, but nevertheless these are tasks that students often express confusion about or find overwhelming.

In reflecting on how I tackle the challenge of finding “ways in” for individual students, I note that I draw on a wide set of specific “tricks” and strategies developed over years, such as (where relevant) simply reading the task instructions in detail with the student for example. What I have become more aware of in recent years, however, is the general positioning I take up in these

interactions. In the first instance, in the broadest sense I try to indicate that I am "on their side". A common initial way "in" to this I have found is by normalising processes. That is, I try to normalise the processes of dealing with uncertainty and the consequent "grappling with" that this work often involves. In doing so, I subtly reframe their experience of this difficulty into validating evidence that they are joining the community of their academic discipline, and in some ways, becoming a member of the western scholarly tradition (i.e. the Academy) more broadly.

At the same time, I enthuse about their work. I respond to the ideas they are presenting with seriousness. By alerting students to the mechanics of how knowledge claims are made in academic contexts, I invite students into a space where ideas have a merit in their own right, aside from the question of meeting the requirements of a specific assignment task. This merit appears to be most generative when it occupies both the micro-space of appreciation in that moment, and the macro. It is my responsibility of course to ensure the student ties things as closely to the task requirements as possible (which lies somewhere between the micro and macro – sometimes referred to as the *meso*-level). Much depends on pragmatic urgencies of due dates and time pressures, but it seems to me that the mood changes, and anxieties fall away, when a space is created to be with the ideas for a moment.

5. Findings

5.1. Student responses

Broad themes emerging from the analysis of our data included:

- belonging
- navigating the HE learning and teaching environment
- understanding expectations
- feeling able to cope
- being heard
- engaging in dialogue on learning
- feeling supported
- feeling confident to continue on the learning journey.

In the process of exploring these themes, we chose to categorise them as a series of student "I statements", which are presented in Table 1, along with relevant illustrative quotes from the student interviews. These "I statements", we believe, capture from the student perspective the importance of the individual consultation process in addressing the affective dimensions of the student HE journey. Therefore, Table 1 presents a range of student participant comments grouped into a series of "I Statements", along with relevant ALL-practitioner actions and intentions.

Table 1 is intended to surface key themes that became evident in our analysis of the data in a way accessible to the reader. We are not presenting the data in this way to necessarily suggest a clear causal link between the ALL-practitioner actions and intentions and expressed positive outcomes for the student participants, but rather just noting alignment between ALL-practitioner and student participant responses. This alignment is explored further in the next section in which we look more directly at the data generated through the interviews conducted with ALL-practitioner participants.

Table 1. Student participant comments grouped into "I Statements", with relevant ALL-practitioner actions/intentions.

ALL-practitioner actions and intentions/Student illustrative quotations	**"I Statements"**
Student participant illustrative quotations: *"…it definitely gives me confidence…it helps me to articulate what I'm trying to say…it is really important for me to feel confident with what I'm doing"* [Beth] *"That language and learning adviser really calmed me down…just helped me to say look, it's OK"* [Annie] *"I feel more confidence in putting my ideas across both in writing and in words, in the sense that I convey these messages in a more methodical fashion…and to me that has made a difference"* [Lester] *"being able to get that second set of eyes and that feedback definitely gave me a lot more confidence in what I was doing and my approach to… to various tasks… so my identity as a student… having again not been a student for many years [it] was… definitely a confidence boosting thing…which is vastly positive"* [Ivan] **ALL-practitioner action/intention:** Addressing imposter syndrome, and helping students overcome self-doubt.	I CAN DO THIS I CAN COPE (I BELONG HERE)
Student participant illustrative quotations: *"I probably spent the first three or four months…just focusing on those mechanics of how I did things as opposed to…the content of my study"* [Ivan] *"…just trying to get my head around I guess the study process…the expectations in terms of the way the assignments should be".* [Luke] *"…more confidence in…starting things…I've got an idea of where to go and what to do"* [Anna] *"you have to be quite organised to have at least a draft going and have a time frame, where you can meet with [the Adviser] and then rework what their feedback is, so I definitely think it helped with my organization and forward planning"* [Megan] *"to get that feedback, I think, is really important for me to feel confident with what I'm doing, yeah"* [Beth] *"I'm building confidence in myself with what I'm writing"* [Alicia] **ALL-practitioner action/intention:** Helping students navigate the "mechanics of learning".	I AM FINDING MY WAY I KNOW WHAT IS EXPECTED I CAN SEE WHERE I'M HEADED
Student participant illustrative quotations: *"…they pointed out things that I had done well"* [Sandra] *"I was encouraged by the fact that he said… basically your arguments are sound, there's nothing wrong with the way you're arguing…so I knew that the genesis of what I had was there"* [Lester] *"…it was sort of validating to be like okay it's not always me that's amiss"* [Sandra] *"it's definitely given me the confidence to you know, to try and do more …on my own"* [Anna] *"I find I have deeper thinking into the issues…and that's a function of the consultation"* [Lester] **ALL-practitioner action/intention:** Identifying, reinforcing and validating good practice.	I AM CAPABLE I HAVE WHAT IT TAKES
Student participant illustrative quotations: *"…it was being able to just use it initially as a sounding board as much as anything"* [Ivan] *"I don't need the service for my language skills…what I need is someone to just talk over ideas with……. [the Adviser was] a great sounding board."* [Annie] *"My course is online and there's not a lot of interaction with students or staff so yeah to get that personal contact and talk about what I'm doing specifically it's been really important"* [Beth] *"I always needed somebody else to talk that process through of going deeper"* [Beth] **ALL-practitioner actions/intentions:** Providing opportunity for dialogue on progress and perceived issues.	I AM BEING HEARD

Student participant illustrative quotations: *"For me it's just reassurance that I'm on the right track"* [Alicia] "*It confirms for me whether I'm on the right track…it's confirming for me that I'm going okay"* [Beth] **ALL-practitioner action/intention:** Reassuring students that they are headed in the right direction. Reminding students of expectations for their current stage of learning.	I AM ON TRACK
Student participant illustrative quotations: *"…they always seem to be on my side"* [Sandra] *"knowing that there's support there if I do need it…especially when we first started studying online..."* [Melissa] **ALL-practitioner action/intention:** Helping students feel they have "someone in their corner".	I AM NOT ALONE I FEEL SUPPORTED
Student participant illustrative quotations: "*I definitely wouldn't be in the position of being* ***comfortable in my studies*** *that I am now if it wasn't for the support in the program you've got"* [Ivan] *"I guess it boosted my confidence…it gave me the boost that I need to be like I'm doing a great job of my studies"* [Megan] **ALL-practitioner action/intention:** All of the above.	I'VE GOT THIS

5.2. ALL-practitioner responses

In the interviews with the ALL-practitioners, several participants referred to their role in supporting students through the transition into university, including helping them to overcome doubts about their capacity to succeed within the HE teaching and learning environment. While they made clear that their role included helping students develop the appropriate academic literacies and skills, they frequently referred to the perceived impact they could have on the students' emotional states and sense of identity:

> *… another thing they can get out of the session is to reduce anxiety because they now know what to do … so they can go away and know exactly what to do next … on a deeper level that means they feel more confident and they start to shift an identity of 'I don't know what to do, maybe I shouldn't be here' to 'I do know what to do … I can do this uni thing'* [Grace]
>
> *short term often [the goals are] to perhaps provide a bit of a floor for the students if they are bemused or confused…alleviating some of their anxiety…to encourage them in their journey, and to facilitate their skill development* [Georgina]
>
> *I'd like more of them to go away with the confidence that so few of them have that the way to write a paper is to draw it from yourself rather than to assume it is out there somewhere on the internet where you can search for it.* [Jim]

Several ALL-practitioner participants referred to the students' learning journey, and their role in motivating students along that path and providing reassurance that they can manage the challenges effectively:

> *getting them to think about learning as an ongoing process, not just that you're there to solve their [immediate] issue…particularly if they have low self-esteem or [lack] confidence with the skills, to really look at their strengths and say, 'look, you're doing that really well' –'look, you'll be okay'* [Glenn]

> *I guess I aim to alleviate their discomfort and anxiety if that is present … I aim for them to leave the session feeling better than when they started* [Georgina]
>
> *[Help them acquire] a more detailed, nuanced, even broader understanding of what they need … maybe, an understanding of what further things they might require and how to approach this particular area of learning with, I suppose, more assuredness or more confidence.* [Glenn]

ALL-practitioner participants also mentioned the necessity of addressing the affective factors that sometimes create fear and inhibit students from "making a start" with assessment tasks (for example), as a pre-curser to addressing their academic literacy and skills development:

> *you can get students in the first month that are extremely nervous – and rightfully so, they are very worried – and so, there's that challenge of trying to get them to move away from the fears and anxieties and to move towards actions … how they can use that to be productive, use that to be organised …, you want to tell them that things will be okay provided [they] stick with it and take these steps.* [Glenn]

6. Discussion

A number of the broad themes identified in this study align with findings of other studies relating to the student experience of ICs. As noted earlier, among the key motivations for attending ICs found by Gonzalez and Donnelly (2022) was seeking "reassurance and support to address uncertainty" (p. 8). The "positive affirmation" students experienced in learning adviser consultations was seen as playing an important role in enabling students to complete and submit assignments despite doubts and anxieties (Gonzalez & Donnelly, 2022). They argue that when the affective domain is addressed first in learning adviser consultations, the conditions are created to tackle any more technical aspects of student academic writing that become evident through the consultation process. The importance of positive affirmation from the student perspective also became evident in analysis of the data generated through our study (see Table 1).

Similarly, Blanchard and Haccoun (2019) note that "… perceived support acts as a buffer against stress, notably by fostering self-regulation and the conservation of self-esteem". From this perspective, student awareness of their access to learning support programs may in itself, even if not acted upon, offer a degree of reassurance that help is available if required. Blanchard and Haccoun (2019, p. 4) refer to instrumental and affective support as two parameters relevant to the higher education learning context, and note that while Faculty support efforts often focus on the former, both play a significant role in influencing student self-confidence and auto regulation. They argue that "affective support can help [students] cope with the anxiety and other negative sentiments that young scholars are likely to encounter" (Blanchard & Haccoun, 2019, p. 12). In our study, several participants suggested that being able to use the ALL-practitioner as a "sounding board", to check whether they were on the right track in their understanding of a task or development of a task response, was important in their transition into the HE learning environment (Table 1).

As mentioned above, Stevenson and Kokkinn (2009, p. A38) suggested that students may hold quite different expectations to advisers regarding the purpose and goals of ICs. To an extent this was borne out in our research. While the student participants were often initially unclear about how the IC would be conducted and realistically what it might achieve, ALL-practitioner participants had a greater focus on both shorter and longer term goals, and strategies they could use to address these. This difference is not surprising given the difference in experience between a student attending an IC for the first time and an ALL-practitioner with many years in the field.

In examining the illustrative quotes presented in Table 1, and considering the "I statements" under which they are grouped, it seems reasonable to ask the question – what if these students *did not have* an avenue to express their concerns, seek reassurance, seek advice or explore positive

aspects of themselves as learners? If we turn those "I-statements" around, to what extent do they represent the feelings students may have when first seeking support through ICs – for example, *I don't belong here, I can't cope, I can't see where I'm headed, I don't have what it takes, I am not being heard, I do not feel supported*? The quotation from "Melissa" at the commencement of this paper is illustrative – "*you need to be able to see the through line … that was super helpful*" – what long term impact would it have had on Melissa's progress as a student if the "through line" had continued to remain obscured?

In analysing the interviews conducted with the ALL-practitioner participants, it was evident that, from their perspective, acknowledging and addressing the affective factors that impact on student learning is a key aspect of their role. They were conscious of the need to help students overcome doubts about their capacity to function effectively in the HE environment, as a first step to beginning to help them acquire the necessary skills and literacies for success. Conversely, for the student participants, the references to affective dimensions seemed less considered and more spontaneous – in some cases they only really appeared to realise the extent to which ICs assisted them in that way in the process of answering specific questions and being invited to reflect on their experiences. There was a sense that students often attended ICs with a view to addressing instrumental aspects perceived as needing to be addressed (e.g. better understanding the task, ensuring their response answers the question, effectively structuring their response, meeting the referencing requirements) and only later realised the extent to which their IC experiences contributed to them better managing affective dimensions of their learning journey.

One ALL practitioner participant referred to helping students to "move towards actions" – this resonates to an extent with the observations from Nash et al. (2015) regarding the "academic paralysis" that may be induced in some students (and academics) by "constructive feedback", particularly in the face of high anxiety and low self-efficacy. A potential benefit (whether deliberate or accidental) of ICs may therefore be the capacity to help students become "unstuck" and overcome barriers impeding their progress. As is evident from the participant responses in our research, those barriers may relate to instrumental aspects of learning such as academic or digital literacy, but as is indicated by some of the data and from what our professional experience tells us, they may equally relate to motivation, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), sense of self-efficacy (Chow & Wong, 2020), or several other factors. Importantly, the IC represents a forum to potentially address *a wide range of factors* impacting learning. In promoting ICs at our institution, we typically state that students can book an appointment in relation to *any aspect of learning*. While students are able to discuss issues impacting their learning with their discipline teachers, the IC may be viewed by some students as a safer space in which to raise and address a potentially very broad range of issues, some of which they may feel disinclined or intimidated to raise with Faculty-based staff. This is not a new idea – Wilson et al. (2011, p. A150) attribute the following to Chanock (1995):

> The one-to-one consultation is an ideal setting in which the student can learn to voice ideas and gain ownership of the disciplinary discourse with a less imposing discourse partner than their tutor or lecturer.

Consistent with this idea, something that was evident in analysing the student participant data in this study was that a significant number of students were wanting more than simply grammar checking or support with the mechanics of writing from ICs. Several student participants mentioned valuing the opportunity to engage in a dialogue on their learning and thereby effectively use the IC to refine their thinking in relation to a topic or question:

> *[The ALL-practitioner] started talking to me about some writing stuff that I was like 'that's great but that's not* ***really*** *what I want'… I want feedback on 'Do you understand what I'm saying, is the content structured in a way that is logical to … an outsider?' because you get so caught up in your own words that you make these assumptions that people know everything that you know,*

> *and they don't … being able to just use it initially as a sounding board … was very, very helpful* [Liam]
>
> *I always needed somebody else to talk that process through of going deeper.* [Beth]

In this regard, some participants alluded to these opportunities for one-to-one discussion on aspects of learning being particularly valued given quite limited access to their discipline teachers (particularly at the undergraduate level), presumably due to increasingly high student-to-teacher ratios and a contemporary Australian HE environment in which teacher-to-student interactions are largely mediated online. Further, some of the opportunities for those conversations are under pressure from institutions' moves to outsource provision of feedback to external providers. In this regard, a question beyond the scope of this paper but perhaps worthy of further investigation is: to what extent do ICs meet a need that once would have been the domain of the discipline teacher? Another pertinent question is the extent to which distanced feedback provided by external providers can cater for the affective dimensions of the student experience, most notably as relates to the elusive notion of belonging. At a time when universities are exploring a future that will include increasing use of generative Artificial Intelligence (gen AI), better understanding the nuances of ICs, and how they meet a *wide range* of student needs, has never been more necessary.

7. Conclusion

Individual Consultations (ICs) are a core part of ALL practice and offer a very broad range of support to students across both instrumental and affective domains of learning. In this study, we have examined the responses of 21 students and 5 Language and Learning practitioners discussing their experience of ICs, with our particular focus on the affective dimensions of their experiences. From a student perspective, the impact of ICs in helping them to address some of the affective dimensions of the transition into the HE learning and teaching environment, and becoming effective in that space, is highly valued. A focus on "I statements" enabled us to note instances of ICs helping students experience feelings of belonging, develop a sense that they were capable, could cope, had what it takes, and also were being heard and felt supported. Interviews showed that ALL practitioners see motivation, reassurance, affirmation and building confidence as key aspects of their roles, closely aligned with helping students acquire the academic literacies required for success. Conversely, from the ALL-practitioner perspective, failure to adequately help students navigate the affective dimensions effectively has serious repercussions in terms of success and retention. This conclusion is consistent with the finding of Campitelli et al. (2019, p. 132) that ICs can be shown to have a positive impact not only on grades but on health and wellbeing, including, at least a self-reported, positive impact on mental health, confidence and focus, and reduced stress.

There is an argument that the role of ICs, as well as the role of ALL-practitioners, is changing and taking on greater significance as one of the few remaining avenues for students to engage in one-to-one dialogue with their teachers on a range of aspects of their learning. Such an argument would align with the notion, borrowed from the field of Language Advising, of ICs representing a "privileged space". While it has been outside of the scope of this study to make this argument, the value placed by students on the opportunity to use the IC as a sounding board, potentially aligns with this development. Part of the effectiveness of ICs appears to stem from the understanding of the ALL-practitioners that sensitivity to affective dimensions of the study experience can assist in removing obstacles to proceeding efficiently with more instrumental concerns. In this study, we have attempted to point to some of the complexities involved in ICs as a unique educational form. Our premise has been that the more this complexity can be understood through the lens of evolving student need and experience, as well as ALL practitioner understanding and perspectives, the more opportunities will emerge for a deeper understanding of the nature of ICs as a core part of ALL practice, but also as a unique and valuable student experience within the rapidly evolving tertiary education landscape.

Declarations

1. **Ethics approval**: Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee, HAE-20-007.
2. **Competing / conflict of interests:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Interview questions

Specific questions presented to students were as follows:

1. How did you hear about the opportunity to book Individual Consultations with Language and Learning Advisers?
2. What motivated you to attend the Individual Consultation with a Language and Learning adviser? (e.g. were you working on an assessment task, advice on how to study in general?)
3. To what extent have consultations matched or varied from your expectations? Please explain. What have you found most useful in the individual consultations you have attended? What have you found less useful?
4. To what extent have you been able to transfer your learning from the individual consultations to other aspects of your study?
5. Have the sessions assisted you to improve your academic writing? If so, in what ways?
6. If you have had guidance and advice on completing assessment tasks, has this helped you in doing other assessments? Please explain.
7. Are there any changes you would like to see to how individual consultations are conducted? Do you have any suggestions for improvement? Please explain.

Questions presented to Language and Learning Advisors interviewed were as follows:

1. Tell us about your IC practice. What do you see as the /general/overall? aim/s of the ICs? What do you understand the short/long term aims of the ICs?
2. What do you expect students will learn/get out of the session?
3. More broadly, what challenges (if any) does the IC present to you as an LLA?
4. What sort of difficulties (if any) have you encountered working with students during ICs? Can you recount a particular IC that illustrates this?
5. Have you found that ICs impact or inform other areas of your work as an LLA? How so?
6. A multimodal response of their choice (NB in recognition that some LLAs have a creative arts background and/or are practicing artists and may prefer to present their replies in using multi-media/creative art).

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