IMPROVING THE PROVISION OF LEARNING ASSISTANCE SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This study is motivated by the need to look continually for ways to improve Griffith University’s learning assistance services so that they meet the changing needs of stakeholders and are at the same time cost-effective and efficient. This study uses the conceptual tools of cultural-historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation to investigate the development and transformation of learning assistance services at Griffith University, one of Australia’s largest multi-campus universities. Cultural-historical activity is a powerful theoretical framework that acknowledges the importance of dimensions such as cultural context, local setting, collective understanding, and the influence of historical variables on interactions in settings. Expansive visibilisation is a practical four-stage process that was used in this study to make visible and analysable the work context of the Learning Assistance Unit.

The study uses these conceptual tools to illustrate how learning assistance services at the University have moved through several stages of historical development and that historical variables, such as the political setting and physical location of services continue to influence current work practices. The investigation involved gathering data through interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders in order to map the University’s Learning Assistance Unit as an activity system that appears to have separated out from the overall activity system of the University. It involved making visible problems and tensions in the activity system, and identifying ways of improving future practice. The study reveals problem clusters and underlying tensions amongst the interacting activity systems of the Learning Assistance Unit, faculty, library and student. These problem clusters relate to different understandings about the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit and the role of the learning adviser, the difficulties in offering a quality service on a restricted budget, and tensions between contextualised and de-contextualised learning assistance. The study suggests that resolving these tensions depends on staff taking an active role in critically examining their practice, in particular the way that they collaborate with key stakeholders in the learning environment. The dissertation concludes by suggesting that one way forward is to expand the activity system on its socio-spatial, temporal, moral-ideological, and systemic-developmental dimensions (Engeström, 1999c).
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For Hannah, who is just beginning her journey of lifelong learning.
CANDIDATE’S STATEMENT

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the dissertation contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the dissertation itself.

Signed:

Date:
CHAPTER 1: NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

1.1 Contextual background to the study

This study is concerned with the development and improvement of learning assistance services at Griffith University. Griffith University is one of Australia’s largest multi-campus universities. It stretches from Southport on the Gold Coast to South Bank on the Brisbane River and has a population of more than 24,000 students and approximately 2,600 staff. The University offers more than 900 programs across five campuses in areas such as education, business, nursing, environmental science, modern Asian studies, music, art, law, aviation, and biomedical science (Griffith University, 2001).

In 1997 the University underwent a radical restructure of its academic and administrative elements. This restructure was aimed at improving the overall quality of planning and management of the University’s activities as well as strengthening cooperation across the University’s academic and administrative areas. One outcome of the restructure was the creation of a set of four University-wide academic areas, namely Arts, Science, Health, and Business (Griffith University, 1998). Another outcome of the restructure was the establishment, at the beginning of 1998, of a centralised learning assistance unit. The term ‘learning assistance’ is used in the Griffith context and in the Australian higher education sector generally, to refer to student services that include assistance with academic writing and other study skills.

The centralisation of learning assistance services at Griffith University was intended to improve the quality, access, and coordination of these services across all campuses. In 1998 a coordinator and team of learning advisers set out to do this by providing students with regular access to workshops and consultations on topics such as critical thinking, academic writing, research skills, oral presentations, and exam preparation. Data collected via an electronic database shows that between July 1998 and June 2001 the staff conducted over 16,500 student
consultations. These consultations were with students from all discipline areas and all year levels including undergraduate and postgraduate (Learning Assistance Unit, 2001a). Service satisfaction surveys conducted since 1998 indicate that students are highly satisfied with the services offered. However, this study is based on the premise that if these services are to continue to meet the changing needs of students then the staff in the Learning Assistance Unit must continually look for ways to understand and improve their work practices. I have a particular interest in these issues as the original coordinator and manager of the service. My involvement in the development of centralised learning assistance services extends back to 1994 when attention was first drawn to problems in the University’s decentralised model of delivery. The problems identified in the decentralised model, discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, included concerns about coordination, quality, access, availability, appropriateness, and consistency of services.

1.2 Purpose of the study

I will argue in this dissertation that improving learning assistance services at Griffith University depends on the staff being able to “see clearly” how the history of learning assistance provision at the University has influenced current work practices (Binney & Williams, 1995, p. 78). Furthermore I will argue that shaping a successful future for the service depends on the willingness of the staff to open themselves up to examining some of the more difficult questions about these work practices. To this end, this study actively engages staff in a process of making visible problems and tensions in the work of the Unit. For example, the study draws attention to problems and tensions in the way that the work practices of the learning advisers relate to the work practices of other key stakeholders in the University community. Participants were asked, during interviews and focus group discussions, to question and examine actively the relationship between learning advisers and others in the learning environment. A willingness by the staff to examine problems and tensions openly in their work and to seek actively new ways of working is particularly important at a time when senior management is attempting to find more cost-effective and efficient ways of working. The Unit’s purpose, structure, location, and methods of
operation are all under scrutiny. In this environment the staff of the Learning Assistance Unit need to be able to demonstrate the contribution that the services make to the learning environment as well as come up with new ways of working that are cost-effective and efficient.

1.3 Aim of the study

This study aims to show how the conceptual tools of cultural-historical analysis and the process of expansive visibilisation can be used firstly, to map the Learning Assistance Unit as an activity system comprising various components. Secondly, the study aims to show how these tools can be used to make visible perceived problems and associated tensions in current work practices. Finally, the study aims to make suggestions about possible, future, desired transformations in the service.

1.4 Theoretical framework of the study

In order to improve practice “one must learn to know and understand what one wants to transcend” (Engeström, 1999a, p. 33). Cultural-historical activity theory and the process of expansive visibilisation, with its roots in the theory, provide powerful conceptual tools for understanding work practices (Cole, 1999; Leont’ev, 1978; Scribner, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). Chapter Three describes in detail how cultural-historical activity theory provides a framework for understanding change and transformation in human activity. For example, in this study cultural-historical activity theory is used to show how Griffith’s learning assistance services have changed over time and how the Learning Assistance Unit appears to have separated from the overall activity system of the University. An activity system is understood to comprise components such as the subject or person engaged in the activity, the object or motive for the activity, community, rules, divisions of labour, and the instruments (including tools). As explained in Chapter Three, central to understanding activity theory is the notion of the object or motive, that is the objective or motive towards which collective activity is directed (Leont’ev in Engeström, 1999d).
Cultural-historical activity theory acknowledges the influence that social and historical factors have on current work practices and draws attention to the diversity and multiple voices of the participants involved in the activity system. It takes into account the influence of history on current practice and the presence of “buds and shoots” of possible further activity (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In this way learning assistance services and the Learning Assistance Unit can be seen as having a trajectory moving through space and time continually changing and transforming, never standing still (Engeström, 1993). The conceptual tools of cultural-historical activity theory also offer insight into problems and tensions in collective work practices. This in turn leads to a productive way of understanding the potential for change and development (Cole, 1999; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). A key feature of cultural-historical analysis is that it is multi-dimensional and provides the basis for understanding the integration of not only the linear but also the socio-spatial, temporal and moral-ideological dimensions of the collective work activity (Engeström, 1999c). That is, instead of just identifying and representing successive steps in a work process, cultural-historical analysis acknowledges that human development extends over time and space and involves interactions amongst people and amongst people and their tools. This approach contributes to an understanding of collective human activity on dimensions such as social context, time, power distribution, and systemic influences. Moreover, as illustrated in Chapter Seven, cultural-historical analysis has the potential to lead from tensions, contradictions and conflicts to change and transformation of the activity on the dimensions mentioned earlier.

1.5 Overview of the research process

My decision to focus on collective activities rather than individual actions was informed by the view that people function as parts of systems or communities of practice, and that knowledge and competent action are distributed not only across people but also between people and their tools (Luria & Vygotsky, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, the Learning Assistance Unit can be understood as part of a University community that has an object or motive shared across the different elements. However, this study shows that the Unit can also be understood as a
separate activity system. Chapter Three describes how the process of expansive visibilisation is used to gain insight into the Learning Assistance Unit as an activity system, capture different understandings on the work of the learning advisers, and generate ideas on new ways of working (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). Expansive visibilisation (Engeström, 1999b), with its roots in cultural-historical analysis, is a structured and inclusive way for practitioners and researchers to formalise the historical development of collective behaviours, materials, and instruments of the work context. In Chapter Three, based on Engeström’s work, expansive visibilisation is described as a four-stage cycle that involves gaining insight, analysis, formulation of new ways of working, and the practical application of new instruments/models.

Between November 2000 and May 2001 semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen key stakeholders (refer Chapter Four). These stakeholders were selected because of their common institutional affiliation and mission, their work with students and shared concern for the academic progress of students. Academic staff, librarians, students, and learning advisers were asked about their general understandings of the Learning Assistance Unit. They were asked to describe the role of the Unit and its relationship to the library and faculty. Key stakeholders were also asked to comment on the motivation behind the work of the learning adviser, possible tensions or gaps in the Unit’s service provision, and suggestions on ways to improve practice. Next, a thorough analysis of the interview transcripts was used to map the various elements of the Unit as well as to provide triggers for focus group discussions with the learning advisers (refer Chapter Five). These discussions took place between February and November 2001 and were used to generate response to the comments from key stakeholders as well as to elicit additional information about the Unit.

1.6 Dissertation structure

This dissertation is divided into eight chapters. This first chapter provides a brief overview of the nature and purpose of the study. It identifies Griffith University’s Learning Assistance Unit as the research site and provides some of the contextual background to the study. This chapter
also presents the main thesis of the study: that is, that improving learning assistance services and moving towards a successful future depends on staff understanding the way that current practices have been influenced by history, and by confronting some of the problems and tensions in current practices that may hinder development and successful transformation.

Chapter Two examines the historical factors that have contributed to the development of the Unit. It examines the literature on learning assistance services at both the national and local levels, and it provides insight into some of the problems and tensions that exist at these levels. These include concerns about equity and social justice, funding, management responsibility, and the structural positioning of learning assistance services. An examination of Griffith’s Learning Assistance Program and Learning Assistance Unit reveals further problems and tensions to do with coordination, quality, access, availability, appropriateness and consistency of services.

The discussion in Chapter Two shows how between 1994 and 1997, the University’s Learning Assistance Program opened up debate about specific problems to do with faculty-based learning assistance services. These specific problems included the *ad hoc* level of service across campuses, the marginalisation of services within the faculty, the remedial reputation of services, the limited professional opportunities for faculty-based staff, and the wastage and duplication of services. This chapter then traces the establishment in 1998 of the centralised Learning Assistance Unit and the influence that the Unit’s historical roots have had on its current structure, staffing, and methods of operation.

The theoretical framework for the study is described in Chapter Three. It is argued in this chapter that the conceptual tools of cultural-historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation offer unique insight into the work practices of the Unit. Included in this chapter is an overview of the advantages of a cultural-historical activity approach, cultural-historical activity theory, as well as what Engeström has termed the third generation of cultural-historical activity theory, that is, the way that change can be initiated through constructive criticism and
questioning of work practices (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). The appropriateness of cultural-historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation in the analysis of the research problem is discussed throughout this chapter.

Chapter Four describes the approaches taken in gathering and analysing the data and demonstrates the appropriateness of the research methodology in achieving the research aims. The chapter includes a description of the qualitative study along with an explanation of the processes involved in identifying the key stakeholders, the interview and focus group format, and the data management and analysis. The limitations of the investigation are also acknowledged in this chapter. The research data are used in Chapter Five to provide a broad analysis of the work activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. In this chapter the interview and focus group data are analysed to illustrate how the historical transformation of the activity impacts on the Unit as a separate, object-oriented activity system with an object, subject, community, tools, rules, and division of labour (Engeström, 1999b). Chapter Five also presents problems and underlying tensions identified by the stakeholders in the work of the Learning Assistance Unit. The data analysis in Chapter Six illustrates how different understandings of the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit impact on the work practices of the learning adviser and creates tensions between stakeholders. The discussion in Chapter Six focuses on three key problem clusters that emerge from the data. These problem clusters are referred to as self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process, cost-effectiveness versus quality service, and contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance.

Chapter Seven discusses future expansion of the Unit’s object-oriented activity on its socio-spatial, temporal and moral-ideological dimensions. It includes a summary of suggestions on ways to ensure that learning assistance services at Griffith continue to be cost-efficient and at the same time meet the needs of students and other stakeholders by ensuring that equity, social justice, and concern for individual development are maintained as essential goals. The final chapter draws together the research findings and shows that the purpose and aims of this study
have been successfully achieved. Chapter Eight demonstrates how this study contributes to the advancement of knowledge through an understanding of the Learning Assistance Unit as a separate activity system, its interactions with other systems, and the culturally and hierarchically situated problems and tensions in the object-oriented activity. Chapter Eight also highlights that this study has the potential to help the staff of the Unit respond to questions about the purpose and value of their work. The chapter argues that the study contributes to this by opening up the way for further constructive criticism and questioning of the work practices of the learning advisers and their relationships with other key stakeholders.
CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the historical backdrop to the investigation into learning assistance services at Griffith University. I have included this historical account because it assists in understanding the Learning Assistance Unit as part of the University activity system and as a separate activity system. That is, it is important to understand that the Unit has a history and a context, it did not emerge “out of the blue” (Engeström, 1999a, p. 33). Cultural-historical activity theory is used in subsequent chapters to provide the conceptual tools for analysing further this history and historical variables such as the political setting and physical location of the Unit. This latter analysis, in turn, makes visible problem clusters and underlying tensions in current practice and an analysis of these is used to discuss the potential for future desired changes and transformations (Engeström, 1999b; Vosniadou, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978).

Although the focus of this study is not the political restructuring or management of learning assistance services it is useful to consider the impact that these factors have had on services at Griffith and at other Australian universities. Unfortunately the Australian literature in this area, such as it is, is restricted largely to studies on the employment conditions of learning advisers (Candy, Crebert & O'Leary, 1994; Marshall & Johnston, 1995; McLean, Surtie, Elphinstone, Devlin, 1995; Murphy, Crosling, & Webb, 1995; Parra1, 1995) and practical issues to do with service delivery for diverse student groups (Hoffman, 1998; Muldoon, 1998; Parra, 1996; Parra, 1998; Peach, 1999b; Taylor, Peters, & Parra, 1998). Whilst the focus of this study is learning assistance practices in Australia and specifically at Griffith University the scope of current American research in this area is acknowledged. For example, the literature includes research into broader issues of quality and accountability in the higher education system as well more specific research into the development, implementation and evaluation of effective learning assistance services (Bogue & Hall 2003; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2001; Komives & Woodard, 2003; Maxwell, 1996). Professional standards and
guidelines developed by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2001) reflect a profession-wide perspective on what constitutes good practice in learning assistance services and describe the essential elements of a successful learning assistance centre (Maxwell, 1996). The standards are used by American institutions to evaluate programs and to inform staff development and program improvement in respect to components such as mission, program, leadership, organisation and management, human resources, financial resources, facilities, technology and equipment, legal responsibilities, equal opportunity, access and affirmative action, campus and community relations, diversity, ethics, assessment and evaluation. What follows is first of all an outline of some of the factors that have influenced the development of learning assistance practices in Australia. This is followed by an examination of learning assistance services at Griffith University with specific reference to the University’s Learning Assistance Program and Learning Assistance Unit.

1Parra is Peach’s previous name.

2.2 Learning assistance practices in Australia

The past three decades have seen significant changes in Australian higher education. These changes have included funding cuts, pressure to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, and demands for public evidence of what institutions are doing and how well they are doing it (Meade, 1994). Increased concern about the purpose and value of university education has forced institutions to re-examine all aspects of their operation, to reshape mission statements, and to produce public evidence such as quality portfolios and organisational performance indicators (Australian Parliament, 2001). Evident in such reports is reference to equity and social justice as key institutional concerns. Yet, universities operating as activity systems, preoccupied with cost-efficiency and competitive advantage are finding it difficult to strike a balance in the object-motive of their activity between the pressures of a consumerist society and social justice issues (Australian Parliament, 2001; Bottery, 1992; Burke, 1997; Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 1995; Lashway 1997; Lingard, 1993).
Funding cuts to institutions create conflict between economic concerns and the need to respond to other questions such as those about student access, retention rates, completion rates, and overall student satisfaction levels. On the one hand there is acknowledgment of the role that student services play in improving the quality of student learning experiences. In most Australian universities these services include personal and careers counselling, health and welfare services, chaplaincy, and learning assistance. Although not always organisationally aligned there is often a strong link amongst these services because of a shared commitment to the shared object-motive of quality, equity, and concern for individual development. These services are seen as having both strategic and pedagogical potential to help institutions respond to the major issues confronting higher education, particularly those of equity and social justice.

Yet on the other hand, inadequate budget and policy decision-making over long periods of time have restricted the development of some services (Australian Parliament, 2001; Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 1995; Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993).

For example, tools such as learning assistance services often appear to be marginalised in the learning environment and excluded from ongoing budget planning processes. This was highlighted in a 1995 study of nine Victorian universities that revealed that seventy-two percent of learning assistance staff surveyed were untenured and a significant proportion were part time. In many institutions learning assistance services also appear to suffer from a poor public image, the result of limited understanding within the learning community of what these services offer and the contribution they make to the object-motive of the university (Candy et al., 1994; McLean et al., 1995; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1987; Parra, 1995).

Yet as early as 1992 the Higher Education Council pointed out that if,
the environment in which students learn is one in which there is adequate counselling, career guidance and learning assistance, more students will be able to perform to their potential. If the environment encourages as many students as possible to exceed their own expectations, it will have done well by Australia. (Higher Education Council, 1992, p. 45)

This view was reinforced in a newspaper article entitled Degrees of Difficulty written by Margaret Gardner the Pro Vice-Chancellor Academic at the University of Queensland (formerly Pro Vice-Chancellor Business & Equity at Griffith University). In response to debate about university drop-out rates Gardner (2002) argues that universities must find ways of reducing the effects of inequalities on student outcomes. She reminds us that there are many reasons that students do not complete their degrees and that universities have an obligation to provide a range of student services (or tools) such as learning assistance that reduce the obstacles to completion.

Meeting this obligation to provide adequate student services, such as learning assistance, is not easy. However in recent years, institutions, including Griffith, have gradually realised the contribution that learning assistance services make to the learning environment. The strategic and pedagogical importance of student services is emphasised in a 1994 government-funded report on developing lifelong learners (Candy et al., 1994, p. 160). This report highlights that learning assistance services make a significant contribution to enabling students to realise academic potential and to become self-directed learners. Learning assistance services help students define their learning outcomes and make connections between cultures and disciplines. In this way learning assistance can be understood as a tool in the activity system of the university, a tool utilised by subjects engaging with the object. The following account of the history of learning assistance services at Griffith University illustrates how the strategic potential and pedagogical importance of these services have been acknowledged by paying more attention to resource allocation, management, structural positioning, and the type and quality of services offered.
2.3 Learning assistance services at Griffith University

Debate about the provision of learning assistance services has gone on for many years at the University. Central registry files (Holman, 1993) trace the debate back to 1988 when concern was first expressed about the English language needs of international (or overseas) students. As the number of international students increased so did concern about levels of English language proficiency and the need to provide learning assistance to this group of fee-paying students. In 1992 the topic of discussion in various forums was the learning assistance needs of an increasingly diverse student body and questions were raised about the University’s decentralised and apparently *ad hoc* approach to service delivery.

At the time the University maintained a decentralised approach to service provision with most of the planning and budget responsibility delegated to the faculties. A limited amount of funding was provided centrally to fund equity programs for groups such as indigenous students and students with disabilities. The rationale for this arrangement, where faculties had key responsibility for service provision, was that it would afford flexibility and enable faculties to meet the specific needs of different student groups (Griffith University, 1994a). However, of the University’s fourteen faculties only five employed specialist learning assistance staff. This meant that, for the majority of students, learning assistance was not available within their program of study. Even in those faculties where services were available they were not integrated in a systematic, ongoing way and were often restricted to first year, undergraduate students. The inadequacies in these provisions were highlighted in University-wide student surveys conducted in 1994. Both the Student Services Evaluation (Griffith University, 1995) and the Student Opinion Survey (Griffith University, 1994b) identified the provision of adequate and appropriate learning assistance services as a major need in the University. One in four respondents to the Student Services’ survey noted that students would benefit from the provision of learning assistance or study skills services.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY 13
In late 1994 a government-funded review of the University’s approaches to quality management and planning prompted senior management to take steps to address these concerns. The review was critical of the significant variations in the level and type of learning assistance services provided. It was also critical of the highly devolved faculty-based provision of service. The review team expressed concerns related to what activity theory would denote as the division of labour and rules including the lack of consistency of services across campuses and the high level of duplication and *ad hoc* coordination that existed between faculty-based services and central services. They also pointed out that access to services was strongly dependent on the area of the University to which students were linked (Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 1995). At this point senior management decided that a review of the management and structural positioning of learning assistance services was warranted.

### 2.4 The Learning Assistance Program

Senior management responded to the issues raised by the quality review process by injecting funds into the Learning Assistance Program (LAP). This program was to focus on investigating and improving aspects of quality, access, availability and appropriateness of learning assistance services. For the purpose of the investigation, learning assistance was interpreted as academic support provided to students above and beyond that which occurs as part of good teaching practice, that is, it was seen as what activity theory would denote as a tool in the University activity system which included faculty-funded services such as essay advisers, study skills advisers, specialist tutors, and academic support staff. It also included centrally funded academic services provided by Student Services, the Murri and Torres Strait Islander Centre, English Language Centre, Centre for Deafness and Research Studies and foundation courses designed specifically to enhance generic skills in communication, computing, information literacy, and numeracy (Parra, 1995).
Under the direction of the Pro Vice-Chancellor Business & Equity, the Learning Assistance Program sought to ensure that the University provided assistance that would enhance lifelong learning and give students the opportunity to develop the generic skills necessary to take full advantage of a university education. More specifically, the program aimed to:

- review and update the information provided in the Report on Academic Support Services for Students at Griffith University by the Academic Registrar in April 1993;
- establish the nature and extent of research, communication and computer skills provided through foundation or first-year programmes in faculties;
- gather study skills materials developed by faculties and examine ways of disseminating “best practice” in this area;
- establish the level of budgetary support provided by elements and faculties to learning assistance;
- review the organisational context and learning support arrangements of other universities;
- make recommendations on the future development of learning assistance at the University. (Gardner, 1994)

These aims were to be achieved through extensive consultation with students and staff, a review of the organisational context and learning assistance arrangements in other national and international universities, and a review of reports such as faculty reports on learning assistance services.

From December 1994 to December 1997 I was employed as the project officer responsible for reviewing the various stages of the program. One of my first tasks was to identify the nature and extent of services provided across the University and to then compare this with service provisions in other institutions. I did this through extensive consultation with over one hundred stakeholders, including students, academic staff, and learning advisers from fourteen Australian and four international universities. Stakeholders were asked for general comments on learning assistance services and where appropriate, for comments on Griffith’s decentralised service model.
A major criticism of the University’s decentralised model was the tension caused by lack of clarity and understanding amongst staff and students about access to, and the role of staff employed to provide services (Parra, 1995). Griffith students described problems in accessing staff during peak times in semester. They complained about the level and type of service available. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds expressed reluctance at disclosing perceived academic shortcomings to faculty-based staff who may also be responsible for grading their assessment (Parra, 1995). Some interviewed Griffith academic staff questioned the degree to which services developed a reliance-on-help mentality rather than helping students to develop as independent learners. Faculty-based learning assistance staff described a role that was isolated, tenuous, and lacking in professional identity. In all but one of the five faculties that employed learning assistance staff, the appointments were fractional or short, part time contract positions. Faculty-based staff described how, even though they were technically part of the faculty, the division of labour in the faculty meant that they were rarely consulted about the learning needs of students or the design of new programs. All agreed that their employment and career prospects were limited with few professional development opportunities.

As part of this investigation interviewees were also asked to describe the attributes of effective learning assistance services and to provide examples of best practice. Most identified services with strong, collaborative links between learning assistance staff and academic staff and programs that encouraged peer support networks. Services that included tools such as flexible drop-in times and workshop programs offered at critical times during and before the commencement of semester were also seen as valuable. However, there was a strong view expressed that services not directly related to the study tasks were of limited value and that the most helpful were services that made explicit the links between skill development and the academic content. This concurs with Marshall who explains:

If students are taught how to learn in isolation from course content, they not only quickly lose interest in the skills being taught but they also fail to transfer these skills to their course work. Help with how to learn must be linked closely with the subject matter students are studying, and must be provided when that help is needed. (Marshall, 1982 in Candy et al., 1994, p. 166)
When asked for feedback on the prospect of a centralised learning assistance service, interviewees expressed the view that de-contextualised skills programs were unlikely to help students develop deep approaches to learning (Parra, 1995). Others pointed out however, that a centrally coordinated model of service delivery could resolve some of the problems associated with the faculty-based model, that is, division of labour problems such as high levels of duplication, lack of consistency, variations in levels of access, and ad hoc coordination across services. A centrally coordinated model had the potential to resolve some of these tensions and improve quality, access, and coordination of faculty-based and central services. When the Pro Vice-Chancellor Business & Equity presented the recommendations of the Learning Assistance Program to the Vice-Chancellor’s Advisory Committee she argued that if a centrally coordinated model were adopted then a central committee would be necessary to coordinate faculty and centrally located services. Moreover, if responsibility for learning assistance were to remain with the faculties then planning and accountability should be integrated into the University and Faculty Teaching and Learning Management Plans. She argued that in a centrally coordinated model this would be the only way to improve the consistency of service levels across faculties and campuses, increase student access, and make the activity more efficient and effective. At the same time however she introduced the alternative idea of taking responsibility for learning assistance provision away from the faculties and moving it to a centralised learning assistance unit.

Support for the suggestion of a centralised model was evident at the time in the Candy Report (Candy et al., 1994). This government-funded report on developing lifelong learners highlighted the contribution that centralised learning assistance services make to the student learning experience. The report described how services can use tools such as individual consultations, study groups, and dedicated “learning to learn at university” courses to engage with students. It explained how learning assistance staff can help students to define and enhance their learning outcomes in setting goals, managing time, developing effective study habits, or developing self-direction in their learning. Further, it maintained that centralised services can support students and encourage independent learning by providing resource
collections or by directing students to other learning facilities such as computer based learning facilities and the library. The staff can help students, individually or through study groups, to make connections between cultures and disciplines and help to break down barriers and prejudices. By responding to the demands of access and equity provisions, the Report argued, staff can also help students to respond to the challenges that they encounter from the transitional to more advanced levels of university study. Finally, by working with the university community (individually inside the classroom, through staff development programs, and in special research projects) learning assistance staff can promote greater understanding of the teaching-learning process, and introduce innovative teaching approaches and assessment methods (Candy et al., 1994).

The Candy Report and the findings of the Learning Assistance Program informed Griffith’s decision to establish a centralised learning assistance unit. The Learning Assistance Program signalled a shift towards greater accountability with regards to the provision of learning assistance services. The program did not resolve all the problems and tensions in the faculty-based model. It did however draw increased attention to issues of equity, social justice, quality, access, availability and appropriateness of services. The program opened up debate about specific problems to do with divisions of labour in the faculty-based model including the marginalisation of services within the faculty, the remedial reputation of some services, the limited professional opportunities for faculty-based staff, and the wastage and duplication of services across the University. The Learning Assistance Program also informed the University’s decision to centralise services by identifying the desirable attributes and tools of a quality service.

2.5 The Learning Assistance Unit

In 1997 the University restructured its academic and administrative elements. Four academic areas were established and changes were made to faculty budget allocations. These changes to faculty budgets meant, amongst other things, that the employment of faculty-based learning
assistance staff became even more difficult. This provided the Pro Vice-Chancellor Business & Equity with an opportunity to canvass the Vice-Chancellor’s Advisory Group for support to establish a centralised learning assistance service. On the basis of the findings of the Learning Assistance Program the Advisory Group agreed to fund a centralised service from the University’s operating budget. Lengthy discussion ensued about the appropriate location for such a service, and the counselling service, academic staff development unit, and library (Division of Information Services) were all put forward as possible locations.

Eventually the library was chosen for several reasons. These included the perceived benefits of the location in terms of its visibility on all campuses. It was hoped that this location would encourage students to use the service and help avoid the remedial label often given to learning assistance services co-located with other student services. The Division of Information Services was also seen as an appropriate place to try to strengthen links among learning assistance, information literacy, and flexible technology. What was not taken into account at the time was the impact that the service would have on the work environment of the library and vice versa. Locating the service in the library (or the Division of Information Services) also meant that staff appointments would be general as opposed to academic. At the time this was seen as cost-effective and easier to manage given that general staff do not require academic supervision but, as this study will show, separation of learning assistance services from the faculty and its re-location to the library has created tensions among key stakeholders.

The Learning Assistance Unit opened for business in January 1998 with a team equivalent to six full time learning advisers and a coordinator. By April 1998 the team had developed a three year strategic plan that identified five factors (or rules) that would be critical to the success of the service (Learning Assistance Unit, 1998). These factors were identified in conjunction with the findings of the Learning Assistance Program report and linked to the mission statement and critical success factors for the Division of Information Services. The first critical factor identified for the Unit was to develop a high profile. The strategic plan described how the identity of the Unit and the professional reputation of the service would be built through the
development of the mission statement and a marketing and business plan. This plan was to include details of tools including a University-wide needs analysis and the development of a central database that would keep track of service usage patterns and student profile details. The second critical success factor was called leadership and creative horizons. This involved developing innovative learning strategies and programs, undertaking innovative research in teaching and learning, and developing a commercial consultancy profile. The third factor was to support quality student learning through the continuous improvement of practice. This included the development of a framework for best practice, the initiation of collaborative teaching programs, and the development of evaluation processes.

Critical success factor four related to the development of a dynamic and effective team. The strategic plan outlined how this would be achieved through effective communication, collaboration, and the management of physical and human resources. Building collaborative partnerships was the fifth factor. This factor referred to the division of labour between learning advisers and other stakeholders and the need to develop, implement, and evaluate joint teaching programs and projects with academic staff and key stakeholders in the University activity system (Learning Assistance Unit, 1998). The strategic plan current at the time of writing (Learning Assistance Unit, 2001c) builds on the first plan and includes success factors related to developing effective relationships, promoting the service, promoting best practice, and enhancing the Unit’s research profile.

At the time of writing, the Learning Assistance Unit is in its fourth year of operation. It has services located on all campuses and a staff equivalent to 6.5 full time advisers and a manager. Services still include tools such as workshops, consultations, and tertiary preparation programs and these are advertised in brochures, orientation information sessions, and a web site. The web site includes the following description of the Unit.

The Learning Assistance Unit, located within the Division of Information Services (INS), is a team of professional educators who provide effective learning programs across all campuses of the University. Learning Advisers
work in close collaboration with academic, library and other student support staff to provide a range of programs in generic skill development including study skills workshops, drop-in sessions, consultations (including email & telephone), self-help facilities on the web, tertiary preparation and return-to-study programs. (Learning Assistance Unit, 2001b)

Between July 1998 and June 2001 over 16,500 student consultations were recorded on the electronic database (see Figure 2.1).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure21}
\caption{Student consultations by semester 1998–2001 (adapted from Learning Assistance Unit, 2001a, p. 1)}
\end{figure}

Figure 2.1 indicates that there has been a steady increase in service usage since 1998. It also shows that semester one was consistently busier than semester two. One reason for this could be that the University has traditionally taken in a larger cohort of new students in first semester. Apart from evidence that the service is being used there are also indications that the service makes an important contribution to the learning environment. For example, feedback from students through the University's 1998 Student Satisfaction Survey (see Figure 2.2) showed that learning assistance services rated highly amongst student services. The results of the next University-wide student satisfaction survey will be available in 2003.
Further evidence of consistently positive feedback is found in the results of the annual Learning Assistance Unit Student Satisfaction Survey. This annual survey has been mailed out to students since December 1998 to find out what they think of the service and how it might be improved. The survey has been amended slightly each year but Table 2.1 compares results on questions that ask students about their perceptions of the service and the learning assistance staff.

Table 2.1 Learning Assistance Unit Student Satisfaction Survey 1998-2001 (compiled from Learning Assistance Unit evaluation reports, 1998-2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Return Rate</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Item:</td>
<td>Level of Agreement – strongly agree and agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAU contributed positively to my performance</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAU staff were approachable and helpful</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was satisfied with the adviser’s sensitivity to my needs and concerns</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results indicate that, despite some variations in levels of satisfaction, in general students are highly satisfied with the service, but that there has been a decline in satisfaction since 1998.
2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the background and context to the study. It has outlined how the development of learning assistance services at Griffith University and other Australian universities have been affected by variables such as the political setting and the structural positioning of services. It has also suggested the potential to understand these variables in terms of cultural-historical activity theory and its potential to help improve and move services forward. This account outlines how learning assistance services at Griffith have already developed from a faculty-based to a centralised model of service provision. Through this development problems and tensions have emerged between the different components of the activity system, including problems to do with the object and divisions of labour reflected in concerns about funding, quality, access, availability, and the appropriateness of services.

As already indicated, the establishment of the Learning Assistance Unit in 1998 resolved some of the problems and tensions evident in the faculty-based model by improving access and the consistency and quality of service provision. However, as this study will demonstrate, further tensions have resulted from the apparent separation of learning assistance services from the faculty and the location of the Unit in the library. It is argued in this dissertation that the service is young and still developing and has the potential to make a significant contribution to the learning environment. It is expected that this potential can be realised through a better understanding of the Unit’s cultural-historical development and the way that this is influenced by the views of multiple stakeholders including senior management, academics, students, librarians and learning advisers. This study sets out to identify and analyse these matters using the conceptual tools of cultural-historical activity theory.
CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter illustrates that in its short history, learning assistance services at Griffith University have passed through several stages of historical development. This dissertation is posited on the belief that to understand this development and to improve services in the future a powerful conceptual framework that will make problems and tensions visible and analysable is required. Consideration was given to traditional cognitive theories that focus on human thinking but, as outlined below, these were found unsuitable compared to situated and cultural-historical theories that offer a way of understanding socially and historically situated human development. Situated and cultural-historical theories share an emphasis on mediation of human action by cultural artefacts but there are important differences. Situated cognition theory (Cole, 1999; Chaiklin, 1993) for example, focuses on human practice at the level of individuals acting in a meaningful social context. Cultural-historical theory on the other hand, emphasises the historically created, object-oriented and collective nature of human activity. As argued below, it is the latter that offers the most appropriate approach to understanding the history, current problems and tensions, and future transformations in the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Engeström, 1999b).

This chapter starts with an overview of the advantages of a cultural-historical activity approach with its roots in the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Leont’ev (Luria & Vygotsky, 1992). The chapter then goes on to describe cultural-historical activity theory including third generation cultural-historical activity theory. The discussion outlines how human activity, when explained in terms of an activity system, can be thought of as culturally organised activity that is mediated by tools and influenced by the different views and perspectives of the various participants (Engeström, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). This is followed by an explanation of expansive visibilisation as a four-stage process of conceptualising change and transformation in collective activity.
3.2 The advantages of a cultural-historical activity approach

Vygotsky describes human development as a process of enculturation, of growing in a community with a shared practice, common tools and a common language (Luria & Vygotsky, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978). Cognitive tools such as language originate in, and are applied in, human practice. These tools serve as the “conductor of human influence on the object of the activity” and are aimed at mastering and triumphing over the environment (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55). Vygotsky argues that changes in human development are often initiated, facilitated and consolidated by social and cultural processes. To understand changes in human activity therefore requires an understanding of the situatedness of knowledge and the influence that environmental factors and external symbolic systems have over the activity (Cole, 1999).

This is in contrast to the work of some cognitive psychologists who for decades have been primarily concerned with how individuals manipulate and process information. For example, many cognitive psychologists have tried to explain the way individuals perceive events, process information, and act in concrete settings, solely as mental phenomena. Unfortunately, in this quest to understand the constructs of mental representations, social and historical factors have often been dismissed as nuisance variables, that is, variables that get in the way of understanding human thinking as an isolated, stable, structure that exists independently from human activity and the social world (Rogoff & Lave, 1984).

This individualist and mentalist bias has, according to some situated cognition theorists (Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991) led to a claustrophobic interpretation of human activity. They argue that it is narrow and claustrophobic because, instead of understanding human activity in meaningful social contexts, traditional cognitive theories try to divide learning from the world. To illustrate, Lave & Wenger (1991) argue that the novice participant or apprentice learns by practising with more competent members of a particular group. This group, with its common activity can be described as a community of practice. In communities of practice, culture is embedded, explicited and activated through the collective activity. This activity often takes the
form of narratives of past events and collective remembering which enable members to establish explanations and evaluations of the practice. Newcomers to a particular environment both work within, and modify the environment. Individuals actively construct their own knowledge of a particular context not as empty vessels or passive recipients of information, but rather as active participants who integrate new information and reorganise existing knowledge (Lave, 1993). Scribner (1997) argues that understanding human practice in work settings also requires an understanding of the social-historical context of work, that is, the ways in which institutional settings, norms and values, and the broader cultural understandings of labour contribute to the reorganisation of work. She laments that unfortunately these factors are rarely investigated in cognitive research.

Engeström and Miettinen (1999) argue that whilst situated cognition theories encompass the socio-spatial dimensions of human activity they do not pay adequate attention to the temporal dimensions. This is not to suggest that these theories should be abandoned, but rather that understanding human activity requires an analysis of both the socio-spatial and temporal dimensions of the activity, that is, the movement of the activity both outward and in unexpected directions, and the inner contradictions of the practice. Cultural-historical analysis provides a powerful framework for understanding these aspects of historically created, object-oriented human activity (Cole, 1999; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). The next section outlines how human activity, when explained in terms of a cultural-historical activity system, can be understood as culturally organised activity that is mediated by tools and influenced by the different views and perspectives of the various participants (Engeström, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978).

3.3 Cultural-historical activity theory

According to Engeström and Miettinen (1999, p. 2), cultural-historical activity theory and its “novel conceptual tools”, have largely been hidden from the Western scientific community. They claim that the rich texture of cultural-historical activity theory has remained a well kept secret and that it has been applied in only a limited way to areas such as the psychology of play,
learning, cognition, child development, and language acquisition. Yet this approach to understanding human activity has the capacity to provide unique insights into many aspects of human activity. This section considers the origins of cultural-historical activity theory and the elements of the activity system as the unit of analysis.

Cultural-historical activity theory is based on what Wertsch (1981, p. 4) describes as “probably the most important concept in contemporary Soviet psychology”. That is, cultural-historical activity theory is based on the concept that thinking represents the interactions of systems of activity. Unlike Western psychology where the predominant unit of analysis has been the individual, the focus of the Soviet psychologists and their predecessors has been to encourage interaction with, and reflection on the tools, rules, division of labour, and communities of activity systems such as workplaces. In this context, activity is understood as “a unit of analysis that includes both the individual and her/his culturally defined environment” (Cole in Wertsch, 1981, p. viii).

In the 1920s and 1930s Vygotsky, Leont'ev and Luria introduced the notion of a crucial distinction between collective activity systems and individual actions (Engeström, 1999b). Leont'ev (1978), who is responsible for consolidating and integrating the ideas of Vygotsky and others, stresses the importance of active subjects whose knowledge of pre-existing material reality is founded on their interactions with it. He argues that the key to understanding the relationship between consciousness and the objective world, or between knowing and doing, is the activity in which the human agent engages (Wertsch, 1981). He questions theories that suggest humans create their knowledge of the world by conscious reflection or that treat humans as passive receivers of stimulus. He proposes that the “starting point and primary unit of analysis should be culturally organised human activities” (Scribner, 1997, p. 309). Leont’ev refers to activity as processes that are driven by human subjects and directed to an object or motive. In cultural-historical activity theory actions are driven by goals and are undertaken by individuals as a contribution to collective activity directed at a collective object. Actions are visible, but the activity to which they contribute often is not. In cultural-historical activity...
theory, *operations* refer to the way that goals of actions are implemented or carried out under particular circumstances; meaningful actions give meaning to operations (Engeström, 1999a).

The work of Vygotsky, Leont’ev and other Russian psychologists highlights the importance of bringing social and historical variables such as tools and artefacts, motivational beliefs, and beliefs about the self into the picture as we try to understand change and transformation in human activity (Leont’ev, 1978; Luria & Vygotsky, 1992). Luria and Vygotsky (1992) argue that human behaviour is a product of evolutionary, historical and ontogenetic processes, and that psychological development is a form of social development conditioned by the environment. Human action, thought, feeling and value cannot be separated from the rich situational context in which the activity takes place. The situated nature of human activity makes the linking of the intellectual and the practical essential. Leont’ev argues that any analysis of human activity must therefore involve not just psychological reflection but also an analysis of “the moments that give rise to it and mediate it in human activity” (Leont’ev, 1978, p.7).

Cultural-historical activity theory moves away from individual actions to a collective perspective that takes into account the social-historical context of the system and the problems of a particular setting, that is, it redraws the boundaries of the basic analytical unit from the individual, to groups, to settings. Cultural-historical activity theory involves developing an understanding of the activity system as the analytical unit, that is, the activity system is recognised as “a collective, systemic formation that has a complex mediational structure” (Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research, 1998; Engeström, 1999a, 1999b, 1987). The dynamic nature and structure of the activity system makes it a strong unit of analysis to understand complex interactions and relationships that evolve over time and produce actions and operations that are directed towards goals associated with the activity. The activity system, as depicted in Figure 3.1, is comprised of interacting elements of the object, outcome, tools, subject, rules, community, and division of labour (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999).
Figure 3.1 Model of an activity system (Engeström, 1993, p. 68)

The *object* of the activity system refers to the raw material or objective at which the activity is directed. The *object* and the projection from the *object* to the *outcome* is the central issue of activity theory. The *outcome* of the activity is achieved with the help of physical, symbolic, external and internal mediating instruments, including both *tools* and signs. The *subject* refers to the individual or sub-group whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis. In the model of the activity system (see Figure 3.1) the *community* comprises multiple individuals and/or sub-groups who share the same general object and who see themselves as distinct from other communities. The *rules* refer to the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system. The *division of labour* refers to both the horizontal division of tasks between the members of the community and to the vertical division of power and status (Engeström, 1993, p. 67).

According to Engeström (1993) there is constant construction and renegotiation within the activity system and between the singular activity system and surrounding systems. For example, this study points to problems and tensions in the activity system of the Learning
Assistance Unit that the data suggest has separated from the broader activity system of the University. Problems and tensions are identified in this study that relate to the object/motive of the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit and the different positions, interests and traditions of related, interacting activity systems such as the faculty and library. Engeström (1993) adds that it is the problems and tensions in the activity that provide the motive force for change and transformation. In summary, cultural-historical activity theory offers a way of pursuing a collective, multi-voiced interpretation of the problems and tensions that manifest in and amongst related and interacting activity systems (Cole, 1999; Engeström, 1999b). The way that this impacts on the direction and shape of the activity can be analysed using the conceptual tools of what Engeström (1999d) refers to as third generation cultural-historical activity theory, described below.

### 3.4 Third generation cultural-historical activity theory

First and second generation cultural-historical activity theory are derived from Vygotsky’s idea of cultural mediation of activity and the object-orientedness of activity. In second generation cultural-historical activity theory Leont’ev distinguishes between activity, actions and operations and shifts the focus of analysis away from individual action to collective activity by acknowledging that individual and group actions are embedded in collective activity systems and that internal contradictions provide the driving force for change and development. Third generation cultural-historical activity theory seeks to build on Leont’ev’s work by addressing the multi-voicedness of networks of interacting activity systems (Engeström, 1999d).

Engeström (1999d) claims that third generation cultural-historical activity theory is a new generation of activity theory that identifies the need to respond to questions about diversity and to develop conceptual tools to understand the multiple perspectives, voices and traditions of networks of interacting activity systems (Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research, 1998). The aim of third generation cultural-historical activity theory is therefore to analyse the cooperative activity of several related systems. This is achieved by examining the
object-oriented activity within a particular activity system. The object, Engeström (1999b, p. 65) explains, can be understood as a “project under construction” moving from potential raw material to meaningful shape and to a result or outcome. In third generation cultural-historical activity theory, activity is perceived as the mediating factor between different systems and it forms the connection between learning and development, and individual and societal development (Engeström, 1987).

Cole (1999) uses the garden as a metaphor to explain the need to understand not only what transpires within an activity system but also what transpires around it. Gardens have their own needs but they do not exist in isolation. Rather, growth and development of the garden are dependent on surrounding conditions such as the amount of space available. Growth and development are also dependent on the way that the garden interacts with surrounding systems. Activity systems, like gardens, do not exist in isolation either; but earlier generations of activity theory tended to focus on singular, relatively isolated activity systems and consequently gave inadequate attention to surrounding issues such as cultural diversity. Third generation cultural-historical activity theory on the other hand, acknowledges surrounding conditions and systems, and encourages criticism, innovation, questioning of authority, and the initiation of change (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999).

In summary, third generation cultural-historical activity theory can be identified by five principles. The first principle is that the prime unit of analysis is a collective, artefact-mediated and object-oriented activity system located in relation to a network of other related activity systems. The second principle is that an activity system is a multi-voiced community, and different views, traditions and interests create tensions that drive change and transformation. The third principle is that activity systems develop and change over time, and tensions and problems can only be understood against this history. The fourth principle is that tensions, problems and contradictions in the activity system are the source of change and development. Finally, as the object and motive of the activity are reconceptualised and participants begin to question current activity, the possibility of cycles of expansive transformation emerges.
Engeström, 1999d). This multi-voicedness of an activity system ensures that the system is never stable or harmonious, that is, different voices and points of view often collide as members express different positions, interests and traditions (Engeström, 1999a, p. 35; Engeström, 1999d). Theoretical conceptualisation of object-oriented activity depends on the researcher’s ability to construct the activity system “as if looking at it from above” (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 10). A practical way of conceptualising the object-oriented activity and constructing a view from above is through a process of expansive visibilisation, elaborated below.

3.5 Expansive visibilisation

Engeström and Miettinen (1999) call for a methodology for understanding transformation in human activity systems that is best developed when researchers enter the actual activity systems undergoing transformation. They argue that such an approach aims to build a two-way bridge between theory and practice by engaging both researcher and participants in constructing new models of local activity. The key outcomes of this approach, referred to as expansive visibilisation, are “…novel activity-specific, intermediate-level theoretical concepts and methods – intellectual tools for reflective mastery of practice” (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 36).

Expansive visibilisation is a structured, inclusive way of understanding the activity system and its interrelated, everyday practices and the relationships and associated tensions between these practices. The process of expansive visibilisation is particularly suited to this study because it is about dealing with real people in real situations. According to Engeström (1999b) the challenge for analysts, researchers and practitioners concerned with understanding and transforming work practice, is to make visible and analysable everyday work activity. Studies that he has conducted in medical settings (Engeström, 1999a, 1999b) demonstrate how the process of expansive visibilisation can be used to successfully weave together the instrumental and social components of an activity system and make visible the different viewpoints and approaches of the various participants. The following example illustrates how over time, tension, conflict and
Contradictions that arise from different viewpoints lead to change and transformation in the object of the activity and the elements of the activity system.

Engeström (1999a, 1999b) illustrates the applicability of his process to real work settings in his account of the merger of two outpatient clinics in children’s hospitals in Finland. His account highlights how the process of expansive visibilisation can be used to gain insight into the nature and problems of an activity as experienced by those involved (Engeström, 1987). In the case of the children’s hospital the process revealed that, although medical staff, as members of an activity system, may share values, information and goals, they also have different positions and histories. These different perspectives on knowledge and practice are expressed through multi-voiced activity that often leads to disturbances or “deviations from the standard script” in the workplace. Engeström’s account shows how his process of expansive visibilisation can lead to dialogue about contradictions and problems in practice and the eventual “reconceptualisation of the object and motive of work” (Engeström, 1999b, p. 63). The account also shows how activity systems can be understood as moving through cycles of expansive transition across zones of proximal development (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, 1999b; Engeström, Engeström & Vähäläho, 1999).

Vygotsky (1978) describes the zone of proximal development as the distance between actual development and possible development. He argues that it is a way of understanding maturation and development when aided by a more capable peer. The sketching of a zone of proximal development is an important aspect of the process of expansive visibilisation. Engeström (1999b, p. 90) describes the zone as “an invisible battle ground”, “a terrain of constant ambivalence, struggle and surprise”. Engeström argues that this zone must be worked out as part of the intervention and redesign process because it maps the distance or area between the present and foreseeable future and opens up opportunities to analyse problems and revise practice. The zone of proximal development is discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven (see Figure 7.4).
The four-stage cycle of expansive visibilisation, illustrated in Figure 3.2, is a way of conceptualising change and transformation. It is also a practical tool for conceptualising the potential for further development of the activity. Stage One involves gaining insight into the activity. Stage Two involves analysing the object-historical and theory-historical aspects of the activity, including recurring patterns and disturbances. Stage Three is about formulating new instruments and/or designing practical solutions. Stage Four is the practical application of these solutions. These stages are elaborated in the following paragraphs, together with an indication of how they relate to the present study.

![Figure 3.2 The four stages of expansive visibilisation (Engeström, 1987, p. 323)](image)

### 3.5.1 Stage One: Gaining insight

Stage One operates with the linear and socio-spatial dimensions of the activity. That is, the aim of this stage is to collect examples of practitioners at their work and to home in on observable behaviours, materials and instruments of the work setting as well as practices that seem to be troublesome. In Engeström’s study referred to earlier, his research team collected samples of work situations using observation, videotaping and interviewing. In this study I used interviews...
and focus group discussions to gain insight into the work practices of the learning advisers. This approach is described in more detail in Chapter Four.

3.5.2 Stage Two: Analysis

Stage Two of expansive visibilisation is primarily concerned with mapping the activity system and placing the observable behaviours, materials and instruments of the work setting in a model of the activity system. This process has the potential to help practitioners make sense of their work practices by making visible the continual interplay between humans and their artefacts (Engeström, 1999c). It is also a useful way of plotting the history of the development of the activity system. Figure 3.1 identifies the interacting components of the system as object, subject, community, tools, rules, and division of labour (Engeström, 1999b). Once the system and its interacting components have been mapped this stage of the expansive visibilisation can also be used to open up discussion about troublesome practices identified in Stage One. In this study I used interview and focus group data, in conjunction with background literature to describe the various components of the activity system and to identify problem clusters and underlying tensions in the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit.

3.5.3 Stage Three: Formulating new ways of working

Mapping the activity system and making its components visible is an important part of the process of expansive visibilisation. It is however, according to Engeström only the “tip of the iceberg” (Engeström, 1999b, p. 66). The most “dramatic” stage in expansive visibilisation is when the participants of the activity system are pushed into formulating practical solutions to solve the contradictions in their work activity (Engeström, 1987, p. 328). These solutions will often lead to intended as well as unintended practical consequences. Engeström provides another example from the hospital setting (Engeström, 1999b).

Staff in a Finnish hospital study wanted to improve the way that the nurse and physician worked with the patient. They started by agreeing on four principles that would underpin any changes
to their work practices. These principles were simplicity, continuity of care, explicit acknowledgment of responsibility, and the immediate dissemination of information. The study describes how a new patient record form was designed and implemented according to these principles. During the three month trial the research team followed a number of patients through the redesigned process. The researchers found that the new patient record form (and its associated procedures) helped reduce not only patient waiting time, but also the number of consultations, and the number of stages a patient had to go through on each visit.

This example illustrates how participants in an activity system can, through a process of problem solving, come up with solutions from the position and viewpoint of the object, that is, from the patient’s viewpoint in the Finnish hospital study. Stage Three of expansive visibilisation is often the “springboard” to new and original ideas (Engeström, 1987, p. 328). But Engeström cautions that it is important that participants are given the opportunity to proceed through this stage to avoid superficial or mechanical responses. Stage Three is usually a time of enthusiasm among participants who are finding keys to problems but are as yet unaware of the obstacles, uncertainties and struggles that lie ahead in the process of analysis and application. In some work settings it may be that a new model of the object of the work is required.

To illustrate, doctors have traditionally conceived the object of their work as a ‘sickness’ or as a ‘patient’. In this way the object is understood as an individual with certain symptoms and illnesses to be cured. However as symptoms become increasingly complex, doctors may need to reconceptualise the patient as someone situated in his or her life activity and therefore move towards a model for conducting community diagnosis. Conflict is inevitable as new ideas (such as community diagnosis), and new instruments and ways of working are turned into practice. In this sense the work environment becomes, what Engeström describes as, a “social test bench” as each expansive transition takes place (Engeström, 1987, p. 330). In the following chapters consideration is given to the transition of Griffith’s learning assistance services through several stages of historical development and the conflict that has resulted, as new instruments (or tools) and ways of working have been introduced. These changes are related to data from the study.
where interviewees seeing the Learning Assistance Unit as a whole addressed the question of how to improve the service.

### 3.5.4 Stage Four: Practical application

Stage Four involves the practical application of new instruments and ways of working. It also involves contrasting the new with the old and analysing the consequences of change. This stage in the intervention can be the most difficult for the researcher as the participants of the activity system start working with the new instruments or models, and conflict arises between the old and the new ways of working. It can become intense and emotional as participants challenge myths that have been used in the past to explain or defend old work practices (Engeström, 1999b). Sometimes what might appear to be the successful implementation of a solution may in fact open up new and unexpected contradictions. This was the case in the Finnish hospital study where, contrary to the expectations of the researchers, several staff expressed strong criticism of the new patient record form. According to Engeström the principles underlying the reconceptualisation of the patient record form remained the same but incorrect assumptions were made, early in the study, about how the different activity systems were constructed. An unintended outcome was further redesign of the form and this triggered another cycle of expansive visibilisation. In this study, time constraints made it impossible to implement Stage Four of the expansive visibilisation cycle, however the study does suggest possible solutions to problems and tensions identified by the stakeholders in relation to the Learning Assistance Unit’s work practices, in Stage Three of the process.

### 3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has argued that cultural-historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation provide a powerful approach to conceptualising the history, current problems and tensions and future transformations of Griffith University’s Learning Assistance Unit. The discussion draws on the work of Vygotsky as well as Engeström’s elaboration of the theory,
Leont’ev and other Russian psychologists, to highlight the activity system as the primary unit of analysis and the way that social-historical variables influence and shape collective activity. The chapter goes on to explain how third generation cultural-historical activity theory provides the conceptual tools to understand the unit of analysis as a collective, artefact-mediated and object-oriented activity system located in relation to a network of other activity systems. The principles underpinning third generation cultural-historical activity theory are identified as multi-voicedness, historicity, problems and tensions as the source of change, development and questioning of activity that leads to transformation in the activity. The stages of expansive visibilisation, a methodology for understanding activity systems undergoing transformation, are identified as gaining insight, analysis, formulating new ways of working and practical application of new instruments/models. In the next chapter the conceptual tools of cultural-historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation are used to make visible and analysable the problems and tensions that have arisen as the Learning Assistance Unit has developed, and seems to have emerged as an activity system separate from the broader University activity system. Cultural-historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation are used as structured, inclusive ways of understanding the activity system of the Learning Assistance Unit and its interrelated, everyday practices and the relationships and associated tensions. The aim is to conceptualise the object-oriented activity of the Unit and to make visible the problems and tensions, to examine them, and to use them to generate possible ways forward that can lead to greater control over practice (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999).

Chapter Four describes how interviews and focus groups were used in this study to capture the different viewpoints of academics, librarians, students and learning advisers. These key stakeholders were asked to comment on their understandings of the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit. They were asked to describe the work of the Unit. They were also asked to try to identify the motive of the work of the learning advisers, to identify any problems in the relationship between the learning advisers and other stakeholders, and to make suggestions on ways to improve work practices. Chapter Four explains how the key
stakeholders were identified, the methods used to conduct the interviews and focus groups, data management and analysis, and the limitations of the study.
4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the approaches taken in this qualitative study to gather and analyse data on the Learning Assistance Unit. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992) qualitative research is an umbrella term used to refer to several research strategies that share some or all of the following features. First, the direct source of data in qualitative research is the natural setting. In trying to understand the setting and the influence that the setting has on human behaviour the qualitative researcher closely scrutinises the organisation of social life and gives voice to the “eloquence of the commonplace” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 11). Second, qualitative research is descriptive not experimental and data are usually collected in words or pictures rather than numbers. Instead of enumerating, qualitative researchers carefully and systematically examine social life in order to understand and describe its qualities. Third, qualitative inquiry is concerned with studying social life in process, that is, how things occur and unfold in the natural setting. Fourth, qualitative research is about constructing a puzzle that takes shape as the researcher collects and examines the complex parts of the puzzle. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) claim that tolerance for complexity in the construction of this puzzle is often mistaken for fuzziness or a reluctance to generalise. They argue however that qualitative researchers acknowledge that everyday life is not straightforward and in a world comprised of meanings, interpretations, feelings, talk and interaction, it is essential to appreciate complexity. Finally, a core feature of qualitative research is that it aims to capture accurately the way that different people make sense of their lives. The qualitative researcher acknowledges that the subject and the subjective are integral features of social life and therefore strives to represent different understandings and viewpoints. Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p. 30) add that in action oriented studies the researcher creates spaces for those studied to speak and often “becomes the conduit for making such voices heard”.
Qualitative research is interpretative and is therefore guided by beliefs and feelings about the social world and how this should be studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Accordingly, in this study instead of using measurement of variables or statistical procedures to try to understand the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit, interview and focus group data were used to derive meaning and identify problems. The data gathered in this way are interpreted using the conceptual tools of cultural-historical activity theory (Cole, 1999; Engeström, 1987; Leont’ev, 1978; Scribner, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). The previous chapter describes cultural-historical activity theory as a powerful theoretical framework that acknowledges the importance of dimensions such as cultural context, local setting, collective understandings, and the influence of historical variables on interactions in the setting. Cultural-historical activity theory also offers useful conceptual tools to collect and systematically scrutinise qualitative data. These tools are used in this study to examine the interview and focus group data by plotting the historical development of the Unit, mapping the work setting, examining the Unit’s status as an activity system, identifying problem clusters and tensions in the setting, and identifying ways of improving current and future work practices. Cultural-historical activity theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for examining relationships and problems, and for understanding change and transformation in the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. It also provides a powerful way of relating the analysis of the Unit in its current contemporary context against its historical origins and possible future trajectory.

The credibility of this study can be considered in terms of the appropriateness of the approaches taken. According to Patton (1990) a credible qualitative study is able to demonstrate the integrity of the techniques and methods used to describe, explain and interpret the data. That is, a credible qualitative study does not jump to conclusions or make ambit claims but rather is clear about the researcher’s experience and qualifications and the assumptions that underpin the study. Janesick (1998) and Silverman (1993) argue that proving the credibility of an investigation depends on checking the methods used to record, write and transcribe field notes and to check the researcher’s claims about the relevance of categories and themes in the data. Peräkylä (1997, p. 201) agrees that enhancing credibility in qualitative research is a concrete
activity that involves testing the accuracy of recordings and/or field notes and the “truthfulness
of the analytic claims that are being made…” Checks and balances used in this study include
using a standardised approach to data collection, making the data publicly accessible, and
finding ways to allow others to review and discuss the material. To illustrate, throughout this
study I sought opportunities to validate the data and discuss my interpretations with colleagues
including my academic supervisor, staff in the Learning Assistance Unit, and other key
stakeholders (such as academic staff, librarians, and students). These data further informed the
analysis process and have been retained and are available for inspection.

This chapter also responds to issues of credibility by outlining the research methodology
adopted in achieving the aims of the study and its appropriateness. The chapter starts by
describing the structure and length of the study. This is followed by an explanation of how key
stakeholders were identified. The interview and focus group process is then documented along
with a discussion about the data management and analysis process. The limitations of the study
are also outlined.

4.2 Structure and length of the study

This investigation took place between November 2000 and November 2001. During this period
eighteen interviews and six focus group discussions were conducted. Most of the key
stakeholders (see below) were interviewed between November 2000 and March 2001. One
interview with an academic staff member was postponed until May due to the work
commitments of the respondent. The focus group discussions were integrated into regular
Learning Assistance Unit staff meetings between February and November, 2001. This reduced
the amount of time required by the learning advisers to consider the issues raised by the
investigation and it also helped link the study more closely with the day to day activities of the
Unit. Prior to the commencement of the study I wrote to the Pro Vice-Chancellor Information
Services requesting permission to conduct the investigation. I explained the research purpose...
and aims, the data gathering processes, and the ethical considerations. By October 2000 I had obtained written approval to commence the project.

### 4.3 Identifying the key stakeholders

According to Binney and Williams (1995, p. 88) the growth of an organisation depends on its relationship with the external environment. Instead of getting “bogged down” in internal issues, organisations need actively to seek feedback from external stakeholders. This enables the organisation to find ways to develop and grow. In this study I identified academics, librarians, students and learning advisers as the key stakeholders in the work activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. My judgement was based on experience and prior knowledge of the work setting (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). I selected these stakeholders because they are bound together through their common institutional affiliation and mission. They are also bound together through their work with students, through the physical location of the Learning Assistance Unit in the library, and through a shared concern for the academic progress of students. If the University community were to be seen as an activity system with the Learning Assistance Unit primarily as an instrument or tool then academics, librarians, students and learning advisers would form the community. On the other hand, if it were conceived that the Unit has separated out from the University activity system as an activity system itself these groups would form related, interacting activity systems.

Through work records and discussions with staff I identified a list of potential participants who had some prior knowledge and/or interaction with the Learning Assistance Unit. These potential participants received an invitation (via email, telephone and in person) to participate in the study. The invitation included an overview of the research aims and purpose of the study and an explanation of the proposed interview and focus group process and format. The overall response to the invitation to participate in the study was very positive. The rationale for the final selection of the sample of five academics, five librarians, four students and four learning advisers was based on my judgement of the individual’s experience and knowledge relevant to
the study, participant availability, and situational constraints such as time and flexibility. This purposive sample was not intended to reflect demographically the stakeholder population, however, the final sample did include a cross section of participants from different discipline backgrounds and campus locations (Morse, 1998; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993).

4.4 Interviews

Qualitative research is most often concerned with questions of ‘what’ and ‘how’, that is, questions that seek to find meaning in social interaction and describe it in terms of what it is and how it occurs (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). According to Gubrium and Holstein (1997) interviewing is the most widely applied technique in qualitative research for conducting this type of systematic social inquiry. This is because interviews are able to provide a window to the social world of the interviewee by giving authentic insight into people’s experiences (Miller & Glassner, 1997). Interviewing is an active process that involves “respondent and interviewer as they articulate ongoing interpretative structures, resources and orientations” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 121). Active interviewing recognises that respondents are not “passive vessels” or repositories of opinions and reasons but rather collaborators in knowledge production (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 116). If the interviewer is able to provide an environment conducive to open communication then it gives the respondent the opportunity to convey their experiences in a way that enables meaningful linkages to be made.

Of the eighteen interviews conducted in this study between November 2000 and May 2001, fifteen were face to face and three were conducted by telephone. The interviews took place in different offices across three campuses. All were tape recorded with the prior permission of the respondent. Most interviews were approximately thirty minutes in duration. Issues of confidentiality were discussed with participants before each interview and an informed consent form was signed by both parties. This form explained that pseudonyms would be used to
protect the individual identities of participants and that if I obtained confidential information I would seek permission before using the material.

Interview was chosen as the technique for conducting this inquiry because the primary aim was to generate data that would give an authentic insight into the way key stakeholders engaged with and understood the work of the Learning Assistance Unit (Silverman, 1993). In cultural-historical activity theory terms, the interview was essentially an opportunity to make visible the collective voices of the stakeholders. To do this successfully I needed to elicit respondents’ opinions, values and experiences (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). It was important from the outset to clarify my specific research interests and to use clear questioning techniques to guide the interview. It was also important that I demonstrated respect for the respondent and appeared natural and not deceptive in my interviewing approach. To aid understanding I often asked the same question in different ways and I paraphrased to check the accuracy of my understanding. I also made an effort to vary who controlled the flow of the interview and I learnt to wait if the interviewee required more time to consider their response (Fetterman in Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993, p. 387).

The questions used to guide each interview were:

1. How would you describe the work of the Learning Assistance Unit?
2. What do you think motivates the learning adviser?
3. What relationship (if any) do you see between the role of the learning adviser and the role of the academic/librarian/student? Are you aware of any problems in this relationship?
4. What is your perception of student experience moving from faculty to library to Learning Assistance Unit?
5. Do you have any suggestions on ways to improve our practice?

These questions sought to elicit different understandings about the role of the Learning Assistance Unit, the motivation (object) behind the work of the learning adviser, possible tensions or gaps in service provision, and suggestions on ways to improve practice. Once the stakeholders had described the work of the Unit they were then asked about the interplay among the faculty, library and Learning Assistance Unit and to identify problems in the relationships between the different stakeholders. They were also asked to suggest ways that the work
practices of the Learning Assistance Unit could be improved. Manually searching these data for patterns and relationships produced categories that further informed the analysis. For example, Chapter Five provides details on patterns that emerged when stakeholders were asked about the purpose of the work of the Learning Assistance Unit and problems in the work activity. Chapter Five explains how data were categorised according to stakeholder responses and words and phrases that were used to describe the aim of the work, the type of tasks involved and resources and/or tools used in the work activity. The categories used in Table 5.1 provide an overview of practical aspects of the work and are supported by further analysis of excerpts from the interview transcripts. Similarly, patterns in the data related to problems in the work activity emerged through a process of manually searching the data and sorting problems into three problem clusters (see Table 5.4). Chapter Six models these problem clusters so that they become visible and analysable. Finally, in Chapter Seven dimensions suggested by Engeström (1999c) on ways to expand or transform activity are used to help determine patterns and categories in stakeholder suggestions on ways to improve practice. This analysis is further informed by identifying elements of the activity system that could be reconceptualized to resolve some of the problems and tensions in the work activity. These data have been retained and are available for inspection.

4.5 Focus groups

This study sought to engage actively the staff of the Learning Assistance Unit in the investigation. That is, the interview data were interrogated further in six focus group discussions with staff from the Unit. These focus group discussions were included as agenda items in regular staff meetings in February, March, April, October and November 2001. Most discussions took up to an hour and usually involved all nine staff. If a staff member was absent from the group discussion then they provided written comments. The discussions focused on excerpts from the stakeholder interviews that I had selected because they identified problems and tensions in the work activity of the Unit. This approach was effective because it stimulated discussion amongst staff. It provided an opportunity to focus on problems and tensions and to
clarify issues. It also forced me, as researcher, to confront issues and to check my interpretations and understandings (Strauss, 1987). The group discussions were guided by the following questions:

1. What general observations would you make about the interview data?
2. What do you believe motivates our work?
3. Can you identify any problems and/or recurring patterns in our work activity?
4. Can you suggest any ways of improving our practice?

The first focus group was held at the Logan campus of Griffith University. At this meeting discussion focused around excerpts from the interviews with the library staff that identified problems and tensions in the Unit’s work practices. At the second focus group I provided an overview of the research aims and objectives for those advisers who were unable to attend a seminar I had previously presented on my research proposal. The third focus group was included in an all day planning workshop where we discussed broader issues of our work practice and the usefulness of examining feedback from key stakeholders. In August I wrote to the staff and asked them to read and comment on printed excerpts from the interviews with students and academics. This was followed in September with excerpts from the interviews with the learning advisers. We discussed this material in focus groups at the October and November staff meetings. For reasons of confidentiality I removed any references from these transcripts that could help identify the interviewee. I also asked staff not to copy the material, nor to use it for any other purpose, and to return it to me as soon as possible. It was necessary to follow up with some individuals until all interview transcripts were returned. Attempts to tape record the focus group discussions were unsuccessful due to poor reproduction quality and the difficulty in recording concurrent conversations. However my written notes and annotations made on the returned transcripts provided summaries of discussions. At the last focus group in November, I presented for discussion a list of the key themes that seemed to emerge from the data. These themes included increased demand on the service, quality of services, equity of service provision, teaching for assessment, generic skill development, and marketing. In December 2001, I also sought feedback from learning advisers from local universities who were attending a regional forum. At this forum I presented for discussion an overview of the research
aims and objectives along with the key themes identified from the data. This process of consultation was particularly important because it confirmed the accuracy of my understandings and the consistency of my interpretations of the data. Moreover, discussing categories and themes as they emerged from the data helped safeguard against researcher bias and also helped me to develop a working model to understand the significance of these categories and themes (Janesick, 1998).

4.6 Data management and analysis

One of the challenges confronting qualitative researchers is to generate data that will provide authentic understanding of people’s experiences (Silverman, 1993). To do this successfully the researcher must give careful consideration to defining the research problem and purpose of the study and to determining the appropriateness of the techniques used to collect and analyse the data. A further challenge for the researcher is to maintain control of the research process and avoid drowning in the data (Morse, 1998). For most qualitative researchers this means developing an organised, integrated approach to data management and analysis (Tesch, 1990; Silverman, 1993).

Tesch (1990) describes handling complex data as a creative, not mechanical task. She argues that it involves competence and clear thinking on the part of the researcher who is responsible for ensuring that the choice of methods of analysis are appropriate to the research question and purpose. Janesick (1998) adds that as the fieldwork proceeds the researcher is involved in a process of continually reassessing and refining these methods of analysis in order to develop working models that help explain the phenomena under study. This process involves identifying links and relationships between concepts and trying to determine the significance of the various elements by checking through field notes, interview transcripts and documents. As the analysis continues the researcher sifts and sorts through the data looking for relationships, points of tension, and conflicting points of evidence. This process is easier if the researcher establishes standardised methods to record, write and transcribe field notes. For example, in
this study the eighteen taped interviews were transcribed with each interview clearly labelled and each line of the interview numbered. These interview transcripts (see Appendix A) are labelled alphabetically under academic, librarian, student, and learning adviser. Notes were taken during the focus group discussions and written comments provided by the learning advisers were typed. These were eventually coded as problem clusters, tensions and themes started to emerge (see Appendix B).

Strauss (1987) explains that this coding process helps to fracture the data so that core categories can be identified. Open coding helps bring information to the surface by producing categories that seem to fit the data. For example, in this study I started by coding the data according to stakeholder group. I then used axial coding (a more intense, selective and focused way of identifying categories) to identify apparent problems and contradictions in the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit (Strauss, 1987). Entwistle (1997) cautions that great care must be taken to ensure that categories come from the data and that these categories fairly reflect the responses made by participants. To illustrate, I started by sorting the data according to key stakeholder group and manually searching for references that would help map the Learning Assistance Unit as part of the University activity system and as a separate activity system. The next chapter shows how words and phrases used by the stakeholders to describe the work of the Unit were grouped under the headings: aim, tasks and resources, and how the components of the activity system such as the object, subject, community, tools, rules, and divisions of labour were identified. I used colour coding, chart paper, and file folders in this analysis process and found that the more time I spent going through the data the more clues started to emerge about the nature and activity of the Unit and its contradictions (Engeström, 1987). I also used these techniques to look for patterns and relationships in relation to apparent problems and tensions in the work activity. At this stage I found it helpful to cut across the key stakeholder groups and examine different responses to each question. Some of the themes that emerged included increased demand on learning assistance services, the quality of services, equity of service provision, teaching for assessment, generic skill development, and marketing. Computer generated tables and manually drawn mind maps were useful as I identified key problems and
tensions (these have been retained and are available for inspection). This process made visible twenty problems related to the work activity of the Unit (see Table 5.3) and further analysis led to the grouping of similar problems in clusters. It was necessary however, to limit the study to three key problem clusters that I have called self-directed learner *versus* victim of the academic process, cost-efficiency *versus* quality service, and contextualised *versus* de-contextualised assistance.

### 4.7 Limitations of the study

The research method adopted in this study was particularly appropriate in achieving the aims of the investigation. Nevertheless, the study could be perceived as limited in relation to the sample, the data collection and my role as researcher. These limitations are acknowledged below.

A possible limitation is that data were collected from a relatively small, purposively selected sample of key stakeholders. It must be acknowledged that situational constraints such as time, resources and participant availability have shaped the breadth and depth of this inquiry, as is often the case in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). For example, the number of focus group discussions was restricted to reduce the time required of learning advisers, and the selection of the interview sample was based on my prior experience and knowledge of the work setting. However, given that the aim of this inquiry was to understand a local setting and to give voice to those involved in the setting the sample size is not a significant issue (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Restricting the sample size was a way of managing the situational constraints and purposively selecting the sample was a way of ensuring that the participants would provide the data needed. It is left to the reader to make a judgement about the transferability or “fittingness” of the study to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 124).

It could also be argued that the study is somewhat limited because time constraints made it impossible to implement Stage Four of the expansive visibilisation cycle (Engeström, 1999b).
Incorporating the focus group discussions into regular Unit meetings reduced the amount of time required of the learning advisers but it also meant that the stages of the cycle were drawn out over a longer period of time. In some meetings the discussions had to be held over due to pressing operational matters. This caused some delay in the progress of the project, although Engeström (1987, p. 324) would argue that having more time to “dwell” on the activity system and its associated problems is actually an advantage. It gives time to define the activity system more clearly and to focus on “points of probable breakthrough” when considering possible transformations in the activity (Engeström, 1987, p. 334). That is, although time constraints made it impossible to complete the expansive visibilisation cycle, the time taken to define the activity system and its associated problems was an advantage.

Another possible limitation of this study relates to the way that aspects of the data collection may have influenced results. For example, I decided that tape recording was the most effective way of capturing the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) agree that tape recording produces an unimpeachable data source that can be reviewed in its entirety. However, mechanical failure and mistrust of being recorded are disadvantages of this approach. To illustrate, technical difficulty in tape recording the focus group discussions meant that I had to take notes. I quickly realised that I could not manually record everything so I developed a process of listening for key points, highlighting, and making annotations. As soon as possible after the meeting I transcribed these notes to assist with my recollection and understanding of the discussion. Another unexpected problem occurred when several interviewees expressed hesitation at being recorded. However, once interviewees settled into the interview format they quickly opened up and were able to tell their stories.

Finally, the influence that my role as researcher has had on the study should be mentioned. The trustworthiness and credibility of the researcher is a key concern when considering the quality of any investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993; Janesick, 1998; Patton, 1990). However, every researcher, regardless of their relationship to the research site, brings preconceptions and biases. Whilst it was impossible for me to remain totally objective
during this study I was very aware of the need to control my bias as I juggled the multiple roles of researcher, colleague and supervisor. I am also aware that my relationship to the research site and to the participants in the study may have caused some stakeholders to constrain their response and that the story told may have been different if someone else were the listener (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). On the other hand, my knowledge and expertise in this work setting was important because without it I would not have have be able to challenge interpretations that emerged. My position within the Unit offered a unique level of access to the research site, as well as to the key stakeholders, and to internal documents from both the University and the Learning Assistance Unit. Taking my interpretations back to the focus group and discussing the emerging themes and categories with my academic supervisor and colleagues helped to reduce bias. This process of consultation also helped me to debrief and to clarify my interpretations. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 302) call this “peer debriefing” and consider it a useful strategy for reducing bias. It helps the researcher to explore aspects of the inquiry that “might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind”.

4.8 Conclusion

This qualitative investigation is concerned with understanding the setting of Griffith University’s Learning Assistance Unit. The approaches used to examine, describe and interpret the data have been outlined in this chapter. The credibility of these approaches is appraised in terms of the strengths, nature and limitations of qualitative research. This chapter also describes the structure and length of the study, the process for identifying key stakeholders, the interview and focus group format, and the data management techniques. The trustworthiness of the analysis process and the claims made about emerging themes and categories is supported by a description of the checks and balances used to verify and clarify interpretations. This chapter outlines how cultural-historical activity theory, with its emphasis on cultural context, local setting, collective understandings, and historical variables, has been used as the theoretical framework to guide the interpretation of the qualitative data. It is acknowledged that this study has limitations and that situational constraints have shaped the breadth and depth of the investigation. For example, using a relatively small, purposively selected sample of key
stakeholders was the most practical way to gather the required data within time and resource constraints. Similarly, incorporating the focus group discussions into regular Unit meetings was a practical way of reducing the amount of time required of the learning advisers. However a consequence was that the project was delayed and consequently it was not possible to implement Stage Four of the expansive visibilisation process. Although initially disappointed I found that having more time to consider the activity system and its associated problems was an advantage. Practical problems associated with using a tape recorder for data collection were initially frustrating but were soon overcome. My relationship to the research site and to the key stakeholders has also shaped the breadth and depth of the investigation. It is important to acknowledge my possible preconceptions. However, my experience and knowledge of the research site provided unique access and understanding and I used a variety of checks and balances to verify and clarify my interpretations.

Despite these limitations the approaches taken in this study were appropriate to achieve the research aims. However reporting and assessing the outcomes of qualitative research is not easy. In the end the reader has to trust the researcher’s judgements about the payoffs that the research has for those involved in the investigation (Engeström, 1987). I believe that this study has advanced knowledge about the work practices of Griffith University’s Learning Assistance Unit, the way that it has developed as an activity system, the problems and tensions that now exist, and possible ways forward in addressing these. This claim is supported by the discussion in the following chapters.
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS OF THE LEARNING ASSISTANCE UNIT AS AN ACTIVITY SYSTEM

5.1 Introduction

Engeström (1999b) argues that a broad perspective of work activity is crucial if researchers and practitioners are to make sense of situations, solve problems, and improve practice continually. In this study, key stakeholders were asked for feedback on the work activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. This chapter outlines this feedback and illustrates how the key concepts of cultural-historical activity theory are used to represent the Unit on the one hand, as part of a single, University activity system and, on the other, as a separate object-oriented system (Engeström, 1999b). The interview and focus group data, in conjunction with background literature, are used in this chapter to describe the various components of the activity system including object, subject, community, tools, rules, and divisions of labour (see also Chapter Three). The data are also used in this chapter to identify problem clusters and underlying tensions in the work practices, which then lead into further analysis and discussion in Chapters Six and Seven.

5.2 Key stakeholder understanding of the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit

Chapter Two explains how, when the Learning Assistance Unit was set up in 1998, it could be seen as a tool directed at the University’s object. That is, its purpose was to provide students with regular access to workshops and consultations on a range of topics including critical thinking, academic writing, and research skills directed at the University’s object, say, the learner with higher education aspirations. This study, conducted three years after the establishment of the Unit, enlists the help of key stakeholders (i.e. academics, librarians, students and learning advisers) to flesh out a current, collective understanding of the purpose of the Unit and to identify the object of the Learning Assistance Unit if it were a single activity system. For example, a summary of the words and phrases stakeholders used to respond to the
question “How would you describe the work of the Learning Assistance Unit?” is provided in Table 5.1. These words and phrases have been listed alphabetically under the headings aims, tasks and resources. These headings help to make visible practical aspects of the work as well as offer insight into stakeholder understanding of the purpose of the activity.

Table 5.1 Words and phrases used by stakeholders to describe the work of the Learning Assistance Unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>centralised approach, clear perspective, direction and guidelines, enablement, enjoyment, explicit, helpful, intellectual stimulation, inter-group collaboration, links, intervention, learning processes, partnerships, pathway, port of call, safety net, scaffolding, visible</td>
<td>assessment help, assignment help, different disciplines/subjects [courses]/year levels [working with], diverse students [work with], feedback [give], relationship building, students’ framework, support, learning cultures, academic staff support, counselling, orientation, procedural writing techniques, study skills</td>
<td>appointments, books, educational philosophy, expertise, lectures, marking criteria, meetings, planning processes, powerpoint presentations, readings, course outlines, transition programs, tutorials, workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians</td>
<td>assisting students and staff, collaboration, competition, complementing the library, expertise, explicit, focussed on process, immediate response, intermittent contact, links, overlap with library, promotion of activities, providing a service, reaching students, sharing the load, skimming the surface, time constraints, visible</td>
<td>academic skills [teach], academic staff [working with], attending lectures, being a resource, bridging programs, conceptual skills, critical thinking [teach], developmental skills, dissecting the question, mature age students [working with], orientation, post graduate students [working with], remedial work, research skills, schools/faculties [working with], taking notes, topics, transition points, tutorials, unpacking the question, writing skills [teaching]</td>
<td>assignments, course outlines, criteria sheet, drop-in sessions, face-to-face contact, generic topics, mind mapping, practical exercises, strategies, workshops, tips and tricks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>applying skills, approachable, aware, backup,</td>
<td>analysing question, draft assignments [assisting with], bounce ideas off,</td>
<td>appointments, assignments, consultations, drop-in sessions,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>Aim</td>
<td>Tasks</td>
<td>Resources</td>
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<td>-------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>crutch, aid,</td>
<td>dedicated, different cultures, expertise, framework, guidance,</td>
<td>expanding on ideas, general advice, international students [working with], marketing,</td>
<td>powerpoint shows, tutorials, workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>helpful, in high demand kind, positive, skill, source of help,</td>
<td>links, one to one assistance, orientation, part time students [working with], pulling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>support</td>
<td>things to pieces, reading [teaching], research skills, time management, unpacking the</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>question, writing, young students [working with]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>assisting independent learning, being active, being sensitive to</td>
<td>academic writing, assisting, counselling, critical thinking, developing skills, different</td>
<td>assessment tasks, audio visuals, books of readings,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisers</td>
<td>content, collaborative relationships, commitment to development of</td>
<td>campuses [working across], exams, feedback [providing], generic skills [developing],</td>
<td>brainstorming, brochure holders, communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>skills, confidence building, debriefing, encouraging enjoyment of</td>
<td>international students [working with], notetaking, orientation, postgraduate students</td>
<td>principles, concept maps, conferences, drawings,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learning, encouraging growth and development, finding out where</td>
<td>[working with], reading effectively, researching, time management, undergraduate students</td>
<td>drop-in sessions, electronic mailbox, email, face-to-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>student is coming from, friendly, having students at core, helping</td>
<td>[working with]</td>
<td>face consultations, glossy brochures, hand outs,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learners interacting, interventions, modelling, motivation, pro-</td>
<td></td>
<td>in-discipline workshops, maps, marking criteria,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>active, reassuring, reflection, reinforcing, relating well,</td>
<td></td>
<td>meetings, noticeboards, open ended questions,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>relationships with academics, relaxed, respectful, student</td>
<td></td>
<td>performance indicators, photocopies,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>focussed, student has someone to talk to, student satisfaction,</td>
<td></td>
<td>powerpoint displays, processes, questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>successful learning experiences, survival, tuning into student</td>
<td></td>
<td>processes, sandwich boards, strategic plans,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>needs</td>
<td></td>
<td>strategies, course outlines, teaching notes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>teaching objectives, textbooks, timetables, topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This table is useful because it provides a broad overview of the stakeholders’ various understandings of the tasks involved and the purpose of the work of the Learning Assistance Unit. A more holistic understanding of the work activity is possible, however, by examining fuller excerpts from the interview transcripts of each stakeholder group. For this reason, in the following sections the interview data are examined to gain insight into views expressed by academics, librarians, students and learning advisers about the work of the Unit.

5.2.1 Academics

As indicated in Chapter Four, five academic staff members (one each from the University’s major discipline groups of Science, Health, and Business, and two from Arts) were interviewed. When asked to describe the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit they used words such as support service, port of call, safety net and “enabling vehicle to help them [students] make that transition to a new form of learning” (Academic E:7-8). Table 5.1 shows that some of the other ways that they saw the work of the Unit was to help students cope with entry and orientation, to help students to bridge the learning culture, to provide study skills, and to assist with assessment. Their responses emphasised service provision to international, mature age, disabled and beginning students. Academic C described the purpose of the Unit as:

…being crucial to assisting our students with coping with entry into university. We see our role as to assist them with that entry and success within their course, but certainly the role of the LAU is not only to assist in orientation of the students, but also to support them. Particularly in the first semester of study - it’s really crucial. (Academic C:9-13)

Academic D (lines 8-9) indicated that the work the learning advisers were doing with her students on generic skills would not only help the students get through the rest of their degree but hopefully set them up in their future careers. In other words, academic staff appeared to be saying that the purpose of the Unit is to help students from diverse backgrounds to manage the transition to university study and to develop lifelong learning skills.
5.2.2 Librarians

Similarly, the librarians expressed the view that the Unit makes a contribution to the long term development of students.

I would see the role very much as developing those skills - those learning skills the students need to be successful with their studies. But not just with their studies, the skills that I guess are generic enough for them to be taken into the workforce or be used in other parts of the student’s life as well. (Librarian E:9-12)

Although the librarians interviewed came from three different campuses the words and phrases they used (see Table 5.1) and their full comments reflected a consistent view that the Learning Assistance Unit helps students to improve their academic performance by providing bridging support with writing and research. Librarian A described the role as:

…really helping students with that nitty gritty of getting down to taking notes, well attending lectures, taking notes and then assisting people in getting through their assignments, and well really the whole approach really in terms of all that preliminary um assistance you give when students just first come to uni and I think that’s carried out in your workshops. (Librarian A:23-27)

The librarians identified international students, first year students, undergraduates, students with low entrance scores, and those enrolled in bridging courses as those most in need of help with skill development (e.g. Librarian A:17; Librarian B:17-18; Librarian D:197). One librarian saw the role of the learning adviser as compensating for lecturers who do not have time to help students develop the necessary skills.

…there’s a recognition that some students come to university, for whatever reason, without all the skills that are going to be necessary to get through the courses and that the lecturers haven’t got time to give them the skills. So I would think that the unit is set up at one end of the spectrum for that purpose. (Librarian B:19-22)

The librarians appeared to be saying that the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit is to work with students from diverse backgrounds, particularly those experiencing difficulties.
5.2.3 Students

The interviewed students agreed that one role the learning adviser plays is to fill a gap left by the busy lecturer or tutor. Student A explained:

The thing is, I have rarely gone to tutors. And I know that I should, but the problem is, with me trying to manage my time and all the things that I have to do, it has been a real big problem last year and it was worse because I had a lot of the skills that I had to learn. So I never had the time to go and see the tutor because he only has two hours at certain times and by the time – I just couldn’t match, you see, so I just couldn’t. (Student A:131-136)

Students also suggested that the Learning Assistance Unit was particularly important in helping students to develop the skills necessary to cope with university studies.

You know, your first year at university, I believe every assignment is a pretty big challenge. (Student B:31-32)

From this perspective the purpose of the Unit was seen as a place to go for guidance:

If you just need assistance with a few things. You might be looking at a question your tutor has given you and thinking, “What is this tutor really wanting?” It’s somewhere to go and bounce ideas off. (Student B:16-19)

When asked for a specific example of why a student might seek out the guidance of a learning adviser Student C responded:

Finding out what the whole crux of the whole assignment is about, so it makes it a lot easier to grasp where to go and different options that you can use; that it’s not just one set style, that you can get possibly three or four different outlooks on one assignment. (Student C:18-21)

Other reasons for accessing the services included help with reading and writing, and help with “pulling apart” assignments or deconstructing the task in order to work out what is really required (e.g. Student D:52; Student B:82). Mature age students, and those from non-English speaking backgrounds were identified by student interviewees as the most regular users of the
service (e.g. Student D:317; Student B:70). Conversely, according to Student C and Student D, younger students do not use the service because:

…the young ones think it’s a remedial centre. They have a real thing that they think it’s a remedial centre and you only use that if you’re a real dummy.  
(Student C:314-315)

When asked for suggestions on how to change this view Student D replied:

I don’t think there’s anything that you could do to make younger students interested because - I don’t know, they seem to have a very strange attitude to learning, whereas the mature age student is here to get as much out of it as they can. The kids are just here to not wear uniforms, drink a lot of coffee and booze. I know it’s a stereotype.  
(Student D:348-352)

In summary, the interviewed students suggested that their main motive for accessing the Learning Assistance Unit is for help with a specific assessment task (see also Table 5.1). However, they also noted that the purpose of the Unit includes providing a substitute for the busy academic and guidance in relation to academic writing.

5.2.4 Learning advisers

According to the learning advisers the purpose of the Unit is to assist students to become independent learners, to build self confidence, to help with skills and strategies, to help students to achieve academic success, and to encourage an enjoyment of learning (e.g. Learning Adviser D:15-16).

I see the role of the Learning Assistance Unit as being very student focused and that we’re aiming to assist the students with their learning to become independent learners, to develop those skills that are going to help them to be lifelong learners.  
(Learning Adviser A:8-11)

The learning advisers also identified first year students and international students as those most likely to use the service (e.g. Learning Adviser D:196 & 597). However they also included students with an assessment task, students who had previously had a positive experience with...
the service, and course work postgraduate students (e.g. Learning Adviser B:87-88). Learning Adviser D was keen to point out that it is not just struggling students who seek assistance - on the contrary students come from a wide range of backgrounds:

Some of them are just at that level of motivation. Just want to pass. Others are, “I want to survive,” which is slightly different to a pass. “I want to pass, but I also want to survive, so how can I manage all of this and survive it?” Others are really just turned on, a little bit like myself and obviously I would key in to those people very keenly, who are just hungry. And you can see it. You can see it in their eyes, in everything they do. Their motivation is much more linked to mine. They’re just excited by things, by learning, by openness, by newness. But I think there is that whole gamut that we have to identify in the students. Part of our role is really finding out where is the student coming from? Where are they at? (Learning Adviser D:51-60)

These excerpts and words and phrases (see Table 5.1) used by the learning advisers suggest that they appeared to be saying that the purpose of the Unit is to help students from a wide range of backgrounds develop as self-directed learners by helping with assessment tasks and encouraging them to develop confidence, skills and an enjoyment of learning.

5.2.5 Summary

This analysis helps to flesh out stakeholder understandings of the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit and the role of the learning adviser. Whilst Table 5.1 reflects some variations in stakeholder understanding of the work activity they all seem to be saying that the purpose of the Unit is to assist or guide students to manage the demands of university study, in particular to manage the demands of assessment. Table 5.2 summarises stakeholder responses to the purpose of the work activity found in the interview excerpts.

Table 5.2 Purpose of the work activity - a summary from the interview transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>To assist with entry and orientation to university study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To assist with generic skill development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>To assist with learning skills development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To compensate for the busy academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>To compensate for the busy academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To assist with skill development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To assist with the assessment task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Adviser</td>
<td>To assist with independent learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To assist with skill development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2 helps to highlight overlaps and differences in emphases by the different stakeholders. For example, the Learning Assistance Unit might be seen as a tool in engaging with the University object, say, ‘the learner’ or ‘learner with learning aspirations’, or alternatively it might be seen as a separate activity system having an object of ‘student with assessment task’. The analysis of the data to this point however does not allow us to determine which is the better definition of the Learning Assistance Unit but the analysis does provide a more holistic understanding of the purpose of the work activity and this is used in the next section to examine problems and tensions identified by stakeholders.

5.3 Problems and tensions in the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit

Once the stakeholders had described the work of the Learning Assistance Unit (see Tables 5.1 & 5.2) they were then asked to identify any problems in the relationship between the role of the learning adviser and the role of the academic, librarian and/or student. They were also asked to suggest ways that the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit could be improved. Both of these questions helped to elicit information about problems and tensions in the work activity. Table 5.3 summarises twenty problems and underlying tensions mentioned by the stakeholders involved in the study.
Table 5.3 Problems and underlying tensions identified by stakeholders

1. Independent learners often do not know how to manage time and the pressures of assessment set by academics (e.g. Student C:364-365; Student A:20-21)
2. Students are expected to have a range of generic skills and attributes but academics do not always teach these skills (e.g. Student A:27-29; Student B:59-60; Learning Adviser D:156-158; Librarian B:19-20)
3. International students feel stupid when they have to ask academics and librarians lots of questions (e.g. Student A:42-43)
4. Some academics and librarians give students the impression that they do not want to know if the student is having a problem (e.g. Student D:64-65; Student C:115-116)
5. Students do not use the library as well as they might so if students are not aware of library services or do not use them then they are often not aware of LAU services (e.g. Academic C:72-74)
6. Learning advisers want to offer a quality service but level of funding restricts the type of service available and makes it difficult to meet increased demand (e.g. Student D:220; Learning Adviser C:103-105; Academic A:280-282)
7. Students want help immediately and are frustrated when they have to wait for an appointment with a learning adviser and/or academic (e.g. Academic C:67-69)
8. Some learning advisers find it difficult to refuse requests even when stakeholders give unrealistic time frames (e.g. Appendix B, p. 286)
9. Consultations with learning advisers that go over time take up other students appointment time and whilst this extra time is useful it is not equitable (e.g. Student D:37-39; Student C:43-45)
10. Some students approach the learning adviser for content help or grammar checks but this type of help is not part of the service (e.g. Student B:20-21; Student C:7-8; Learning Adviser B:113-115; Learning Adviser C:40-41)
11. Some students book into the LAU for an appointment and then do not turn up. This prevents other students from accessing services and shows a lack of respect for the work of the learning adviser (e.g. Student C:41-42)
12. Some of the marking criteria sheets are about skills, conventions and the mechanisms of writing but the LAU does not deal with these issues (e.g. Academic B:225-227)
13. The role of the learning adviser can be stressful. They often counsel students who are emotionally upset even though they are not counsellors (e.g. Student B:95-96; Learning Adviser B:76-78; Academic C:23-24)
14. Learning assistance services try to emphasise general skill development but most students are motivated to use the service because they want help with the assessment task (e.g. Learning Adviser A:158-160; Learning Adviser D:230-231)
15. Some academics are experts in their areas but not necessarily good teachers (e.g. Student A:102-103; Student B:204-205; Learning Adviser D:433-435)
16. Weak links between the LAU, faculty, and library make it difficult for students trying to understand the expectations of the learning environment (e.g. Student D:178-179; Learning Adviser A:72-76; Librarian A:68-69)
17. Some students have found that LAU information conflicts with the expectations of the academic (e.g. Student C:148-149)
18. Problems between learning adviser and academic are caused by ad hoc requests, timetabling conflicts, after hours requests and unclear assessment items (e.g. Appendix B, p. 286)
19. Efforts to improve the links between the LAU, faculty, and library are often accidental or incidental (e.g. Academic B:196-198; Librarian A:111-112)
20. Academics and librarians promote the Unit as a service for struggling students and yet many students will not use a service that is perceived as remedial (e.g. Student B:158-159; Student C:314-315)

According to Engeström (1999b) identifying disturbances in the activity is a crucial step towards understanding the activity and finding ways to improve practice. In order to make sense of these data in Table 5.3 the next section of this chapter uses the conceptual tools of cultural-historical activity theory to suggest theoretical models of the activity system and its related tensions (Engeström, 1999b).
5.4 The Learning Assistance Unit as an object-oriented activity system

The central issue of activity theory is the object (used in the sense of objective or motive) towards which collective activity is directed. Leont’ev explains that the main thing that distinguishes one activity from the other is:

the difference of their objects. It is exactly the object of an activity that gives it a determined direction. (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 62)

According to Leont’ev (in Engeström, 1999d) the concept of object-motive or purpose is implicit in the very concept of activity. That is, the way that individual, purpose-driven activities are connected to collective object-oriented activity is central to understanding the basic structure of an activity system. Engeström (1999a, 1999b), in his hospital studies, depicts the object of hospital work as the patient with a health problem or illness. In his studies conducted in schools he identifies the general object of the teachers’ work as the student or more specifically the relationship between the student and the knowledge that they are expected to acquire. He points out that in both activity systems the fundamental motive or purpose for the work of both teachers and hospital staff is the involvement, effort, emotion, excitement and frustration that is aroused when they interact with real life students and patients.

It is assumed that the University is an activity system. It has a long history as a social institution going back to 1971 and has an object that the community understands. In the University activity system the object would be the learner (with higher education learning aspirations) and if each structured part of the University were operating in a single activity system then this would be the object of the library, the faculties, the Learning Assistance Unit, and management. Yet the data suggest that the Learning Assistance Unit engages primarily with only one facet of the learners’ aspirations, namely the assessment task. Learners (or students) come to the Learning Assistance Unit with a problem related to assessment. Moreover, they come to the library with a resource need. Thus, if the Learning Assistance Unit were to be modelled as an activity system the object of its work would be something like ‘student with an assessment
task’. This suggestion is based on the historical origins of the role (see Chapter Two) and frequent references in the data to the role that the Unit plays in assisting or guiding students to manage the demands of assessment (see Table 5.1). Such an interpretation is further supported by service usage data from 1998 to 2001 that indicate that the most common reason a student approaches the Learning Assistance Unit is for help in relation to an assignment (Learning Assistance Unit, 2001a). Learning Adviser D explained:

…the student is a learner who comes from a context, with a context. They come from a faculty. They come generally in the context of an assignment or a purpose that is bigger than just the inquiry that they are making. (Learning Adviser D:110-113)

Thus, it seems that the Learning Assistance Unit engages primarily with one aspect of the University’s object (learner with higher education learning aspirations), namely ‘student with an assessment task’. Yet, the data also seem to suggest that the motive or purpose of the work of the learning adviser is to help students more broadly to realise their academic potential. To illustrate, the stakeholders used words and phrases such as approachable, collaborative, explicit, helpful, understand learning cultures, student focused, and visible to describe the aim of the work. According to the stakeholders these aims are achieved by providing help with academic writing, assignments/assessment, building links and relationships, counselling, developing frameworks, generic topics, orientation, skill development, working with students, time management, and unpacking the question.

Thus, there is still an open question as to how far the Learning Assistance Unit might have become a separate activity system directed at assessment or simply be a tool related primarily to assessment, or even one of the subjects in the overall University activity system directed at learners’ broader aspirations. Further analysis of the research data and the background outlined in Chapter Two make it possible when conceptualising the Learning Assistance Unit as an activity system, to identify other components such as the subject, community, tools, rules, and divisions of labour (Engeström, 1987). This is discussed in the following sections.
5.4.1 Subject

In the basic structure of an activity system the “subject refers to the individual or subgroup whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis” (Engeström, 1993, p. 67). In a separate activity system the agency of the learning adviser would be the point of view in the analysis. In a mapping where the learning advisers are viewed as subjects in the University activity system, learning advisers would be using the tool of assignment writing in activity directed at the University’s collective motive of learner with aspirations. This would apply equally to academics and librarians.

5.4.2 Community

A community is defined as a group that functions with a common interpretation of what the members of the community are trying to do. Griffith University, for example, is a large community comprised of four academic groups and several administrative divisions. The Learning Assistance Unit is part of this University community but it is also a smaller community comprised of a team of eight learning advisers, a manager and a Pro Vice-Chancellor/director. This smaller community may be seen to share the same general object or purpose of working with students, that is, to help them achieve their academic potential, particularly in relation to learning associated with the assessment task. The learning advisers within the Learning Assistance Unit community have different backgrounds and therefore often take different approaches to similar tasks. These differences can create tension and conflict and Table 5.3 draws attention to problems related to the different approaches learning advisers take to student consultations and relationships with other stakeholders (see Table 5.3: 9, 10, 13, 16, 19). At the same time the Learning Assistance Unit community provides opportunities for learning advisers to share expertise as they interact, and share space and resources on a daily basis. Learning Adviser A explained how expertise is shared within the community:

…there’s a debriefing type thing. From those types of conversations you pick up ideas and tips from the others and listen to how they approach things or how
people have done something. I find that that is useful. You do tend to reflect yourself. Even just in how you’ve dealt with a particular issue. Saying, “I did that. How might I approach it differently?” (Learning Adviser A:90-94).

5.4.3 Tools

The outcomes of an activity system are achieved with the help of physical tools such as instruments and signs and mental tools such as methods, concepts, forms of discourse and structures of reason. (Engeström, 1993). For example, Table 5.1 lists tools (or resources) used in the Learning Assistance Unit such as consultations, drop-in, expertise, powerpoint presentations, assignments, questioning techniques, strategies/processes, tutorials, texts and workshops. The following account illustrates how the textbook is used as a practical tool in student consultations:

…very often you say to them, “Do you have a textbook?” “Yes, but I didn’t bring that.” More often than not, it is the textbook you want to teach them is the first port of call for information. How do you scan it? Where do you find it? There’s a glossary, there’s an index, there’s a contents list. How do I scan down to find that information? To read effectively? What sort of notes might I take? All of those sorts of things can be demonstrated just on a basic textbook. Book of readings - the same. (Learning Adviser D:422-428)

The tool most often mentioned by students was the assessment task (e.g. Student A:180; Student B:42; Student C:18; Student D:26). Students talked about the assignment question and trying to understand what the tutor wants (e.g. Student A:149). Student B referred to the difficulties that some students have with the assessment task and how the learning adviser might help.

In the last semester last year we had two students from Scandinavia and one of them was having real problems with her assignment and I was talking to her one day and I said, “Why don’t you go to the Learning Assistance Unit, they’re fantastic?” A real challenge for those students. They can speak English very well, but to get it down on paper to the qualifications that the university want - a real challenge. I think that perhaps if the Scandinavian student in this case, had gone to the tutor, the tutor may say, “You’re best if you go to the Learning Assistance.” The tutors, as I see, are all very busy people. (Student B:70-77)

However, Table 5.3 points to problems related to the tools used by the learning advisers to assist students. These include problems related to rules such as the way funding restricts the type of
service available, and difficulties in meeting increased demand and ad hoc requests with existing resources (see Table 5.3: 7, 8, 18).

5.4.4 Rules

The rules of an activity system refer to the “explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system” (Engeström, 1993, p. 67). The background discussion in Chapter Two suggests that one rule that constrains the activity of the University (and therefore the Learning Assistance Unit) is the rule of cost-efficiency. Chapter Two explains that senior management expects the Learning Assistance Unit to offer an equitable, accessible, multi-campus service, on a restricted budget. This constrains the work activity as Learning Adviser C explained:

> there’s area for improvement in terms of maybe - I don’t know whether it’s reconfiguring an existing staff or increasing staffing levels or - something to accommodate the increase in demand. Particularly around teaching times. When it’s peak time it’s very difficult for staff to cope with and also the student that’s trying to get into a service. (Learning Adviser C:105-110)

Another implicit rule or norm that emerges from the research data relates to the way that learning advisers interact with students. For example, in Table 5.1 stakeholders were identified as indicating that being able to establish easy rapport, being empathic, and culturally-sensitive and age-sensitive were important “rules” for the work of the Learning Assistance Unit (e.g. Academic C:22-23; Student A:55-57; Learning Adviser D:300). Learning Advisers, according to Academic C, must also be able to help students put things into perspective.

> I think it’s a difficult role because you are walking a tightrope at times with people who can be quite emotionally upset or have major social problems, like a lot of ours do with their families, which is affecting their performance, but they’re not necessarily seeing that that is the case. A lot of students will blame themselves for not being able to understand, or not being able to get assignments in on time, without actually thinking about all the different aspects that impinge on that. Things that they may not really have much control over. I think one of the things a learning support person must be able to do is to almost enable the student to put things into perspective. (Academic C:27-35)
Learning Adviser D (lines 420-421) talked about yet another rule: that students come prepared for consultations. That is, the rule or expectation that students bring tools such as the textbook and/or course outline, that they spend time before the consultation thinking about the task, and that they have their ideas ready before approaching the learning adviser for help. However, Student A, from a non-English speaking background, revealed her frustration at not being aware of these rules and the difficulties she had in trying to prepare for a consultation when she could not understand or explain her needs:

I come there and say, “Look I have this problem, what should I do with it?” With regards to the drop-in sessions I always found that when I came to a problem – last year I found that I was looking for answers. I didn’t know what was wrong and why I couldn’t cope. So, I was looking for help but I didn’t know exactly what things. I didn’t know how to define what was going wrong with me. The people couldn’t actually help me. They said, “Come and we will help you.” But then I couldn’t … myself. (Student A:207-214)

In summary, this feedback from the stakeholders suggests that the work of the Learning Assistance Unit is constrained by explicit and implicit rules. These rules relate to the service being equitable, accessible and cost-effective, learning advisers being empathic and sensitive and able to establish easy rapport, as well as students coming prepared for consultations. Some of the problems and tensions related to these rules identified in Table 5.3 include problems and tensions to do with stakeholder expectations of students and student expectations of the Learning Assistance Unit, for example, the expectation that students know how to manage time and the pressures of assessment set by academics and the expectation that learning advisers will be able to respond to problems related to unclear assessment items (see Table 5.3: 1, 2, 3, 6, 11, 18).

### 5.4.5 Division of labour

The division of labour within an activity system refers to both the “horizontal division of tasks between members of the community and to the vertical division of power and status” (Engeström, 1993, p. 67). For example, there are divisions of labour in the University activity...
system between academic and administrative areas. As already mentioned the Learning Assistance Unit is made up of eight learning advisers, a manager and a Pro Vice-Chancellor/director. Not all of these learning advisers work full time so the full time staff equivalent is six and one half positions. Apart from the two Gold Coast campus staff, all of the advisers work across at least two campuses during the week. According to Engeström (1999b) the horizontal and vertical divisions of labour in communities of practice are based on power and status between members. For example, there is a clear division between the role of the manager of the Unit and that of the learning advisers. The learning advisers on the other hand are all employed at the same general staff classification level. Therefore, it is likely that issues of power and status within the team have more to do with length of service and perceptions of influence (e.g. Learning Adviser A:66; Learning Adviser B:39). Learning Adviser D made the following comment in relation to the division of labour within the team:

I guess my first thing would be, for the team that is operating together at the grass roots, to try to work out as a team what are the strengths and weaknesses. So somebody’s good at marketing and they’re happy to do it - let them do it. Let them run with it. If all of you are not good at it, then maybe it needs to rotate. (Learning Adviser D:475-479)

The interview data also revealed divisions of labour between the Learning Assistance Unit and the other parts of the University activity system: the faculty and library. This division of labour is highlighted in the following comment from Librarian E:

…we then say to the student, “You’ve got your information, but then if you want to work out how to use it, that you’ve then got to go to LAU.” And then, I guess, where your guys would be referring to us, like, “This is what information you need, this is how you use it, but I can’t show you what’s the best place to find that information, you then need to go to the reference staff”. (Librarian E:65-69)

Academic A also mentioned this practice of referring students between different parts of the University:

I think from our end what we need do is to identify students who require assistance and actually formally refer them to you. That, I think, would help. (Academic A:304-306)
Student D mentioned a clear distinction in the division of labour between the Unit and the faculty:

…the bottom line is, the person who has given you the mark, your tutor, they’re the ones whose hoop you have to jump through. LAU can give you nice general advice and guidance, but when it comes to actually fine tuning and making the filling in there you’ve really got to be doing what your tutor wants. And the only way you can find that out of course is with consultation with them. (Student D:176-181)

Problems and tensions related to the division of labour within the Learning Assistance Unit and amongst the related University parts are identified in Table 5.3. These include the impression that some academics and librarians do not want to know if a student is having a problem, the counselling role that the learning adviser plays, weak links between stakeholders, and the perception of the Unit as a remedial service for struggling students (see Table 5.3: 4, 13, 16, 20).

5.4.6 Alternative mappings

These data confirm at least two possible mappings of the Learning Assistance Unit as an activity system. Figure 5.1 depicts the Learning Assistance Unit as an object-oriented activity system with a community of learning advisers, a manager and a Pro Vice-Chancellor/director. In Figure 5.1 the learning adviser is identified as the subject. The collective activity of the learning advisers is shown as directed towards assisting students with assessment tasks to achieve their academic potential. Figure 5.1 also shows that the work activity of the learning advisers involves divisions of labour, rules and common tools. This basic triangular model (see Figure 3.1) originated with Vygotsky’s idea of culturally mediated actions, that is, the idea that human activity is a process of shared practice and interaction with common tools and common language (Engeström, 1999d).
The basic model of the activity system, as illustrated in Figure 5.1, has been expanded in Engeström’s so called third generation of cultural-historical activity theory to include networks of interacting activity systems. Even if the Learning Assistance Unit is a separate, object-oriented activity system, it does not exist in isolation. It is part of a larger University community (Engeström, 1999b). It is therefore possible to also map the Learning Assistance Unit in relation to interacting activity systems. Chapter Four explains that academics, librarians, students and learning advisers were identified as the key stakeholders in the work of the Learning Assistance Unit because they are bound together through their common institutional affiliation and mission, their work with students, the physical location of the Unit in the library, and a shared concern for the academic progress of students. Figure 5.2 is one interpretation of how the Unit as a separate activity system interacts with the surrounding activity systems of the faculty, library and student. Figure 5.2 is a powerful way of conceptualising the different positions, interests and traditions of the various parts of the University activity system, and facilitating analysis of the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit (Engeström & Miettinen,
1999; Engeström, 1987). It is important to point out that the purpose of this study is to analyse the Learning Assistance Unit. The intention is not to analyse the surrounding systems. The details included in Figure 5.2 have been drawn not only from the data but also from background literature and feedback from relevant stakeholders who were approached for confirmation of my interpretations of the various components of the other activity systems.
Figure 5.2 Network of interacting systems
The tentative mapping in Figure 5.2 also helps to highlight the problems and tensions that might exist between the separate activity system of the Learning Assistance Unit and those of the faculty, library and student. These problems and tensions would exist because, according to Engeström (1993), when participants in related activity systems express different views, interests, positions and approaches it creates tension and conflict. This tension and conflict can arise between the object of the participants’ work and the tools of that work. It can also arise in relation to rules and/or divisions of labour within the system and between the related systems.

For example, when a new way of doing something is introduced it often leads to contradictions between the old and the new ways of working. Contradictions are discussed below.

Engeström (1999b) identifies four levels of contradiction in human practice. Primary contradictions are those that create conflict within a single component of an activity system. He uses the example of medication as a useful preparation to treat illness on the one hand, but on the other a commodity to be sold for profit. In this study there would be a primary contradiction between offering a quality learning assistance service and pressure on learning advisers to service as many students as possible. Secondary contradictions occur when there is a clash between a new kind of object and the components of practice. A patient who demands modern medicine from the village doctor who does not have the tools is an example of this contradiction. In this study there would be a secondary contradiction between the type and level of learning assistance service demanded by students and the capacity of the Learning Assistance Unit to meet these demands. Tertiary contradictions appear when representatives of a culture try to impose a more advanced form of activity. For example, a tertiary contradiction occurs when hospital administrators order resistant medical staff to employ new procedures, or in this study, when learning advisers try to make students think critically, when they may prefer to just reproduce information. Quaternary contradictions emerge between interacting activity systems in the implementation of the central activity. The doctor for example can order a patient to adopt a new habit, and the learning advisers can encourage students to become self-directed learners, but both must consider that conflict and resistance may occur in the process of implementation.
Not all of the problems identified in Table 5.3 can necessarily be described as contradictions. Rather the problems that emerge from the data appear to relate to apparently different understandings of the object, and problems and tensions in the relationships amongst different activity systems. These problems and tensions identified by the stakeholders all warrant investigation, however it was necessary to limit this project to focus on three key problem clusters. These clusters are drawn from the twenty problems and underlying tensions identified in Table 5.3. The relationships between the problems identified in Table 5.3 as articulated by the problem clusters chosen for analysis are given in Table 5.3.

Table 5.4 Key problem clusters in the work activity of the Learning Assistance Unit related to different understandings of the object, and problems and tensions in the relationships amongst different activity systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem Cluster</th>
<th>Underlying tensions</th>
<th>Problems identified in Table 5.3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process</td>
<td>The Learning Assistance Unit versus the faculty The Learning Assistance Unit versus the library</td>
<td>1, 3, 4, 5, 14, 15, 18, 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost-efficiency versus quality service</td>
<td>Tensions related to the type of service available Tensions in the level of service available Tensions reflected in learning adviser workload</td>
<td>6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance</td>
<td>Tensions related to generic services Tensions between challenging students and assisting students Tensions related to levels of collaboration between learning adviser and academic</td>
<td>2, 7, 10, 16, 17, 19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have chosen to focus on these particular problem clusters and their underlying tensions identified in Table 5.4 because they seem to capture many of the concerns identified by the stakeholders. In addition, as the following chapters indicate, understanding these issues has the potential to help the learning advisers at the level of their everyday work practice, and to provide the motive force needed for change and transformation in the activity (Engeström, 1999d).
5.5 Conclusion

This chapter summarises feedback from stakeholders on the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit and the role of the learning adviser (see Tables 5.1 & 5.2). These data support the view that the role of the adviser is to assist or guide students from diverse backgrounds with the demands of the university environment and the assessment task. However, other data suggest that the role of the learning adviser is also to work with students experiencing difficulties, and to compensate for busy academic staff who do not have time to clarify the assessment task or help students develop generic skills (see Table 5.2). This chapter captures some of the tensions in the various understandings of the stakeholders. Alternative mappings of the Learning Assistance Unit as part of the University activity system and as a separate activity system are given. The mapping as a separate system is expanded to include relationships with the faculty and library as interacting activity systems. To this point in the analysis the data do not resolve which is the superior mapping. However, there is evidence that much of the work of the Learning Assistance Unit is seen to be concerned with the assessment task.

In this chapter the research data, in conjunction with background literature, has been used to help define the object of the Learning Assistance Unit (when mapped as a separate activity system) as ‘student with assessment task’. Attention is drawn to problems and tensions identified by the stakeholders’ different understandings of the activity, the role of the learning adviser, and the relationship between the Unit and the other systems. The learning adviser has been identified as the subject of the Unit’s activity system as well as a member of a community that shares the same general motive or purpose. From the data some of the tools of the activity system have been identified: these include consultations, drop-in, expertise, powerpoint presentations, assignments, questioning techniques, strategies/processes, tutorials, texts and workshops.

This chapter has also considered some of the rules that constrain the actions and interactions within the Learning Assistance Unit, such as the service being equitable, accessible, and cost-
effective, learning advisers being empathic and sensitive and able to establish easy rapport, as well as students coming prepared to consultations. The division of labour within the Learning Assistance Unit is depicted amongst the advisers, between the adviser and the student, between the advisers and the manager, and between the manager and the Pro Vice-Chancellor/director. A basic triangular model has been used to depict these various components of the Learning Assistance Unit as a separate activity system and the model has been expanded to include the interacting activity systems of the faculty, library and student. This expanded model draws attention to the problems and tensions in the relationships between the Unit and the other systems. There is still an open question about the alternative mappings of the Learning Assistance Unit and how far the Unit might have become a separate activity system. The following chapter seeks to clarify this by analysing key problem clusters and tensions in depth under the headings of self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process, cost-efficiency versus quality service, and contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance.
CHAPTER 6: PROBLEMS AND TENSIONS IN THE ACTIVITY SYSTEM

6.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the previous chapter by focusing on three key problem clusters in the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. That is, this chapter focuses on the problem clusters of self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process, cost-efficiency versus quality service, and contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance (see Table 5.4). I have chosen to focus on these problem clusters for two reasons. Firstly, tensions related to these problem clusters are evident in the data (Table 5.3) and it is theorised that these tensions seem to arise from different understandings of the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit (Engeström, 1999b). Secondly, during my time as the manager of the Unit I observed that tensions related to these kinds of problems surfaced regularly at staff meetings, planning days, and in dialogue with stakeholders. Hence an analysis of these problem clusters and associated tensions has the potential to help learning advisors at the level of their everyday work practice and advance the development of the Learning Assistance Unit. The chapter is divided into three main sections. They are problem cluster 1: self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process, problem cluster 2: cost-efficiency versus quality service, and problem cluster 3: contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance. Each section uses theoretical modelling and excerpts from the data to makes the problem clusters and associated tensions visible and analysable. This analysis contributes to an understanding of the Learning Assistance Unit as both part of the broader University activity system and as a separate activity system.

6.2 Problem Cluster 1: Self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process

In an attempt to flesh out an understanding of the problem cluster, derived from Table 5.3 and referred to as self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process, I searched the corpus
of data for words used by the stakeholders to describe the object of the activity system of the Learning Assistance Unit, that is, ‘student with assessment task’. This revealed interesting insights into how the object and the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit was understood and pointed to tensions caused by the different understandings of stakeholders such as academic staff (see 6.2.1) and library staff (see 6.2.2). To illustrate, Table 6.1 shows that stakeholders used a larger variety of negative references about students than positive references and that the negative references were more emotive than the positive references.

**Table 6.1 Words used by stakeholders to describe the ‘student’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive words to describe the ‘student’</th>
<th>Negative words to describe the ‘student’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>convinced</td>
<td>confused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coping</td>
<td>crying out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critical thinkers</td>
<td>desperate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curious</td>
<td>drop out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good</td>
<td>dumbsos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hungry to learn</td>
<td>dummy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keen</td>
<td>floundering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open</td>
<td>having learning difficulties/problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-managing</td>
<td>lacking confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>standing on their own two feet</td>
<td>lacking maturity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>successful</td>
<td>lazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turned on</td>
<td>needing assistance/support/reassurance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The references captured in Table 6.1 were made in response to questions about the role of the Learning Assistance Unit. This suggests that many stakeholders understand the activity of the Unit as assisting students having trouble or experiencing difficulties in the learning environment. To elaborate, Student A, from a non-English speaking background, responded to questions about her understanding of the role of the Unit by described herself as once a “good student” but implied that she became “desperate”:

…I always was a good student but it was totally different and I had to change. So I think the common thing between here and overseas students, a student or an Australian student, is that we don’t have those skills, and we find that we have to do all this work and we don’t know how to. And everybody gets desperate because of that and that’s the main reason, I would say. (Student A:25-29)
Similarly, Student D described herself as “floundering”:

...I was floundering around. I got no direction and no sense of purpose. I'd done a load of work, but it was all “messy”. It had no form of cohesion to it. (Student D:49-51)

Librarians B and D also referred to students experiencing problems when asked about the Learning Assistance Unit:

...certainly with some undergraduates I can remember having, but they - some of them had real problems and I don't know that the problem lay so much in an area that could be solved by help by LAU or by library, it was very much a personal thing. Maybe they shouldn’t have been doing the course in the first place. (Librarian B:260-264)

...I think one of the issues in terms of the library, and this is really specifically related to people using the library, is that it’s so very complex. And the other side of that is that they really don’t know what they don’t know. In terms of - like they’re not aware of what is available for them to use on the whole and the knowledge that they do have is confused and vague. It all looks so difficult, and it is, it’s a big - a lot of concepts there. (Librarian D:155-160)

Academic E stated below, explained that in this context, where students experience difficulties in the learning environment, the learning adviser might be perceived as a student advocate:

...for the student who’s the victim of the nasty academic who has given very bad assessment with poor criteria and “We’re [learning advisers] here to show you that someone really does care.” So there’s this whole role about “We’re really on your side and yes we know they [academics] are bad boys and girls.” (Academic E:18-24)

Learning Adviser A agreed that part of the role of the learning adviser was about giving students reassurance and at the same time helping them to develop skills:

In lots of cases it’s to give them [students] confidence with their learning. Sometimes, we have students where I can think of situations where it is just reinforcing and reassuring them that what they’re doing is ok. In other cases it’s really helping them with skills and strategies and processes that they can use and apply. (Learning Adviser A:11-15)

However Academic E described the role as more like a study skills counsellor.
I see a sort of pseudo rescue advocacy role. I see a genuine helping role. I kind of see a socialisation role as well. Inculcation or orientation - helping these kids cope with what’s going on for them. I often wonder whether that fades nicely into a sort of counselling role; a study skills counselling role which, typically, the University has put somewhere else in Student Services. But I think it may be more meaningfully placed in this context, where you are actually dealing with the phenomenon of how to cope with university, but using this particular piece of work - what does this say about how you study? So I think it’s a more grounded study skills counsellor role. (Academic E:33-41)

There was lengthy discussion amongst the learning advisers at the August focus group about the emphasis that some academics and students appeared to place on the quasi-counselling role of the learning adviser. To illustrate, after reading the transcripts one learning adviser commented that:

The LA [learning adviser] interviews reflect a ‘good and correct’ emphasis on lifelong learning and generic skills. The student interviews highlight the quasi-counsellor role of learning adviser and yet the learning adviser interviews don’t acknowledge this at all. Even though we know we do it perhaps we’re uncomfortable because we aren’t trained but we do reassure “yes you can do this”. We’re a friendly, approachable port of call. A lot of what we do is diagnostic but counselling is not what we want to emphasise. (Learning Adviser E, Appendix B, p. 270)

This observation helps to illustrate a tension that seems to arise from different understandings of the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit and the role of the learning adviser. On the one hand the data suggest that the learning advisers are reluctant to acknowledge a counselling role partly because they are not trained in this area, and partly because it reinforces the view that they work with victims of the academic process rather than self-directed learners (Learning Adviser A:9-11; Learning Adviser D:57-59; Appendix, B, p. 268).

On the other hand, stakeholders appeared to emphasise that the role of the adviser is to help students experiencing difficulties and this includes playing a counselling type role. The problem, according to Librarian B, is that learning advisers have a “picture” of the object or motive of their work that does not necessarily match the reality of everyday practice.

...you don’t differentiate. You don’t say “Only students that are struggling at the undergraduate level need apply.” You have this picture of any student being able to come to you. (Librarian B:19-25)
The reality, according to Academic E, is that learning advisers spend most of their time working with struggling students or those not coping with the demands of university study. These different understandings of the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit and the role of the learning adviser give rise to multi-faceted problems and tensions within the activity system of the Learning Assistance Unit and between the elements of this activity system and the activity systems in which academics and librarians predominantly work. The following discussion focuses on some of the ways that these tensions are played out in the Learning Assistance Unit versus the faculty (see 6.2.1) and the Learning Assistance Unit versus the library (see 6.2.2).

6.2.1 The Learning Assistance Unit versus the faculty

At the level of everyday practice the learning adviser appears to play several roles in the learning environment including confidence builder, compensator, interpreter, motivator, tutor, counsellor and skill provider. And as the earlier discussion points out, different interpretations of the role of the learning adviser (such as the view that learning advisers work predominantly with struggling students and that they play a counselling role) creates tensions within the Learning Assistance Unit and between it and related parts of the University such as the faculty. These tensions are depicted in Figure 6.1. Figure 6.1 is based on the modelling of learners’ engagement with the whole University as the activity system. The data are used to suggest where tensions would exist within elements of such an activity system.
Figure 6.1 is only one interpretation of the data and it could be described as somewhat clumsy in its attempt to represent the multi-faceted problems and tensions associated with the problem cluster. Figure 6.2 on the other hand, which is based on the modelling of the Learning Assistance Unit as a separate activity system in Chapter Five (see Figure 5.2), takes into account the way that the Learning Assistance Unit, conceptualised as an activity system, interacts with surrounding activity systems of the faculty and student. Figure 6.2 helps to highlight aspects of the data that reveal there are salient tensions between:

- the learning advisers’ view of the object of their work as encouraging self-directed learning and the reality that they end up working predominantly with students experiencing difficulties in the learning environment
- the view that, although the learning adviser often plays the role of interpreter between the student with assessment task and the busy academic, apparently weak links between the Learning Assistance Unit and the faculty make this difficult
Figure 6.2 offers a way of conceptualising the different positions, interests and traditions of apparently separate, but interacting activity systems of the Learning Assistance Unit and faculty so that meaningful discussion can take place about ways to improve practice (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Engeström, 1987). Tensions are depicted as double-headed arrows or lightning bolts. Solid lines are used for tensions between elements within an activity system and dashed lines for tensions between activity systems as a whole.

The conceptualisation depicted in Figure 6.2 seems to account for tensions found in the data and therefore provides evidence that the Learning Assistance Unit and the faculty may have separated out as distinctive activity systems in the University. That is, there are differences in the objects with which each activity system engages. Another way of informing the question is to conceptualise these tensions using excerpts from the data that relate to the activity systems of the Learning Assistance Unit and faculty. To illustrate, the learning advisers’ view of the object of their work as encouraging self-directed learning contrasts with the view of some stakeholders.
(e.g. Academic E:18-24; Student D:48-53) that most of the learning advisers’ time is spent helping students who are victims of the academic process (in particular, ineffective teaching practices). For example, students referred to academics as experts in their field, extremely qualified, and very academic (e.g. Student A:102; Student B:203). However, students also commented that some academics are unable to get across to students, that is, they are not clear in conveying what they want or what they mean. Table 5.3 (1, 2 & 3) also notes that some academic staff appeared to make assumptions about what students know. For example, some academic staff were criticised for not teaching generic skills, expecting students to already have these skills, being very busy without time to explain anything in detail, and not being aware or understanding of students’ problems (Student B:202-208; Student C:115-116; Student D:64-65; Librarian B:20-21; Learning Adviser D:154-158).

These data suggest a tension in the separate activity system of the faculty between tools and outcome that is worth investigating. However this is not possible within the context of this study. It is important however, to emphasise that the stakeholders in this study did not suggest that all teaching practices in the University were problematic. Student A pointed out that there is great diversity within the academic staff and it is impossible to generalise:

…all the lecturers. They are all from different backgrounds. Some of them are Australians and some of them are from different countries, so it’s very difficult to put them all in one bag, in one big group. (Student A:89-92)

Nevertheless, Learning Adviser D claimed that the tools used by some academics place unfair expectations on students, and implied that the student becomes a victim of an academic process that expects students to have certain skills but does not teach or model these skills in the learning environment.

…you’ve still got a lot of the old school - they just stand up, lecture, content and walk out. And then they pay lip service to the skills and say, “Well, here’s a group assignment - do it;” but provide no modelling, no guidance for that sort of thing to happen. As far as I’m concerned, separating those two boundaries is just not right. (Learning Adviser D:154-158)
Academic D agreed:

We never taught them how to write. We never taught them how to present orally. Yet they’re marked on their writing and they’re marked on oral presentations. We’ve never taught them how to prepare for exams. We’ve never taught them how to read effectively or take notes effectively, yet they’re all basic skills that they need to possess. (Academic D:85-89)

Students B elaborated on how this lack of guidance impacted on her learning experience:

I find, also, with some of the tutors and lecturers, some of them are very academic. They’re extremely qualified, but not very good at conveying what they mean. Even when you go to see them in their study, sometimes - I can remember in semester one of year one, I thought my goodness, what is she trying to get at here? I went to see her in her study and I really came away none-the-wiser. A very academic person but unable to get across. (Student B:202-208)

Student A explained that for students from non-English speaking backgrounds the problems are exacerbated:

What I have found out here is that the lecturers, they are experts in their areas, but not necessarily good teachers. So, they give a lot of trouble to students, because they’re thinking in their area and they’re not thinking, how should I teach so they learn? Some of them don’t show any interest of (having) you learn. Because you can tell when someone wants you to learn, they talk to you and you see their interest for them to learn. But some others they just are there. They just read their thing. Where if you pass you pass, if you don’t - it’s up to you. You do it. (Student A:102-109)

However, Academic E put forward the alternative view that instead of being victims of the academic process some students resist the academic challenge and develop a sense of helplessness.

…in some ways academic systems are saying they want to challenge students to think. Students are then interpreting that in a variety of ways, one of which is helplessness, another one of which is anxiety - emotion focused coping. They run to somebody who then says “Don’t worry, we’ll help you over that problem. Here are the three quick answers to it.” The student feels rescued and happy about that, but then, in a way, that process is subverting the other process (Academic E:150-156).
That is, Academic E appeared to say that the support provided by the learning adviser subverts an academic process that values and promotes critical thinking and independent problem solving. In other words, by “rescuing” the student the learning adviser reinforces the view that the student is a victim of an academic process that aims to encourage and challenge students to become self-directed learners.

This comment triggered discussion amongst the learning advisers about the tension between intervention and non-intervention and the tension between dependency and independency (Appendix B, p. 264). That is, the learning advisers appeared to share Academic E’s concern that students may resist the academic challenge and become dependent on learning assistance services. But they also pointed out that unclear assessment criteria and/or inadequate feedback make it difficult for students.

I usually have students returning with marked work that has no comments or certainly no relevant/specific ones and wants me to fill in the gaps about why a certain mark was given! (Learning Adviser A see Appendix B, p. 280)

Academic A (lines 53-54) indicated that, included in her written feedback to students, is the advice that they seek out a learning adviser. However, filling in the gaps or playing the role of interpreter between the student and the academic is risky and creates other tensions. For a start the learning adviser could get the interpretation wrong!

…I’ve had an experience where the LAU’s said, “Yes, this is fine, this is going on quite nicely,” and got it to the marking stage and just happen to run it past the tutor and he said, “Hmm it’s not really what I’m looking for,” and had to completely unpack it from a different angle. (Student C:146-150)

Academic B concurred that trying to second-guess the academics’ intentions is impossible because everyone has different expectations.

It almost becomes an impossible task for the adviser. How can you really know what’s in the mind of the academics out there? When you are dealing with fifteen students a day who all come from a different discipline or different
subject [course] even, or, to make it even more complex, tutor, within a subject [course]. Because that’s what it gets down to, is that each tutor raises different expectations. (Academic B:237-241)

Student D explained that despite the willingness of the learning adviser to help:

the bottom line is, the person who has given you the mark, your tutor, they’re the ones whose hoop you have to jump through. (Student D:176-177)

Furthermore, in the role of interpreter the learning adviser can only help up to a point. The process of unpacking the question is, according to the advisers, about students critically evaluating what is needed and the responsibility for interpreting the task rests with the student (Appendix B, p. 279). Student D agreed:

…LAU can give you nice general advice and guidance, but when it comes to actually fine tuning and making the filling in there, you’ve really got to be doing what your tutor wants. And the only way you can find that out of course is with consultation with them. (Student D:177-181)

In terms of the theoretical framework adopted for this study, these data show that, when viewed as a separate activity system, tensions exist between various components of the activity system of the Learning Assistance Unit and between the activity systems of the Learning Assistance Unit and the faculty. In summary (see Table 6.2), there are tensions between the learning advisers’ view of the object of their work as encouraging self-directed learning and the reality that they end up working predominantly with students who are struggling with the demands of the academic process and compensating for the teaching practices used by some academics. There are also tensions between the view that learning advisers play the role of interpreter for the busy academic and that weak links between the Learning Assistance Unit and the faculty make this difficult.
Table 6.2 Problems and tensions in the Learning Assistance Unit versus the faculty - a summary from the interview transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</table>
| • Role of the learning adviser is to work with struggling students  
| • Interpreting the academic’s intentions can be risky for the learning adviser  
| • The level of guidance/feedback provided by some academics can cause problems  
| • Providing learning assistance could subvert the academic process |
| **Librarian** |  
| • The level of guidance/feedback provided by some academics can cause problems |
| **Student** |  
| • Role of the learning adviser is to work with struggling students  
| • The level of guidance/feedback provided by some academics can cause problems  
| • Academic staff are a diverse group |
| **Learning Adviser** |  
| • The multifaceted role of the learning adviser can be difficult  
| • Interpreting the academic’s intentions can be risky for the learning adviser  
| • The level of guidance/feedback provided by some academics can cause problems  
| • Learning advisers try to encourage self directed learning when students want specific help with assessment |

The summary in Table 6.2 highlights problems and tensions such as different understandings of the object of the activity and different understandings of role of the learning adviser, academic and student. By modelling the activity system in this way, and examining interview excerpts, this section has brought into focus tensions such as the role of the learning adviser in working with struggling students, the role of the academic staff in assisting students, and the role of learning assistance services in the academic process. This analysis contributes to the purpose of the study by providing insight into problems and tensions in the way that the work practices of the learning advisers relate to the work practices of other key stakeholders (in this case the faculty) in the University community. That is, modelling of the separate activity systems within the University, with weak links between them, makes apparent tensions experienced by stakeholders. Finally, an additional tension appears to be evident in the movement of students with assessment tasks backward and forward between the activity systems of the Learning Assistance Unit and the faculty. Students appear to become confused and frustrated when they have to repeat the details of their problem to both learning adviser and academic (e.g. Student A:148-150; Learning Adviser D:200-201; Librarian A:129). This situation has some similarity to a dilemma Engeström (1999b) found in his study of children’s hospitals in Finland.

*CHAPTER 6: PROBLEMS AND TENSIONS IN THE ACTIVITY SYSTEM*
Movement backward and forward among medical staff within the activity system of an outpatients’ clinic during a consultation resulted in the unnecessary and inconvenient double undressing of child patients. Discussion and consultation amongst staff however led to an understanding of the multi-faceted tensions between the interrelated systems of the clinic, patient and primary care giver. This then led to the redesign of the admissions process that changed the unnecessary and inconvenient practice of double undressing of child patients. This experience helps to inform discussion in Chapter Seven on ways that learning advisers and academics might work together to improve the student experience of moving between the faculty and the Learning Assistance Unit. In this analysis of the Learning Assistance Unit versus the faculty, the modelling of the Learning Assistance Unit as a separate activity system has been more powerful in explaining the tensions derived from the data than the modelling of the Learning Assistance Unit as an integrated part of the University activity system. The next section considers the relationship between the Learning Assistance Unit and the library.

6.2.2 The Learning Assistance Unit versus the library

The problem cluster of self-directed learning versus victim of the academic process also manifests in a number of ways in the relationship between the Learning Assistance Unit and the library. Figure 6.3 offers one visibilisation of these tensions, with the learners’ engagement with the University as a whole depicted as the activity system, and with the Learning Assistance Unit as part of the division of labour of this activity system.
However, Figure 6.3 is only one interpretation of the data and there would be others. For example, Figure 6.4 separates out the Learning Assistance Unit as an activity system (as in section 6.2.1), and takes into account the way that the Learning Assistance Unit interacts with the surrounding activity systems of the library and student. More specifically, Figure 6.4 provides a more teased out depiction of the tensions found in the data between:

- the overlap between the role of learning adviser and the role of librarian in encouraging self-directed learning

- library processes that emphasise technology and the impact this has on the work of the learning adviser
Excerpts from the data provide further insight into the tensions identified in Figure 6.4. For example, the data point to tensions between the Learning Assistance Unit and the library related to different understandings of the role of learning adviser and librarian in encouraging self-directed learning.

According to Student A, learning advisers help students by orienting, showing and guiding students through the academic process.

The Learning Assistance Unit gives you the orientation or shows you how to use your skills, how to learn your skills, suggesting different ways as to how to cope with the study and the work of university. (Student A:75-78)

Student B agreed that the learning advisers’ role is to guide students but she added that the librarians have a different role.
The Learning Assistance people are there to guide in more of an overall outlook to your - if you’ve got a problem with your assignment. Things like that. As I’ve used it, it’s more assignment based and then you go to the library with the ideas that you’ve got. And if needed you go to a librarian. So they do have two separate roles, but I see them, in part, interlinked. (Student B:41-45)

The role played by librarians on the other hand was described as giving, helping, and showing.

For example,

The librarians give you general information about books, about how to research, how to find out about things. (Student A:74-75)

Similarly,

The librarian is more of a hands-on person for the books. That’s their expertise. They can help you with the computer to find a particular book; or if you’re looking for maps they show you how to find maps in particular books and things like that. (Student B:37-40)

Learning Adviser C pointed to possible tensions in the division of labour between the activity systems of the Learning Assistance Unit and the library:

…about how enmeshed we [learning advisers and librarians] see our roles. That perhaps some people think - particularly librarians might think that they could take on the role of the learning adviser. I guess, there are some librarians that have some skills in that context of teaching. I guess it’s very individually based, too. Working with one librarian is very different from working with another. There’s tensions there, I guess, in terms of role overlap or something. (Learning Adviser C:79-85)

Librarians D and E could not agree about the degree of overlap between the division of labour between the learning adviser and librarian:

I don’t know that we overlap, except in the area perhaps of referencing. ‘Cause we do get asked, and we keep guides in the desk draw there that we can pull out and show to students. (Librarian D:30-32)
Librarian B suggested that there is some degree of interlinking or overlapping between the roles:

Ah, there’s an element about what the library does which is purely about using tools and that’s pretty basic sort of stuff, and a lot of people can teach themselves about learning the tools. More important to that, and prior to that, is this issue of understanding what the whole enterprise is about. Then, particularly, we overlap when we start talking about individual topics and how you deal with that topic because the whole process of preparing to do an assignment is the same process as preparing to research for that assignment. (Librarian B:89-95)

According to the learning advisers, different understandings of the role of the learning adviser and librarian in encouraging self-directed learning causes tension. Furthermore, the reluctance of some students to use the library or to approach the librarian impacts on the work of the learning adviser (e.g. Learning Adviser A:129-133; Learning Adviser C:87-91; Learning Adviser D:113-119; Appendix B, p. 270).

It is not suggested that librarians are not interested in helping students to become self-directed learners. On the contrary, the data suggest that library staff are keen to help students and, as Librarian E explained, librarians want to do more than just help students with their immediate needs.

...but hoping you’re providing a [library] service that will encourage them to come back and confer with you when it’s needed, but also then pass the word on to other students. You know, “Hey, this is a good place to go and they were really helpful and I learnt a whole lot of stuff that I really found useful”. (Librarian E:23-27)
Librarian C agreed:

...most of the librarians, are not, or mostly, are not trying to give students a ready made answer to their enquiries for assistance, they are more teaching students how to be able to search for information themselves - find it, retrieve it, save it, use it. (Librarian C:24-27)

However, as Academic C (line 77) pointed out, not all students use the library and those that do, do not use it as well as they might. Perhaps one reason is that:

...traditionally they [students] have seen the library as outside the - like the academic stream and the librarians as a bit scary. You know, lots of people say to me, “Oh, I’m afraid of librarians.” You know, and you think, well gee, I didn’t think I was all that scary. (Librarian D:101-104)

These issues were of particular interest to the learning advisers and were discussed at length in the February focus group (Appendix B, p. 270). According to the focus group discussion it seems that part of the problem is that the librarian is primarily concerned with students becoming information literate so that they can locate resources independently. The student however, is most concerned with getting the assignment done. Kieft (1995, in Abbott & Peach, 2001, p. 306) suggests that when librarians try to engage students in information literacy programs it becomes increasingly apparent that few students are interested in how the library or the technology works. That is, students do not want to “learn the library”. The students in this study agreed that librarians have a certain expertise and are generally helpful, however some were not positive about librarians’ efforts to encourage students to become self-directed, independent learners. To illustrate,

When I’ve approached the library staff for help, they tend to stay behind the desk and wave you in the right direction. There’s not much – this sounds very negative – there doesn’t seem to be very much effort made to actually deal with whatever problem it is that you’ve gone to them. I mean, personally I don’t go to library staff unless I really hit a brick wall and cannot go any further, and the last thing you need to be told is “Go away and have another go”. That’s what happens quite a lot. (Student D:62-68)
This suggests a tension in the activity system of the library between tools and outcome that would also be worth investigating but is not possible within the context of this study. However, this study is concerned with the way that the librarian’s apparent focus on technical tools impacts on the work of the learning adviser and the role that the learning adviser plays in helping students to make connections between library resources and the assessment task (Appendix B, p. 270).

Part of the problem appears to be in the way that some librarians interact with students. In the February focus group discussion it was argued that librarians “don’t teach, they demonstrate” (Appendix B, p. 284). That is, some librarians operate from behind a desk using a training model that precludes the librarian from engaging in a personal relationship with the student (Appendix B, p. 286). Learning Adviser D elaborated:

> I think most of them [librarians] are just there like the complaints department, or the information department in a shopping centre. “I want this - give it to me!” “Where’s the shoe department?” “It’s in that direction.” “Where is this?” “It’s in that direction.” Or “How do I access this?” They demonstrate it on the computer. In front of them maybe. Or they give them a handout. But I don’t think they look at the person as a person who has a context around them, who maybe has a reason for what they’re asking. (Learning Adviser D:75-81)

> I walk past that desk and I can hear students say, “Well, I’ve got to do...” and they [librarians] say, “Well, you’ll find that there.” “Oh but my assignment...” and the student is crying out to explain further. A little bit like going to a doctor and having the secretary or the doctor’s attendant saying, “Well, what’s wrong with you?” And you’re saying, “That’s why I’m at the doctors.” That same level of information but the patient is actually crying out to tell the story, because they’re not quite sure what it is. (Learning Adviser D:120-126)

Librarian A (line 355) agreed that sometimes the librarian feels like a “traffic direction person” instead of a librarian. The physical layout of the library, and high demand at certain times in the semester means that students must often queue for service and that the librarian is able to do little more than point towards relevant resources. Student A pointed out that this situation is problematic for students from non-English speaking backgrounds who do not understand the Australian library system and who need more detailed explanations:
The library staff. Well, you see there is a lot of things. When I first came, I didn’t know anything about anything. And the information is not given to you, you have to look at it. But if you don’t look, or you don’t know what to look, you don’t know what to ask either. You see, so there is a lot of information everywhere but you don’t see it. So you have a lot of questions about everything, especially if you are not – when you are from another background, another country, there are more things that probably are common here, in Australia, but not for us. So, there are a lot of questions that may sound for you – for Australian people – stupid, silly. Why don’t you do it yourself? (Student A:35-44)

The learning advisers added that the librarians’ emphasis on technical tools such as search strategies makes it difficult for students to make the links between the information and the assessment task. Librarian C agreed,

...in teaching students to use the various data bases and information retrieval systems that we have. They’ll [librarians] be working at a very operational level and not necessarily highlighting to students skills that are behind that helping - not helping students to reflect on those skills. So that means that often the students aren’t able to transfer necessarily what they’ve learnt to the next context. (Librarian C:41-46)

The librarians’ use of Boolean operators was another example used to highlight this tension. According to the learning advisers when librarians use Boolean operators to unpack the assignment question they focus on words but do not help students with the process of critical analysis and synthesis (Appendix B, p. 269). Librarian C (lines 33-34) agreed that some librarians work at a very technical level with students and they are not explicit enough about what they are doing, nor do they try to actively involve students in the learning process.

we just go you know, bang bang bang, this is the how, and, press this button, press that button and you walk away and you’ve forgotten which button it was and you don’t have a conceptual framework to remind you. (Librarian C:126-129)

These data (summarised in Table 6.3) show tensions exist between various components of the Learning Assistance Unit activity system and between the activity systems of the Learning Assistance Unit and library.
This discussion about the relationship about the way that the work of the learning advisers relates to the work practices of librarians also helps to progress the purpose of the study. That is, it can now be seen that similar tensions found to exist between learning advisers and academics over the role of learning adviser and librarian in encouraging self-directed learning also exist between learning advisers and librarians. In addition the data points to tensions between the Learning Assistance Unit and the library because of the way that the librarian’s focus on technical tools impacts on the work of the learning adviser, and the role that the learning adviser plays in helping students to make connections between library resources and the assessment task. The modelling of the Learning Assistance Unit versus the library has been helpful in depicting the apparent differences in object and the various tensions found in the data and this analysis also helps inform the discussion under problem clusters two and three.

6.2.3 Conclusions

In conclusion, use of the modelling of the Learning Assistance Unit as a separate activity system has made visible some of the tensions that manifest in relation to the problem cluster referred to as self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process. This problem cluster, and the associated tensions that arise from different understandings of the object of the activity and the role of the learning adviser, are summarised in Figure 6.5.
Figure 6.5 lists the different roles played by the learning adviser in response to the object of ‘student with assessment task’. The Learning Assistance Unit object is represented on one hand as a self-directed learner and on the other hand as a victim of the academic process. In this analysis this mapping of the Learning Assistance Unit as a separate activity system has been found to be superior because it helps to understand the everyday work practices of the learning advisers in order to come up with ways of improving practice and working together more effectively with stakeholders (Engeström, 1999c).
6.3 Problem Cluster 2: Cost-efficiency versus quality service

In the remainder of this chapter the Learning Assistance Unit, library and faculty will be modelled as separate activity systems because of the superior ways in which this enables tensions to be visibilised.

Chapter Two explains how the decision to establish a centralised Learning Assistance Unit was driven by concerns for equity, social justice, quality, access, availability and appropriateness of learning assistance services. A centralised unit was expected to address these concerns as well as concerns to do with the marginalisation of learning assistance services within faculties, the remedial reputation of some services, the limited professional opportunities for faculty-based learning assistance staff, and the wastage and duplication of services across the University. Chapter Two goes on to report that whilst the establishment of the Learning Assistance Unit helped to resolve some of these problems to do with the division of labour and rules, other problems and tensions have emerged. In this section one such problem cluster referred to here as cost-efficiency versus quality service, is examined.

Managing increased service usage whilst maintaining a quality service was a particular concern for me as the manager of the Unit. I was responsible for drafting, implementing and managing the budget and coming on or under budget was one of my annual performance indicators. I could not ignore pressure to increase services to meet increasing demand but I had limited success in convincing senior management that increasing services and maintaining quality required increased funding (Learning Assistance Unit, 2001a). Consequently, as this study shows, tensions have emerged between rules related to providing a cost-effective service that improves the University’s credibility and viability in the marketplace, and rules about providing a quality service that adds value to the university learning environment. (Dempster, 1997; Leithwood, Begley & Cousins, 1994). In other words, the data (see Table 5.3) suggest that economic factors constrain the actions and interactions (such as type and level of service available) within the activity system. For example, learning advisers described a tension
between trying to meet stakeholder expectations with restricted resources (e.g. Learning Adviser B:100-105, Learning Adviser C:103-105), and how stakeholders, especially students, become frustrated when they cannot access the type of service they require or the service they require is not available immediately (see Table 5.3: 6-12). The following discussion examines the impact these tensions have on the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit. More specifically the discussion focuses on tensions apparent in the data related to type (see section 6.3.1) and level of service (see section 6.3.2) and the impact that increased demand and restricted resources have on learning adviser workload (see section 6.3.3).

6.3.1 Tensions related to the type of service available

Chapter Two explains that at the time of writing, the main tools utilised by the Unit included workshops, consultations and tertiary preparation programs. In a study that I conducted in 1999 (Peach, 1999b) I reported that pressure to meet increased demand and to develop more cost-effective ways of working had led to a re-configuration of these tools. For example, workshops were increasingly used to replace consultations so that advisers could provide services to greater numbers of students. Similarly technology (such as email, telephone and self-help facilities on the web) increasingly replaced face-to-face interactions between students and learning advisers.

However, the data from this study suggest that these reconfigurations have created other tensions. Figure 6.6 represents some of these tensions on the basis of the Learning Assistance Unit as a separate activity system. Figure 6.6 is only one interpretation of the data and there would be others. However this map points to salient tensions among the object, tools, division of labour, rules, and subject of the Unit and between the Unit and the student. For example, Figure 6.6 points to tensions between responding to increased demand, reconfiguring tools, difficulties in responding to individual learning needs, and maintaining a quality service on restricted resources.
Figure 6.6 Type of service available: tensions arising from cost-efficiency versus quality service

To illustrate further, the following comment from Librarian B supports the view that workshops make it difficult to respond to individual learning needs.

Librarian B explained the dilemma as a compromise:

It’s a compromise between wanting to give individual attention, which we do through drop-ins and things like that - and you do too - and having to deal with numbers, therefore having to run sessions for groups of people. (Librarian B:81-83)

Catering to the mass audience, he argued, is the “cheap option” (line 410) but it does not always work because:

nobody wants to be dealt with as - a blob. They want to be an individual and they have individual needs. (Librarian B:412-417)

Referring to her experiences with the Learning Assistance Unit, Student D agreed:
everybody has their own circumstances they want to say, “Well, this is what is happening to ME, how can I be helped?” And that didn’t necessarily work very well in the group environment. The one-on-one consultation I felt was fabulous - really, really helpful. (Student D:34-37)

Similarly, technology, as a tool to substitute for face-to-face contact makes it difficult to respond to individual learning needs (Appendix B, p. 286). Librarian D explained that this is because:

They [students] appear to need the support, the face-to-face support as do people who haven’t studied for a long time or who maybe didn’t complete like an academic stream in their schooling way back. You know, they left in year ten and did a trade or something like that. And they’re at that stage, they seem to need a lot of people interaction. (Librarian D:239-243)

Technological tools such as email, telephone and the web offer alternative ways for learning advisers to work with students for whom face-to-face consultations or workshops are not an option. That is, students who do not attend classes on campus or whose time is restricted due to work, family and other commitments (Peach, 1999b). These efforts by learning advisers to reconfigure services to incorporate technological tools were linked to University initiatives in the area of flexible delivery. Flexible delivery in the university context is seen as a way of improving the educational experience for students as well as a way of controlling costs (Laurillard & Margetson, 1997). The rationale is that the use of technological tools will offer students greater flexibility, and cost-savings will be made by shifting away from more staff and time-intensive face-to-face interactions.

However, Learning Adviser A argued that it can be difficult to work with students in this way.

When you’re doing a drop-in face-to-face, you can pick up that they’re not really understanding what you’re saying, or you’re overloading because there’s too many factors you are picking up on that they need to make some changes to, or something like that. I think it is that questioning process. Effective communication principles underlie a lot of it, in terms of sorting out what it is that they are needing or wanting us to help them with. Maybe the need and the want of the help is sometimes different too. (Learning Adviser A:144-150)
Another tension related to the type of service available is the expectation amongst some stakeholders that the Unit should provide grammar, spelling and general editing services. At the time of this study the Unit did not provide this type of service and the data point to tensions created when students, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, are unable to access this type of service (e.g. Learning Adviser A:70-76; Learning Adviser B:69-77; Learning Adviser C:40-41). According to Learning Adviser A, students become frustrated when this type of service is not provided. She added that it can be difficult to explain that grammar is usually only part of the problem in writing an assignment and that a consultation that focuses on the analysis of the question, structure of the argument, and the use of library resources would be more meaningful.

...even the spelling and grammar checks. They might want that but even when we say we don’t do it and we will look at other aspects and structure, there’s still a lot of benefit in that for them. Benefit that they hadn’t even realised could be gained. I think that is important as well. Showing them - any student - that what they think they might be needing, might not be the only area that’s requiring some help. (Learning Adviser A:155-160)

Brown (1994) agrees that correcting typographical and grammatical errors is no guarantee that students will produce clear writing. Instead he advocates a top down approach that focuses on the more complex tasks of flow, logic and coherence.

In summary (see Table 6.4), this section relates theoretical modelling to interview excerpts to highlight how tensions related to increased demand and restricted resources manifest in the problem cluster of cost-effectiveness versus quality.

| Librarian | • There is a compromise between providing individual assistance and meeting increased demand for services  
• Face-to-face support is important to students |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>• One-to-one consultations are more likely to address individual needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Learning Adviser | • Face-to-face support is important to students and the learning adviser  
• Students become frustrated when the type of service they require is not available (e.g. grammar) |
Efforts to find cost-effective ways to meet increased demand have led to the reconfiguration of tools but these reconfigurations appear to have created other tensions related to the type and level of service available and the impact that increased demand and restricted resources have on learning adviser workload. The data suggest that these tensions impact on the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit and leave the learning adviser struggling to meet stakeholder expectations and individual learning needs. This analysis of problems related to the type of service available, and the following discussion about level of service, helps explain some of the problems and tensions discussed in 6.2 in the relationship between learning advisers and other stakeholders such as different understandings of the object and the role of the Learning Assistance Unit.

6.3.2 Tensions in the level of service available

Detailed in Chapter Two are problems associated with the previously decentralised model of learning assistance provision. A major concern, reflected in 1994 student surveys and the government-funded review of the University’s approaches to quality management and planning, was the significant variation in the level of learning assistance provided across the University. That is, Chapter Two explains that under the decentralised or faculty-based model the majority of students were unable to access adequate or appropriate services. Senior management responded to these concerns by investigating ways of improving the quality, access, availability and appropriateness of services and then by establishing a centralised Learning Assistance Unit. However, Chapter Two points out that the establishment of a centralised Unit has not resolved all of the problems evident in the decentralised model. Since the establishment of the Unit there has been a steady increase in service usage and the location of services in all campus libraries appears to have improved the accessibility of services across all campuses (Learning Assistance Unit, 2001a). Yet other problems have emerged. For example, the data suggest (see Table 5.3) that the reconfiguration of tools used by the Unit (including the shift of resources towards workshops) has created tensions between the level of service available for individual
consultations and the length of appointments. Figure 6.7 makes visible tensions identified in the data.

Figure 6.7 Level of service available: tensions arising from cost-efficiency versus quality service

Student D explained:

…we used to run a […] association. And we would say to people when they’d come to us and say, “Look, we’re struggling academically,” - “Oh, well use the LAU”. And the feedback we almost invariably got was, “Oh, well I called past but the door was locked, there was nobody there, there was no spaces on the sheet for the drop-in sessions or the one I want”. (Student D:237-241)

Similarly, Student B had this to say about the level of service available:

…sometimes it’s difficult to make an appointment. Particularly if you’ve got a deadline and dread, you’ve left it to a fairly late date to see somebody and have time with them to discuss that. (Student B:94-96)

Student C expressed concern about the length of appointments.
It’s the time of getting the appointment but it’s also the time spent at the appointment. I could probably spend a good hour in there. By the time you unpack and sort of come up with what suggestions you’ve got or whatever, and you’re sort of defined to a half hour or fifteen minutes. You just don’t get anything. I mean, that’s not the LAU’s fault. (Student C:228-233)

These excerpts highlight the pressure that increased demand for services places on the quality of the tools used by the service. Learning Adviser B explained how this impacts on the work of the learning adviser:

In some cases it would be possible or easy for me to fill in and respond to the students from, for instance, the librarian’s point of view. But then that would take up the time - for instance, if I’m in a drop-in session, there’s twenty minutes and the best use of that time would be made if I use that time to help them in a way that I’m geared to do and that the Learning Assistance is geared to do. (Learning Adviser B:100-105)

Academic C added that tensions are heightened when learning advisers and academics are not available when and where the student requires.

…some students are frustrated because when they want to seek help, they want it now. They don’t want to make an appointment in a week’s time or whenever it is. Some of them leap up and down and say, “But why aren’t you there?”. (Academic C:67-70)

Student B (lines 96-97) and Student C (line 273) suggested that the only solution to this problem is to employ more learning advisers.

…if you raise the profile of the LAU any higher, all you’re doing is increasing demand and it’s already stressed beyond being able to cope. (Student D:220-222)

In summary (see Table 6.5), the problem cluster of cost-efficiency versus quality manifests in tensions in the level of service available.
Table 6.5 Problems and tensions related to the level of service available - a summary from the interview transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>• Tensions arise when academics and learning advisers are not available when student requires</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>• Learning Advisers not always available, it can be difficult to make an appointment and then the length of the appointment is too short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Adviser</td>
<td>• The increase in demand for the service has not been met with an increase in resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Learning Advisers struggle to make the best use of time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This discussion highlights some difficult questions concerning the work of the learning adviser and relationships with key stakeholders. That is, this section highlights how fiscal constraints have led to the reconfiguration of tools used by the learning advisers but how this has created tensions between stakeholder expectations and the level of service available including the availability and length of individual consultations.

6.3.3 Tensions reflected in learning adviser workload

This study is based on the premise that learning assistance services make an important contribution to the University’s learning environment. Furthermore, shaping a successful future for the service is dependent on the willingness of staff to examine some of the more difficult questions about work practices. The stakeholder feedback offers insight into some of these questions. For example, the data suggest that the problem cluster of cost-efficiency versus quality (Table 5.4) manifests in tensions related to the work practices of the learning advisers. The following discussion highlights how economic factors constrain the actions and interactions of the learning advisers resulting in tensions related to the use of time, the demands of administrative duties, and changes to management. Figure 6.8 offers an interpretation of these tensions based in the Learning Assistance Unit as an activity system.
The way that the tensions identified in Figure 6.8 manifest in the work practices of the learning advisers are supported in excerpts from the stakeholder interviews. For example, the learning advisers interviewed in this study described their work as enjoyable, mentally challenging, and personally satisfying (e.g. Learning Adviser A:127-128; Learning Adviser B:164; Learning Adviser C:25). Yet the focus group discussions identified shortage of time and workload issues as major concerns (Appendix B, p. 286). Learning Adviser C added that staff were also concerned about their capacity to meet increased demand.

…one thing that is being realised more and more is that our unit is becoming more popular with students and that’s I guess a concern in terms of whether we can continue to meet that high demand. (Learning Adviser C:103-105)

According to Hargreaves (1994) shortage of time is one of the perennial complaints of teachers and teaching. Administrators, concerned with rules about productivity and accountability, exacerbate the problem by trying to regulate and rationalise teaching time. Hargreaves (1994) argues however that teaching is about more than just implementing curriculum guidelines and it
is not something that can be easily broken down into small discrete components with clearly defined objectives. For the learning advisers in this study it appears that a shortage of time makes it difficult for them to plan, prepare and evaluate their teaching practices and materials. Learning Adviser D emphasised the importance of staff spending time thinking about the purpose and context of their teaching.

…we’ve all agreed to the goals and purposes of the generic workshops. But for me it’s sitting down say, “Note-taking. Has it changed?” We’re now into much more technology. We’ve shifted. Actually sitting down from last year to this year and seeing if note taking is different. And yes it is. Each year it changes. Is there anything new in the literature? Has any research been done? That, to me, is a professional approach. (Learning Adviser D:340-345)

But she appeared frustrated at colleagues who used tools such as electronic resources to save time.

We can talk about improving our powerpoint…if the […] powerpoints aren’t tuned to what it is we’re doing at this roots level, they’re useless. I get the feeling that we are being led by these wonderful resources that are all on ‘I’ Drive. We just pluck them out, personalise them and customise them to how we like them, but I don’t think we spend much time thinking, “What, really, do I want the students to be able to do, or have, by the end of the day?” And then thinking at the end, “Did I really get that?”. (Learning Adviser D:551-362)

Learning Adviser A on the other hand, described how she tried to improve her teaching strategies, despite a shortage of time:

You do tend to reflect yourself. Even just in how you’ve dealt with a particular issue. Saying, “I did that. How might I approach it differently? I can’t afford to spend that much time with a student. What strategies can I use to help them clarify what they need to get out of the drop-in and how could I do that more efficiently and still be effective - or be more effective?”. (Learning Adviser A:93-97)

These excerpts highlight how the problem cluster of cost-efficiency versus quality manifests in tensions related to rules about the use of time. Another issue raised at the April focus group related to divisions of labour and the amount of time required by the learning advisers for administrative duties such as providing a reception service for students and entering data on student consultations (Appendix B, p. 286). After each student consultation the learning adviser enters the details of the consultation in a database. This information is then used for reporting
purposes. A study of South Australian learning advisers (Marshall & Johnston, 1995) highlights the value in gathering data for reporting purposes and for informing work practices, but the study identified similar concerns about the time that it takes for learning advisers to collect and then enter data.

The team has experienced a number of problems implementing the system [for data collection]. At the campus level the biggest problem has been the time it takes staff to collect and then collate data, especially that for individual sessions, at the end of each semester (Marshall & Johnston, 1995, p. 505)

Another tension in the division of labour in Griffith’s Learning Assistance Unit appears to relate to changes in the management of the service. Learning Adviser D explained:

…as a Unit there has been a fair bit of change from the day we started where we had a coordinator who was actually doing more of the coordination role, the grass roots stuff, to now having a manager who is much more out managing us as a Unit within a bigger context. So I think coordination roles have now come back to the campuses and I think that needs to be acknowledged. (Learning Adviser D:491-496)

In other words, as a result of the growth in the Unit’s profile, strategic planning and management responsibilities have increased. According to the learning advisers this change had impacted on their workload by increasing responsibility for campus-based operational matters such as timetabling and liaison with stakeholders (Appendix B, p. 286).

6.3.4 Conclusions

In conclusion, section 6.3 makes apparent the problem cluster of cost-efficiency versus quality service and the tensions that have manifested in this cluster in relation to the type and level of service available, and learning adviser workload (see Figure 6.9). Efforts to find cost-effective ways to meet increased demand have led to the reconfiguration of the type and level of service available. There has been a shift in the use of tools such as individual consultations, workshops and technology. These reconfigurations have raised concerns about rules and divisions of labour including the quality of the service, the relationship between the learning adviser and the object of their work (‘student with assessment task’), and learning adviser workload.

CHAPTER 6: PROBLEMS AND TENSIONS IN THE ACTIVITY SYSTEM
Figure 6.9 helps illustrate how economic factors restrict the actions and interactions within the activity system. The tensions that result impact on the quality of the service and leave the learning advisers struggling to meet stakeholder expectations. It is intended that this analysis will help learning advisers to understand their everyday work practices better, and in the next chapter consideration is given to ways of expanding the object of the activity system on its temporal dimensions (Engeström, 1999c) so that staff can work towards a long term view of a quality service that is cost-effective and value adding.

6.4 Problem Cluster 3: Contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance

The decision to locate the Learning Assistance Unit in the library (or the Division of Information Services) was based on the view that it would be cost-effective, easy to manage,
and provide easy access to stakeholders on all campuses (refer Chapter Two). However, this study identifies a third cluster of problems that seems to have arisen because of the separation of learning assistance services from the faculty. This problem cluster, referred to as contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance, appears to manifest in tensions related to generic services, different understandings of the role of the learning adviser, and variations in the level of collaboration between learning advisers and academics (Table 5.3:13-20).

6.4.1 Tensions related to generic services

Earlier in this chapter generic workshops and consultations were identified as the main tools used by the Learning Assistance Unit. In semester one, 2001 the Learning Assistance Unit offered twenty different workshop topics. The most popular topic was academic writing followed by oral presentations, exam preparation, literature reviews, report writing, time management, and reading effectively (Learning Assistance Unit, 2001a). The most popular topics for individual consultations in semester one, 2001 were assignment planning and structuring, and unpacking the question (Learning Assistance Unit, 2001a). Despite the popularity of these services, literature in the field of teaching and learning suggests that learners benefit most from contextualised learning assistance and generic skill development (Cottrell, 2001; Biggs, 1999; Ramsden, 1997; Hounsell, 1997; Laurillard, 1996). That is, assistance provided in the context of the faculty or discipline is more effective than generic programs offered in isolation. This study highlights tensions related to the use of tools such as generic workshops and consultations offered by learning advisers located outside the context of the program of study. For example, Figure 6.10 based on the data (see below) depicts tensions between student expectations that learning advisers will provide assistance with specific assessment tasks and the learning advisers’ generic approach to meta-cognitive skill development.
Figure 6.10 points to a tension between student expectations that the learning adviser will provide assistance with specific assessment tasks and the tools used by the learning adviser (such as workshops and consultations) that focus on generic skills. The dilemma, according to Librarian B, is that taking too generic an approach with students often means barely skimming the surface of important issues.

You try and talk at a level which is generic to both, but in doing so I think you lose both in the end because they’re really wanting to deal with their specific discipline and their issues. (Librarian B:70-72)

Another problem was identified by Learning Adviser A:

Students come in and the first thing we ask them for is their assessment but we’ve got to keep reminding ourselves its about process and to be meta-cognitive. (Learning Adviser A, p. 264)

Learning Adviser D pointed out that it is possible to be sensitive to content and to help students to make the connections between process and content by emphasising:
...the rounded context. Help them [students] learn the skills for solving their own problems and the principles behind not only where they’re going, why they’re going and how they can extend that. (Learning Adviser D:130-132)

This view is supported by a study of Victorian learning assistance services (McLean et al., 1995) that found that the skills taught by learning advisers outside a discipline or program of study do not necessarily lack contextualisation. Learning advisers help students to find out about the nature of the broader university learning environment and assist students to develop strategies to negotiate the meaning of signs and symbols within the university context. According to van Oers (1998) context should be conceived of dynamically. That is, context is never universally given nor objectively determined and what counts as context depends on how a situation is interpreted in terms of the activity to be carried out.

Learning Adviser B agreed:

…I know that there are academics who are hostile to the notion of generic skills. They imagine that they can’t be taught. They perhaps imagine that we teach them in a pristine environment. That’s got no relation to their content. Whereas in fact we are sensitive to the content. That’s what the students are bringing to us and we’re merely trying to assist the students to know what these skills are and how they can apply them specifically to their content areas. (Learning Adviser B:117-122)

Helping students to develop meta-cognitive learning skills should, according to Biggs (1999), be the ultimate aim of university teaching. These skills are developed in situations where students are encouraged to question or solve problems independently as well as theorise and hypothesise. Student A described how the workshops offered by the Learning Assistance Unit provided an opportunity to develop generic skills that can be applied in different contexts.

…I think the workshops are kind of informative. They tell you, like in the writing one, they tell you how to write, what skills to use, how to apply it in different contexts. The same with everything. They make you aware of what it is and show you all that you can do. Then it’s up to you to decide what you do and how to apply it to your own studies. (Student A: 202-206)

Nevertheless, Hounsell (1997) and Cottrell (2001) argue that lecturers and tutors have chief responsibility for guiding students on how to learn, and skill development should be anchored in
the discipline or course. The dilemma is, as Biggs (1999) points out, that traditional university teaching has not been directly concerned with the development of generic skills. Instead it is either left to the interventionist (such as the learning adviser), or the student learns it by osmosis! This dilemma impacts on the work practices of the learning advisers and creates tensions related to different understandings of their role (as summarised in Table 6.6).

Table 6.6 Problems and tensions related to generic services - a summary from the interview transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Librarian</th>
<th>• Taking a generic approach just skims the surface of real issues</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>• Generic workshops are informative but individual consultations are more useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Adviser</td>
<td>• The assessment task drives the interaction despite the learning advisers intention to focus on meta cognitive skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Despite resistance from some academics it is possible to help students make connections between process and content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The problems and tensions summarised in Table 6.6 highlight some of the problems in the work activity of the Learning Assistance Unit already identified such as fiscal constraints and different understandings of the object (i.e. student with assessment task), purpose of the service and the role of the learning adviser. The next section adds to an understanding of how these problems and tensions impact on the work activity and relationships between key stakeholders.

6.4.2 Tensions between challenging students and assisting students

Since the assessment task originates from the faculty it follows that the best person to clarify the academic expectations of the specific task is the lecturer or tutor. But as pointed out in Chapter Five, the lecturer or tutor is not always available to provide this type of assistance, and as a consequence the role of the learning adviser comes in to play. However according to Librarian C the role of the learning adviser is to focus on process not content:

...I think, the LAU is much more focused on process and learning skills and will very rarely drop into the content side of things. Whereas academic staff are teaching in that context of lecturing, it’s all content. (Librarian C:60-63)
Earlier in this chapter Academic E (lines 150-156) claimed that assistance provided by learning advisers has the potential to subvert an academic process that aims to encourage and challenge students to become self-directed learners. Academic E also argued that providing help to some students and not to others could be seen as inequitable and artificial.

Maybe that student only passed because they were given an artificial level of assistance that, once it’s withdrawn, doesn’t do them any service - that’s one question. One that you hear students talk about is the role that of social justice and equity in intervention. Student A didn’t get help, Student B did - Student B does better. (Academic E:138-142)

Figure 6.11 models some of the tensions among the Learning Assistance Unit, faculty and student related to the dilemma of challenging students to become self-directed learners and assisting students to understand the academic process.

![Figure 6.11 Challenging students and assisting students: tensions related to contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance](image)

Student D provided support for the view that the learning adviser could be subverting the academic process.
The grade I got on that assignment, I’m convinced, went up substantially because of the help I got here. Because I was floundering around I got no direction and no sense of purpose. I’d done a load of work, but it was all “messy”. It had no form of cohesion to it. And I was helped just to go back and unpack the question and say, right, which information is relevant, discard the rest and file it down this way. Very, very helpful. (Student D:48-53)

However, Student D went on to explain that the learning adviser’s intervention was only part of the task involved in completing the assessment task.

I would use pretty much what they’d discussed as a framework and used that as an aid or a crutch if you like. Come up with a rough draft content wise and that is then what I would take to the tutor. Because the LAU don’t look at the actual filling in the sandwich, if you like, they’ll tell you this is the bread, off you go and put the filling in it. (Student D:159-163)

Learning Adviser D agreed that the intervention of the learning adviser is not about subverting the academic process but rather providing a model for students.

I think ours is a modelling responsibility. That’s how I would use it. How do I use the tools that have been provided by the academic or the faculty, usefully? When do I use them? Where do I use them? So having modelled once, hopefully, for their other subjects [courses] at a later date, begin to realise which is the first point of call. (Learning Adviser D:456-460)

These excerpts (summarised in Table 6.7) highlight tensions related to different understandings of the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit and the role of the learning adviser.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>The provision of learning assistance could be perceived as inequitable and artificial and subverting the academic process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>The learning advisers’ role is to assist with skill development not content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Intervention by the learning adviser can improve grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The learning adviser only provides the framework for the assessment task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Adviser</td>
<td>Learning Advisers have a responsibility to model skills in self directed learning</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
It appears that on the one hand the learning adviser is understood to assist students to understand the academic process by modelling the development of generic skills, but on the other hand there is concern that intervention by the learning adviser (who is located outside the context of the faculty or discipline) may serve to subvert the rules of the academic process by providing artificial levels of support. It is argued that this creates tensions between the key stakeholders that make it difficult for the staff in the Learning Assistance Unit to demonstrate the contribution that their services make to the learning environment and if services are to continue to meet the changing needs of students and other stakeholders then these issues must be addressed.

6.4.3 Tensions related to levels of collaboration between learning advisers and academics

An earlier investigation into the provision of learning assistance services at Griffith (see Chapter Two) found that effective services were dependent on strong, collaborative links between learning assistance staff and academic staff. However this study reveals that there is significant variation in levels of collaboration (e.g. Academic B:177-179; Librarian B:136-138; Learning Adviser B:120-122). To illustrate, Figure 6.12 maps some of the tensions between the different activity systems related to levels of collaboration between learning advisers and academic staff, the learning advisers’ understanding of academic processes, and the learning advisers’ capacity to fully engage with the academic context.
The data depicted in Figure 6.12 are supported by evidence from the interview transcripts that suggests that levels of collaboration between learning advisers and academics range from academic staff advertising learning assistance services in course outlines, to academic staff who agree to make time in class for learning advisers to conduct workshops (Student A:181-183; Learning Adviser D:149-158). According to Learning Adviser D some academics also actively seek out the learning adviser for help with embedding generic skills in programs and courses.

...those lecturers who do think similarly treat us as a valuable part, and as part of the team. I feel very much a part of the team. They’ll actually ask advice, they’ll float assessment criteria past us, they’ll phone up. More and more are they asking for resources. They phone up for a coffee and talk – “Will you have a look at this?”. (Learning Adviser D:170-174)

librarian A stressed the importance of close collaboration with academic staff.

I think with the faculty we’re never quite sure. We refer our students back to the lecturer or the tutor to clarify some points where we feel we don’t want to you know wade in and give them the wrong sort of information and advice and I think probably your unit may find the same; you’re not quite sure unless there’s some kind of very close collaboration. (Librarian A:90-95)
Academic B suggested that learning advisers should be part of the faculty teaching team.

I’ve looked at some of the [course] evaluations that have come through and the negative ones in relationship to the workshop have been, “Oh we wanted more content; we wanted it contextualised.” And I’ve resisted that in the past but I’ve thought no, if we’re going to be asking all the students to go and run this workshop, we can make it contextualised. We just need to open our doors to whoever’s running the workshop and say, “Hey look, be a part of the planning and the thinking,” so you can…you can say to them, “Look, this is what you’re writing about”. (Academic B:157-164)

These different approaches highlight the importance of learning advisers understanding the academic context and the value of collaboration between learning advisers and academics. Academic B warned that without this collaboration the value of the service will diminish.

I think they [learning advisers] are then in the danger of being wishy-washy by saying, “Well, I don’t want to advise you here, go back to the lecturer!” So what good are you doing if you are not in the position to say, “I think that this is what you should do.” And if you’re not convinced that that is right, well then you need to. I think you still need to be able to give some feedback to them in some way. (Academic B:263-267)

It is argued here that learning advisers need a good understanding of the academic context if they are to assist students to develop generic skills. Table 6.8 summarises responses from stakeholders in relation to levels of collaboration between learning advisers and academics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>• Learning Advisers should be part of teaching teams</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Learning Advisers should be able to provide students with meaningful feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>• Collaboration with academic staff is important but not always clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Adviser</td>
<td>• Some academics actively collaborate with learning advisers on generic skills development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Improving the relationships between learning advisers and key stakeholders is a central concern of this study and this summary highlights how these relationships impact on the work activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. This analysis also supports earlier discussion about problems and tensions caused by different understandings of the object, the role of the learning adviser, and how fiscal constraints have shaped the level and type of service provided.
Candy et al. (1994) identifies some of the ways that learning advisers and academic staff can develop better understanding. These include collaborating with academic staff by working inside the classroom, through staff development programs, and in special research projects that promote a greater understanding of the teaching-learning process. Komives and Woodward (2003) caution however that creating collaborative partnerships presents challenges that require new forms of educational and conceptual leadership in higher education. They argue that institutions should aim to create linked, aligned and integrated learning communities where people continually learn together. Suggestions identified by stakeholders in this study are discussed in the next chapter.

6.4.4 Conclusions

Figure 6.13 summarises the tensions discussed in this section under the problem cluster, contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance.
Figure 6.13 helps to depict tensions that seem to have developed because of the way that the role of the learning adviser, located outside the faculty or discipline context, is involved in teaching generic skills and clarifying academic expectations. The data suggest that there are tensions related to rules that students meet certain academic requirements, and the view that intervention by the learning adviser provides artificial levels of support that may subvert these requirements. Figure 6.13 also reflects tensions between the learning adviser and the student. Evidence in the data suggests that although the learning adviser may try to focus on the development of generic skills and processes most students seek help with a specific assessment task. In order to promote self-directed learning and generic skill development the learning adviser must demonstrate a sensitivity towards content, based on a good understanding of the academic context, and strong links between the activity systems. The data presented so far suggest however, that these links are often weak, and in Chapter Seven, consideration is given to ways of strengthening links by reconceptualising the distribution of control and responsibility for the object-oriented activity.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of feedback from key stakeholders on problem clusters evident in the work practices of Griffith University’s Learning Assistance Unit. The analysis uses theoretical modelling and excerpts from the data to make visible and analysable problems and tensions related to different understandings of the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit and the role of the learning adviser, both as part of the Griffith University activity system, and as an activity system itself that has separated out from faculty and library activity systems. Modelling of the Learning Assistance Unit as an activity system that has separated away from the overall University activity system has been found to have more expository power than viewing the Learning Assistance Unit as an integrated part of the University activity system. Understanding of the Unit’s work practices has been advanced through close scrutiny of the problem clusters of self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process, cost-efficiency versus quality service, and contextualised versus de-
contextualised assistance. The analysis indicates how tensions in the activity manifest in the work practices of the learning advisers in a number of ways.

For example, tensions related to the problem cluster of self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process, can be seen in the work practices of the learning advisers as follows. It is now understood that learning advisers play multiple roles in the learning environment and that this often creates tensions between stakeholders. To illustrate, whilst learning advisers endeavour to provide a model for students and encourage independent, self-directed learning they often end up working with students who are struggling with the academic process. The data suggest that learning advisers play a quasi-counselling role by compensating for the busy academic. This intervention by learning advisers, located outside the faculty, seems to create tensions related to rules and divisions of labour including concern that this intervention provides artificial levels of support that subvert the academic process. Similarly, intervention by the learning adviser between the student and the librarian seems to create tensions. The data suggest that learning advisers intervene between the student and librarian in order to help students understand the relationship between library resources and the assessment task. However the librarian’s focus on information literacy and technical tools appears to impact on the work of the learning adviser. Different understandings of the role of the learning adviser and librarian in encouraging self-directed learning become an issue particularly when divisions of labour between the roles are challenged. Consequently, it appears that instead of a shared object, the tensions in the object may have led to the emergence of different activity systems with somewhat different objects, that is, as identified in Figure 5.2 ‘student seeking resources’ in the library activity system and ‘student with assessment task’ in the Learning Assistance Unit activity system.

Problems and tensions related to the problem cluster of cost-efficiency versus quality service also impact on the work practices of the learning advisers. For example, a squeeze on resources draws attention to the conflict between providing a service that improves the University’s credibility and viability in the marketplace and providing a quality service that adds value to the
learning environment. The data suggest that the quality of the service has been compromised due to pressure to meet increased demand. Reconfiguring tools to meet this demand has led to tensions related to stakeholders expectations, the type and level of service available, and learning adviser workload. The shift away from individual consultations to workshops and technology has raised concern about the effectiveness of these tools in meeting individual learning needs and the relationship between the learning adviser and the object of their work: ‘student with assessment task’. Stakeholders also identified tensions related to the availability of appointments, the length of appointments, the unavailability of grammar and editing services, and the shortage of time for learning advisers to plan, prepare and evaluate work practices.

Finally, problems and tensions to do with the problem cluster of contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance, can also be understood in terms of the separation of learning assistance from the faculty and the separation between content and generic skill development. To illustrate, there are tensions related to student expectations that the Learning Assistance Unit will provide help with specific assessment tasks. However, a consequence of the location of the Unit outside the faculty or discipline context is that the learning adviser is not the best person to clarify the academic expectations of a specific task. At best the learning adviser can model generic skills and be sensitive to content, however this is dependent on a good understanding of the academic process and strong links between the activity systems. This discussion highlights that collaboration between learning advisers and academic staff is critical to the learning advisers’ capacity to develop work practices that will enhance this engagement and understanding. The following chapter considers new ways of working that may help address some of these issues.
7.1 Introduction

Chapters Five and Six identify and analyse problem clusters and underlying tensions in the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. That is, the discussion and modelling of the activity in these chapters brings to the surface problems and tensions to do with the way the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit has developed over time, appears to have separated from other activity systems in the University, and has led to apparently different objects. Chapter Five provides an analysis of stakeholder feedback on the purpose of the Unit. It maps the various components of the separate activity system and suggests that the activity system can be considered as one of a number of related systems. Chapter Five also presents key problem clusters in the work activity identified by stakeholders during interviews and focus group discussions. Chapter Six models and analyses these problem clusters as tensions between self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process, cost-efficiency versus quality service, and contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance. The discussion and modelling of the activity system in Chapter Six highlights problems brought about by different understandings of the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit and the role of the learning adviser.

Chapter Seven opens up opportunities for considering ways of improving the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit and thereby improving understanding of the purpose of the Unit and the role of the adviser. To this end this chapter, based on Stage Three of the expansive visibilisation process (Engeström, 1987; Figure 3.2), considers suggestions made by stakeholders on new ways of working that may, in the future, expand and transform the activity of the Unit so that it can continue to meet the changing needs of stakeholders and at the same time remain cost-effective and efficient. In the discussion reference is also made to the professional standards and guidelines developed by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2001) on what constitutes good practice in learning assistance services. Whilst the standards and guidelines relate to the American context they provide a useful guide to improving the quality of services at Griffith University. That is, according to the Council (Komives & Woodard, 2003, p. 508) quality learning assistance programs:
• assist students in self-understanding and self acceptance
• assist students in considering their life goals by relating their interests, skills, abilities and values to careers, the world of work, and the nature and purpose of higher education
• assist students in developing an educational plan consistent with their life goals and objectives
• assist students in developing decision-making skills
• provide accurate information about institutional policies, procedures, resources, and programs
• refer students to other institutional or community support services
• assist students in evaluating or re-evaluating progress toward establishing goals and educational plans
• provide information about students to the institution, college, academic department, or some combination thereof

Engeström (1999c) argues that decisions about the expansion or transformation of an activity should take into consideration the socio-spatial, temporal, moral-ideological, and systemic-developmental dimensions of the activity system. Engeström explains that these dimensions help draw attention to concerns about the activity such as: who else should be involved in the activity (socio-spatial), what previous and forthcoming steps should be considered (temporal), who is responsible for the activity and who decides (moral-ideological), and where to from here (systemic-developmental). He argues that these dimensions are particularly relevant in problem situations or in periods of significant change. It is therefore appropriate to consider the various suggestions from stakeholders about ways to improve work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit under these dimensions.

The discussion starts by considering suggestions that could help expand the activity of the Unit on socio-spatial dimensions. That is, consideration is given to ways of analysing and reconstructing the social context of the activity of the Unit as a way of improving collaboration
amongst stakeholders. The discussion then examines suggestions from stakeholders that could help expand the activity on temporal dimensions by taking a longer term view of learning assistance services. Next, the discussion considers suggestions that could help expand the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit on moral-ideological dimensions by reconceptualising stakeholder responsibility for the object of ‘student with assessment task’. Consideration is then given to how expansion on these dimensions might impact on the systemic-development of the Unit’s activity system and its relationship to the overall University activity system in the future.

7.2 Socio-spatial expansion

The findings of this study point to a need to expand the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit on several dimensions, including the socio-spatial. That is, the previous chapters point to tensions among the different stakeholders and it is suggested that increased consideration of the social context of the object of the Unit and the network of others involved with the object could help resolve some of these tensions (Engeström, 1999c). For example, it appears that the overall University activity system has split into separate activity systems of Learning Assistance Unit, library and faculty, each with somewhat different objects. Moreover, the object of each separate activity system is not fully understood or accepted by related activity systems. The analysis in Chapter Six, of stakeholder feedback, highlights that different understandings of the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit creates problems for the learning adviser who must juggle multiple roles, including the tension that arises when the learning adviser tries to compensate for the busy academic. This situation often leaves the learning adviser in the risky position of trying to interpret the academic’s intentions and by doing so, possibly subverting the academic process.

Tensions also arise when the learning adviser intervenes between the librarian and the student. The librarian’s focus on the use of technological tools appears to affect their interaction and relationship with the student. The data analysis shows that some librarians, in their enthusiasm to engage the student with the technology, apparently give inadequate attention to the student’s
learning context. This impacts on the work of the Unit as learning advisers try to help students make the connections between the assessment task and library resources.

The history of the development of the Learning Assistance Unit suggests that resolving these tensions between the Unit and different stakeholders will not be easy. This study shows that the centralisation of learning assistance services did not resolve all of the tensions associated with the previous faculty-based model and it created other tensions. Engeström, Engeström and Sunito (2000) discovered, in their studies of school communities, that reconstructing current activities on socio-spatial dimensions is not easy. They found that the socio-spatial structure of the classroom, where teachers work mostly in autonomous isolation, makes it difficult to analyse and reconstruct practices collectively. Similarly, the socio-spatial structure of University activity system where academics, librarians, and learning advisers often work in isolation makes it difficult to give increased consideration to the social context of the object collectively. For example, the previous chapter demonstrates that weak links between the separate activity systems of the Learning Assistance Unit and faculty make it difficult for learning advisers and academics to collaborate.

However, stakeholders suggested that reconceptualising the tools, division of labour, community and object of the activity system could help improve collaboration between learning advisers and other stakeholders. These suggestions are listed in Table 7.1.
### Table 7.1 Stakeholder suggestions for improving collaboration between learning advisers and other stakeholders

#### Tools
1. In-discipline programs could be designed as more than just an add-on to existing generic programs (e.g. Learning Adviser A:111-113)
2. Activities of the Learning Assistance Unit and the library could be clustered around specific learning objectives (e.g. Learning Adviser D:600-602; Learning Adviser C:117-118)
3. More appropriate strategies to address student diversity could be developed (Academic A:352-354, Academic C:142-146; Student A:274; Student B:69-77)
4. Learning advisers could reach out and connect with more students (Learning Adviser D:399-401)

#### Division of labour
5. Academic staff could promote learning assistance programs (e.g. Academic B:336-338)
6. In-discipline learning assistance programs could be encouraged (e.g. Student A:166-183; Academic C:100-104)
7. Learning advisers could be involved in the planning, development and teaching of subjects [courses] (e.g. Academic B:141-142, 163-164)
8. Learning adviser and librarian could increase cooperation during orientation and transition activities (e.g. Librarian B:299-303)
9. Academic staff could set up appointment between student and learning adviser (e.g. Academic A:310-312)

#### Community
10. Collaboration could be extended to heads of school and course convenors (e.g. Appendix B, p. 286)
11. Regular meetings [between learning advisers and academics] could be arranged to develop, and evaluate collaborative relationships (e.g. Academic B:163-164; Appendix B, p. 286)
12. Links between learning advisers and academic staff developers could be strengthened (e.g. Appendix B, p. 268)
13. Librarian and learning adviser could share content area information (e.g. Librarian E:102-107)
14. Educational unit for librarians and learning advisers could be established (e.g. Librarian C:108-113)

#### Object
15. Longitudinal understanding of the cumulative student learning experience could be developed (e.g. Academic B:302-307)

Figure 7.1 maps the suggestions captured in Table 7.1.

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![Figure 7.1 Stakeholder suggestions for improving collaboration between learning advisers and other stakeholders](image-url)
Figure 7.1 helps to illustrate how a better understanding and acceptance amongst key stakeholders of the object of the activity system could expand the activity on its socio-spatial dimensions. This view of a quality learning assistance service based on improved collaboration between stakeholders is consistent with the American Council for the Advancement of Standards for goals for academic advising. That is, the standards include reference to the importance of providing students with accurate and comprehensive information and advice on a range of policies, resources and services and also suggest that stakeholders should share information about students across elements. In the Griffith context this would involve other, more distant, stakeholders, although not discussed in this study, such as personal counsellors, Heads of Residence, and administrators, who may also have a role in reconstructing practices collectively and thereby resolving tensions amongst different stakeholders.

7.3 Temporal expansion

Chapter Six argues that the Learning Assistance Unit is under increased pressure to come up with more cost-effective ways of working. Efforts have been made to reconfigure tools in order to manage costs, however it is apparent that maintaining a quality service on a fixed budget is difficult. For example, the previous chapter describes how changes to the type and level of service appear to have created tensions between stakeholders and impacted on the workload of staff in the Unit. The discussion in Chapter Six suggests that this squeeze on resources is making it difficult to maintain a quality learning assistance service and that it is not easy in such an environment to take a long term view and expand the activity on its temporal dimensions. However, tension between cost-efficiency and quality is not unique to the Unit nor indeed to Griffith University. According to Karmel (2000) higher education in Australia is seriously under-funded. This view is supported by the findings of a Parliamentary Senate Inquiry (Australian Parliament, 2001) that found Australian universities are in a state of crisis. The result of reduced government spending is that teaching quality and access opportunities to university are under threat and universities are being forced to rely on more volatile sources of income such as full fee paying students, from both international and domestic markets. This
decline in government funding is attributed in part to changes in the way the education sector is viewed and changes to social priorities.

That is, there has been a shift away from the view that education is a social good to a view that it has both social and private benefits. In other words, a human capitalist view of education assumes that the main benefits of education are to the individual and individuals are calculating players who act to maximise their personal, economic utility. The literature suggests that this narrow economic thinking about education and the trend of reduced public funding to universities is unlikely to change in the near future (Australian Parliament, 2001; Griffith Institute for Higher Education, 1997; Higher Education Financing and Policy Review Committee, 1998; Kemp, 1999; Lingard, 1993). This leaves senior management in large, complex organisations such as Griffith University, and staff in elements such as the Learning Assistance Unit trying to find ways of operating in a competitive and uncertain world. Leaner, tighter management structures, and clearer policies and goals may help universities to manage resources more effectively but it is short sighted to assume that a more market-oriented approach to education will produce a higher quality learning environment (Lowe, in Griffith Institute for Higher Education, 1997). Forbes (2002) agrees that “Unis are not supermarkets” and aggressive marketing ideologies are eroding Australia’s ability to build quality learning environments that nurture teaching and research.

In this context expanding the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit on its temporal dimensions and articulating a longer term vision for a quality and cost-effective learning assistance service will be a challenge. According to staff in the Learning Assistance Unit a quality learning assistance service must be improvement-oriented, consistent, relevant, flexible, and responsive to individual needs (Learning Assistance Unit, 2000b). It must encourage independent learning and be valued by both students and staff. Learning advisers in a quality service are professional and collaborative, they know their professional limits, and are honest about what they can provide.
Despite concerns about the changes taking place in the broader context of higher education in both Australia and overseas, this collective understanding of what constitutes a quality learning assistance service, in conjunction with the following suggestions made by stakeholders, offers a good basis from which to expand the activity on its temporal dimensions.

Table 7.2 Stakeholder suggestions for developing a longer term view for learning assistance services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. improve teaching and learning practices through research (e.g. Learning Adviser D:593-594)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. articulate clear teaching objectives (e.g. Learning Adviser D:324-331)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. develop programs that target the younger student population (e.g. Student B:242-244; Appendix B, p. 286)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. improve teaching approaches in generic programs (e.g. Learning Adviser B:138-140; Learning Adviser D:324-326)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. make better use of marketing tools such as website, orientation, student portal, brochure, chalkboard (e.g. Academic A:301, Student B:147-151; Student C:288-295; Learning Adviser D:383, 393, 481)</td>
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<th>Rules</th>
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<tr>
<td>6. be pro-active rather than re-active in helping students to develop as self-directed learners (Learning Adviser C:127-128; Academic B:285-287)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division of labour</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. reconfigure learning adviser staffing levels (e.g. Learning Adviser C:107-108; Student C:224; Student D:220-222)</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Community</th>
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<tr>
<td>8. review the structural location of learning assistance services (e.g. Librarian C:108-113; Academic E:73-75)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. develop a guiding framework for learning assistance intervention (e.g. Learning Adviser D:530-531)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. articulate the Learning Assistance Unit’s role in the broader learning community (e.g. Academic B:273-274)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. keep the learner and the process of learning visible in the University (e.g. Learning Adviser D:573-576; Academic E:194-198)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Figure 7.2 illustrates how such approaches to reconfiguring the tools, rules, divisions of labour, community and object of the activity system could help expand the activity on its temporal dimensions.
Despite apparent tensions related to maintaining a quality service on a restricted budget the suggestions modelled in Figure 7.2 provide a basis from which stakeholders can consider developing a longer term vision for a cost-effective and efficient learning assistance service that makes a valuable contribution to the quality of the University learning environment in a competitive and uncertain world. To develop a framework for future development and to progress the services on its temporal dimensions the staff at Griffith should consider the standards used by American institutions. These standards evaluate a comprehensive range of service components (i.e. mission, program, leadership, organisation and management, human resources, financial resources, facilities, technology and equipment, legal responsibilities, equal opportunity, access and affirmative action, campus and community relations, diversity, ethics, assessment and evaluation) and may be helpful in addressing some of the problems and tensions identified in this study.

7.4 Moral-ideological expansion
Moral and ideological questions about divisions of labour, such as who is responsible for the object of ‘student with assessment task’ lead into consideration of the responsibilities of the academic, librarian, student and learning adviser. For example, in the previous chapter a distinction is made between contextualised and de-contextualised assistance. That is, the student comes to the Learning Assistance Unit with an assessment task and the learning adviser, who is located outside the faculty or discipline context, is asked to provide assistance. The discussion in previous chapters suggests however that weak links between the activity systems of the faculty and Learning Assistance Unit make it difficult to provide services that are valued by the various stakeholders. The result is that the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit and the role of the learning adviser are not always understood or appreciated. For example, the work of the Unit is sometimes regarded as remedial and in some cases intervention by the learning adviser is seen as subverting the academic process.

Stakeholders suggested (see Table 7.3) that changes to the divisions of labour and interactions with the object could lead to improvements in the way that learning assistance services are understood and integrated into the activity system of the University.

Table 7.3 Stakeholder suggestions for improving the integration of learning assistance services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division of labour</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. learning assistance services could be increasingly integrated into courses and programs (e.g. Academic B:140-142; Student A:181-183)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. stronger links could be developed with academic staff development unit (Academic E:196; Appendix B, p. 268)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. learning advisers could help librarians to develop effective teaching skills (Librarian E:256-262; Librarian B:112-115)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Object</th>
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<tr>
<td>4. learning advisers could scaffold the learning experience, not just advise on procedural aspects of academic writing (Academic B:174-179)</td>
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</table>

These suggestions have been mapped in Figure 7.3.
Redistributing and reconceptualising control and responsibility for ‘student with assessment task’ as mapped in Figure 7.3 would include giving greater consideration to whether the tools used by the Unit are adequately meeting the needs of student cohorts such as students from non-English speaking backgrounds and students coming to university straight from school. Questions should be asked about the relevance of these tools and the appropriateness of the type and level of service provided.

The indications are that, given the different histories and viewpoints of the stakeholders, redistributing and reconceptualising control and responsibility, for the object, will not be simple. It would, for example, also involve reconceptualising divisions of labour, rules and tools within the overall University activity system so that the Learning Assistance Unit outcome for the ‘student with assessment task’ would be about developing positive attitudes and useful skills, not just about absorbing knowledge (Frazer, 1992). The rules of the overall University activity system would be reconfigured to reflect effective teaching that inspires and induces curiosity, self-awareness and self-confidence with respect to the way that knowledge is acquired and applied. Tools would be reconfigured to include giving clear explanations, making courses...
interesting, clearly specifying standards and giving useful feedback (Biggs, 1999; Candy et al., 1994; Hounsell, 1997; McInnis & James, 1995; Ramsden, 1998; Ramsden, 1997; Trigwell & Prosser, 1997).

Reconceptualising control and responsibility for ‘student with assessment task’ would also mean that stakeholder interactions with the object would involve managing student discomfort by interacting with students to ensure understanding and learning, and by fostering generic and lifelong learning skills. This implies that academic staff will do more than just focus on discipline content, librarians will do more than just teach basic library use, and learning advisers will do more than work in isolation with individual students. Librarians for example, will work to foster competence and stimulate interest in information literacy and they will work with other stakeholders to design learning tools that meet the individual needs of students (Peterson, 2001; Abbot & Peach, 2001). Students would take greater responsibility for their own learning and take advantage of opportunities provided in the learning environment to help them develop as independent, self-directed learners with inquiring minds, information literacy, a sense of personal agency, and a repertoire of learning skills (Candy et al., 1994). Expansion on this domain, thus, would bring the objects of the separated activity systems more into alignment, and may in the longer term lead to re-affiliation into a single University activity system.

7.5 Where to from here?

So far this chapter has considered suggestions from stakeholders on new ways of working that have the potential to expand the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit on its socio-spatial, temporal, and moral ideological dimensions. It has not been possible within the scope of this study to implement or evaluate the impact of these suggestions on the object-oriented activity. Notwithstanding, it is possible to speculate on how these suggestions might transform the shape of the activity of the Unit in the future. The zone of proximal development, referred to in Chapter Three and modeled in Figure 7.4, is a way of conceptualising this transformation. Vygotsky describes the zone of proximal development as:
...the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving…. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

Although Vygotsky’s work was primarily concerned with the development of the child, his concept of a zone between an embryonic state of maturation and the buds of development helps us to understand development and potential transformation of collective work activities (Engeström, 1999b).

![Figure 7.4 Zone of proximal development (adapted from Engeström, 1999b, p. 67)](image)

Engeström (1999c, 1999b) illustrates how the zone of proximal development can be used to understand development and potential transformation of collective work activities. He argues that systemic conditions in the work place are influenced by the actions of the practitioners engaged in the activity, and periods of transformation in the activity open up opportunities for future transformations in the construction of the object. He explains that this is because as systems go through cycles of continual construction and reconstruction, this affects the object. He uses the activity system of the hospital to illustrate. A transformation of the hospital is also a transformation of the patient because the historical evolution of the object is partly constructed...
by the activity system. In the Finnish hospital study, changes to hospital admissions processes affected the patient by reducing waiting time, shortening the length of the consultation, and reducing the number of consultations required (Engeström, 1999b).

In the activity system of the Learning Assistance Unit it is possible to speculate that future transformations in the activity may also lead to changes in the construction of the object of ‘student with an assessment task’. The zone of proximal development has been sketched in Figure 7.5 to help visualise possible future changes.
Figure 7.5 Past, present and possible future constructions of the activity system of the Learning Assistance Unit
The details in Figure 7.5 come from several sources. For example, the details about past activity are derived from the historical account provided in Chapter Two. The details about present activity are based on the analysis of the activity system provided in Chapters Five and Six. The details of possible future activity are based on the findings of this study and feedback and suggestions for expansion that have come from stakeholders. These speculative shapes of possible future expanded and contracted activity represent an interpretation of where the Learning Assistance Unit might go in the future. Sketching the zone of proximal development is, as Lave (1993) points out, a way of confronting the problems and tensions that impede movement and change within an activity system. Figure 7.5 illustrates how the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit has already moved forward and continues to go through stages of historical development. This schematic representation of past, present, and possible future activity depicts components of the activity system as having a trajectory, moving through space and time (Engeström, 1993).

Schematically representing the past, present, and envisioned future of the activity system provides a motivating and supporting framework for the participants of the activity system. A schematic representation, such as Figure 7.5, is useful because it highlights the zone of proximal development between the current activity and possible future activity and it provides a “sense of where to from here or an upward contextualisation” Engeström, (2000, p.78). The model itself however will not lead to change. The challenge remains with practitioners, such as the staff of the Learning Assistance Unit and the key stakeholders identified in this study, to try to implement and evaluate solutions in an environment that is constantly changing (Engeström, 1999b).

It is argued here that if the staff of the Learning Assistance Unit do not accept this challenge to try to expand their object-oriented activity on several dimensions then it is possible that the Unit could contract in the near future. Figure 7.5 suggests that contraction of the activity would mean that the learning needs of students would continue to be treated in isolation. Tools such as workshops for large groups of students would become more prevalent and consultations would
remain a short term solution to student demands for help with the assessment task. In a contracted activity system, weak links would continue to exist between the Learning Assistance Unit and other activity systems. As a result academic staff and other key stakeholders would continue to understand the Unit as a remedial service, focused on assisting struggling students. The links between the activity systems of the library and Unit might strengthen in a contracted future but this would be as a result of administrative convenience rather than a collective reconceptualising of the object of the activity.

Alternatively, an expanded future has the potential to open up possibilities for a collaborative reconceptualising of the Unit’s activity. Sharing responsibility for developing a quality learning environment would involve taking into account the students’ intellectual, personal, and social context. As illustrated in Figure 7.5, the Learning Assistance Unit would still use tools such as workshops and consultations but there would be an emphasis on other tools such as student learning groups and in-discipline programs. A shift in divisions of labour between the different activity systems could also strengthen links between stakeholders. These links would help foster understanding and acceptance of the different objects and enable stakeholders to take a longer term view of student learning needs. This would help shape the future role of learning assistance services as pro-active rather than re-active and it would make a significant contribution to the enhancement of the quality of the overall University activity system.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has opened up opportunities for staff in the Learning Assistance Unit to consider suggestions made by stakeholders on new ways of working. These suggestions, including the American standards and guidelines for developing a quality service, have the potential to expand the activity system on several dimensions. For example, stakeholders identified ways of improving work practices by improving collaboration between learning advisers and other stakeholders. Suggestions such as academic staff promoting services and the encouragement of in-discipline learning assistance programs have the potential to expand the activity of the
Learning Assistance Unit on its socio-spatial dimensions by giving greater consideration to the social context of the object and the network of others involved with the object of ‘student with assessment task’. It is argued here that acknowledging this shared responsibility and looking for new ways of working together more closely would lead to improvements in the quality of learning assistance services as well as the University activity system.

This chapter also reports on suggestions from stakeholders on ways of improving the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit by developing a long term view of the activity. Suggestions such as developing a guiding framework for learning assistance intervention and improving teaching and learning practices through research have the potential to expand the activity on its temporal dimensions. Developing a longer term view of learning assistance would involve ensuring that the rules of the activity system reflect an improvement orientation, consistency, relevance, flexibility, responsiveness, and that services are valued by both students and staff. The challenge for staff in the Unit, as well as for senior management, in this competitive and uncertain world, is to search for long term solutions that avoid reducing learning assistance services to a narrow set of economic indicators. It is argued here that rules about quality, equity, social justice, and concern for individual development must remain as the essential goals of the activity (Higher Education Financing and Policy Review Committee, 1998; Lingard, 1993).

Finally, stakeholders consistently identified improved collaboration amongst stakeholders as a way to improve the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit. Suggestions on ways of improving collaboration include a more pro-active role for learning advisers through scaffolding the learning experience in programs and courses. These suggestions about expanding the activity on moral-ideological dimensions challenge claims made about the best way to support students in the learning process. That is, improving collaboration amongst stakeholders would involve reconceptualising the distribution of power amongst key stakeholders (Engeström, 1999c). It would also involve challenging some of the claims made about the best way of supporting students in the learning process. For example, the findings of this study suggest that
there is scope for the learning adviser to become more pro-active in the development and teaching of generic skills in the context of the discipline. The findings also suggest that learning advisers could take a more pro-active role in ensuring that the student voice is heard in discussions to do with improving the quality of the learning environment.

In conclusion, it has not been possible within the scope of this study to implement or evaluate the impact these suggestions would have on the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. However, the study has created an opportunity for reflection and speculation. That is, the study has made it possible to model current problems and tensions in the activity of the Unit, and to speculate on possible ways of moving forward. Importantly, this study offers the staff a chance to consider new and exciting ways of working and to be actively involved in shaping a successful future for the service and drawing on the experience of colleagues from America. Sweeping changes to the Australian higher education sector, including increased demand and reduced funding, have brought to the front and centre the impact of critical issues such as funding cuts, quality measures, and increased accountability. Instead of being victimised by these inevitable changes, staff in the Unit can use the findings of this study to focus their energies. That is, in collaboration with key stakeholders, they can start to resolve some of the problems and tensions identified in the study by expanding the activity on its socio-spatial, temporal, moral-ideological, and systemic-developmental dimensions (Engeström, 1999b).
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Introduction

The aim of the study was to help learning advisers and other key stakeholders at Griffith University develop a better understanding of the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit with a view to using this understanding in generating improvements in learning assistance at the University. The study has achieved this aim by advancing knowledge of the Learning Assistance Unit in a number of ways. First, using the conceptual tools of cultural-historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation it has been possible to map and analyse the Unit and relate its current status to its history. Second, these tools have been used to schematically represent the Unit both as part of the Griffith University activity system and as a single activity system that appears to have separated from the overall University activity system. Third, the study makes visible some of the problems and tensions in the current activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. The latter mapping of the Unit as a separate activity system has been found to provide a better explanation of the current tensions in learning assistance. Fourth, the study synthesises ways in which the Unit’s activity might be expansively improved. This final chapter provides a review of the theoretical principles underpinning the study, and a summary of the investigation and the findings. It also identifies the contributions of the study to the advancement of knowledge about the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit, the way the Unit has developed as an activity system, the problems and tensions that now exist, possible ways forward, and suggestions for further research.

8.2 Theoretical review

The work of Vygotsky, Leont’ev and other Russian psychologists in conjunction with Engeström’s elaboration of the theory highlights the importance of bringing social and historical variables such as tools and artefacts, motivational beliefs, and beliefs about the self into the picture as we try to understand change and transformation in human activity (Leont’ev, 1978; Luria & Vygotsky, 1992). From this perspective, the activity system can be seen as the primary
unit of analysis for understanding human activity and the way that social-historical variables influence and shape collective activity. In other words, understanding human activity requires an understanding of the influence that environmental factors and external symbolic systems have over the activity. In Chapter Three it is argued that cultural-historical analysis, with its emphasis on the historically created and the culturally elaborated dimensions of human life, is a powerful way to understand and analyse collective human activity.

Furthermore, Chapter Three highlights that the novel conceptual tools, made available through cultural-historical activity theory, have the capacity to provide unique insights into how human activity is culturally organised, mediated by tools, and influenced by the different views of the various participants. In work environments, such as the Learning Assistance Unit, this approach can offer unique insights into the collective activity of the work setting. This study for example, demonstrates how the conceptual tools of cultural-historical activity theory can be used to focus on problems of the Unit by taking into account the social-historical context of the Unit as an activity system that has separated from the overall University activity system.

Third generation cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 1999d), as described in Chapter Three, also opens up ways of understanding the multiple perspectives, voices and traditions of networks of interacting activity systems. This approach makes it possible to examine not only the object-oriented activity within a particular activity system, but to analyse the co-operative activity of several related systems. That is, third generation cultural-historical activity theory acknowledges surrounding conditions and systems, and encourages criticism, innovation, questioning of authority, and the initiation of change. In this study, the multiple voices and points of view of academics, librarians, students, and learning advisers have been analysed to influence the synthesis of change and transformation in the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit (Engeström, 1999a).

Chapter Three also introduces expansive visibilisation (Engeström, 1999b) as a structured, inclusive way of understanding the history of the development of the activity system; the
interrelated, everyday practices; and the relationships and associated tensions between these practices. With its roots in the theory, this four-stage process involves gaining insight into the activity, analysing the object-historical aspects of the activity, and formulating and applying new ways of working. This process is particularly suited to this study because it is about dealing with real people in real situations. For example, the study argues that the Learning Assistance Unit has moved through several stages of historical development. It also maps the activity and observable behaviours, materials and instruments of the work setting making it possible to open up discussion about the problems and associated tensions in work practices. The process of expansive visibilisation encourages participants to formulate practical solutions to solve the contradictions in the activity by taking into account the different positions, interests, and traditions of the members. The result is that both intended as well as unintended changes emerge, and the system can be seen as having a trajectory moving through space and time continually changing and transforming, never standing still (Engeström, 1987).

8.3 Summary of the investigation and the findings

The tools of cultural-historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation are used in this study to examine the development and transformation of Griffith University’s learning assistance services. The investigation starts with an historical account of the development of the Learning Assistance Unit as part of the University activity system. Established in 1998, it is suggested that this centralised service was intended as a tool to help the University address concerns about the coordination and consistency of learning assistance service provisions across multiple campuses. As such, it would have been one of the instruments of the overall Griffith University activity system with activity directed at overall learning aspirations of the students. Chapter Two explains that this faculty-based model, in place prior to 1998, presented problems to do with the division of labour and rules related to access, equity, duplication, and the marginalisation of faculty-based learning assistance staff. The shift to a centralised model of service provision was seen as a way of resolving some of these problems. However, Chapter Two points out that socio-historical variables such as the University’s political setting and the
structural positioning of services have influenced the way that the centralised service operates. For example, little consideration was given at the time to how the newly created Learning Assistance Unit would relate to other related activity such as that of the faculty and library. As a result there have developed tensions related to different understandings of the purpose of the Learning Assistance Unit and the role of the learning adviser. The findings of this study indicate that the centralisation of services has helped resolve some of the problems associated with the faculty-based model. However, it has also created other problems related to the way that the Unit seems to engage with only one aspect of the learner, namely the assessment task.

To make these current problems and tensions visible and analysable, interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with key stakeholders. Academics, librarians, students, and learning advisers were identified as the key stakeholders in the work activity of the Unit. Between November 2000 and November 2001 eighteen interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of key stakeholders, and six focus group discussions were conducted with staff from the Learning Assistance Unit. This approach generated data that were first transcribed, then sorted, and then analysed to identify categories and themes that offered insight into the nature of the activity and its contradictions (Engeström, 1987). The tools of cultural-historical activity theory were then used to conceptualise the Unit on the one hand, as part of the broad University activity system, and on the other as a separate activity system. These two alternative possible mappings were undertaken because the data supported that the object of the Learning Assistance Unit may have moved away from the object of the University activity system as a whole. These two mappings were achieved by first, mapping the activity system comprised of components such as the object, subject, community, tools, rules, and divisions of labour, and then mapping the relationship of the Unit as a separate activity system to a network of interacting activity systems including the faculty, library and student.

The focus of the next stage of the analysis was to identify evidence in the data of problems and tensions in the work practices of the Unit; and to use this to see which of the alternative mappings would best explain the data. The discussion in Chapter Six considers three key

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problem clusters. These problem clusters are reported as self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process, cost-efficiency versus quality service, and contextualised versus de-contextualised assistance. The discussion about self-directed learner versus victim of the academic process considers how, on the one hand, stakeholders view the object of ‘student with assessment task’ as the student struggling in an uncaring learning environment, and on the other hand, as student as an independent, self-directed learner. These different understandings of the object were found to impact on the daily work of the learning adviser and create tensions amongst the different stakeholders. For example, the learning advisers reported being called on to play several roles in the learning environment including compensator and interpreter. This has given rise to concerns about the learning adviser subverting the academic process and providing some students with artificial levels of assistance.

The discussion about cost-efficiency versus quality service examines tensions related to a squeeze on resources and different expectations of the service. That is, it examines tensions which appear to flow from an increase in demand for services since 1998 which has not been matched with an increase in resources. To accommodate the increased demand, changes have been made to the type and level of service available and the use of tools such as workshops and technology. However, despite changes to the type and level of service, concerns have been reported about service quality, the relationship between the learning adviser and student, and learning adviser workload. These data point to a tension between funding learning assistance as a valuable service because it adds to the quality of the learning environment, and funding learning assistance as a commodity because it improves the University’s credibility and viability in the marketplace. Finally, the discussion about contextualised versus de-contextualised learning assistance considers tensions which appear to be related to variations in levels of collaboration between the Learning Assistance Unit and the faculty. The data reflect concerns about the way the role of the learning adviser, located outside the discipline context, comes into play when academics are too busy, or not willing, to help students with the assessment task. The chapter highlights tensions in the object which seem to arise from students seeking help with a specific assignment from learning advisers who use tools (such as workshops) that focus
on generic skills. Concern that intervention by the learning adviser may subvert the academic process by providing some students with artificial levels of support is also highlighted. The mappings of the Learning Assistance Unit, faculty and library as separate interacting activity systems with variations in their objects helps to highlight the nature and locations of the various tensions.

Chapter Seven synthesises suggestions from stakeholders on ways to improve the activity of the Unit by expanding it on its socio-spatial, temporal, moral-ideological and systemic-developmental dimensions. That is, consideration is given to ways of expanding the activity and the social context of the object by improving collaboration amongst stakeholders. The chapter goes on to consider expanding the activity by taking a long term view of the service and reconceptualising the distribution of power amongst key stakeholders. In summary, Chapter Seven suggests that the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit and the overall University activity system could be improved if learning advisers developed a better understanding of their multiple roles and were willing to take a more pro-active, long term, advocacy role on behalf of students. This would depend on academics taking more responsibility for assisting students in the development of their academic potential, librarians adopting an approach to teaching information literacy that gives more attention to the students’ context, and students being more active and reflective in their learning. Chapter Seven concludes by speculating on how the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit might transform in the future. A sketch of the zone of proximal development is used to illustrate how the Unit has already moved through several stages of historical development and how future activity might possibly contract or expand depending on changes to current work practices.

It is acknowledged that the breadth and depth of this inquiry was shaped by situational constraints such as time, resources, and participant availability. However the visibilisation process has yielded salient and useful results. These results include a better understanding of how learning assistance services have developed through several stages of historical development; alternative ways in which the Learning Assistance Unit can be understood as part
of the University activity system and as a separate activity system made up of several components; the key problems and tensions in the current activity; and suggested new ways of working. Although the study did not result in the implementation of these suggested new ways of working, it is now possible, through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory, for learning advisers and others to understand current practices better, and to consider suggested improvements and understand future transformations.

8.4 Contributions of the study

The contributions that this study makes to the advancement of knowledge of the Learning Assistance Unit are outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Other contributions can be summarised as follows. First, the study builds on the work of Engeström by demonstrating the applicability of third generation cultural-historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation across different domains. Second, the study synthesises literature on cultural-historical analysis and cultural-historical activity with practical application in a complex work setting. Third, the study demonstrates the value of using approaches from qualitative research methodology such as semi-structured interviewing, focus group discussions, and open and axial coding to understand and analyse collective human activity in its social and historical context. Fourth, the study makes a practical contribution to improving the quality of the learning environment through the provision of quality learning assistance services. That is, although the study makes no claims about generality, this account may help practitioners from different domains (including the American higher education sector) understand and improve the quality of their own learning environments and their collective work practices.
8.5 Further research

A motivation for conducting this study was to help learning advisers to respond to questions about the purpose and value of their work and to develop the understanding needed for staff to take a more active role in shaping the future of learning assistance services at Griffith University. This however, is not the end of the story. There is scope for further investigation. One possibility could be to return to the research site to complete Stage Four of the expansive visibilisation process. This would involve implementing some of the stakeholder suggestions identified in Chapter Seven on ways to improve practice and then contrasting new and old ways of working. Another possibility would be to make visible and analysable some of the other problems and underlying tensions identified in Chapter Five. These investigations would, according to Engeström (1987), trigger subsequent cycles of expansive visibilisation that would have the potential to inform the continued development and redevelopment of the service. Further studies focusing directly on the activity of related parts of the University (e.g. faculty and library) could help to resolve the extent to which separate objects have evolved across the University, the associated tensions and expansive ways of addressing them. The current study has only scratched the surface, but it has helped to understand the Learning Assistance Unit itself as part of this overall system.

In conclusion, the reward in this study has been to get a theoretical grasp on a practical situation. This study brings together unique insights from participants in the activity of the Learning Assistance Unit. The participants have shared their views on the purpose of learning assistance services, the roles of the learning adviser, and problems in everyday work practices. Their feedback has helped to identify and understand problems and to open up discussion about issues related to the learning environment such as expectations of learning assistance services, the quality of the student learning experience, and the level of collaboration amongst stakeholders. As the staff in the Learning Assistance Unit look toward the future they can be sure that the service will continue to go through cycles of construction and reconstruction. It is my hope that ongoing research, criticism and questioning will ensure that as the service moves
forward it is adaptive and responsive to student needs, and that meaningful, ongoing relationships with stakeholders are pursued.
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Interview with Academic ‘A’, (Business), Griffith University, 10 November, 2000

DP: A, thanks again for making the time to talk with me this afternoon about the Learning Assistance Unit and your perspective or view on the role of the Unit. I wonder if - would you mind describing what you think the role of the unit is and the motive for the work of the learning advisers - the people that you’ve come into contact with?

A: Ooh, the second (laughing) part - um, the role. I see the role as being, well, obviously a support service of providing students with a port of call where they can go to clarify predominantly their writing analysis skills, seems to me to be, I guess my perception of it, and also what I see the students’ perception of it. When I was running learning support independent of the LAU it was very much about study skills; let’s look at the question; what does the question really mean? Divide that up then into various parts and what do we think fits within that? And basically, I presume, my impression is, that that’s what the learning assistance does. And conversations with individuals in that position initially lead me to believe that was the path it was going. And also there’s a lot of flexibility with it as well. I mean, I also did things like oral presentation skills and it strikes me that any particular issue that a student has with dealing with their assessment at uni, learning assess – learn.... - the unit is a place that they can go and get a level of support that’d be satisfactory I’d imagine for the vast majority of students and then a follow up direction. Um, to push them along to other areas. I mean my - always – the biggest problem always seemed to be with those who had ah, a learning, a particular learning difficulty. Not didn’t have - just didn’t have the conceptual skills, but, you know the dyslexic student or whatever it might be. I never knew what to - quite what to do with them apart from direct them to UQ but I hope that that’s (laugh) you know, that’s my intent when I direct people that way. Yeah, OK yep, you can get some guidelines here; I will give this level of support. You know, and there’s only a level that I can give. Um, learning assistant unit is another step along that path. Talk to them, make use of the variety of different ways you can utilise them and potentially, you know, if there is some other possibility, that then you’ll get directed to another level of support that would be available.

DP: And in the learning advisers responding to that, um?...

A: I think they’ve been remarkably flexible and wanting to be helpful. Part of the problem I think for the liaison - for me in the school - is that I don’t have first years in first semester. And, I get the impression that people feel that in first semester that their subjects are already full enough, blah blah blah blah blah. I’ve made an appointment already to um, with the current adviser here, to raise that awareness anyway in first semester. That I will go in, you know, separately to the lectures and um introduce, explain and that we will, you know - I’ll interact with her to say look, well here’s the pieces of assessment, this one’s coming first and to try and construct some form of support that is more structured. Because I think that is part of the problem. My perception is students either don’t hear that it exists, you know, in the orientation blurb, or perceive that it’s just for people who’ve got some real problem. You know, that actually have a learning problem.
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Um, they don’t know how to make use of it for some reason. And that’s why I think that if it comes from within the school as well as the LAU that there’s a possibility, you know, there’s a greater chance, I think, targeting. And also again first year, like when I write on their assignments I tell them, go and see…. I think that needs to be integrated more in first year subjects - first semester subjects.

DP: In terms of students’ misperceptions about - of what the service is or isn’t, um, would you describe the staff perceptions as equally as perhaps um, unclear or…?

A: Yes, yeah I would, I really would. Um, and I’m not quite sure why. Because the information’s there, they all know that it exists. Um, I think part of the problem is academics. A lot of people are academics for an extended period of time. There is, to a certain extent, you know, this assumption and things like that. But, you know, there’s a certain level of “Students come to uni they should already be able to” so if you can’t already do that we’ll sink. Um, unfortunately we do not have that luxury anymore. There is a wide range of a student body. Whether that’s unfortunate or not that’s a different issue, but we don’t have that and I think that the way that we’re supporting students actually needs to change. From this level, even if it’s just, you know, even if it is just that increased level of awareness of really what can be provided and how that can be built in without creating a bigger workload.

DP: So academic staff, re-examining the way they make their sorts of services um, more explicit to students, more visible?

A: Explicit, available, more visible, encourage it rather than, I mean I went mad at mine in terms of the sort of - you know, in that parenthesis of state of them being in a state of unconscious incompetence and we needed to you know, to change things around and for a lot of them it was just about understanding processes. Um, how to, not just “find the book” or “find a piece of information” but what do you do with that? I think that that - those aspects need to be teased out and we need to - maybe there just needs to be greater links between learning assistance, I think they do. There just needs to be clearer school based links - Learning Assistance Unit to schools which obviously, you know, would help if there was a one person in the job for a long period of time.

DP: Yeah, then you get that continuity. Can you think of any other, perhaps practical ways that we could collaborate more um, effectively?

A: Oh, I think that - I think there needs to be a level of - like within our school, if I should get a first semester, first year subject next year, then I would, I would like to formalise that link by having Whoever come in, talk to them, say this, this, this, you know, this not just the ten minute grab, or “We’ve got workshops, we’ve got…” but to actually be specific and tease some things out so that they can see a real value and that it’s not just for you who struggle, so it’s - that it’s broad.

DP: It’s validated.
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A: I mean we don’t want to overload this - the unit, obviously, but everyone needs to be aware of the opportunities.

DP: And we’re very mindful of um, the benefits I guess of having that visible collaboration link in terms of the students’ perspective on “OK, this is being endorsed by the lecturer, the tutor”, um, “it’s an OK source of additional or supplementary sort of support”.

A: I think the reason that our students work well with the library is we have Librarian E. And she’s sort of our students’ person that they can go to see if they have a particular problem. I mean she gets other students from other schools as well, but that aspect of “Here’s a librarian and she knows, you know, she’s aware of what it is that you’re - where it is that you’re at”. Um, I think having a link with our administration, and sort of saying right, at the beginning of every semester, can we have a copy of the um, the subject outlines, at least for the first years.

DP: Yes.

A: I mean they’re the ones who are, you know, my perspective. Then if they know if that helps there, they can second year tag along their assignments, you know, to have that so that you guys are aware too, you know, pre-prepared in advance or whatever, or at least can go “OK, yeah, OK yeah. Well I can flick through and find that myself.” You know, “That, I think, would be really useful.” And it gives them a point of contact, that’s like - …. gives them a sense of ownership too.

DP: Yes, and that the student doesn’t have to feel that the adviser is starting from total –

A: That’s right, and they’re creating a burden for them.

DP: Yeah, yeah, one of the things I want to do is map the Learning Assistance Unit as this system and part of that is the tools that the unit uses to do what it does. And you’ve mentioned the subject outlines, but the other tools I guess that are really critical are things like the assignment question obviously and the criteria sheet…

A: Yep, well, they’re inherent in ours. Like, for example, mine in leadership has all of that in the package which is why I said the subject outline. Most here - most staff here will have all that. The assignments, when they’re due, what the criteria actually are, step by step.

DP: It sort of - it raises interesting questions, I guess, about our practice and what our purpose is, in that we’re teaching to this task that’s been set. That “OK, here’s the task, now let’s unpack it, let’s discuss it, let’s look at you know, um, how you’re going to respond” um… And if that - if that information is clear and easy to understand it’s fine, but often it’s not, and I’m not singling out this school at all but generally…

A: No, no, no, I understand that, but generally, um… That was the other thing I spoke with your Learning Assistance Adviser about. ‘Cause I sort of went,
I’ve had a question which I thought was remarkably clear, but obviously it isn’t. So, could I have a chat with you about it sort of thing. And, you know, then I wonder too. Is that a role that, I mean, she was very open about it. …

DP: It isn’t, I suppose - if you were to look at our official brief or portfolio that sort of support is not - it’s not explicit but it’s almost like it has to hap… well, it should be happening. If we’re doing a good job then we’ve got information that will really inform you in terms of looking at it from the students’ perspective, and the students have gone to someone who I would hope they perceive as neutral and someone who’s not interested in grading them or assessing them so they may be more open. And also someone who doesn’t have that content um, connection, so the students have to be clearer in articulating what it is they understand, what it is all about. Because it’s almost like they’re - they’re explaining it to a person not from that discipline background. So there’s advantages there as well. The student has to think, well, how am I going to explain this to a person?

A: That’s right.

DP: Um, but that role of, you know, seeking out, information, advice, just consulting with the adviser, I think it’s a really important part of the relationship between the faculty staff and the unit staff.

A: Yep, it just, you know, it came to mind, hadn’t ever occurred to me previously. It was just this particular situation where there was a level of misunderstanding, ‘cause it was a new - it was a new piece of assessment that I’d written. And it was the first piece of assessment that I’d had with them and I was thinking, well I’m directing them there, the flip of it is, I should also be getting something, you know, I also need to go and capture the information so that it is - there is a cycle, so that there can be a re-evaluation, from a clearer perspective.

DP: Have you done a - with the students - have you followed through with the students in terms of their experience of being referred and then coming back and…?

A: Oh, well no. No I - none of them have checked back in this time, not this time with me. Last year they did. Um, we organised a few workshops, that a number of them sort of really ran with, thought it was the best thing since sliced bread, and they found that very useful. No, actually I haven’t - I haven’t had any par - specific feedback this time.

DP: ‘Cause it, as I mentioned earlier…

A: Only just as I mentioned that they are actually aware, yep.

DP: … that’s one of the things that I’m interested in and when I speak with the students I’m hoping that I’ll get some insight into how they…how they see the relationship, and if they see a relationship, or do they see you know, it all as bits and pieces. You know, you mentioned the library, the library’s a bit, the LAU’s another bit - the faculty or the school’s the other bit. Do they see it as something quite disjointed, or do they see it as something that yes, this is something that we
can call the learning environment and we move within it. I don’t know, do you have any sense of that, I mean …?  

A: Again, from last year, it’s been a different situation, to a certain extent, this year. Last year I would say yes. Not sure, comes down to individuals though who are seeking a learning environment, who are that little bit older or who are a little bit more conscious in the processes that they put in place in order to able to learn, because they are here to learn. There is - there are, you know, the level of individuals who are here to do and, so no, that’s just another bit. But, the ones who are conscious about their learning process really do see it as a pool. You know, that they can dip into and there is a level of validity, and this person knows, and here’s another source of information that I can go and make use of. That it is a big resource that they can - that they can play with. So, yeah

DP: Well, that’s positive I think.

A: It is very positive. I’m always very - extremely encouraged by that and surprised, too, at the various places that it comes from. You know, initially at one stage I was thinking is it only mature age students who think like that? But um, no, it’s not…

DP: You can’t generalise. It really depends on their purpose and what their…

A: Very much their purpose and what they’re here to do and how important the process is.

DP: It’s interesting given the real focus on generic skills development, and you know, the belief that students must develop other skills other than the content knowledge. So, it’ll be interesting to see, I guess, how successful we are as a learning community in instilling that in more than just those students who already have that sense of wanting to understand the processes and have those skills that they can use in a whole lot of different contexts. So, I don’t know whether you have a perspective on that issue of generic skill development as part of the university experience, um…

A: I - you know I think it happens clearly for them in a number -in certain subjects more generally ah, across the board, they’re just not so necessarily aware. I’m lucky, I suppose, that I teach a practical subject this sort of semester with first years and it’s encouraging I suppose, watching the change for them throughout the semester, from just being a participant in something to somebody who’s watching themselves being a participant, um, to being the person out the front, and then watching themselves be that person out the front as well as when watching the group. Um, that process is yep, that’s basically what we do through the semester. So at - on that level it’s occurring and in that they are making links and they are getting a greater understanding about certain parts within the university, but it’s more a - it’s very much a personal development process within that subject.

DP: And again driven by individual sort of…
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A: Yes, driven by ind… and thankfully also driven by the process of the subject because it can be - it is about them doing it, it is very much that experiential learning. Full on, you are taking responsibility from a very early stage, sort of. But, you know, that they are, they very much are, I sit back to a large extent, um...

DP: We see that I guess, to an extent, with students who access our services very early on. Those students who will come to, you know, things that we run even before semester starts or will start ringing us before semester starts or those that are booked in, well you don’t have to book in, but they turn up for the workshops from week one. There’s this sense of taking responsibility that, you know, it might be driven by anxiety or it might just be driven by a real determination to manage this whole new experience. Um, and they’re a different group to the group that you probably run into sort of halfway through the semester, or at the end of the semester, or students who come in from second or third year who haven’t sought any sort of guidance before. Um, they’re often being driven by failure - they’ve had bad experiences and are now taking stock. And um, well I guess one of our responsibilities is to be able to respond to those students regardless of where they decide to hook in or link up with us. Um, and some you know, will come in for a short period of time and then, you know, you’ll see them two or three times and that’s enough. Others will try to sort of, keep coming back regardless of whether they need it or not, sort of this dependency thing developing, which we’re conscious of and have you know had to from time to time discuss that very issue with the individual that you know, you really don’t need this support any more - you’re OK you know. So it’s interesting, I guess, the different approaches that the students take.

A: I have concerns too. It’s like how far can your brief go, as well. You know, it’s a limited number of individuals within a system that’s a lot of variety in terms of what it does offer.

DP: And I think that’s why we really do need to be looking at what we’re doing all the time and responding in whatever way we can. And I mean, one of the examples I guess, is the model that we’ve got now has moved away from an emphasis on one-to-one and has gone to workshops, small groups consultations, you know if you come in for consultation bring a friend if there’s someone else doing the same assignment, and trying to um, increase the spread. Um, certainly working with you and other academic staff in sort of large classes is another way that we’re able to work with a large number of students. But you’re right, I mean, there’s a resource issue there and it’s not going to continue to stretch and in online resources, those sorts of things are another dimension that we also have available, but again, not all students learn in that mode and don’t like not having that face to face contact. So, just in conclusion, are there any things that you’ve observed or that from your own experiences of working in the area that you think we could do? Any sort of strategies? We’ve sort of talked about the collaboration issue, using the tools like the subject outlines, the criter … Are there any other things that you can think of that might help us to improve what we do?

A: I actually do think it is just about being more visible. And again, I know that that’s balanced by what it is that can be done. But, from my end, I’m not sure, you know, I don’t think I can answer that from your end. There’s nothing
that I require that I can think of that you don’t or wouldn’t provide. I think from our end what we need to do is to identify students who require assistance and actually formally refer them to you. That, I think, would help.

**DP:** So the clearer communication, better visibility…

**A:** And sort of set up the appointment. You know, this student or this student is coming to see. You know, that sort of thing. Or these students require some assistance with…

**DP:** Would you take it to the next stage of - and we have had this happen in some schools where the academic staff member has asked us to perform an assessment type role. Like, you must attend the LAU for x number of workshops or whatever, before you’ll be able to resubmit this assignment, for example or…

**A:** Yeah, that’s interesting. I hadn’t ever - I hadn’t ever considered it. Um…

**DP:** It would place us in a really difficult position I would think.

**A:** I think it would too. I - the greatest thing that I want to, you know, don’t know, this is going to be sweeping statement, I might have another greatest thing on another day, that I really try and encourage with them is personal responsibility. You know, if they’re going to fail - to choose to fail because they don’t choose to go and get help that’s already available and been made aware of, then so be it. You know, you can push people and direct people so far. I will encourage them continually but, yeah, I think that notion of personal responsibility is important.

**DP:** And that scenario I described is very much that big stick sort of. It’s another threat um, another hurdle…

**A:** It is, very much a big stick. Yeah, I think it takes, it makes - it makes learning a punishment.

**DP:** Interestingly, on a conference earlier this year there was a Canadian presenter who was working in a learning assistance equivalent type centre and that was their very model - was students who had been excluded, or were at risk of failing. It’s there was this punishment sort of process where they had to go and do you know, x number of hours, in terms of their skill development. And for me in terms of the model we’ve developed, and continuing to develop, I think that would be very contradictory to our philosophies about student-centred learning, student self management of their learning processes. OK, well is there anything else you would like to share on this Friday afternoon? (Laugh)

**A:** No, I don’t think so. I was just really pleased when I knew that there was a unit in place. I just think that we need to work out ways to support each other so that, you know, the unit, your unit can be a success and we can also see that we’re you know, contributing to this ongoing process of learning development. No, I think it’s great - the best thing since sliced bread. I’ve a grave deal of concerns about the diversity of student intake that we have and how we cater for that. That’s a good way of doing it - addressing it.
Interview with Academic ‘B’, (Arts), Griffith University, 16 November, 2000

DP: […] we’ve already had quite a long discussion about my project and my aims at this early stage of the whole process and as I indicated I would be interested, I guess, in finding out, from your perspective and - first of all about the Learning Assistance Unit; what you see it’s role is in the learning environment and what you think motivates the work of the learning advisers.

B: Alright well I - because of my fairly unique background I guess I’ve got a –probably - there’s three areas that I see the learning assistance playing in terms of the university life. One is working with beginning students to help them into the university. And that’s, you know, I know that there’s a range of programs that you engage in for that, and I think that that’s very important to try and help students make that bridge between the learning culture that they’re leaving and the one that they’re moving into. So that’s one role that I’m aware of. And in the second role is that ongoing support at an individual level, and in term…a….it’s not…yeah, it is an individual level where the learning assistance, meeting the self identified needs of students, and that might be from the appointments, that you offer or from the workshops that you offer, but it’s still sort of self identification. And thirdly, it’s the academic identification, where you’ve got the academics who are actually seeking you out and saying, “Look, I’ve got the problem with this group of students” or “I need them to be able to do this and, can you help in that area?” So they’re sort of the three key areas that I see you working in and as a result of that there’s all those linkages that have to go on because of that and the thing that I’m starting to see a little bit more happening is that there’s also a liaison with you and the, things that are being offered by the library people as well. And that’s another linkage that I’m starting to build on myself as an academic.

DP: Just before we go down that track I wonder, in terms of the role of the learning adviser, what do you think motivates the work that the advisers do?

B: I think there’s a fairly high job satisfaction in dealing with individual students, particularly with the ones who come back and you get to establish a relationship with them, and I think that there’s a performance element in it as well, where you’re up disseminating your skills and talents and sharing that expertise with people who are seeking that sort of expertise themselves. And that’s a good feeling, to know that you have got something to offer and I think that is a motivating factor. And then there’s that retrospective motivation that you get when you walk out of a session with a student or a workshop and you see the faces, the heads nod and the questions that have been asked, and you know that you’ve affected their whole thinking in some way. I think that that’s a motivating factor as well. I think it’s a highly personalised job and I think it is very much a student motivation that comes out of it. It is the student and the learning adviser - it’s that interaction. I don’t know whether there’s a lot of motivation that you get within the team - you get other things from working within the team but I don’t know whether that’s where the motivation comes from. It might, to a lesser extent.
DP: Do you want to elaborate on that a bit more?
B: What, on the team, the difference that I see?
DP: Yes.
B: Ah, I think it’s got something to do with the personalisation of teaching and the relat… notion of it being a relationship building thing and the actual teaching, as the job of the LAU relies very much on the feedback you get from the students, not from the other team members that you might be working from. I think that’s my suspicion, whereas working with the team members, it’s more of a supportive role that you get from there, which I don’t think is a motivating factor, I think it’s a sustaining factor that keeps you going and maintains that intellectual stimulation that you need to have beyond just working with students and I think that that probably is a really important area.
DP: This is a bit off - I guess a bit off the track but just to follow that through further - how would you see that work environment, that is the LAU as you’ve described it as similar or different to say, a school teaching team or a faculty teaching team? Do you think it’s the same - that the motivation is not necessarily from your colleagues, that it’s the students that provide the motivation?
B: Um, I think there’s a difference. I don’t know whether I could explain what the difference is. What’s the difference? Oh, I don’t, well I don’t - and I don’t know whether this is right, but I think that working with a teaching team and developing programs with a teaching team is more collaborative. If you - I can only talk from my experience, and I think there is because, and I - this is why I think might be the difference, because it’s a sustained project that goes on over a semester. And so there’s a continual meeting, rehashing, re-energising, rethinking that goes on across that team in the delivery of the information to those students. So you’ve got all of that stimulation that’s a regular part of the academic team, whereas with the LAU it’s a much more one off thing where you might be working with a group who are all dealing with a subject but it’ll be one workshop that you’re delivering or the time that you do with the transition sessions. Yeah, I think that that’s a big difference.
DP: Yeah, and this is starting to emerge as a thing, that the average sort of, return rate of students to the LAU, and this is just an average, is about two point five. So you don’t see students very frequently. You see them possibly twice; a few will come back obviously a lot more times than that. But because you only see them in a one off or possibly two off, situation you don’t get that opportunity to develop very close relationship or understanding of their learning needs or issues in depth. I mean, I don’t know that you’d get to do that as an academic either when you’ve got large classes; you might within a tutorial group, but you’ve got sort of 13 weeks to develop that relationship.
B: You do, you do. And you certainly get to know the students other that just students as well. Like they don’t talk to you about their problems with the writing. They’ll argue with you about a concept in relationship to the ideas that you’re talking about and that in itself is very stimulating. There’s the difference - the difference I think is that you do have a two way relationship with students in
the academic world, whereas in the LAU world it tends to be fairly one way, where you’re dealing and you’re telling them and showing them and they are fairly passive in the experience, saying, “Oh, is that what I’ve got to do?”

DP: Yes, and I think the other thing, too, is that the motive for the students and for the learning adviser as well actually comes from the academic faculty or school, and the motivation or the motive is usually the assessment task. So what you’re giving the students is actually driving, or stimulating, or creating the relationship that might develop between the interaction that will develop between a learning adviser and a student. It’s not something that the learning adviser has imposed on the student, it’s something that’s imposed from the school or faculty.

B: Yeah, so I guess that’s - almost sort of that locus of control.

DP: It’s in a sense a reactive relationship - you’re reacting to whatever the dilemma is or the issue is that the student’s trying to deal with yeah, yeah.

B: Yeah, and so I think it might get back to that control thing where you’re still, having to work within somebody else’s framework and even if that’s the student’s framework and the student’s framework is still working within someone else’s framework - the academic’s. So there’s two levels that the learning adviser has to deal with there. You know, what are you really meant to be doing here and what are you actually doing in this assessment?

DP: And the path of least resistance for us in a sense is to not question or interfere with any of those external demands or stimuli that are creating the interaction, but I really feel we’ve got a responsibility to “interfere” if necessary, which may mean in a very appropriate way to - if you’re getting a lot of students with a particular assignment or task that it’s obviously creating difficulties, to approach the academic staff member and say, “How would you…” You know, still using an appropriate sort of approach, not a confrontational approach, “How would you like me to deal with these you know, significant number of requests that we’re getting for support in this area?” So, I think for some advisers that’s not an easy path to take, that they perhaps feel more comfortable just, OK, accepting the status quo and doing what they can do in terms of helping to remediate or fix or help. But I think there is a responsibility there to try and have some influence if something’s quite obviously an issue.

B: And I think when academics actually start to use LAU the way I did last semester, I think that really the people who were involved in running those workshops needed to be a part of my team and be in on a couple of the meetings when we were discussing assessment.

DP: Yes.

B: And even to be able to be there when we had our moderation, and everybody was there but the people who’d been behind the scenes working in that assessment weren’t there. And for us to be able to build on this year and go further with it next year, they needed to be there.

DP: Yes. So do you see that as a possibility?
B: Yeah, I do.

DP: Is it something that could happen?

B: I do, yeah. Definitely. And I think because I’ve looked at some of the [subject] evaluations that have come through and the negative ones in relationship to the workshop have been, “Oh we wanted more content; we wanted it contextualised.” And I’ve resisted that in the past but I’ve thought no, if we’re going to be asking all the students to go and run this workshop, we can make it contextualised. We just need to open our doors to whoever’s running the workshop and say, “Hey look, be a part of the planning and the thinking,” so you can say to them, “Look, this is what you’re writing about.”

DP: Yes, yep, and some of our most successful examples of where that’s happened that you’ve had that collaborative relationship […]

B: Yes, well it does make – it saves the students having to take an extra step in their understanding. It’s one thing to say this is how to write an assignment, but if you can actually - and this very much reflects my research - the two things that students are dealing with in writing is the conceptual understandings about the topic and then the procedural understandings about the topic. How do I actually write about it? Now, if you’re just in LAU just dealing with the procedural stuff, the students still have to get their heads around applying that procedure to a particular topic, that might be a good thing or a bad thing, but if we’re really trying to look at scaffolding the whole experience of the students, if there’s that collaboration between the LAU and the academics we can do that for them as well.

DP: That - I guess that’s something else that I was going to raise in our discussion was this from the students’ perspective. How do you see them at the moment, you know, moving from using the activity system sort of theoretical framework, the activity system of the faculty or the school to the LAU and to the library. Do they see it as very disjointed? How do you perceive the student experience?

B: Well, I think that generally they would see it very disjointed, absolutely. It’s fractured and I don’t think they can – they see the links between the services that are being offered. We tried to change that this semester with the workshops that we ran and we did have opportunities during the lecture and the tutorials to actually refer them back to that thinking and to say, “You know, think back about what it was you were looking at in the LAU workshops when you were trying to get a structure to this. We want you to synthesise the understanding so how are you going to do that? You know, what’s the framework that you’re working on here?” So I think that that’s what needs to happen more. And that was accidental and incidental and very serendipitous. And if it’s going to be more meaningful for the students we need to make sure that it is and it’s planned and it’s interact - integrated.

DP: Um, what I wanted to ask you about now is perceived contradictions or tensions between the work of the LAU and the faculty or the school. Do you see, we’ve talked about the differences and we’ve talked about the student experience
in that it’s essentially fractured for them from one to the other there are ways of maybe changing that but are there contradictions or other tensions between our practises that you can think of? (Tape stops)

Interview with Academic B, 16th November, continued...

B: I’m sure that there are and I’m sure that the students would see that. I’m sure that they would come from lectures and tutorials on assessment and say, ‘Look you’ve got to do this.’ Then they’ll go to a workshop on writing and there will be a totally different emphasis on what it’s all about. I guess the interesting thing would be whether the students actually can see that there is a contradiction, as well. Or whether they’re just grappling with all of these sources of information that they’re accessing and, correctly or incorrectly, making judgements and decisions about what they’re going to do based on LAU information, which may be conflicting with the lecturer’s expectations for the task. I mean, it just gets down to simple things like the personal “I”, the personal voice. It can be as simple as that. And if you’ve got someone in LAU who will say, “Well I can’t answer that.” You’ve got to go back to the lecturer. That again is another problem for the student. Do they? I guess there’s other things, like documents, criteria sheets. How are they all set up in providing a framework for the student to write and do they compliment or contradict what’s happening in terms of the process orientation with LAU? In many cases with the criteria sheets, 80% of the information on it is skills, conventions, and mechanics of writing. And that’s not dealt with in the LAU. So that, rather than being a contradiction, may just be gap.

DP: It’s interesting you mentioned the study guide, the subject outline and the criteria sheet because in mapping the unit as an activity system, that, to me, is certainly one of the tools that we use. That’s how we get a grip on what the task is all about and what it is that the student is faced with. Sometimes these tools are very helpful. Sometimes they’re non-existent. Sometimes they’re very difficult to unpack and really creates a challenge for the Adviser in trying to advise the student.

B: It almost becomes an impossible task for the Adviser. How can you really know what’s in the mind of the academics out there? When you are dealing with fifteen students a day who all come from a different discipline or different subject even, or, to make it even more complex, tutor, within a subject. Because that’s what it gets down to, is that each tutor raises different expectations.

DP: Exactly. And students who are studying four subjects, with four different tutors, four different sets of expectations in many cases. It creates a really difficult interpretation experience for them, because they’ve got to try and interpret the demands.

B: And they’ve got two people’s demands that they’re interpreting. The Adviser, as well as the lecturer. I think that going to an Adviser would be a very positive effect for the student in terms of clarifying their thinking and their understanding. There would be much more congruence, rather than lack of congruence in what’s happening across the subjects. But that’s always the worry.
DP: I guess one of the things that you’ve mentioned which is really important in terms of our practice is the assumptions that we make and then how we relay that to the student. I mean, you used the real example of the personal “I” in terms of voice. Realising that there are all sorts of perspectives on that as there are with referencing, as there are with all sorts of conventions of writing. So it is important, it’s a very practical sort of issue that the Advisers need to continue to reflect on what they’re doing and be clear in their minds that they’re not misleading or misguiding - unintentionally or not.

B: Yes, I think they are then in the danger of being wishy-washy by saying, “Well, I don’t want to advise you here, go back to the lecturer!” So what good are you doing if you are not in the position to say, “I think that this is what you should do.” And if you’re not convinced that that is right, well then you need to. I think you still need to be able to give some feedback to them in some way. Those assumptions that you talk about, one would have to expect that the Advisers have got certain skills and talents in being able to make those judgements themselves that probably in most cases are correct. It’s only in the rare case that there’s a problem and then you have to deal with it. But I wouldn’t like to think that they were going to make changes in their practice, based on fact that there maybe a lack of coherence, or tensions and conflicts that are going to occur. I think that they need to advise, and they need to take a position, and then qualify that in some way.

DP: Just in conclusion, you’ve already made a number of suggestions in terms of ways of making the student experience of interactions with academic staff, Learning Advisers and we’ve touched very briefly on the library. Are there any other suggestions that you can make about improving our practice?

B: I think you’ve got to start working with these academics. I think that you know what you need to do. You’re liaising well with the library and maybe you just need to be a little more proactive in the work that you’re doing with the academics. I think it is establishing a particular status or identity within the unit as an authority in an area that the academic can trust and not be seen to be either abrogating responsibility or saying “I don’t know anything about this, you help me out here.” I think they may place barriers from the academics’ use of the Advisers. So I do think that if this system is going to work - and I’ve seen how it can work. And it can work powerfully - we need to be far more integrated as a university. And that’s been an issue for everybody, not just across areas, but even just within the four subjects that are being run across a semester. I mean, one convenor doesn’t know what the other convenor is doing. So, if you’ve got one convenor who is using the Learning Advisers to run ten workshops for all those students in that semester, maybe the other three convenors should know that that’s happening. That then can facilitate a much more integrated use of that large investment of the Learning Adviser’s time. So I think that everybody just needs to talk more. And if I’m asking the Adviser to run ten workshops on teaching students how to write a literature review as third year students, then a) I need to know that in first year they all went to the Learning Advisers in [...] 1 to learn how to write a particular teaching theory statement, and that b) in second year another convenor used the advising system to focus on something else. So they’ve had these accumulative experiences. Now I don’t know if that happens very often in faculties, but I think it’s going to happen more. I see it happening
far more in my work now. So if it’s going to be coherent and have an evolving, spiralling effect, a cumulative effect, then we need to have that longitudinal sort of understanding as well as that lateral.

**DP:** It takes us further and further away from that reactive, remedial ...

**B:** Yes, it becomes highly proactive. And we can have a long term plan and we can say, “Well look, these three subjects are offered over four years and I need you in the first subject and the third subject.” It’s the same students you are going to be working with in […] or […] in the second year. So I need to talk to the academic there as well and say, “What’s your problem? What are you trying to solve here? You’re already solving a problem that I’ve already got as well.” So that’s great.

**DP:** It’s more holistic, isn’t it?

**B:** Because we don’t want to overkill with the students either. I mean if they’re being sent of to the Learning Adviser workshops as first years and second years and as third years in five different subjects, it’s not going to be good use of time and resources.

**DP:** You’d end up with a great deal of resentment, I would imagine. Particularly if there’s not a sense of collaboration or discussion about how this develops. Well, B, thank you very much. Is there anything else you want to add?

**B:** There needs to be a change in the culture of the academics. They need to understand more how they can build on those resources out there. I’m just starting to see that potential. And then I’m starting to recognise what a huge drain just I am going to be on the resources of the library and the LAU. So, if I’m going to be that sort of a drain, I’ve got to make sure that it’s not just a subject thing that we’re looking at. That by the time they’re in third year and they’re looking at a literature review for me, they’re probably looking at that sort of writing in a range of other subjects. So we need to look at bringing in all those academics and we need to have a meeting where we all sit down and we can maybe set down a fairly generic workshop on that where the students are actually being specifically told, “In this subject when you do, this’ll be the content that you’re dealing with and so you may need to change it accordingly.” But you’re killing a dozen birds with one stone.

**DP:** Well you’ve just mapped your challenge for the next year or more!

**B:** Next semester is going to be such a nightmare. But I really did think that this semester was good. I thought it was the beginning.

**DP:** It’s great.

**B:** And we don’t have any evidence yet, but we’re starting to mark some of the stuff and I think that that liaison between the LAU and our three subjects was very powerful.

**DP:** We’d love to have some of that evidence once it’s available.
**Interview with Academic ‘C’, (Arts), Griffith University, 16 November, 2000**

DP: Thankyou very much C for agreeing to be part of my research project. I’ve already explained some of the background to the study and I wondered if you could start by describing from your point of view what you see as the role of the Learning Assistance Unit.

C: So, we see the role of the LAU as being crucial to assisting our students with coping with entry into university. We see our role as to assist them with that entry and success within their course, but certainly the role of the LAU not only to assist in orientation of the students, but also to support them. Particularly in the first semester of study - it’s really crucial.

DP: When you think about the work of the Learning Adviser and I know you’ve had a number of opportunities to work with the Advisers here. What do you think motivates their work? What’s the purpose of their work?

C: I guess they must have a desire to see students succeed in the academy. They must have some sort of empathy or report with students and that’s students from a whole range of backgrounds - age groups and ethnicities and so on. So they have to be culturally sensitive. They have to be age sensitive. It could be quite stressful, I would think, because a lot of students come with a lot of other baggage as well. I guess you would counsel them the same. They’re not counsellors. There are counsellors. You refer people to them for that but very often people won’t go straight to a counsellor, they might come to a Learning Support person. So I think it’s a difficult role because you are walking a tightrope at times with people who can be quite emotionally upset or have major social problems, like a lot of ours do with their families, which is affecting their performance, but they’re not necessarily seeing that that is the case. A lot of students will blame themselves for not being able to understand, or not being able to get assignments in on time, without actually thinking about all the different aspects that impinge on that. Things that they may not really have much control over. I think one of the things a Learning Support person must be able to do is to almost enable the student to put things into perspective. To say, “Look, this is what I need to do and these are some of the external issues that effect it.” There might be internal things as well. I think it is very hard to have to do that for students.

DP: When you think of how you’ve described the role of the Learning Adviser and you think about the Unit - because I guess activity theory is interested in the collective practice - when you think of the practice of the Learning Assistance Unit and the faculty or the school, do you see overlap? Do you see contradictions? Or do you see any tensions or potential between what we do and what you do?

C: No. I don’t see that there is any tension there at all. I think that in the past, because I probably came here around ‘93, there wasn’t the amount of support available at that stage and I found that I was doing a lot of the support for our students. In fact I don’t think we had a person on campus, it might have just been yourself. I found that fairly stressful because we were having to do that on
top of our ordinary teaching as well. In fact, it was probably with […] and myself putting in a report about that it may have galvanised the university to actually do something about it. So at that stage probably it was very stressful. But I think that was because there weren’t the bodies there. But I think over time that we have very collaborative arrangements, and that what we do is very compatible, I think. Certainly from my perspective or the position that I come from, I think would be very similar to the position of most staff. Even to the way that we present. Last year when (refers to Academic B by name) was working with us, we looked at each other’s material and said, “Well it’s almost identical.” So we were coming from the same position. I think that way it’s great.

DP: In terms of the students’ experience of coming to someone in the faculty for advice and the interaction that they have within that system, and then going to the LAU and then the library, how do you think students see that experience?

C: It varies quite a lot. Some students are frustrated because when they want to seek help, they want it now. They don’t want to make an appointment in a week’s time or whenever it is. Some of them leap up and down and say, “But why aren’t you there?” Others I think have had a very valuable experience. It’s been very helpful for them to go along. I’m not sure how they see the Learning Assistance Unit actually relating to the library. Not all of our students actually visit the library. They probably aren’t aware of what they could use it for and how helpful it would be. Similarly with the Learning Assistance Unit as well. As you know… did the survey this year and it wasn’t a huge feedback, and it was fairly variable feedback that we got. But out of that and out of our awareness that students don’t use the library as well as they might, from our end, in collaboration with your unit as well, we’re actually putting into place firmer partnerships for the beginning of next semester.

DP: Are there any strategies or suggestions that you have for improving that experience that students have in working with those three key areas?

C: We’ve been concerned that some students appeared to drop out. What we are trying to do is identify if there is a key period of time where they’re really at risk and will drop out. Also to try to follow up students who may have submitted a first assignment but then don’t go on and submit any other assignments. We haven’t really got a large enough sample really to be able to do anything really valid. It appears obviously that they are quite vulnerable at the beginning and if they get some feedback that they perceive as being negative, or they feel they are not getting enough support or whatever, then they’re going to drop out. So, […] and I have been working on - I supposed it is three-pronged attack in a way. First of all we’ve identified two subjects that we consider as being core subjects within the course of […] which is one of the ones I teach –[…]. Because I build in a lot of the learning strategies on how to write and so on. And also the […] as a foundational subject as well. We’re trying to give them as much support as we can really in those two subjects, early on. Suggest they do them first as a way in to the other ones. We’ve also been talking to… about how we might do more with the orientation. Because our students have an orientation separate to the (refers to faculty by name) at large. We’ve always had a study skills component, which is varied between one and two days. We will certainly continue with that, but what we were thinking of doing is we’ve also engaged the Learning Assistance Unit to come along and help with that. This time what we’re looking at is yes, having
that, but on the second day to take it turns of an assignment all the way through. So we’re actually going to get them to start looking at what the question is and so on. Now how are you going to find the information? So they’re actually physically have to go to the library to do researching and so on to get them engaged in all of that, to come back and start unpacking it. Well what are you going to do with all this now? And so on. So you follow that through as a day. Which we’re hoping will get them involved with the Learning Assistance Unit, with the library and with us, so that there is a triangle effect there. We’re also talking about having a workshop maybe. We have to think further about this. But in the first two or three weeks, (refers to Learning Adviser A by name) will put on an initial workshop specifically for our students - probably late afternoon because a lot of them come in the evening - so that they know there’s something specifically for them. From there we might be able to get individual appointments if they want to. So that’s what we’re planning for next year and we’re hoping that way, that all of us are going to be able to do what we can for our students to get them going. So they know then where to go to for assistance, because they’re familiar with the library and so on. At the same time, being realistic, we know we’re not going to catch all of the students because not all of them come to orientation or come on campus. We try through the materials that are sent out, to make them aware of what’s available on line. With our subjects on line there are links to your website. And also to suggest they send emails or do something that way. We’re doing what we can to try to get the students to engage in this process.

DP: And making explicit the links between the faculty and the school and the unit and the library.

C: Which is just seen as being part of being here. You can come to us, you can go to them, you can go to the library and so on.

DP: Thank you very much for sharing your insights. Is there anything you want to add before we finish off this interview.

C: No. I think it’s really great that we have the opportunity to work together because we all have these students’ interests at heart. And the more support we can give each other than the better I think.

...............Tape turned off

...............Tape turned on

C: An increase in the number of overseas students. And although they theoretically have the relevant English language levels, a lot of them are struggling. And we don’t have the time to give them, that they actually need. It’s an area that I think we’re going to have to address - what support is given to them. It’d be limited to how much time you’d be able to spend with them as well.

DP: It’s a really difficult issue and often extra English isn’t the answer.

C: It’s ...... immersion and it’s a cultural immersion as well. Some can be very demanding, on the doorstep all the time, wanting answers for this that and the other because they’re used to directed learning. So to try to sort of disengage and make them become independent is one issue. Another issue is really to try to bring their written expression up. We encourage them to form networks amongst
themselves and also with our students too. To develop learning support groups.
But we can’t keep facilitating that.

**DP:** No. They need to be self-directed. It’s a strategy or a point that we
emphasise too. Your peers are your greatest resource and they’re usually much
more accessible than anybody else. We’re here but you need to develop that
study group, learning community sort of approach.

**C:** I’m nervous that this is going to be throughout the faculty I would think.
That would be increased number of these students. Whether or not there are still
students. There used to be students in the ... linguistics who would take on - as
tutors - overseas students.

**DP:** As paid positions?

**C:** I don’t know whether they were all paid, there might have been .... I gather
- this needs to be checked up - but a lot of the ... linguistics people are overseas
students themselves who are students themselves, who are doing this as a course.
Perhaps at the masters level.

**DP:** So these are the people that were doing the Saturday morning through
(refers to academic staff member by name). I didn’t realise that shift in profile.

**C:** It may be something to pursue. I don’t know whether that is still the case.

**DP:** Because we certainly have in the past used that as a referral resource.
There are these classes on Saturdays and I know at the beginning the focus was
really a community, almost like a conversation group. But they realised early on
that they were getting an increase in the number of students who had specific
needs, so they were trying to tailor the classes a bit more to meet those needs.

**C:** A lot of them need specific instruction and it might be just to increase
speed in reading. Or it might be a specific instruction on how to write a particular
way.
**Interview with Academic ‘D’, (Science), Griffith University, 27 March, 2001**

DP: D, thankyou very much for participating in my project. I wonder if I could ask you to start by explaining what you think the role of the Learning Adviser is?

D: The people actually involved in the LAU for our side of the (refers to School by name) is to be able to present tools of information to our students that will help them get through the rest of their degree and hopefully set them up in future in their careers. We’re just looking for the basic generic skills. This is the subject that we’ve got the LAU involved is Generic Skills. And we’re looking for those basics of generic skills that, although we practice, we’re not involved in the teaching of them. That’s why the LAU has been helpful in that regard.

DP: I’m interested in what motivates the work of the Learning Advisers. So I know from talking with my staff that you’ve been involved in the actual classroom context where they’ve been, so I wonder if from your perspective as an academic staff member, what you think is motivating the work that they do?

D: The enjoyment. They seem to enjoy what they’re doing. All of them, so far that I’ve met. The feedback that they get from the students. The feedback they get from the lecturers. That would cover it from the side that I’ve seen.

DP: How did the students react and respond?

D: Differently with different people. I’ve seen some of the people from the LAU get a better response than some of the other ones. They also act differently when I get involved. I have met all the students through demonstrating in laboratories, rather than through lectures. So I seem to have a closer relationship with the students than a lecturer-student relationship. I think that the LAU people, when they come in, also have that lecturer-student relationship, rather than that little bit of closeness. Although we’re calling them workshops, it’s not a lot of hands on and at the moment, it’s not a lot of information coming from the students. It’s a lot of information going out to the students. Whereas I think when I start speaking I think they play a more informal role, because they know that I’m not that formal. I haven’t got that “Lecturer” title, yet.

DP: You mentioned how you’d seen them respond more positively to some advisers than others. The personality is not important, but were there particular strategies or reasons why you think they responded better to some and not to others?

D: It might be the content. Some of them have trouble because some of the workshops are very dry. A lot of them tend to think “I already know this because I’ve already done this all the way through High School,” so they tend to switch off. I have noticed different teaching styles affect the way it is. I think that if you brought the same teaching style into some of the workshops that do have that problem, you wouldn’t have as much of a problem. You’d still have that “I already know this,” but I don’t think you’d have as much. Some of them are very fired up. They get up and jump up and down. That’s wonderful and the student’s really react to it. But some of them are methodical in what they’re doing and they make sure that they follow the line all the way through, and that tends to be very
dry. Even though they have a support person there to bounce ideas off of and to jump up, and I’m there to bounce ideas off and jump up. If they go through that methodical “This is the way we’re going to do it” sort of thing, I think it becomes dry for the students. Although the other presenters do go through each section, they tend to involve more examples and try to get more feedback from the students.

**DP:** So, feedback, examples, enthusiasm, they’re the sorts of things.

**D:** And asking. Not necessarily asking the students but asking the other person, or asking the lecturer, that helps too. It breaks that focus on the one person as well - the visual focus and the hearing focus. It allows the students to go off in another direction.

**DP:** How do you think the students are interpreting the Learning Adviser coming into the discipline area?

**D:** I think because they’re first year students, they’re very accepting of it. I think if we tried to do this with fourth year students, we would have more of a problem. Although fourth year students tend to be a little more mature, and tend to give and accept a lot, I think fourth year students would say, “Well you’re not a real lecturer” or “This is not really what I need to know”. Although we have had a lot of fourth year students saying “Why didn’t we do that subject?” and “Why didn’t we learn all these things?”

**DP:** The only […] students that I’ve really had contact with are in second year when they have to write an assignment.

**D:** Ethics!

**DP:** And they start coming in on their own - self-referral. Looking for strategies to write assignments.

**D:** We never taught them how to write. We never taught them how to present orally. Yet they’re marked on their writing and they’re marked on oral presentations. We’ve never taught them how to prepare for exams. We’ve never taught them how to read effectively or take notes effectively, yet they’re all basic skills that they need to possess. That’s why we’ve got LAU to come in for us.

**DP:** From what you’re saying, even from the feedback from fourth years, there is some acceptance by the student population that these skills are important. It’s not just us saying they’re important.

**D:** Yes. The fourth year students do know that they’re really important. I think the problem is that if we tried to teach the fourth year students, they would resent it, because they’ve already gone through three years without it. I don’t think the first year students have a problem with who’s coming into their classes, because they’re not used to who’s coming into their classes yet.

**DP:** Do you have any thoughts on the relationship between the School and the library, and the students and the librarians? We’re organisationally located within the library, and whilst it’s always been a unique sort of positioning, and most
study skills type centres like ours across the country are not in libraries. We’re, I think, the only one that’s actually physically located in a library. I’m just interested in what perceptions and thoughts you have about the students’ interpretation of the library. Do they go to the library? Some students boast that they’ve never been to the library and they still manage to get through their degree.

D: You’d probably find our students don’t go to the library until they hit Ethics, which is second semester, second year. Then they probably start hitting it quite hard after that because a lot of their work involves project work. But up until second semester, second year, they don’t do any project work, so, no, they don’t need to go to the library for book/journal information and stuff like that. They do hit the libraries earlier on because they have lecture material available in the library, but that’s basically the Reserve Room, photocopier and get out. They won’t be using the library prior to second semester, second year.

DP: So you’re not bringing the librarians in to run information literacy type classes?

D: Well, the students now do, in first year in Generic Skills, they now do the library research tutorial. So again they don’t have to go to the library, but they realise what the library has to offer, they’re taught how to look up different things, how to decipher different questions, how to use the referencing/catalogues down there, the World Wide Web. That’s a compulsory component of the subject. That’s worth 10% for that. So they’re forced to become more involved in the library now, than what they used to. But they still aren’t required to go into the library and look for something.

DP: So they’re doing all this work eventually within the library context, whether it be by remote access or physically in the library. They’re doing some work with the Learning Advisers and they’re obviously spending the majority of their time in the school or the academic context. I guess what I’m interested in is do students see this as a coherent, logical, experience, or is it all over the place, or is it connected?

D: I think they see it as another avenue that provides assistance for them in their learning. I don’t think they see it as a link between our faculty or our School and the library. I just think they see it as another pathway where they can get help. I think it’s great that they actually get introduced to the LAU people because once you know somebody you don’t fear going in and presenting yourself for the first time. I think they are introduced also to the other things that the LAU can provide. Same with the library. I think a lot of them aren’t used to electronic resources in the library and things like that, and by doing the modules, the library research tutorial, they’re introduced to another pathway where they can get information and help. Whereas before they wouldn’t have.

DP: So there are attempts to make it clearer. To demonstrate how these things can be drawn on to help them on their path to graduation and success.

D: Yes
DP: In terms of tensions or gaps in the work that the Learning Advisers do and the work that you’re doing, from the students’ perspectives and your perspective, do you see contradictions or possible conflicts, or issues?

D: No, I haven’t yet. I think a couple of times there were one or two things that were mentioned that we said we didn’t require or we didn’t do, so they weren’t brought into the units that were delivered. So, no, we haven’t had any of that.

DP: You’ve already mentioned some of the teaching strategies that seemed to be more positively received by the students. Can you think of any other strategies or things that the LAU could do, generally, to improve what it is doing?

D: A lot of their presentations are by overheads and we’re actually finding our students, especially in[...] because they’re so up with the technical things, a lot of our students are presenting, themselves, in PowerPoint and also expecting lectures to be, either in PowerPoint or something like that. I have lectures that have animations in them and things like that. I think students are looking for that.

DP: So an issue of presentation. Anything else?

D: No. I think the two-tag team is great. Having two people in the room. I think that’s a really good idea. And I think also having two in there is a really good idea as well.

DP: It’s a bit resource intensive, though, in terms of your time.

D: It is. But it’s easier than writing a lecture. It’s one hour, and it’s easier than an hour lecture.

DP: Is there anything else you’d like to add?

D: No, to be honest. It was me who discovered the LAU and I knew that we wanted to teach generic skills and I knew none of us had the skills to be able to do that, so I went looking. We didn’t know whether we’d have to pay for it or not. If I was the LAU, I’d be advertising that. The fact that Schools don’t have to pay for this. We were just astounded. We could get five workshops or five lectures and it wasn’t going to cost the School anything. It should be in every first year degree course.

DP: The problem we’re finding now, I guess, is sustaining that. If we get more and more requests, how are we going to sustain that with the resources that we have. Yes, the Unit is funded by the University. It’s very rarely that we charge. We run a fee for service course for students before semester even starts and that’s a purely voluntary elective thing that is open to the community, so we charge a small fee for that. Other than that, we don’t charge the faculties. It’s only if we are replacing the lecturer or the tutor. In your example, you’re there; it’s not as if they’re saving money by not paying for someone to be there.
DP: Thankyou E for agreeing to be part of my research project. Could you start by describing what you see the role of the LAU as?

E: My hope is that it has two roles. One is as a safety net for students as they make the transition into higher education. By that I mean as an enabling vehicle to help them make that transition to a new form of learning. And I hope is that it furthers the agenda of learning as a process within the University. In other words it holds up the value of understanding learning and the way students learn. Helping academics come to better terms with what learning means. It has a focus on students, but also a focus for the University environment on keeping the agenda of learning per se, as a process, more visible.

DP: Thinking about the role of the Learning Adviser, what would you suggest motivates the work that they do?

E: From observations of some of it, I think there’s a strong tone of helpfulness in that there are students perceived to be at risk or not coping or generally in need of help. Another tone I’ve seen is almost an intergroup role. By that I mean Learning Adviser as advocate for the student who’s the victim of the nasty academic who has given very bad assessment with poor criteria and “We’re here to show you that someone really does care.” So there’s this whole role about “We’re really on your side and yes we know they are bad boys and girls.” It’s kind of an intergroup tension that happens there. I often see it as a triangle which is set up between the student, academic and the Learning Adviser. Triangular relationships are often complicated things. Often they work on coalitions, two against one. Sometimes I wonder whether students play a triangular game in order to get what they want from either side.

DP: Interesting.

E: So I see a sort of pseudo rescue advocacy role. I see a genuine helping role. I kind of see a socialisation role as well. Inculcation or orientation - helping these kids cope with what’s going on for them. I often wonder whether that fades nicely into a sort of counselling role; a study skills counselling role which, typically, the University has put somewhere else in student services. But I think it may be more meaningfully placed in this context, where you are actually dealing with the phenomenon of how to cope with University, but using this particular piece of work - what does this say about how you study? So I think it’s a more grounded study skills counsellor role.

DP: Great. Just going back to your notion of the triangle, Engstrom uses that in this Activity Theory and uses it to map an Activity System. So if the LAU is a system so could the academic world be, or the faculty or the school be an Activity System.

E: Absolutely, yes.
DP: And there’s interaction that occurs between the LAU and the School, the LAU and the library - I wonder if you could look at both of those relationships and any comments you have about tensions or overlaps, gaps between library, LAU, faculty, School and LAU.

E: The University is in a constant state of confusion or ambivalence about this whole notion of centralised approaches to problems versus School based approaches. I think the LAU gets caught up in that dynamic. Academics, typically, are pretty much grounded in their own discipline and in that profound sense of autonomy. So they really run on a pretence that they are actually their own mini university. The School as University. “We only have to belong because, well, we have to. But really we’d prefer...” So there’s that kind of isolationism that often goes on in Schools. Often with individual academics within that. So, central admin and places like the library are seen as necessary evils. So within that context of academics being profounding ambivalent about centralism versus their own patch, I think the library does a reasonably good job of staying out of that dynamic. Because it provides a profuse service, doesn’t it? “We’ve got this bundle of resources and you can access them as you wish, and we’ll help you access them.” But they don’t actually get involved with the dynamics through the assessment or those sorts of issues. In other words, they don’t get involved in the main game of learning. They support the main game of learning in the library, whereas I think the LAU probably is more involved in the main game of learning, because they actually get involved with helping kids with assessment and that sort of stuff. So, I think that there’s the perception that “What the hell is the LAU doing in the library because it doesn’t quite fit there - because they are quite different activities and they’re quite different Activity Systems?” Although it is interesting to note that now we find the library being very assertive about the library tutorial, and wanting now academics to make that as part of their assessment. That’s been an example of tension in this School, for example, where one member of staff was approached by the library to use the library tutorial and the library suggested that they make it compulsory and assessable. The reaction was, “Hello! You’ve just stepped across the line here.” So you could see that the Systems were rubbing against each other in terms of what was appropriate way of thinking about them. The point I was making is that I think the library is following the LAU’s interventionist line. So I think in many ways it’s following that a bit. So I think there’s a convergence in ideology about the need for centralist agencies to get more actively involved and to get more involved in the main game of learning with the Schools. If that’s a Partnership Model, where “We’re doing this together, let’s work out a partnership,” but with this comes some overarching centralist, “You will do this,” I don’t know. There’s lots of stuff to be worked through there.

DP: That leads me into a question about your perceptions of the student experience in all of this. Dipping into LAU, dipping into library, being driven by the School and the assessment, having that discipline area as their chosen area of study, what’s the student experience?

E: My first reaction to that is an historical analysis, in that when I was an undergraduate, and I think probably the same for yourself, the model - for better of worse - was called “Self-Regulate or Die”. Either you learnt through your own devices to cope with the system and find out what the library did, no one would
tell you. You had to deconstruct an assessment question. No one gave you a list of criteria. University was seen as a form of Social Darwinism. We were able to weed out. If you couldn’t deconstruct the system it meant you weren’t‘t smart enough to deconstruct the system. I think that was probably part of the University’s service to you; to show that you really belonged. So that ethic was fine. It was actually seen as a part of the process. That model doesn’t generalise to mass education, because now we scrutinise dropout rates as if they mean something and blah, blah, blah. So, I think self-regulation is significantly espoused significantly more in the literature these days than it was twenty years ago. But I think we actively work against self-regulation in the way we help students. There’s a real tension there between dependency and independency. I’m not sure we’ve got that balance right in higher education. There’s a real danger that students increasingly are seen as consumers or clients and therefore we’re trying to provide coherent, customer happy type services to them, to keep them happy and get good CQ ratings and to make it a satisfying experience. But I’m not sure that necessarily equates with a transforming educational experience which actually helps them to become more self reliant, more self-critical and blah blah. So I think there’s some educational values that have to be teased out here.

We talk about generic skills. I think there are generic metavalues about what education is about. That the University might, if it thinks of the students as clients and customer satisfaction, fall into an unbalanced analysis of - really at the end of the day, what is it we want students to be able to do when they graduate? Ok, we want them to be critical thinkers and blah blah, but do you want them to be self-managing professionals who are able to be coherent in the way they approach a learning environment, deconstructive managers? Because that, in a way, is a metaskill for managing life. So if we make it too easy for them, have we really done them a service or not? So I think that’s the kind of tension for me. And that speaks to the role of any service group. How do you help someone, but not disable them in the helping process to help themselves next time? I don’t know. I don’t think we’ve got it right yet.

DP: On that, getting it right, what sort of things can you suggest that the LAU can do?

E: It’s the same as academics. I think educational philosophy. What is your guiding framework for intervention? Is it that you get satisfaction when a student who would’ve failed, now passes? Is that an indication of success? Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. Maybe that student only passed because they were given an artificial level of assistance that, once it’s withdrawn, doesn’t do them any service - that’s one question. One that you hear students talk about is the role that of social justice and equity in intervention. Student A didn’t get help, student B did - student B does better. How does that work itself out in the grading process in terms of management of opportunity and resources? It’s an imponderable question. But it’s an important question. What is the role of enablement versus help? The thing about .....(?) that speaks to what type of help. How much support one gives versus how much challenge. So when a student comes for help with an assignment question, does one use a Socratic method of interview that helps them tease out what they think is actually means, or do they say, “There, there, never mind, here are the three key points. Can’t you see them? I’ve highlighted them for you.” These are really important questions. Because in some ways academic systems are saying they want to challenge students to think. Students are then
interpreting that in a variety of ways, one of which is helplessness, another one of which is anxiety - emotion focused coping. They run to somebody who then says “Don’t worry, we’ll help you over that problem. Here are the three quick answers to it.” The student feels rescued and happy about that, but then, in a way, that process is subverting the other process. We haven’t got our shit together. But if we had a higher order set of values about, “What does this University really want to do with students,” it could work in partnership, I think.

**DP:** Grounding that a bit, could you just give me some practical ideas that you think tomorrow, or next week or next month the LAU could start doing to address this.

**E:** I don’t think there’s a problem. I don’t know how you guys practice, but assuming there were (tape scratch)... different Activity Systems and that things are pushing...

**Tape stop**

**E:** I think it’s to work out who you want to be partners with. And is it possible to be partners with students and partners with staff? Are there any tensions in that? It’s kind of breaking that triangle.

**DP:** Does it have to be either/or?

**E:** No, but most of those tensions get resolved either/or, because it’s easier. It’s the higher order integration of that tension that goes to both. Because we all have a shared system that drives us. I think that is the thing. And I think partnerships with other things like counselling services, because I think at the end of the day, you can still offer a coherent service to students, where everybody is saying the same thing, or compatible things if not the same thing, but which still encourages self-regulation and independence. But incoherence is not necessarily the same thing as teaching kids to learn to manage themselves as it can be quite disabling in its own way. One of the pieces of rhetoric is that student needs to learn to find their own way and it’s incoherent - but big deal - it’s up to them to work it out. That’s not really defensible, I don’t think, in today’s environment. I think academics fall back on that quite regularly as a kind of rationalisation of not having to make the effort to connect. Autonomy is a big driving thing that cuts through all of us. I guess what you guys are already doing - you’re exploring partnerships. I think that’s an important way to go. I don’t think it’s - do you want to be part of the main game, or do you want to support students as they go through the main game. No one else in the University really champions the cause of learning as you guys can and should do. GIHE talks about it, but it’s staff development or this that and the other. Really in terms of the felt experience of the learner, you are the guys that should be doing that and bringing that as a visible voice into the agenda. I think it’s about voices at the end of the day. So, yes, I see you as an advocate for the student voice in that. Without having to be the defender - everybody else has got to be bad in order to do that.
Interview with Librarian ‘A’, Griffith University, 9 November, 2001

A: Oh, right.

DP: So if we could start with your general sort of perceptions of, you know, what is the work of the Learning Assistance Unit and what do you see as the driving forces for that work.

A: Right, sure. Well I think the name Learning Assistance Unit really aptly describes what you do and your place in the university and I see the group very much as assisting students and staff. I don’t know whether the brief, you know, expands to staff as well but in terms of helping assisting probably mainly students with their progress through university studies. So it involves assisting them with all sorts of things, all the things that you advertise and which are very visible in terms of the courses like the critical thinking, research skills, writing assignments, all of those things and especially the workshops that you do I think in - at the start of the semester - the bridging sort of ones. I see it as a unit that’s really there to assist students with all aspects of their study and research and writing at university that’s mainly what I see the unit as on the other hand well the library is here to do a similar thing but it’s a more focused approach on information retrieval skills I suppose ah, the information literacy group tend to concentrate on assisting with the technology and the software, that sort of approach, whereas I see the Learning Assistance Unit as really helping students with that nitty gritty of getting down to taking notes, well attending lectures, taking notes and then assisting people in getting through their assignments, and well really the whole approach really in terms of all that preliminary um assistance you give when students just first come to uni and I think that’s carried out in your workshops.

DP: So when you look at the role of the Learning Assistance Unit and the Learning advisers and then the role of the librarians and the library um do you see overlap or do you see um tension or do you see gaps?

A: No, I don’t see tension at all, and I think, as we tried to do last year and this year to take a collaborative approach because I think a lot of the things you’re trying to do with students we’re also trying to do in terms of information retrieval and strategies for seeking and acquiring appropriate information to assist them in whatever they’re doing in the university work and the sort of things you’re doing I think they go very hand in hand with what we’re trying to do and in many cases we do overlap slightly as you see in the- you know, when we do the academic writing program together, it - we very nicely mesh in terms of what your advisers are talking about and what we’re trying to help students with in the library approach, the workshops, the demonstrations and so on.

DP: If I could just focus for a moment on the student and the trying to visualise the student who might move from speaking with the library a librarian and getting some advice, support and then going to a learning adviser or the other way round, how do you perceive the student experience? Is it as clear to them about how well we see ourselves integrating what we do or do you think it’s disjointed?

A: I…yes
DP: I don’t want to put words into your mouth but…

A: No, no that’s interesting, I really haven’t actually thought about it from the students’ point of view, but I think probably it’s not as visible or aware to them of the collaborative approach that is taken or could be taken further that I think the student sees us all as bits and pieces. I think - I don’t know, but if I just think about that I think really you know we send the students up to the Learning Assistance Unit when they come to us at the desk when they say “Look, I’m having troubles with um writing this assignment,” and we sort of pick up on that and say, “Oh look yep, we can help you with the information but the actual assistance with writing it, putting it together, you know formulating paragraphs and everything - best to make an appointment with our little drop-in session with the Learning Assistance Unit.”

DP: Yes.

A: So, I think they tend to see us all as bits and pieces; even though we’re all in the same building maybe we could make a more concerted effort to put things together as a package, but I’m not sure that students want that. Maybe they do see things in discreet compartments and they like to keep things separately, I don’t know.

DP: Yes. Well part of my interest in this study is how - what is the student experience say moving from what I’m using the theoretical component of ‘activity system’, so if the Learning Assistance Unit is an ‘activity system’, the library is an ‘activity system’ and the faculty and the student in…

A: … between all three points…

DP: … moves between all three of those what’s their experience? Is it something coherent or is it as you say, in bits and pieces? Are we confusing them even more, I mean do they, as you say, like it that way or is it problematic in that, you know, we might be repeating similar things? If, as you say, some of the work that the advisers do and the librarians do sort of overlaps in some ways, then are they being given the same advice or conflicting advice in the faculties if they approach the tutor or the lecturer for advice about a particular assignment? Again, is it a seamless experience, and from what you’ve said…

A: I don’t think so, DP, because actually that’s interesting - I think with the faculty we’re never quite sure. We refer our students back to the lecturer or the tutor to clarify some points where we feel we don’t want to you know wade in and give them the wrong sort of information and advice and I think probably your unit may find the same; you’re not quite sure unless there’s some kind of very close collaboration and a really good example of that was last year when I think it was Academic A did the with the (refers to School by name) and we all got together to start with all three were represented. The faculty member who was convening the whole course and I thought that was a really good approach ‘cause we saw what they wanted, what their difficulties were with the students and then from the Learning Assistance point of view you could say, “Well yes, we’ve had students come in,” and from the library you know from a retrieval point of view, getting stuff for their assignments, so I saw that that was a really a good integrated approach. But, generally, I think I agree with you, I think there’s probably these
three points and we’re not quite sure and we try to integrate with the faculty and I suppose that’s our role - liaison librarians. So we try and get as much in-class work as we can with certain subjects and topics so that it’s relevant and we’re getting the faculty support so that the students see it as being important, that they need to do it and I think we need to do more and more of that. So we’re not something over here - they go to the faculty and they go to their lectures or they get their lectures off the web. They see us as integrated more and I think that’s what I personally think we should be doing - trying to get a much more collaborative, integrated approach between library and faculty so that the setting of assignments and all the work involved where we assist the students and I would think also from your point of view which you do, I mean you go into schools and faculties and courses with particular topics and workshops and so on, but I think we need to strengthen that more so the student does see it’s all part of that triangle, I suppose.

DP: Yes, I’m trying to think about examples where we don’t have that visible sort of collaboration where we go out into the discipline areas and probably the things that we would rely on most heavily when a student comes to us for support is the criteria sheet. That would be one of - you know like the assessment criteria sheet and the assessment question are the things that we rely on as almost, you know, this is the lecturer’s perspective on paper, if you like, this is what they expect, so we don’t always have the chance to interface with them personally but we - this is almost like their written perspective. But sometimes that’s not always easy I suppose because some subjects don’t have that resource and if they do sometimes its not always clear anyway, so…

A: And we find that often there’s, it’s imprecise, it’s unclear what they really need to be doing and we often refer them back to their schools, you know to their tutor or whatever…

DP: So that’s probably an example of a tension or a contradiction maybe between the faculty and the library and the LAU.

A: Yes, definitely.

DP: I’m just wondering, can you think of any examples of - between the LAU and the library? Are there any …

A: Um, sometimes I just, just sometimes get the feeling that, hey, we need to be a bit more collaborative and I get a little tension feeling that maybe we’re trying to compete a little bit. Just sometimes I get the feeling or if we’ve been to orientation sessions I’ve suddenly thought “The Learning Assistance Unit should be here too talking about you know whatever, just little things like that I often stop and think, “Hang on, we should be doing this x together.” And so I suppose it’s not really much attention - we’re not really competing against each other we want to, you know, integrate and collaborate, but just sometimes I think it’s just simply because of the process we tend to maybe forget where there could be links to make it a more seamless process for the students.

DP: Yes. And I think it’s evolved and you’ve mentioned how we’ve started teaching the Academic Writing 1 workshop together but I think, you know, three years ago when the university decided to establish the unit we were all somewhat puzzled about how it was going to fit …
Appendix A Librarian A

A: Exactly!

DP: And suddenly you had us dumped on you and you’re sort of, I guess, it’s ah, it’s taken a while for us to unravel and I’m hoping that this research project will help enable that process even further, that we will find things or examples of practice things that we can, you know, things that we can improve and you’ve just mentioned two already in terms of orientation. In terms of, as you say, it’s not really competing but it is perhaps lack of clarity as to where expertise lies.

A: Yes, and also from the student’s point of view again, I think they - if it was more integrated they would see the connection and the flow, whereas sometimes I just feel there is that bit of tension that oh there’s these people and then there’s these people and they’re a little bit confused as to maybe what each role is.

DP: And probably that’s because we’re still coming to terms with it…

A: Yes, that’s right.

DP: We can’t articulate it clearly enough.

A: No, it has been an evolutionary process but I think it’s moving along in the right direction, so from - it might be interesting to interview a student from that point of view to see how they feel from their perception.

DP: Yes, absolutely. The plan in stage one is to interview five students, five librarians, five learning advisers and five academics and just try and tease out…

A: Yes, it would be interesting to see the academic’s perspective, too, but I do - did feel that that project last year with […] with Librarian D and getting everyone involved was really good.

DP: Yes, and it’s much more satisfying because you really do feel like you’re working together to achieve an outcome between all three units. And if we were to try and describe what that desired outcome is can you…

A: Um, well, I suppose it’s the student seeing that there are a number of units, if you like, within the university that they can go to and - but its all designed to sort of produce the final outcome, if you like.

DP: And which is?…

A: Which is a Griffith graduate that has all of the skills required for the lifelong learning approach and if you’ve got those three working together providing all of this input and giving assistance when necessary at point of need and working together and it’s to model, if you like, how you progress through and solve problems and come to the desired outcomes.

DP: Yep, so it takes us back to that bigger picture of the skill development.

A: Exactly!

DP: And the graduates and the skills development…
A: Yes, exactly and we can all three if were working together can contribute to that with that goal in mind of the outcome of the Griffith graduate.

DP: Just in conclusion, I mean, without putting you on the spot, is there anything that you can - you’ve mentioned collaboration, are there - and orientation as possibly a practical strategy that we can do something about even before the next orientation, but can you think of anything else that in a practical sense that might be implemented? I mean, I’m very aware that what I would be able to do as a result of this project is influence the work practices of the LAU and that might have ripple effects in terms of what happens elsewhere, but essentially it’s about me trying to find ways of improving the practices within the LAU. Can you think of anything, given the discussion we’ve had about collaboration and integration, any practical things that?

A: Um, maybe there could be a little bit of input say from the info lit and the library point of view at some of those initial workshops that you do or even, you know, just one of us there as a representative more or less saying, “Well look, you know, you’re covering a wide range of things here, there’s also this and this that we as a unit - that, you know, down the track, you might like to look at,” and especially, you know, with the software that info lit teach, you know, all of those skills and when they’re getting to the point of their assignments the need for being aware of all the information sources available to them. So maybe they see it there that there are these other units and we’re here to help, but at this point we’re concentrating more on these initial study skills and preparation for uni. Just as a practical thought that maybe and then that sets the pattern for when later on they want to come in…

DP: Yep, no that’s good.

A: So that’s just a practical thing.

DP: Yep, great. Is there anything else you want to put on record?

A: No, no… I just (Laughter) …I just think that all of your team are great, and I’ve enjoyed working with the team.

DP: Oh, good.

A: And ah, I think there’s potential, you know, for us to do more of these things and maybe have a bit more of a concerted effort to see how we can collaborate a bit more on those practical themes. But I think it’s all been very positive and I think we can, you know, just continue, and hopefully improve the access for the students for the sort of things that they need.

DP: And improve the experience that they have of moving from one area to another.

A: Yeah, and so they see us more as an integrated unit and with the faculty as well. So there’s support from the faculty too.
DP: And they’ve got some, I guess, notion of what their learning experience or the journey that they’re on…
A: …involves.
DP: That there are times when the resources and the support we provide will be of use to them at different points along that journey.
A: That’s right.
DP: Yes, yeah. Mm, all right, great! And now this is where we...(tape turns off) …they’re unclear.
A: That often the students, when they’ve -they come to us, they’re quite unsure - you mentioned a criteria sheet before - ah, my experience is that they very, very much - what the schools or the individual convener supplies to the students, and there’s not like a standard across the uni. That I think it confuses a lot students; some get clear directions, others don’t, so that when they come to the library, ah, or to you - I suppose you would notice it too - that there is quite a deal of confusion in the student’s mind as to really what is being asked. And that’s where I think you can help a lot by interpreting the questions and things. But often they don’t even have that. They don’t have a clear idea of what the assignment topic is and the lecturers and tutors don’t seem to - whether it’s the student who hasn’t picked up on it, and needs to go back and get it clarified - but there seems to be quite a deal of difference that’s between the different schools and I notice that with the post grads too, in terms of their experience with their supervisors. You know, as to how much assistance and help they get and direction and some are really good and others they’re really - I get the impression they’re floundering and in discussion with us and we try and help them in terms of where they might find information, and I’m sure they get some assistance from the Learning Assistance Unit too, and a lot of those things that they really need to do in their post-grad work, but it really does depend very much on the supervisor
DP: …I guess one of the ways we’ve articulated that, in at least in you know, forums and documents that I’ve been asked to well - what is the Learning Assistance Unit, that cryst… helping students to make sense of the learning environment and the expectations and then to crystallise their thoughts about the learning experience and expectations. It’s almost this translation of the culture, you know, this hidden culture that they’ve suddenly found themselves…
A: …dropped into.
DP: Whether it be under-graduate or post-graduate trying to, you know, translate that and make sense of it, yeah.
A: And that’s when I think we, the two units can really help there with them, but I think they still need that direction and if we had more input or collaboration with the faculty. Well then I think it makes it clearer for everyone then and the directions and the outcomes are much clearer for all concerned.
DP: This is a little bit off track perhaps, but I was just thinking - I mean, faculty librarians, it’s not a new position, I mean you’ve been around for a very long time, I mean um, what are some of the changes, I mean, were you much
more closely aligned in previous stru…sort of structures, or have you always been
sort of removed and had to make efforts to develop a profile, or…?

A: Yeah, traditionally I think here, we’ve been, and librarians are seen very
much as being in the library, but recently, or last year, even earlier, we’re trying to
sort of get ourselves seen in the faculty, and even having like a position in the
faculty – (refers to Librarian by name) goes over to […] and sits there for a certain
period of time, you know, each week and staff, faculty staff, come to her. So I
would like to try and do that too next year, but I think also it’s a matter of
logistics, depending on the number of faculty staff that you’re sort of serving the
needs of. I think I’ve got about a 150 so, it’s - you tend to have your core group
that you really liaise with, in the key areas, you know the large under-graduate
areas, any more than that it gets a bit difficult to really try and give that sort of
one-on-one service. So you’ve got a get much exposure in the faculty I suppose
so that they know we are here and they know they can come to us as well.

DP: And that’s a real problem to us, too, as demand increases - you’ve only got
a limited number of staff and resources. Um, the […] example that you used -
um, to do that every time – you....

A: Very resource hungry.

DP: Very difficult to do it, so we’ve got to look for other strategies working
together. I mean the advantage of that sort of program was that we were able to
access a lot of students at one time because it was in large lectures 450. So that in
itself - the advantages outweighed the time being spent trying to get together with
the academic and the library staff and the learning advisers. But it worries me, I
guess, as time, you know, goes on and budget stays the same and the resource
base. I mean, and it’s not realistic that we’re just going to multiply and multiply
anyway; and it’s the same with the Library.

DP: That’s right you are going to have that similar sort of resource base

A: Exactly.

DP: So looking for other strategies to um…

A: ‘Cause you really can’t…you create the demand and you really can’t meet
it. You almost become too successful and then that’s why we find we have to pull
back a bit, otherwise, you just can’t meet the demand as you would like to. So, as
you say DP, we have to get more efficient so that we spread the message and
we’re thinking in the library in terms of this means more and more web based
resources, so that people who are off campus and we’re getting more and more of
those students, where we put our energies into creating that sort of material, and
we’re more or less a - like a traffic direction people which I tend to feel
sometimes we are now too. We just want to direct people to all of the places;
make them aware what’s available. Now that could be done web-based rather
than person - face-to-face. But there’s always value in the face-to-face, as well,
certainly with establishing contacts with faculties.

DP: Yes.
A: And students too. They see you and then they know they have a name and a face and even if they ring you or e-mail you…

DP: …they feel more comfortable

A: They have the contact and I would imagine it’s the same at your Learning Assistance Unit - that they would like, at some point in time, students really like some sort of face-to-face contact, and reassurance and assistance. They found that at (refers to campus by name) that they really do need to have certain designated periods where students can come in. And I think they’ve carried out a very successfully that combined approach. That sort of student workshopy time, or I forget what they call it now.

DP: Common time.

A: Common time - where there’s Learning Assistance people, and library staff, and of course, they have the advantage of small numbers in all areas, and they really integrate well from our point of view. But it’s interesting that the students are still needing and wanting that face-to-face contact.

DP: Great. OK, well, thank-you again.
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Interview with Librarian ‘B’, Griffith University, 9 November, 2001

DP: Thank you, B, for agreeing to participate in this research project. I’ve
already given you a bit of background to the theoretical framework and
methodology, and what I guess I’m interested in at this stage is talking with you
about your perceptions of the Learning Assistance Unit and what you think is the
purpose of our work, or the motive of our work, and following that looking at
links between the Learning Assistance Unit and the work of the Library and
looking then to discussing the student experience. But we can get onto that later.
So, to go back to the first part, what do you see as the purpose of the Learning
Assistance Unit and the motive for the work that it does?
B:
OK, ah, purpose of the unit - at the ground level I think the university’s
purpose for the unit is to increase the success rate of students at the university. It
was recognised, I think, that there were students who were struggling; that in the
mass of numbers of most courses it was easy to drop off the bottom for various
reasons - with increased international students particularly, with OP scores sliding
in some degrees. Without calling it remedial work, which it isn’t necessarily,
there’s a recognition that some students come to university, for whatever reason,
without all the skills that are going to be necessary to get through the courses and
that the lecturers haven’t got time to give them the skills. So I would think that
the unit is set up at one end of the spectrum for that purpose. Ah, it’s more than
that though, of course, because you don’t differentiate. You don’t say, “Only
students that are struggling at the under-graduate level need apply.” You have
this picture of any student being able to come to you. So if it’s a PhD student,
presumably, who has run into some kind of a problem, it maybe that the Learning
Assistance Unit has the expertise to be able to help. Not - I wouldn’t think all the
time of course, and I don’t know, but I suspect maybe you’re feeling your way at
that end of the spectrum, that there’s probably a lot more literature and practice
recorded at the under-graduate level and when you’re dealing with a PhD there’re
all these questions of who’s really responsible for your student? Where do I fit in
with GUPSA and with the supervisors? And so on.
DP: Yep, yep, OK. When you think about the work I know that you’ve been
involved in, the library perspective and the Learning Assistance Unit, do you see
synergy there or do you see tension or gaps or…?
B:
Um, a bit of both. The tension probably comes from - because some of
what we’re doing really is very similar, I’m always wary of duplicating effort and
losing the student when you stand up and start talking to them and that they’re
glazing over because they think they know this already - they’ve heard it before. I
find in some of the work I’ve done with specific groups of students in the same
course - I’m thinking here of say the planning students in second and third year,
and where the session is far less structured - it’s not me up front, so much as it’s
me with the LAU people sitting around, more of a tutorial side, sort of
atmosphere, where what we tend to do is bounce ideas around. As (refers to
Learning Advisor by name) says, we model, in a sense, the sort of processes that
are involved in solving problems to do with information. That’s where we really
click - or for me - that’s where we really click. Maybe I work best in that sort of
atmosphere. I find it a little more difficult to work in the “you first, then me, then

Appendix A

Librarian B

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“ah” and particularly with time constraints because really, depending on the amount of time you have available, you can barely skim the surface of these sorts of things. You almost need to lead students through a practical exercise of actually doing the thing and having some success in going from purely a topic to actually laying their hands on some things, and that’s a time consuming activity. That’s an hour’s time in workshop just to do the basic sort of enterprise. That’s probably where some of the tensions occur - when you’re trying to do a range of things in one finite session with only a certain amount of time allocated and…

DP: Mm, and working with a group that’s not homogenous.

B: No, that’s right. That - they’re a difficult group. It’s one thing to be able to go into a session with a group of students who have some idea of the topics and have had a bit of time to prepare think about it yourself. You can still go in there and be very off-the-cuff and solve the problems as you go but when you go into a group and you could have anybody - it’s the same problem I found with trying to run workshops just purely called general […] workshops, where you could have somebody who was doing […] effectively - not really […] at all - in the same room as a […] person. They had - they’re just coming from completely different directions. You try and talk at a level which is generic to both, but in doing so I think you loose both in the end because they’re really wanting to deal with their specific discipline and their issues. That’s probably the same sort of problem we face upstairs, but I - from what I’ve seen - the LAU people seem to handle it fairly well. They are still dealing with generic issues, they usually try and deal with a couple of topics to sort of broaden the…

DP: Mm mm, but it is problematic, as you say, because it reaches a point where the individual student is having difficulty transferring sort of general concepts or general understandings to their specific task.

B: It’s a compromise between wanting to give individual attention, which we do through drop-ins and things like that - and you do too - and having to deal with numbers, therefore having to run sessions for groups of people.

DP: Just to go back to your earlier comment about the LAU and the library in some ways being on about the same thing, can you be explicit in what you think those overlaps are?

B: Ah, there’s an element about what the Library does which is purely about using tools and that’s pretty basic sort of stuff, and a lot people can teach themselves about learning the tools. More important to that, and prior to that, is this issue of understanding what the whole enterprise is about. Then, particularly, we overlap when we start talking about individual topics and how you deal with that topic because the whole process of preparing to do an assignment is the same process as preparing to research for that assignment. It’s the same thing and the research part is simply a section in the assignment process, so you could probably cover it just as easily as we could. We get involved because it’s a good collaborative thing. We have some insights that the LAU people don’t necessarily have or we’re up with the latest this, that or other, or something like that, but I guess for a long time we’ve basically been doing that introductory bit without some of the tips and tricks that the LAU people would bring to that part of the
exercise. I don’t think what I have found, in the collaborative sense, is that from sitting in on sessions and not just with the group upstairs, but also with the planning students or whatever, I found that useful to me and have found myself starting to use some of the language and jargon from the LAU people (Laughter) when I’m doing sessions with the other students.

DP: Unpacking the question…

B: Unpacking the question and mind mapping and… (laughing) - it’s brain washing! It is, isn’t it! Yeah, whether I’m using precisely as you would, I don’t know. It’s the same sort of concept. Yeah, I think that having worked with the LAU people is actually having an impact on my practice when I’m working with groups. I’m perhaps - I’m not sure how, but I suspect I’m approaching things a little differently to the way I would have previously.

DP: And similarly, I think the influence of having yourself and other reference librarians working with the learning advisers has had an influence as well. It’s certainly helping the advisers to think more deeply I think about the connections and about the links because I think there was a point, you know, some years ago, where people went, “Well, are there any links? Are there any connections? Well if there are, where are they?” Well, if there are, you know, we don’t see them, they’re not necessarily that visible to us because we’re looking at it from a different perspective, but I think the work that we’ve done, certainly in the last 18 months, has had that influence, that it’s starting to become more clear, that there is this real synergy there, that…

B: Yes, I think that when, for example, when (refers to Learning Advisor by name) would be talking with the […] for example about understanding the topic, for example, and brainstorming now what’s the topic’s about, my contribution, which she’d be aware of, but perhaps not place as much emphasis as I would, would be on the issue of defining your terms using appropriate literature; that there’s - you don’t just go to a general dictionary if you can go to a sociology dictionary, you get a far better piece of literature in a sociology dictionary and in fact you can use it - if it’s a signed article -you can use it in your actual assignment or whatever you’re doing. So that’s the librarian’s approach. We would perhaps, in a context sort of sense, we would come at a group like the planners who were doing perhaps what we would think was a sociology type subject on cities or something like urbanisation, and we would say, “Well, you’re dealing with the literature of…” and that’s the way we would approach it. You’re dealing with the literature of […], or you’re dealing with the literature of sociology, or broader still, the “Social Sciences” and there is this body of literature and certain aspects of - certain things are more important that others. If you’re doing sociology we emphasise that there are some major dictionaries and encyclopedias with articles by major thinkers in the field. You use those, you use the journals yes, but you also pay close attention to the books, because books are heavily published and so on. […], you talk differently. You talk about, perhaps more about the professional magazines, rather that the research journals. Or maybe you talk more about data books, and patents, and standards and things like that. It’s a different literature depending on the purpose.
DP: Mm, just want to pick up on the student experience of interacting a librarian, a learning adviser, and also the faculty, because they’re sort of the three systems that I want to look at and I’m interested in how the student perceives it. I mean we, I think as professionals, are still grappling with where our links are. We know that, as we’ve discussed already, that there are links and that we’ve been building on those, but what’s your perception of the students’ experience? You know, do they see a connectedness between all three of us, or do they see it differently?

B: Um, it would differ depending on which group we’re talking about. If we’re talking about a generic group coming to a workshop upstairs, I would say they would find trouble seeing a connection between their faculty and what we’re doing, because we’re operating independently essentially. It’s a drop-in - not a drop-in thing, but it’s a sign-up yourself; your own initiative. Nobody’s pushing you to do this, whereas, other extreme would be (refers to Academic by name) over in […], working with (refers to Learning Advisor by name) and I perhaps, we’re all sitting in the tute room. Now that’s a major investment of staff time on that group. You’d have to be blind not to see what’s going on there. You’ve got the lecturer-come-tutor basically putting their two bobs worth in at the same time as these other two people and one of them’s coming at it from a learning perspective and the other one’s obviously the library person ‘cause they (both laughing) keep going on about …

DP: Literature (laughing)

B: … databases and things like that. And they certainly get to - I mean I have a passing acquaintance now with a number of students that I see in the post-grad area, for example, through these basic workshops they’ve gotten to know me. I don’t know what the relationship ongoing would be with (refers to Learning Advisor) by name), or something like that, but certainly they’re more familiar with me and understand my role visa vie their studies. I’m there to help them basically, yeah.

DP: Yes, yes. And where that investment’s been made in terms of getting to know them, the links are more clear. A student that fronts up at the desk though…um…

B: Yeah, I’m not going to necessarily recognise all the people that go through those sessions, but they - well certainly some of them - feel that I am approachable in a social - more social setting. […] and have cups of coffee with them and things, and they have no problems wandering up and saying, “Oh, B…” and I wear my badge so they can remember my name. You know, “Can I see you?” or “Can I see you about such and such?” or something like that.

DP: So, is what you’re saying then that for those students it’s clear in their minds about what your function is? What the - you know, are they - do you think they’re consciously making decisions about, “OK, I need this sort of help, therefore I’ll go and see B. No, I need this sort of help, I’ll go to the LAU”, or “I need this advice, I’ll go to the faculty.” Do you think they see it that way?
B: I’m not sure about the LAU angle; I’m not how strongly that one goes on, or whether they think that. Whether they are seeing the LAU people as an on-going resource for them or whether they see that as a finite thing that happened in third year or whenever it happened. With the library, because their use of us is on-going, it’s a weekly thing. Ah, and because of my role as I projected is fairly much a problem solving role, I think they see me as a resource.

DP: So do you then make decisions on their behalf? For example where they come to you with an issue, would you make a decision that no, actually probably (refers to Learning Advisor by name), or someone in the LAU would be better placed to help you with that, or no, you need to go back to the tutor, or…?

B: Yeah, I don’t know that I’ve had to do that, but certainly that would always be at the back of my mind. I’d - if in the course of conversation it became obvious that their problem was really a writing issue or something like that, then sure that, because I know that the LAU doesn’t discriminate between, levels of students, I’ve got no problems with referring them on.

DP: Do you think that’s a shared interpretation amongst the library staff, or is that because you’ve had more contact, or…?

B: No, generally I think that the people I’m working with - well, I think that the library staff, librarians and others, who work in the contact area understand the LAU and are more than happy to share the load (both laughing) when it comes to work. So if - now if the - the trick would be whether, in the what we call the “reference interview” that we have with the person, whether it becomes apparent to the person who’s doing the interviewing, that hey, the issue is really - it’s not about finding resources, it’s about unpacking this question in the first place. Now we would feel a certain ability to help them to unpack, but at the counter itself, that’s a pretty hard thing to get involved with. It’s too busy for that and the low post-graduate level, while I do see some undergraduates, the tendency is not to do that sort of thing, not to set up special appointments and so on. Ah, most undergraduates would be dealt with at the desk unless they very specifically ask for me.

DP: Do you have any sense of say - of an undergraduate who you’ve referred onto the LAU, have they made it? Or, I mean, did they take that advice? Or, I guess one of the things I’m looking for in this investigation is problems or contradictions, or issues within our practice that, you know, that we’re not aware of, that maybe other people are aware of that we could be, you know, looking at. And I know from literature that I’ve looked at, particularly from the states - there was one interesting article called “Faculty referral - the kiss of death”. And it was actually about the faculty referring students to centres like ours and they never make it. It’s sort of like as soon as the faculty makes that suggestion then students just totally go the other way. You know, there’s no way. But my sense is that’s not what’s happening here. That in the three years where we’ve been in existence we’ve successfully developed a profile that students don’t immediately attach remedial to or, you only go there if you’re in - really desperate. But I’m just looking, I guess, if there are examples of where students have…
B: Mm, I can’t think of any specific examples at the moment. We’ve had undergraduate students - I can’t think of any postgrads. Most postgrads go away with so much (laughing) to keep going on …

END OF SIDE ONE

B: …yeah, yeah, most of the postgrads I wouldn’t - I don’t think I can remember any examples where I had to say, you know, “Well, you really need to go up there to see the LAU people,” but certainly with some undergraduates I can remember having, but they - some of them had real problems and I don’t know that the problem lay so much in an area that could be solved by help by LAU or by library, it was very much a personal thing. Maybe they shouldn’t have been doing the course in the first place; things like that. I certainly recommend LAU in my own sessions and, rightly or wrongly, I will often make - put great emphasis on the fact that the LAU is not a remedial unit. The LAU deals with - and if I’m dealing with an undergraduate group, I say, “The LAU deals with PhD students.” And if I’m deal - talking to PhD students, I say, “The LAU deals with PhD students. It’s not about remediation of any sort; it’s about helping you where you run into difficulty along the way, and you will run into difficulty because you are not Einstein or something you know, you’re - maybe you’re not (laughing).”

DP: Yeah, the environment is unknown and I guess there’s all those issues isn’t there. And you mentioned that right at the beginning about helping them to make sense of what’s happening here and what the expectations are, mm…

B: And when you get to postrad - no, at all levels, undergrads as well - one of the issues is, “You’re heading into a new discipline, most of you have no experience at this discipline before, even if you’re doing a PhD this is new ground for you. You’ve not done this research before. So you’re starting from scratch, and, how are you going to very quickly settle into the territory?” The library’s attitude is you need to get to know the culture of the literature of this particular discipline, which maybe different to other areas that you may have studied in. LAU compliments that because LAU looks at the process of dealing with the topics and developing strategies for taking a topic, whatever is thrown at you and pulling it apart so that, you know, if you don’t understand the question, you’re never going to write the right paper. So I think, to get that very basic thing right, but then also, you know, at the undergrad level in particular, taking you from writing high school papers, some of which are pretty dubious in quality, to moving to the university environment where the expectations can be quite brutal, depending on how lucky you are with your supervisors, your tutors and so on.

DP: Yep, yeah. In sort of conclusion, in terms of practical strategies is there anything that you can think of that, you know, the LAU could be doing more effectively or it might look to be developing in a different direction, or way, based on what, you know, what we’re doing at the moment and particularly how we’re inter -relating with your work, in the library work?

B: I think there’s a lot of scope, to work at some of those transition points. We’re already doing things at the undergraduate introduction sort of level. With those students, who identified themselves as having problems, we know from talking to people in the faculties that they are having problems dealing with the
same sort of issues - how to deal with the intake of undergrads at the OP level that they’re getting them; how to transfer them across into the culture of say environmental studies from high school, or wherever, or from coming back from breaks from study. They are struggling with those and with the generic skills issues, and generic skills are just so heavily across our two areas it’s not funny. In fact, it’s a great boon to us both that the university is putting so much emphasis on it. So how we interact then - I think that there is an opportunity to get away from, or not to get away, I don’t know - to take the things that have been happening with the generic groups upstairs and move into the specifics of the discipline. I - last year, I don’t know if it’s going to be, or this year, I don’t know if it’s going to be next year - I had two hour workshops with all 200 and something or other students in […] and I was crazy by the end of it. It would have been interesting to have split that two hours with a Learning Assistance Unit person and let them take much of the load of dissecting the question and stuff like that. Some of that was dealt with in-faculty. They were trying to – (refers to Academic by name), the contact person over there - they were trying to do a lot of that in house. Now, my attitude would be, you may not have the staff, but you’ve got the expertise, and should be somehow involved with people like (refers to Academic by name) in helping them to solve their problem of making the transition with these students from high school into university. And getting through the first year subjects to a stage where if they were to do an assessment of the standards of the students with generic skills in mind they would say, “Well, we’ve seen a real improvement in their ability to take topic, pull it apart, research some literature - not to PhD standard obviously, but, to research some literature, come up with some articles that are actually reasonably good quality articles, or some books that, you know, quite useful. Write a paper that’s more or less coherent, and meets our requirement for them to progress into second semester, first, ah second year, whatever it happens to be.” So the transition there is coming into uni, and that’s a key point with the bulk of students. The problem is the numbers, but by getting into the course as we’ve been trying to do with library, I think that’s where the success will start occurring because they’re focused, they’ve got an assignment coming up, they’ve got to think through their topic, and everybody’s behind us in the faculty ‘cause they want that to succeed. The more students they can get transition from first to second year the better for them. Other transition points - third year, where a lot of them are heading towards projects of some sort or other, probably also going into some sort of research project or program. If they’ve already been through a bit in undergrad, then that’s less critical, but for many it’s not the case and it’s a transition point. They come in to do their honours and they haven’t really got the research skills developed to be able to do it. Definitely PhD and things like that - the opportunity is there as well - it’s a big transition for most people. My view of how we should be dealing with information literacy and probably therefore also with the whole issue of, well, generic skills really and being a student at university, is that it should be dealt with in a sort of a whole curriculum progressively in the years and then with something into the research years. That progressive approach, I think the opportunity from what I can see, lies with generic skills and with getting the people in the faculty to develop this approach that says we don’t have to teach everything in the first semester, or in the first three weeks of the semester. We certainly don’t give them their two hours worth then kick them adrift, but we actually work with them, and in this subject here, it might simply be one question that they have to answer in preparation for a tutorial and the - to answer the question they’re going to have to
go to the library and do some research, but we don’t cast them adrift once again. We actually have, you know, maybe it’s a web page or a handout or something they can use in conjunction and they actually work through the exercise, they don’t sort of do it blindly. In this other subject here we might need them to get some key data to do this lab, or something science lab. So they need to become familiar with the data books in the library, or something like that. And we give them a list of the data books and tell them, “Go and find the […] in Australian dollars”. How am I going to do that? Here’s some clues.

DP: And so in that developmental journey with the students on, I guess in terms of developing their content and their skills knowledge, you see the library and the Learning Assistance Unit as supporting that - underpinning it, working more collaboratively with the faculty to decide on direction, or…

B: The key collaboration with the faculty is not always going to be between library and LAU. There maybe really good times when we can work together but there’d be plenty of other times where what’s more important is that a particular piece of assessment or a particular exercise occurs which doesn’t really require both groups involvement. But the important thing, I think, is to get the three way conversation going to help the people in the faculty who are the actual deliverers of the whole thing anyway; to get this idea that, you know, the best way that students learn is in context and not by some thing that you tell them to go to in the library. Students aren’t silly - if they can see that there’s some benefit in what’s happening, if they can see that the assignment will become an easier thing because of what they are doing now…

DP: Mm, but it’s making them, or helping them to be aware of ways of making the process easier isn’t it. Enabling them to link in with what’s available to make that process easier to understand and to deal with, you know.

B: Yeah, I think there’s lots of opportunities, probably more opportunities than we’ve got the staff to handle, and maybe that means we have to go to some sort of self paced sort of approach in some areas but, yeah, the learning doesn’t stop. There are all different ways of writing and in some degrees students will be expected to write in different ways. There are opportunities to focus on one aspect of the writing process at one point in time. Do a literature review and express your bibliography in the form that’s suitable for publication in nature. Well, there’s an exercise that’s, you know, in some respects it’s complex, but expressing it in the form of nature is fairly basic, but it’s getting students to appreciate that there are all these different styles and the different context. Yeah, and how do you figure out how to, you know, what piece of information am I looking for that’ll help me to do this thing?

DP: Mm, who’s my audience? What’s the purpose?

B: That’s right.

DP: Well, yeah, I mean, what’s exciting, I think, is that there is so much potential, and as you’ve sort of pointed out, the generic skills agenda is certainly I think, something that both our areas are very much key players in all that.
B: What we’ve got to avoid is the trap of thinking that generic skills have to be addressed generically, which is so much the way the library thinks.

DP: Yes.

B: What’s the cheap option? The cheap option is the mass audience, and then, where’s the mass audience? Nobody’s coming to our sessions. Why not? Because nobody wants to be dealt with as…

DP: As no depth.

B: … a blob (laughing). They want to be an individual and they have individual needs.

DP: Yes, yep, yep. And that’s where the faculty, as you say, it’s where it is all happening and it’s actually providing the impetus for what’s happening in our - both our areas. I mean, without that there wouldn’t be the need for the rest of it. So yes, we’ve got to keep that focused there and the links with the faculty are so important ‘cause at - you know…

B: Yeah, we can put an ad, as we have been doing, on the end of course outlines that says here’s all the sessions the library’s is running and the LAU’s running, something like that. How much better, if in that subject they actually are taken in hand at certain points by people who have either worked with us to see our approach, or who are actually from us and who are dealing with real exercises that really relate to their assessment and will help them to pass that particular subject while giving them the general skills that we’re trying to impart.

DP: Are you hopeful that we’ll ever end up with that model?

B: It’s very hard to see. See I deal with one, two, three faculties, about seven schools or something or other, eight schools or something. It’s just such a big exercise to go one. I’ve had an approach from […] to do something in first semester next year. We’ve - I’ve - I’m going to have a month’s holiday at the end of the year so that leaves me about six weeks at the moment to get something going for next year. I don’t know what’s happening with […] - they haven’t made their plans yet but the plan at the moment for them is to - as far as I’m concerned, is to do what we did this year but spread the load by me providing each of the people out here with the notes - the accessories that they can take in and deliver the session themselves. But, maybe there’s even more scope, talking with somebody like (refers to Academic by name) to bring the LAU into it and really spread the load some more. We would like to use our own facilities rather than the learning centres. The learning centres are fine but there’s too many interruptions from students. They want to come in and use the computers - it’s not ideal set up, you know, if we can use our own facilities.

DP: Yeah, and if there’s scope for that collaboration with the LAU involved we’re always interested in talking about those possibilities because, as you know, as you’ve already said, it’s that discipline imbedded - that imbedding it in the context and making it relevant to what the students being asked to do that makes the difference, and we know that, I mean, we continue to run a generic program
because that also has other benefits in terms of, I guess, students who can’t access any sort of advice or support. Wherever they’re studying, it’s not always easily accessed. There are also students who prefer to go somewhere where it’s neutral and perceived as not having a vested interest in their, you know, progress as such, or their assessment marks at least. Yeah, well, alright, thank you very much, B.

B: That’s alright.

DP: I’ll turn this thing off now.

B: …. record. OK, what I didn’t say in the interview before is that I find it much easier to work with some people in LAU than with others. OK, so individual differences do count in the synergy that occurs in the room. I find (refers to Learning Advisor by name) a breeze to work with and it is a real case where we just start bouncing when things - when we’re in a session. It’s not necessarily always that way though, and I don’t know what it is, I can’t put a finger on it but, it’s just some people you click with and others it’s a little harder.

DP: That’s right. Yeah, and even within the LAU team, and we do a lot of collaborative teaching. We have the same situation where some advisers work really well together but others find it more difficult, yeah.

B: So really, at the base of anything we do, you need to have some sort of structure. So that something occurs in the session. Even if it doesn’t sort of - even if it isn’t in an infectious session, which is the one that really catches the students’ imagination, there’s still some basic learning going on in that session.

DP: Yes, I think that’s - a responsibility you have as a facilitator, tutor, whatever role you’re playing, is that you’ve got some outcome, or intention for outcome at least. Yeah, yeah. Oh well, good! Thank you!
Interview with Librarian ‘C’, Griffith University, 10 November, 2001

DP: Thanks C for making time to talk with me this morning. I’ve given you a bit of background on the project and my aims. I wonder if we could start - if you could perhaps describe your perceptions of what the motive of the work of the Learning Assistance Unit is? Why do we do what we do? What’s our purpose from your point of view?

C: Ah, that’s a big question. I’ll try to answer as best I can. What I see the Learning Assistance Unit doing is working with students to help them to develop their academic and generic skills so that they can better - become better students so that they can use more explicitly the skills that they need to achieve all the various components of their work as students. So it’s nothing to do with the content of their courses, but more the skills that they need to be a student. Critically to write well, to present well, their assignment work.

DP: When you think of the work, particularly of the reference librarians, the faculty liaison librarians, do you see overlap, or do you see conflict or contradictions between the work of the Learning Assistance Unit and the library?

C: Um, there are some. Not intentional or sort of diametrically opposed ways of doing things. But similarly to the Learning Assistance Unit, librarians - when they’re assisting students are working on - working with students on their skills to do the various tasks they need to do in finding information. So, most of the librarians, are not, or mostly, are not trying to give students a ready made answer to their enquiries for assistance, they are more teaching students how to be able to search for information themselves - find it, retrieve it, save it, use it. So, in that sense it’s similar, in a way, you know, in the work practices. Where things might be slightly different is that occasionally with the faculty librarians - that we’ll go over into content as well, ‘cause the skills of the faculty librarians are to be experts in a particular bibliographic field. So they will know the databases the students should be doing, so they’ll be giving them answers in that respect, but still the focus is on helping students develop the skills. Sometimes the library staff are not nearly as explicit with students about what they’re doing though, and it’s more implicit. Whereas, I think, from what I’ve seen the Learning Assistance Unit doing, they try to make things more explicit to students.

DP: Yes. Can you think of a concrete example of that?

C: Ah, yes. OK, well, certainly in the courses that the library staff run for students that are working at a very operational level mostly, in teaching students to use the various databases and information retrieval systems that we have. They’ll be working at a very operational level and not necessarily highlighting to students skills that are behind that helping - not helping students to reflect on those skills. So that means that often the students aren’t able to transfer necessarily what they’ve learnt to the next context.

DP: Mm mm. As I mentioned earlier, one of my interests is thinking about the student experience. With a student, for example, seeking support or advice from a librarian and then going to a learning adviser and also interacting with an
academic in the faculty context. What’s your perception about the student’s grasp on all of that? I mean, how do you they see? Do they - is it a seamless sort of experience for them, or is it very disjointed?

C: Ah yes, I think - I imagine for students that it is fairly disjointed because, I think, in a way services delivered by the library - we run the reference enquiry desks, and students will go to that desk looking for personal assistance and as I said, they do sometimes get the direct answer to what - the content of what they were asking, and they’ll be told, yes, this is the answer, and they’re also given assistance to learn, but in terms of what the LAU does, I think, the LAU is much more focused on process and learning skills and will very rarely drop into the content side of things. Whereas academic staff teaching in that context of lecturing, it’s all content, you know, the sort of underlying skills are not - they’re all assumed. I don’t know if that really explains what I’m trying to get at, but I imagine for students it’s quite - I think that what they may do in a tutorial might resemble a little bit more what you’re doing in LAU and what some of the courses that the library staff run/provide, but outside of that there’s a lot of differences.

DP: Mm, so we’ve already tried, I guess, between the library and the LAU to look for links and ways of making it more connected for students. I guess we’re still grappling with that, but can you think of any other strategies or ways that we could - we could make it? I mean, one of the - I guess the intention of - certainly of the LAU and I think this is true for all of us - is to try and make the learning experiences as positive as possible for students and as relevant and as appropriate as possible. So if they’re moving between these three sort of systems or areas, and it’s not making sense in terms of where the links are, how can we do something about that?

C: Yeah, good question. Well certainly between LAU and library I see that there is a need for us in the library to take a more educational view of what we’re doing because I think that while students expect us to run the sort of workshops that we do, and we can’t not do those. We need to go that extra distance and start trying to take the - try to offer courses that will make more explicit to students what the skills are that they’re using. And I think with all of us working more closely with the academic staff, you know, towards imbedding more what we’re doing into courses, that helps a lot as well. I think it - the more we can work with academic staff, that we explain to them or work with them so that they understand what we’re trying to do, and we understand better what they’re trying to do, we can reinforce each other's approaches. I think if we had more staff to focus on the educational side of things amongst the library staff things would change there as well.

DP: Mm mm. Have you got any - in terms of when you say focusing on the education side, have - can you think of examples or scenarios that you have in mind, where you’d draw on that, or what you would change that you’d do now? Or would it just be that the people would continue to - I’m not explaining myself very well at the moment - continue to do what they’re doing, but do it with different understanding or a different perspective? Is that…?

C: Um, I think if we could get the staff who are already doing the training to take a different perspective, more time on looking at what underpins what they’re
The very operational side of things and we don’t look at the more conceptual side of things near enough and I think, you know, you could spend as much time as we do already on the operational side, on the conceptual side and make a huge difference - much more of a difference than we make at the moment. It’s just that we don’t have that approach to it and while students expect it, we don’t always have to do exactly what’s expected. You know, like I think, in a practical sense, we were speaking earlier about possible organisational changes as a result of focus on service, there could well be an educational unit amongst, or formed of librarians or educator librarians - a sense to what you have in LAU - and I think there’s a lot of reinforcing of each other’s approaches and skill areas that we could do. You know, lots of the things that LAU talks to students or teaches to students about can be applied through information literacy, like critical thinking, problem solving in information literacy; all those sort of more conceptual skills that students use without knowing they’re using. We could incorporate that into our information literacy program.

DP: Yes, and make it explicit, even though you would still have that operational component of the “how to” but it’s about the “why”.

C: And more.

DP: Yeah.

C: And more time on the “why” than on the how to. Whereas we just go you know, bang bang bang, this is the how, and, press this button, press that button and you walk away and you’ve forgotten which button it was and you don’t have a conceptual framework to remind you. So I think one of the issues for the library is that a lot of our training is done by our level five staff who do an excellent job but they don’t, I - it’s hard to get them to adopt a different understanding of what they’re doing. They have many other roles and it’s only part of a very complex role.

DP: Yep, yep. If you were to think about what you know about the learning advisers and their practice, can you think of things that we could be doing differently or problems in our practice that appear - that you’re aware of? Now we’ve sort of been focusing in on the library issues, but I’m just wondering, from your sort of perspective, if there are things within our practice that we could also be examining?

C: Um, that’s a little harder for me to say, but, I suppose one of the things that occurs to me is, in terms of us working with the academic staff, I think we could - and this isn’t necessarily an across the board thing - just when I look at what happens here at (refers to campus by name) I can see that we could do better in terms of working as a team when we’re taking our message out to the academics I think we occasionally even work against each other and sometimes we just don’t make the connections between what each other is doing. So a learning adviser will have a relationship with an academic group and that information could well be useful to the library staff and vice versa. And, it’s a very big part of the library staff work to understand what’s happening in the
Appendix A Librarian C

faculties and have that strong relationship as well. So I think we could do better
in that area.

DP: Yep, yep, OK.
C: It’s not a criticism but….

DP: No, I know what you’re saying.
C: That’s one area I think that would be the main thing I would say there. In
terms of working with the students and using staff to the best effect with the
students, I think LAU does a very good job.

DP: Mmm, mmm, yep. OK, well, I don’t really have any other sort of
questions or prompts but that just gives me an - and just as you were talking, I was
thinking about the other interviews, and there are certainly some themes there that
are already starting to emerge, which is a great relief (laughing).

C: That’s good, yeah, saying something different, but…

DP: I’ll be able to say yes, there was definitely some shared perceptions and,
you know, issues, particularly the one about collaboration in that three way sort of
process with the academic staff, the library staff, the LAU staff and how that
approach, you know - there are some examples of particular sort of initiatives or
projects that have happened where that’s worked particularly well. And it’s
worked well for the staff. The staff have got a lot more out of it, but also the
students of course, which hopefully is our priority - that’s our focus, I mean; that’s
why we’re doing all of this. So that’s a theme that is emerging, is looking for
more ways of bringing the three of us together and using one another, as you say,
to develop relationships and links yeah, yep. Great, well is there anything else
you want to add, C?

C: Um, I think, just as you were saying there, it’s just an extension of that
really - making sure that, well making sure that our message is going out clearly
to the academic staff. And that’s sort of taking that concept of us working in
closer together to get the message across, because I think academic staff have to
know the full range of what we can do for them. Now I have heard of instances
where, and you may heard of this too, some - there was a new academic staff
member […] who was wanting, you know, generic skills assistance for students
and didn’t know where to send them and people just kept saying to him, “Oh,
send them up to the library. Send them up to the library, and the person
concerned didn’t know why they were saying send them to the library.” Didn’t
sort of, cotton on to the idea that the Learning Assistance Unit is in the library.
And if we had a - like a generic skills education unit, which is you know, like
Learning Assistance Unit plus library - three of these in that had a bigger identity
it would do everybody better.

DP: Yes, yeah, the - it would maybe address that issue of seamlessness so the
experience is not so disjointed. There would still be elements within that structure
with professionals with particular skill, backgrounds, but yeah, the way they
interact with each other would be more closely aligned and linked, yeah.
C: I think, what you've been asking about is a very interesting sort of - you know, there's three styles of academics - what we do in the library, what LAU does, but if you add in as well what Student Services does, another philosophy where they have a much more pastoral role and that's a - you know, once again, courses that students may not be able to distinguish why one set of courses comes from here and another set comes from there. That brings in yet another style of assistance for students.

DP: Mm, and that - thinking back to the combined services forums, they were the sorts of issues that I guess we started to grapple with, was what are our commonalities and what are our differences and what does this mean for the student moving between all of these different services and elements.

C: Yes, and each one is sort of flavoured by its origin (laugh).
Interview with Librarian ‘D’, Griffith University, 15 November, 2001

DP: D, thanks again for agreeing to participate in my research project. I do have a consent form which I would have brought over this morning for you to sign, just officially describing the project and all of the clauses in there about confidentiality and your rights, I suppose, to exit the study at any stage or to ask for feedback about the project. So I’m sorry we’ve had to switch this from a face to face to a phone interview, but I’ll send that - well actually I will be coming over later today for the INS expo battle of the sections. So I’ll bring it with me, if that’s OK?

D: Yeah, yeah, that’s fine.

DP: And you can sign off on it then. So that’s just, I suppose, the legal side of it. But, we’ve already spent a bit of time talking about, what I was hoping to capture in our conversation this morning and I wondered if you’d like to kick off by describing what you think the role of the Learning Assistance Unit is and the motive behind the work of the learning adviser?

D: Oh, OK. Well, I’ve always assumed that the role of the unit was to support students who need help with how to study; how to take notes, you know; how to do all those things effectively and really well as a student that they need to know about to get through the university. Oh gee, what else can I say? Just how to be a good student in an academic environment and produce good work. But we get asked at the desk a lot about referencing and, lately with the [...] students who need that extra support, they look for assistance over grammar and those kinds of things and I think I’m a bit woolly as to where LAU cuts off in respect to tutoring students about grammar and reading through their assignment and helping them to correct their grammar and that kind of thing. Their vocabulary, that sort of stuff. And, I suppose, I don’t know that we overlap, except in the area perhaps of referencing. ‘Cause we do get asked, and we keep guides in the desk draw there that we can pull out and show to students to say, “Well look, you need to talk to your lecturer really about what styles they want you to use.” And, “This is Harvard, this is APA,” kind of thing and give it to them to look at and I have said to them that they can go to you people and get some help with those kinds of things if you want. So I hope I’ve been telling them the right thing. Is that answering what you’re asking?

DP: Yes, yes, yes, yep.

D: Yeah, and I’ve always thought that we’ve worked together really well. That no, I haven’t picked up any vibes where there are problems. I think the only thing I’ve seen as criticism, if it can be called that, from students is that they’re not there when they want you here and now on the spot. You know how they’ll find they’ve got a need this minute and it’s not today when Theresa’s here or something like that and then they get a bit fazed because obviously they’ve got to get this thing in by tonight or tomorrow or whatever it is. Yeah they - it’s just that they haven’t planned themselves very well in that respect. Yeah, it would be interesting to know why it’s at (refers to campus by name). I was really impressed with the presentation you gave the other day.
DP: Oh, thank you.

D: And yeah, I just liked the way you presented it, visually and graphically and then asked questions about why you got the results that you did and it makes it stand out so much better than just a set of figures. Ah, yeah, that was interesting. I …bit curious to know about that because it obviously means that there might be a role for the library staff here in more promotion or something like that.

DP: Yes, yes.

D: Not sure with that one so maybe we’re not working closely together enough if you get a result that looks like that for (refers to campus by name), but you get a really high take up rate on other campuses like the (refers to campus by name) and (refers to campus by name), yeah.

D: …Yes, with academics.

DP: … with library staff as well as academics, yes.

D: Yes, and I wonder too, with the (refers to faculty by name) here, they’ve always been extremely supportive of the students in terms of helping them with their assignments and that kind of thing and the students often go to people like […] for example, for a lot of help. And I wonder if they get perhaps more help from the academic staff that they’re involved with from this camp - or this - in those schools anyway, than perhaps they do from other areas.

DP: That well may be, yeah. Just on the students’ experience, as you know, my study’s using the framework of activity theory and looking at the unit as an activity system and the library as an activity system and the faculty or the - yeah, the faculty as an activity system and those systems have features such as tools that, you know, are used in the work practice. And there’s a community and there’s rules and those sorts of things. I’m just wondering, we’ve talked a little bit about the student experience, how do you think they perceive going to say (refers to academic by name) or another academic as opposed to going to the library to talk with a librarian or Learning Assistance Unit to talk to an adviser?

D: Well, a lot of the students here - I was talking to someone […] and his comment was really interesting. He said that the students […] are like babies and he has to keep kind of treating them like they’re his children and that kind of thing, whereas he’s never struck that in all the years he’s done a similar role over at (refers to campus by name).

DP: Really?

D: So maybe there’s something about the maturity level of the students, I don’t know. And I think they also bond more closely with some of the academics that they see constantly and (refers to academic by name) is certainly a really lovely person. I mean the students would feel very comfortable going to her. But I know that traditionally they have seen the library as outside the - like the
academic stream and the librarians as a bit scary. You know, lots of people say to me, “Oh, I’m afraid of librarians.” You know, and you think, well gee, I didn’t think I was all that scary. So maybe it’s something to do with the amount of contact or the continuity of contact that they have with different people involved in their studies.

**D:** And that - I don’t know how you would measure that. Probably it’d have be a qualitative interview kind of thing, wouldn’t it?

**DP:** Yes.

**D:** Like, talking to little groups of students, but yeah, I suspect that the age group thing has something to do with it. I see a lot more of the mature age people. They will far more readily put their head around the door here and say, “Hey D, you got a minute?” than the younger ones. And the younger ones who come to me like that have often been directed by one of the academic staff. It isn’t very often that they initiate contact and I don’t know that they’re even aware that particular librarians attached to particular parts of their academic buddies. You know, like […] and I share the […] people here between us. We’ve got a couple of schools each. Again, that may lead to some confusion ‘cause there’s more that one person as well and then again when they don’t have a lot of contact with you, that confuses the issue even more, I think. I don’t know, and perhaps the Learning Assistance Unit person is in a similar situation, where you only have that kind of intermittent, point of need sort of contact rather than an ongoing relationship that’s developed over a semester with one of the academic staff. I don’t know. … test that one out.

**DP:** Yes, it’s as if…

**D:** Yeah. And it would - I’d be interested, too, in what that means in terms of library people like the faculty librarians. Like I said earlier, I think what you find as a result of what you’re doing will have a lot of bearing for a lot of different groups, yeah. Don’t know.

**DP:** That’s a really interesting issue and I guess I’m interested in it as well. As you say from the learning adviser perspective, when we look at our statistics on an average, you know, we get about a return rate of two point five visits by the same individual. Of course there are other individuals who we see a lot more that than, but on average …

**D:** Yes, but that’s the average…

**DP:** …it’s about two and a half visits per person, and it’s not a very long period of time to really develop any sort of, relationship. So it’s almost as you were talking I had this picture in my mind of sort of students within that faculty activity system occasionally crossing the boundary, or poking their heads out and sort of maybe venturing into the library because they’ve got a need or they’ve been told that they’ve got to, you know. And it may be that for learning assistance it’s the
same, that it would be interesting to know what motive the students have for
seeking out library and learning assistance staff.

D:  Mm, I think one of the issues in terms of the library, and this is really
specifically related to people using the library, is that it’s so very complex. And
the other side of that is that they really don’t know what they don’t know. In
terms of - like they’re not aware of what is available for them to use on the whole
and the knowledge that they do have is confused and vague. It all looks so
difficult, and it is, it’s a big - a lot of concepts there that you’ve got to get your
head around just to be able to sit down and use electronic databases that’ll give
you a list of journal references. So I think there’s some fierce stuff in there as
well possibly, and they’ll avoid it as long as possible. They’ll only come to the
library in a lot of cases when they’re absolutely driven to it because the lecturer
said, “Oh, you’ve got to go and get some journal articles, you know, for this
assignment.” And they’ll expect - they’ll come to the desk and ask you so
innocently, you know, “I’ve got to get half a dozen journal articles for my
assignment, could you show me?” And they expect all to be so easy and done in
five minutes. And it’s not. It takes ages as you’d know, so I think they have
different perceptions of what, you know, the complexity of what they’re taking on
when they’re trying to do something in the library. And I don’t know how we can
simplify it because these databases are things that we now kind of buy in
commercially so we don’t have a lot of control over how they’re designed and that
kind of thing. Yeah, so I don’t - whether it’s in terms of the Learning Assistance
Unit either, whether what you’re doing with them is similar in that they’re not
aware until they sit down to do an assignment of the complexity of doing it, and
then being aware that they can get help. And you said something the other day
too at that meeting down at Logan about where we don’t want them to become
dependent upon us either. We want them to learn to stand on their own feet and be
able to do things for themselves but support them in the process of learning. I
think too there’s a danger, especially when they’re used to going to maybe one of
the academic staff they become kind of dependent. And maybe a dependence on
that academic is not a good thing in the sense that it doesn’t encourage them to go
to the other sources that are available to get help from, like the Learning
Assistance Unit, library, yeah. And we sometimes, too, wonder whether the
academic staff are fully aware of what is available in the library and how to use it
and that kind of thing and just what information that they give to the students in
that respect.

DP:  Just on that D, I wonder if, sort of in conclusion, you can suggest any
strategies that, not just librarians and learning advisers, but also academic staff,
ways of maybe working more collaboratively, making the learning environment
more coherent for students, so that they’re not sort of just venturing out when
absolutely necessary?

D:  Yeah, so that becomes like an integrated part of their whole learning
experience. While they’re here initially, I guess in the first year, you’d need to
establish it early. Yeah, I don’t know, you’d probably need to establish ways of
going the three different groups to get their heads together and look at how that
can be arranged. Maybe course coordinators, and a representative from Learning
Assistance Unit and the library, on each campus. We did - we have recently had a
big overhaul of our […], which is material that students take out with them out on
their [...] and it’s taken quite a while. It’s taken like three years to start the
process off by writing a discussion paper in the first place, and then circulating
that and then setting up a group to evaluate what’s gone on. First of all to
recommend what we all should be doing about it and that included the library and
the academic staff together, and then having a look at that, revisiting it again at
the end of each year. And that was quite good. We were able to get a lot of
interest initially when I circulated the people who were specifically - would have
an interest in the [...] because they were involved in [...] and that kind of thing.
Got a really good response and we all had a meeting with lots of nice food
(laughing). You know the people here and they’re probably fairly difficult - well
they’ll enjoy a nice spread, but don’t we all? So (laughs) the social stuff! And we
had some good results by doing it that way. So maybe you could do something
similar. I don’t know who would drive it; you might like to talk to people in the
library as well if you don’t want to be stuck with doing it yourself you know,
‘cause it involved quite a lot of work and quite a lot of liaising with people. And,
if you could get a group together that was representative of each of the different
schools on each of the campuses, just sit down with you in a similar way I guess.
And all of those groups get their heads together about how we can have more
understanding of what each other does and how we can coordinate that in a way
so that it’s more seamless for students and it all flows very well for them. I think
that’s a big problem in this university as a whole actually, probably because we’re
so split, and there are so many different areas and such a complex set up and it’s
very hard to get together the people who are involved, or even to know who your
stake holders are in a particular thing, or who’s going to be affected by something
that you decide to do. You know, very often there’s quite a surprise that this
group has got the fallout on something of an act that was never intended to upset
people and that kind of thing, yeah. We don’t have those nice seamless things of
making everything flow. And it’s not like a fault of any one person; it just seems
to happen in the university. Perhaps it happens in every organisation?

DP: Mm, it’s a combination of complex factors, isn’t it? As you say from…

D: …there’s a lot of literature that I came across when I was involved with
 [...] services in the library - and this is going back a little while now, maybe six or
seven years ago - there was quite a bit of literature that said there was a high drop
out rate with kids coming straight from school into tertiary study and trying to do
it at a distance. They appear to need the support - the face-to-face support - as do
people who haven’t studied for a long time or who maybe didn’t complete like an
academic stream in their schooling way back. You know, they left in year ten and
did a trade or something like that. And they’re at that stage, they seem to need a
lot of people interaction and that may be one of the reasons why the take up rate’s
been higher at (refers to campus by name), ‘cause there’s less face to face contact
in that initial year of study.
DP: Thank you again, E, for agreeing to participate in the project. Um, we’ve had a bit of a discussion prior to turning the tape on and I wonder if we can start with that first question or first issue, about what do you see from your perspective is the role of the Learning Assistance Unit and what do you think motivates the work of the advisers?

E: OK, I would see the role very much as developing those skills - those learning skills the students need to be successful with their studies. But not just with their studies, the skills that I guess are generic enough for them to be taken into the workforce or be used in other parts of the student’s life as well probably ties in fairly closely I guess there with the library’s information literacy skills as well. But I guess there’s a more um, immediate role too which is just you know, helping them when they need it rather than just developing skills for later on you know, when they may need it. So it’s kind of like it’s…that’s where your drop-ins come in. So it’s very immediate; the student have a problem that’s why they’re there; and then there’s some more developmental skills you know, which I guess comes via the um, the workshops and such. And what motivates them? Probably the same thing that motivates the library staff. The desire to, you know, to contribute to the student’s learning experience and to see the student succeed and do well and feel that you’ve know, you’ve had a contribution to that. And again not just helping them with their immediate needs, but hoping you’re providing a service that will encourage them to come back and confer with you when it’s needed, but also then pass the word on to other students. You know, “Hey, this is a good place to go and they were really helpful and I learnt a whole lot of stuff that I really found useful.” But I guess what motivates you is very similar to what motivates us.

DP: Mm mm. Just following on that notion of the learning advisers and the library staff. Can you identify any other overlaps or similarities in our practice?

E: In the - what do you mean by ‘practice’ DP?

DP: Um, the way that we go about doing what we do in terms of working with students, the role that we play in the learning environment?

E: Again, not - again, it’s so very closely related in terms of the way you go about doing your business it’s not dissimilar to us too, in either to going out promoting your activities amongst both the student body and the academics, so you trying to get them to think about us when something comes up so that we’re automatically included in things like orientation, meetings, you know, classes with students and… So it’s really part of that, promoting and how you go about, you know, doing very similar to what we do. Overlap, from what I can see of your program - I’ve never actually sat in on any of the courses or run any of the joint courses although I know other staff have- there does seem to be very much an overlap on um, development of search strategies, analysing assignment topics and then you know, accessing information, or what I’m trying to find the most appropriate information sources too; that seems to overlap although to a lesser extent to the previous ones I’ve mentioned.
DP: Mm mm. Do you think that creates problems or tensions, or has the potential to create problems? Not necessarily conflict, but a tension between the two roles?

E: I don’t see it as a tension but I can see it as perhaps a source of some confusion to student and not knowing quite where to go. But it just probably means to a certain point of the student’s need we both can satisfy that, but then … divergence, you know, it’s the point where, OK, you then take it to the point of accessing that information source and using that product below, you know, the technology. And then you’re saying well you’ve got this information, how do you then use it in a context of your assignment. You know, managing it, synthesising it as well. So, I don’t know to a certain point there could be some confusion but then it quite clearly diverges after that, what we can provide. And I guess that’s where we then say to the student, “You’ve got your information, but then if you want to work out how to use it, that you’ve then got to go to LAU.” And then, I guess, where your guys would be referring to us, like, “This is what information you need, this is how you use it, but I can’t show you what’s the best place to find that information, you then need to go to the reference staff.” But I don’t know in that initial - particularly when it comes to things like developing search strategies, analysing assignments, there is a little bit of overlap and confusion there.

DP: Mm mm, mm mm. It…….confusion on the part of both staff and students?

E: Yeah, yeah, I think so, yeah.

DP: Can you think of ways that we might address that?

E: I guess you could, you know, look at clearer guidelines. You know, what do we do and at what point do we stop what we’re doing and then either refer it on or - I mean, the only - my only concern is when, you know, you do start to set guidelines, you know, we do this and then after this it goes to someone. What it does take away is the discretion and judgement that you would anticipate a professional person would use in either setting. You know, I might feel quite confident to, you know, to just take it that one little step further but if the piece of paper - the guideline says to me you only ever take it to this point, then I think you’ve just got to try and weigh the balances between, you know, allowing the person in a professional setting to use their own knowledge and judgement. You know, if someone like (refers to Librarian D by name) who’s got really intimate knowledge of the […] area over a long period can add a lot. You know, on paper it says, “I’m sorry, we only go this far.” I don’t know how you marry those two needs.

DP: And it - as you say, does come down to that professional, decision making or perspective. One of the issues is that the learning advisers often find themselves is um, personal issues that impact on study issues and the role of not being a counsellor or personal counsellor but you can’t sort of suddenly stop a student midstream and say, “No, sorry that’s not my territory.” But you’ve got to have the professional skills and the - I guess the empathy to deal with it appropriately.
E: Yeah, for sure. And I guess one thing that I’ve thought of that I really must try and do and just did never get around to it this year, is to actually sit in on some of those sessions where I think there could be some overlap and just to get a bit more idea of content of those sessions. And maybe you could run special sessions just for library staff in you know, the break. Finding a time obviously when your guys are around and our - all our staff are around too so that we’re all getting that same information at the same time. Perhaps working in that way that we see you teach a lesson, we understand your content is, what point of view you’re coming from and we can say, “Oh yeah, well that sits with us,” or “That part’s different.” Now when we are advising students we have a better idea of - I guess a bit more of the detail there.

DP: I’m - just as you’re talking - thinking about examples where we - we’ve actually got workshops on some campuses where it’s co-facilitated between learning adviser and the library staff member.

E: I think that’s a really good thing. We just never - at this stage - but it’s not as though it won’t happen. I know (refers to Learning Adviser A by name) and (refers to Librarian D by name) have been planning for the […] students.

DP: So yeah, as I mentioned stage three of the project is really to look at practical strategies that we could implement from the Learning Assistance Unit perspective and see how that might influence or change practice for the better. So I mean even just looking for more collaborative opportunities to either have library staff sitting in on sessions or actually, you know, co-facilitating, might be something that in the new year we could look at, you know, introducing?

E: Yeah, in a - perhaps a more structured way - sort of kind of been done. It’s kind of been based on someone talking to someone in the tea room or it’s been fairly informally done. And partly that’s, you know, everyone just gets so busy and if there’s no history of it happening on this campus; even if someone leaves it there’s no-one to pick up the practice. But I think a more structured approach to that on this campus would be suitable. But also, I think, just increasing, as I’ve just mentioned, increasing the general understanding at a bit more detailed level of what it is, the course content that you’re actually offering. And then we could certainly reciprocate as well in terms of a bit more detail about, you know, we’re not just holding a library class, this is the way we structure our library class. And this is the type of topics that we cover. So a little bit more increase of knowledge on either side would probably help that as well and that may facilitate into a more structured, collaborative approach. So, OK, you’re already doing that and you’re doing it well. And then we’re already doing that bit and how can we marry these two together? And learning from the experiences that have already been very successful on other campuses.

DP: Mm mm. Could we focus for a moment on the student experience and particularly because I’m using activity theory and I’ve sort of described the Learning Assistance Unit as one activity system and the library as another and the faculty as a third activity system, that the student actually engages in most cases at least with all three - or the students who I’ll have in my study will have engaged with all three. How do perceive their - how do they interpret the learning environment made up of those three sort of um, elements or systems?
E: I think the university environment is actually can be incredibly complex, one for students and I think the whole university environment is not set - none of the systems are set up to be simple for a student. You know, particularly when they’re coming in first semester and, I mean, while we may have clear idea of who does what, I’m don’t think it’s at all sure for them. I mean, if you just take even the academic environment there’s areas where they have to go to their course convenor, the subject convenor, the lecturer or the tutor, or student admin the school secretary or AO. I mean, who to go to for what even in that environment is really confusing. We’ve got, you know, service points on campus, we’ve got the lending desk, the reference desk; we’ve got an IT help desk, we’ve got a learning assistance office, student counsellors, student services. You know, I think it’s actually really complex and quite hard for the student. And I wouldn’t mind betting a lot of them could get to the end of a year or two years or even three and not know about any one particular service. They’ve just got enough to get through and get by on and if they desperately need help at a point of need, the ones with a bit of initiative, or the ones that are desperate enough will go and find it and the others probably just skim through getting by. Yeah, and I don’t know if I’ve got any solution to that but that would just be my perception. A lot of them probably do extremely well but the majority either just skim by, just enough knowledge to get them through.

DP: Mm, and what that does, particularly for the LAU and maybe to some extent the library, is doesn’t give us, I guess, an equal sort of role to play in the learning environment. We’re sort of relegated to the boundary or the periphery in the students…

E: …And it’s often a reactors thing, you know, when someone goes to a lecturer with a problem “Oh, you need to go to the librarian” or “You need to go to the LAU people.” Hopefully you’ve got a good lecturer who’ll remember both of those areas (laughing) of course it doesn’t always happen and the student may come and seek us out because of the need or the referral then but there’s all the other pro active things, like getting out there running workshops, running classes, getting…organising in class time Um, a lot of that doesn’t get, I don’t know, doesn’t fit in always well with the…the academic environment.

DP: Mm mm. In terms of, I guess, the things that provide the incentive or the motive for the students to come and seek out a learning adviser, often it’s - if it’s not desperation it’s at least determination to get a grip on a particular piece of assessment, so we find a lot of our work is driven by assessment and that’s reinforcing.

E: As is ours. And that’s true, again, it’s that reactive stuff. It’s not - I mean I know we talk - spend a lot of money talking about generic skills and lifelong learning, but for the majority of undergraduate students the reality of life for them, is to get in, they all work, to get in in the shortest possible time, get by. You know, they put in as much effort as they can within the restraints that they’ve already got with work, and lectures, and home and social life. And they give it what they can and some of them are really dedicated, they all want HDs and some of them just want passes, just get by in the shortest amount of effort. But I don’t know that what we see as important of lifelong learning and developing skills cuts
a lot of ice with the majority of students. And I’ll go into orientation talks and I’ll
…. what I think is motivational. I’m saying you know, “What’s in it for you to
come in to this stuff to learn, develop your skills. Not only will you get better
marks, you’ll, you know, this is a marketable commodity, a skill that you can put
on your resume and you can look at to your prospective employers. They can say,
“Wow, this person is computer literate and use this product and knows how to
find and evaluate information.” But they don’t know how to make the
connection, the students. You know, even though you tell them that, they just
don’t make the connection.

DP:  Mm mm. And I don’t know, as you say, that there are any easy solutions
or even things that we can do within our practice, to change that?

E:  No, you’ll always get your dedicated ones and a lot of those are mature
age students anyway or post graduates. But, the majority of the 18, 19 year olds
were just coming in. It’s very hard to reach them. We’re only reaching you
know, what one, two percent, five percent of the student population?

DP:  Yes, yeah, it’s not huge is it?

E:  It is. It’s a pity. And the ones we do reach in class time - I guess this is a
philosophical argument (refers to Librarian D by name) and I often bat between
ourselves, is the ones we get in class times have to be there rather that choose to
be there, and how much do they truly get out of it anyway and um, is it a really
worthwhile exercise? Like I - again, we bat that one back and forward so I don’t
really know the answer to that one either.

DP:  I had a stage where a couple of the advisers were almost going to not go
into classes because they were being invited in to rather hostile, you know, first
year classes where the lecturer had decided that you know, these skills are
necessary and you need these. But the participation wasn’t voluntary and so that
puts the adviser in a difficult position where it’s not just discussion and
transmission, it’s more about classroom management sort of issues. Yeah, we’ve
- we seem to have - it hasn’t seemed to be as much of an issue and maybe those
particular advisers have, you know, reflected on their teaching practices and come
up with different ways of doing it, I don’t know. But, it is problematic because in
the most cases, I guess, as with the library, the people or the students that you see
are there because they choose to be there. What’s motivating them might be
somebody else’s agenda, for example an assessment item, but they have made that
decision to walk in the door.

DP:  Yes, absolutely.

E:  Well just to conclude then, E, I’m just wondering if there are any other,
practical strategies that you can suggest that we can look at, either between the
library and the LAU or between all three sort of players, the faculty the library,
and the LAU?

E:  This is a little bit peripheral I guess to what you’re asking me but one of
the things that we’ve identified here that we would really like to do - and you’ve
just made me think of it by your last comment - was classroom management and
teaching strategies. None of us have a background in teaching and most of us
don’t have a higher qualification beyond our degree either, and I’d really be very
keen to explore some developmental opportunities for the library in terms of
trying to transfer some of that skills and knowledge that you’ve got in those areas
to our staff as well. Or, I mean, if there were going to be academics coming in
talking about classroom management or, you know, try - how to involve the
audience, teach, how to present, how to do any of that training, I’d be really,
really keen to do that collaboratively.

DP: That sounds like a really good suggestion.
Interview with Student ‘A’, (Business), Griffith University, 28 February, 2001

DP: Thankyou A for agreeing to be part of my research project, and to have this interview, this morning. I’ve given you an explanation of the background and you’ve signed the consent form and I’ve just got some questions that I’d like to ask you and I wonder if we could start by you explaining what you see the role of the Learning Assistance Unit, in the university, from your perspective as a student. What do you think the Learning Assistance Unit, what is its role?

A: From what I have seen, I think that the role of the people that work in the Learning Assistance Unit is to guide and to give knowledge of some skills of how to cope with the university studies. Some advice and help you to understand or find yourself some new ways of how to cope or study skills. Reading, writing and what you need to do, especially the work at university. Assignments…

DP: What do you think motivates students to come to the Learning Assistance Unit?

A: Well, in my case, and I talked with a lot of the students, is not everybody has those skills. I don’t know too much about school background from people here, but I found that in school probably there is something that they are missing. It’s not the same. There is a huge change. That’s from talking with other students. From my side, I had a totally different approach to study; different from here. I always was a good student but it was totally different and I had to change. So I think the common thing between here and overseas students, a student or an Australian student, is that we don’t have those skills, and we find that we have to do all this work and we don’t know how to. And everybody gets desperate because of that and that’s the main reason, I would say.

DP: As I mentioned earlier, I’m interested in your experiences of coming to the Learning Assistance Unit, compared to your experiences of going to the library. So what sort of things motivate you to go to the library staff?

A: The library staff. Well, you see there is a lot of things. When I first came, I didn’t know anything about anything. And the information is not given to you, you have to look at it. But if you don’t look, or you don’t know what to look, you don’t know what to ask either. You see, so there is a lot of information everywhere but you don’t see it. So you have a lot of questions about everything, especially if you are not – when you are from another background, another country, there are more things that probably are common here, in Australia, but not for us. So, there are a lot of questions that may sound for you – for Australian people – stupid, silly. Why don’t you do it yourself? Because we’re not used to it. Everything, usually, at least in my country, they are giving to us. We are not used to going. Everything is informed to us. Everything is given to us. We just work with it. We are not used to going to look for it. Also I had that always there. The having to look for opportunities. Still, there were a lot of things – it’s something personal – there were a lot of things that are different. So I went a lot, to ask a lot of questions…

DP: To the librarians?
A: ... to the librarians. Some were very good. Others did not understand. Sometimes I had some problems because when people are not treating me well, or sometimes it is the cultural background that they think that you are an overseas student and you are English – one thing is a language problem and another thing is being stupid. Sometimes you feel that they are treating you as if you are stupid. So there is a problem there. But I don’t get angry. Goes once, and I forget it. If the person the next time is nice, you know how it should be, I’d say that’s fine.

DP: When you think about the job of the Learning Adviser and the librarian, do you see any similarities between them?

A: No. I don’t know. I have a different experience with the Learning Assistance people. It doesn’t matter how, or what happened, I don’t know what is the difference, but the Learning Assistance people are always kind. I have never met anyone who has treated me in the wrong way or in a bad way, or anything, nothing. That for me – I’m a bit fussy with that special thing – I can say is good about the Learning Assistance Unit. The people.

DP: What’s different between the sort of help that the Learning Assistance Staff give you to the library?

A: Well the librarians give you general information about books, about how to research, how to find out about things. The Learning Assistance Unit give you the orientation or show you how to use your skills, how to learn your skills, suggesting different ways as to how to cope with the study and the work of university.

DP: Ok, so we’ve talking about the Learning Advisers, we’ve talked about the librarians, what about the faculty staff – the academic staff? What do you see as similar of different between the Learning Advisers and the faculty or academic staff?

A: You mean the lecturers?

DP: Hmmm (yes)

A: That is a good thing because you can not... ... all the lecturers. They are all from different backgrounds. Some of them are Australians and some of them are from different countries, so it’s very difficult to put them all in one bag, in one big group. It’s different. But I would say something about the lecturers and the tutors is that I find that the Learning Assistance Unit is much more prepared and aware of things than the lecturers and the tutors in many ways. This is my own experience from my country. Teachers, they study to be teachers. Like, even if they are professionals in one area, if they want to teach, they have to do a pedagogic course – masters, doctorate or something to be able to teach. It depends where they’re going to teach, because if – doctorate to teach at university, they may need a lower kind of master to teach at school. You know, it depends where they are teaching. So, I’m really used to academics teaching. People that are aware of different ways of teaching and which one to choose according to their students. What I have found out here is that the lecturers, they are experts in their areas, but not necessarily good teachers. So, they give a lot of trouble to
students, because they’re thinking in their area and they’re not thinking, how should I teach so they learn? Some of them don’t show any interest of (having) you learn. Because you can tell when someone wants you to learn, they talk to you and you see their interest for them to learn. But some others they just are there. They just read their thing. Where if you pass you pass, if you don’t - it’s up to you. You do it.

**DP:** So when you’ve got an assignment to do, do you expect any support or advice from the lecturer or the tutor?

**A:** No, but it’s the way they teach. You see, university is university. Really the teacher, it’s impossible the lecturer – or the tutor probably has more access to students than the lecturer because they are handling so many students that you don’t really expect, you know, some make the time, but, I don’t know what they have on their timetable, but I have seen them very busy. So, according to their time, the ones that are willing to help, they are always there. The other ones they may want to help but they don’t have time. But you can still see in the class, their intention of teaching.

**DP:** Well I guess what I’m interested in, and I’m thinking as you’re talking is how does it feel for a student when you get an assignment question or a task from the lecturer, you then go to the Learning Assistance Unit and talk with the Learning Adviser, and you go to the library and you talk to the librarian, is it really confusing or do you see the links? Do you see connections? Or are you visiting three very different places? What’s the experience like from a student’s perspective?

**A:** The thing is, I have rarely gone to tutors. And I know that I should, but the problem is, with me trying to manage my time and all the things that I have to do, it has been a real big problem last year and it was worse because I had a lot of the skills that I had to learn. So I never had the time to go and see the tutor because he only has two hours at certain times and by the time – I just couldn’t match, you see, so I just couldn’t. So I cannot talk about going to the tutors. With regards to the librarians it’s very different the role that they do, so I cannot see how they can confuse me in any way. So, the information that I ask for is to research, to look for things, or information about anything else – about computers or anything. So it’s not the kind of information that I came looking for here in the Learning Assistance Unit. The Learning Assistance Unit I just came for help, because I didn’t know how to use certain things.

**DP:** So, what you’re saying is that for you, there isn’t really a relationship between the library, the LAU and the faculty or the school?

**A:** There should be, if you do it in the proper way. But because of the way that I have been doing things. Like I should think that if I go to the tutor and he tells me you should do this, this and this, and then you go to the Learning Assistance Unit. If they are not connected – I’m just guessing because something similar has happened, but in a different context – I think that if they don’t connect… Matching what you know with what he says is going to be very difficult.
DP: So what you’re saying is that maybe there is a relationship but you’re not necessarily aware of it because you haven’t been using the tutors very much.

A: That’s right.

DP: How do you think that relationship could be improved, because if you remember my research is about improving the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit. What could the Learning Assistance Unit do to improve the relationship, say between the Unit and the school or the faculty or the academic staff?

A: I don’t know how – it would be very high work for you – but I remember there was a subject this year, I think it was business communication, I wish I took this subject last year, but because they changed the program, I didn’t take it last year and I’m doing a double degree and I’m going to change this semester – well I’m doing it now. But it would have been so helpful now, because that was not only good in business communication but also it included a lot of things from the library. I think the librarians were talking there. But something like that also the Learning Assistance Unit could get inserted. Last year in the industrial relations subject – I don’t know how they did it inside – but it was obvious that there was kind of an agreement between the … cont….

…industrial relation teachers or … and the Learning Assistance Unit, in order to assist the Learning Assistance people help us to do the assignment or research that we had to do, with them. There were Learning Assistance people that went to the class. They explained some things about how to do assignments and showed some PowerPoint shows. It was really good. The thing is that I was so lost with everything that I didn’t find time to come here. But that’s another issue of mine. Last year I got help from the Learning Assistance Unit but I was running from one place to another and I just – every time that I needed help and I wanted to put my name down it was all full. Sometimes I wanted to come and I was running from one place to another and I couldn’t make it. So that was my history last year with that!

DP: You’re talking there about the one to one drop in time.

A: Yeah, the drop in time.

DP: Have you been to workshops as well?

A: Yes, I have been to workshops.

DP: Can you describe what’s useful about workshops and drop-ins, or what the difference is, or what your observations are?

A: I think the workshops are kind of informative. They tell you, like in the writing one, they tell you how to write, what skills to use, how to apply it in different contexts. The same with everything. They make you aware of what it is and show you all that you can do. Then it’s up to you to decide what you do and how to apply it to your own studies. I would say so that the drop-ins would be to
try to learn a specific context. Like if I have a problem specifically, I come there 
and say, “Look I have this problem, what should I do with it?” With regards to 
the drop-in sessions I always found that when I came to a problem – last year I 
found that I was looking for answers. I didn’t know what was wrong and why I 
couldn’t cope. So, I was looking for help but I didn’t know exactly what things. I 
didn’t know how to define what was going wrong with me. The people couldn’t 
actually help me. They said, “Come and we will help you.” But then I couldn’t … 
myself. But the few times I came and I actually talked with the people I found 
that there is a problem. Probably, like I said, we do things differently in my 
country. So, we are explained “How To” step by step. This is step one, this is 
step two, this is step three. You do a lot of things without doing that, probably, 
your step one and your step two – in between for me there are five steps. Because 
I haven’t done it before in the way you are doing it. The thing is the tutors – as 
well as I had a lot of problems with councillors with the same thing – they cannot 
tell you how to. But things from my context where I come from, I needed to 
know how to – see one person’s. See exactly step by step. Probably the first time 
I would do it exactly the same, but the second time I would find my own one. The 
way we learn, as I remember, is we use somebody’s way and then we develop our 
own. That is the way we learn.

DP:  Becoming more self-directed. An independent learner.

A:  I remember my Grandfather used to help me with my assignments. He 
practically directed me step by step. He practically did it himself but we did it 
together. Then after that I did it myself. But I developed my own way. But I 
started with him. So here, everything of that is gone. I can take some things from 
what I learned, but it’s a totally different way. I have to start from zero. So that 
was the problem that I found. Everything here, it is assumed that I should know 
what. Some things – and it doesn’t have to do with lack of communication – I don’t 
have to go to school for that. I just need, as I said, it was very difficult to match, 
for the tutors to understand.

DP:  When you say the tutors, you’re not talking about the Learning Advisers?

A:  The Learning Assistant, yeah. The Learning Advisers.

DP:  So they also expected you to know some things.

A:  I don’t know. I have this feeling. You see, for me to understand what was 
going wrong, - at that moment, I didn’t know what was going wrong. So I have to 
actually understand it; do a lot of thinking myself, analyse situations, compare 
with others, talk with a lot of people. Then I came out with all this. Now I have 
clear of what happened, what was the problem. I know what are my good things, 
what I need to develop. But for me to do that I am going through a very, very 
weak processes.

DP:  Do you think the Learning Assistance Unit helped you clarify that?

A:  They wanted to. But no. They wanted to help me but they couldn’t.

DP:  You had to go through the process yourself.
Appendix A

259 A: I had to go through the process myself to understand, because there was a
cultural problem. I am not a teacher. Probably if I would have been a teacher, I
would have been aware of what was the approach that those here were using. But
because didn’t have that knowledge, I had to kind of go through that. I’m not
better now, but at least I’m aware of that. It makes things easier, because it’s easy
to find out, this is what I want and it’s easy for other people to help me.

265 DP: Well just as a final question, are there any other practical strategies you
can suggest that we could do to improve what we do? You’ve mentioned linking
in with the subjects and the tutors and the lecturers. Any other things that you can
think of that would be more helpful?

271 A: I think the main thing about the Learning Assistance Unit – this is not a
criticism, but, the intention is there, the skills are there, they want to. I have not
met anyone who does not want to. Everybody wants to. Maybe because they are
treating the different cultures and the approach that they are using is the
Australian approach to teach. This is not only me. I have met a lot of people who
are worse than I am – they are still lost. A lot of Asian students, I have seen them.
Interview with Student ‘B’ (Arts), Griffith University, 13 February, 2001

DP: Thankyou very much for making the time to come in and help me with my research project. I know that you’ve had some contact with the Learning Assistance Unit and we are very appreciative of your feedback on our services. We’ve filled out the consent form so we don’t need to talk about that. I’ve given you a little bit of an explanation about the project and how I’m interested in improving the work practices of the Unit. I wondered if we could start with a general question about your perception of the Learning Assistance Unit? What do you see the role of the LAU as, within the University?

B: So you’re saying the role of all of the students in relation to the LAU?

DP: Yes

B: Well I see it as a place to go to for guidance. If you just need assistance with a few things. You might be looking at a question your tutor has given you and thinking, “What is this tutor really wanting?” It’s somewhere to go and bounce ideas off. Also I think, for students - and there are a lot at Griffith - who do not have English as their first language. It must be very, very difficult for them. I think the Learning Assistance Unit would be a great support to them. And certainly in my case for mature age students, it’s terrific. There’s not always people at home to bounce ideas off and who don’t understand. So with that expertise of really just guiding you, they might just say one or two sentences and you think, “Oh yeah!” and away you go with some new ideas. Also I’ve found that they’re really good if you need backup in the way of information. They always say you can get information or resources from the library on the particular avenue that you are looking at in that question, that type of thing. A general backup. People who have the knowledge there that can give you that backup. Because when you first come to university and look at the library and it’s somewhat of a challenge. You know, your first year at university, I believe every assignment is a pretty big challenge.

DP: Can I just pick up on the fact you mentioned the library staff. In your experience and in your mind, what do you see as the same or different between the role of the Learning Adviser and say, the librarian?

B: The librarian is more of a hands-on person for the books. That’s their expertise. They can help you with the computer to find a particular book; or if you’re looking maps they show you how to find maps in particular books and things like that. The Learning Assistance people are there to guide in more of an overall outlook to your - if you’ve got a problem with your assignment. Things like that. As I’ve used it, it’s more assignment based and then you go to the library with the ideas that you’ve got. And if needed you go to a librarian. So they do have two separate roles, but I see them, in part, interlinked.

DP: Can you elaborate on the parts that you see as interlinked?

B: In as much as - again I’ll use the assignment as an example. The question may require you to look at a particular area that maybe you haven’t investigated in the library before. Again, I’ll just pick up maps. There you go to the librarian and
say, “Look I need some maps on the German states in the sixteenth century,” or
something or other. And they say, “Oh sure, that’s no trouble, we’ll just get into
the computer and look at that.”

**DP:**  What about the relationship, or the similarities and differences between the
Learning Adviser and the academic staff? Do you see a connection there?

**B:**  Very slight. I think the academic staff’s role is teaching, is lecturing etc.
Marking papers and things like that. And again if I just use the assignments, they
pose the question or hypothesis they want to present. I would think that the link -
as I see it - is not as strong as the link between the library and the Learning
Assistance group.

**DP:**  Does that make it difficult? What do you think would motivate a student
who has been given a task by an academic staff member to actually seek out a
Learning Adviser? How do students work out the connection or the link?

**B:**  The link I would think there could possibly be that the student may have
English as a second language. In the last semester last year we had two students
from Scandinavia and one of them was having real problems with her assignment
and I was talking to her one day and I said, “Why don’t you go to the Learning
Assistance Unit, they’re fantastic?” A real challenge for those students. They can
speak English very well, but to get it down on paper to the qualifications that the
university want - a real challenge. I think that perhaps if the Scandinavian student
in this case, had gone to the tutor, the tutor may say, “You’re best if you go to the
Learning Assistance.” The tutors, as I see, are all very busy people.

**DP:**  What are the Learning Advisers providing that the tutors aren’t?

**B:**  Again, I would think, analysing a question for an assignment. Breaking it
down into pieces, interpreting what the tutor wants. As I’ve seen it in year one,
the tutors that I’ve had certainly haven’t got the time to do that. They say, “You
choose a question that you like and away you go and we’ll see it when it’s passed
in on the special day that we’ve nominated.” The Learning Assistance people, as
far as I’ve found, are there to bounce ideas off. You certainly need to have your
ideas there ready first and they really expand, I find, on the ideas.

**DP:**  When you think about the sort of work that the Learning Advisers do, can
you think of ways that they could improve what they do?

**B:**  One thing I found difficult - I’m a part time student - is they’re only there
certain times. I know that this is because of staff cutbacks and shortages and
things like that. Sometimes it’s difficult to make an appointment. Particularly if
you’ve got a deadline and dread, you’ve left it to a fairly late date to see
somebody and have time with them to discuss that. So, yes, that wonderful thing
of more staff.

**DP:**  In terms of what they actually do in the consultation or the workshop, has
anything struck you as missing or something that could be done differently?

**B:**  Yes. You find some of them - and I guess this is only because all people
are different - is that some of them have more experience in maybe reading what
you have put down as your ideas and expanding on it for you. They have that
skill to pick up what you’re trying to say but can’t quite get the right direction.
They pick up on it and expand it for you. Others are not as skilled, I feel, in that
area.

DP: They have different skills or different perspectives.

B: Different skills.

DP: I’m just trying to get my head around what it must be like for a student
who gets a task from an academic and makes a decision to go to the Learning
Assistance Unit and also to the library, and whether or not you see it as moving
between three very different spaces, or whether you see it as all part of one
experience? We think of the university as a whole. But actually the people in it
are having very different experiences and as staff we think, “Yes, well that makes
sense. With structures like that and structures like that, well why wouldn’t you
see the relationships?” And I’m just wondering whether it is coherent for students
or not and whether it is confusing. The location of the Learning Assistance Unit
in the library is a very unique situation. It doesn’t happen within very many
universities where the LAU is in the library, they’re located somewhere else. I
don’t know whether that is helpful for students or not. You mentioned earlier that
you saw stronger links between the Learning Advisers and the librarians. I don’t
know whether that’s because we’ve created those links, or whether they really
exist.

B: It could be that it’s been created because it is physically in the library. I
feel that Learning Assistance could be given better marketing. Particularly
towards students who are having issues with English as a second language. These
Scandinavian people I was referring to were half way through second semester
and they hadn’t even thought of going to the Learning Assistance people. To me
that’s your first stop for some problem like that. I feel that here it is good in the
library. I think if it was in another building somewhere else, students wouldn’t
have that same idea of it being interlinked. Your steps are you get your question
for your assignment, you look at it and decide what you are going to do, what
avenues you’re going to take, which hypotheses, and you go to the library and you
start looking at that and you start to build it up. Then, in my case, I feel that I
don’t have people that I can bounce ideas off. Often the students in the groups in
the seminars are all busy in their own groups. At home, my husband loves to
manage me, so I keep university separate. This is my thing. So my assignments -
he’s never read one! I want to keep it that way. So I go to the Learning
Assistance to bounce ideas off. Often the students in the groups in
the seminars are all busy in their own groups. At home, my husband loves to
manage me, so I keep university separate. This is my thing. So my assignments -
he’s never read one! I want to keep it that way. So I go to the Learning
Assistance to bounce ideas off. To say, “Have I got this right? This is what I’m
going to do. I’ve got my plan here. Am I on the right track? Do you think this is
what the tutor is wanting?” So I see it being connected with the library and
remotely connected with the tutor. That’s how I use Learning Assistance. But I
do feel it could be better publicised. In fact I don’t recall, maybe it could be
expanded on in that first morning. Like they had this morning in humanities,
down in the Northern Theatres. Maybe that could be expanded on, even there or
somewhere. I feel it does need more. And given the image that it’s not a place
for the dumbos to go. I think going to university is a huge step. And it’s just a
place to get your ideas that are blocked in your head, out there on the paper.
DP: Do you think that image of it being somewhere the “dumbos” go, do you get a sense of that?

B: It never worried me. Maybe seventeen year olds are a lot more sensitive about things like that. In the peer group, they have the peer group pressure. I’m way past that. I’m quite happy to do that. It doesn’t bother me at all. So maybe that is something that a 17 year old would answer better for you.

DP: When we look at our statistics, we do see a lot of mature age students. We have our own interpretations and that would be one of them. That there’s not that sense of stigma or bravado about having to cope. I think the older you are the more willing you are to seek assistance. I’m still interested in your perception of the remoteness of the academic staff from the Learning Advisers. I’m wondering whether one of the reasons for that is not only geography in terms of us being located centrally and in the library, and the academics out there in the faculties or the schools. Is it because we don’t deal with content?

B: I’m not quite sure what you mean by content?

DP: The German maps that you were talking about earlier. If you came to see one of the Learning Advisers, I don’t think any of them have a history background, for example. So they wouldn’t be able to help you with the content of that particular task.

B: So that’s where you - with the maps - I would go to a library staff person. To find the books where those maps are.

DP: In terms of your interpretation and what you’re going to do with those maps in answering your assignment question, the Learning Adviser should be able to help you with the process of working out, “Ok, I’m going to use these maps to answer this question or put my argument forward in this way”. But they wouldn’t be able to give you advice on, “No, this map is not actually from this period.” Our focus is on process. I’m just wondering whether as a student that creates any problems or dilemmas for you when you’re not sure yourself about the content?

B: I think you pick up a lot of the content of things from lectures and from seminars. You can think to yourself by looking at a particular question, “Oh yes, that really revolves around chapter 6 out of my dossier or out of a particular supportive book that we’re using. From that I need to read chapter 6, elaborate on it and dig deeply.” That’s where it comes in there. Again I see the tutors as very busy people. I’m quite amazed to find that a tutor I had this semester is also the Dean of the faculty. That just staggered me. I thought that guy must have enough to do. He’s only taking one lecture and tutorial. Never the less, he obviously has papers and things...

Interview with Student ‘B’ 13th Feb, cont...

B: It all gets down again to the big fat word of funding. I find, also, with some of the tutors and lecturers, some of them are very academic. They’re extremely qualified, but not very good at conveying what they mean. Even when you go to see them in their study, sometimes - I can remember in semester one of year one, I thought my goodness, what is she trying to get at here? I went to see
her in her study and I really came away none-the-wiser. A very academic person but unable to get across. If I had a problem with that now, I would go straight to the Learning Adviser and say, “Look I have been here, I just don’t know where to start on this.” Also, I think there is a great place interlinked with the workshops. The workshops that the library offers. I think they’re all wonderful. They’re all very good in helping you. For instance in the case that I have just said. In semester one I hadn’t done a workshop on how to critically think about questions and to break them down, and obviously I very badly needed to do that. So again, I think perhaps if Learning Assistance can guide people to appropriate workshops if the people for some reason have overlooked the fact that they are being offered by the library. Again, there’s that link with the library, and the more remote link with the lecturer and tutor.

DP: So when we look at our marketing and look at our ... develop links, we should be concentrating a lot of our efforts on trying to establish stronger links with the academics?

B: Yes, I’d be interested to see how that went. Because as I say, I feel they’re very short of time.

DP: I think for many of them they are just very relieved that we exist. Because three years ago we didn’t exist so they really had nowhere .. and now there is an alternative or an option. Many of them are very grateful, some of them are still not completely sure on what we do and some prefer to do it themselves.

B: Perhaps if they’re not sure on what to do there should be a better two-way link there with them. For instance in my case, they can see how supportive the Learning Assistance Unit has been and the end result. Perhaps some more work in that area.

DP: Thank you very much for your time this morning. Is there anything else you want to add?

B: There’s one thing about publicity. I don’t know if it is publicised enough about the website. I only found it accidentally last semester. Maybe that should be more prominent too for students. The students like the 16-17 year olds that feel the peer group pressure, who feel it’s for dumbos, maybe at home, they could get through on the computer, if they had the website.

DP: So when you found it, did you have a look at it and see what sort of resources are on there? Was it helpful do you think?

B: Yes. To be honest nothing stands out in my mind at the moment and I also know that everything is evolving and it’s probably different now to when I looked at it. But I do think that that’s a strong link that could be for the seventeen year olds who are too embarrassed to come up and make an appointment.
DP: You were talking about the Learning Assistance Unit and getting people to come and then not understanding the role.

C: They don’t know the role, they expect that they are going to take assignments and things like that and you’re going to have like a proof reading system. And they don’t realise that it’s the step before that, it’s that we’re pulling things to pieces. That the unit will help you, but not actually do it for you. They’ve sort of got the LAU and possible tutors, muddled up. They think the LAU is a tutoring kind of system.

DP: One of the things I’m interested in is the specific situations where you’ve consulted with the Learning Adviser.

Tape recorder adjustment...

C: Finding out what the whole crux of the whole assignment is about, so it makes it a lot easier to grasp where to go and different options that you can use; that it’s not just one set style that you can get possibly three or four different outlooks on one assignment.

D: So if we’re looking at specific experiences of the LAU – individual ones – there’s two kinds of assistance that I’ve had from the LAU. One is in a group workshop type situation and the other is an individual one on one consultation with regard to a specific assignment. The workshop situations were pretty good for a general introduction to an area. I personally found them to be not quite as useful as a one-in-one consultation but the areas that they were discussing you perhaps wouldn’t have the option for anyway. The one that I went to was extremely well attended, but because everybody got their own individual questions, it seemed they were more keen on putting forward their own personal experiences and having them dealt with, than giving an overall view. I think, as well, things like time management, which is the one that I went to, is – because everybody has their own circumstances they want to say, “Well, this is what is happening to ME, how can I be helped?” And that didn’t necessarily work very well in the group environment. The one-on-one consultation I felt was fabulous; really, really helpful. The only thing that was slightly bad was that my consultation just went on and on and on and managed to eat up two other students’ consultation time.

C: Yeah, I’ve actually missed out on consultations for that exact reason, where I’ve set a time, say at one, and I’ve had a lecture at two, and I still haven’t had the consult, so I’ve had to walk away, because somebody else has just overlapped. It’s been their time, and it’s been helpful to them, but it’s also thrown me right out into a spin as well.

D: Well certainly that one specific instance that I was referring to then, where I got that individual help. The grade I got on that assignment, I’m convinced, went up substantially because of the help I got here. Because I was floundering around I got no direction and no sense of purpose. I’d done a load of work, but it was all “messy”. It had no form of cohesion to it. And I was helped just to go
back and unpack the question and say, right, which information is relevant, discard the rest and file it down this way. Very, very helpful.

DP: Can you, outside of the Learning Adviser role and the sort of support that they give you, think about your interactions with library staff. What sort of similarities or differences do you see in the sort of support that you get from the library staff compared to the Learning Advisers?

D: Good question. I would have to say that the Learning Advisory people are a lot more approachable. They are a lot more helpful. They seem to be a lot more dedicated to what they’re actually doing. When I’ve approached the library staff for help, they tend to stay behind the desk and wave you in the right direction. There’s not much – this sounds very negative – there doesn’t seem to be very much effort made to actually deal with whatever problem it is that you’ve gone to them. I mean, personally I don’t go to library staff unless I really hit a brick wall and cannot go any further, and the last thing you need to be told is “Go away and have another go”. That’s what happens quite a lot. But I’ve never had that with the LAU. If I’ve managed to get in touch with them, they’re really, really good, really helpful and positive.

DP: What sort of questions would you go to the librarians with?

C: As a last resort you can’t find a periodical or a journal. Books you usually flounder around until you find them yourself or you ask somebody else. Sometimes with the databases, you can’t quite get to where you know you want to go. So you go to them. But, I mean, similar to D, I’ve sort of found that usually it is a pretty negative experience. I don’t think there is anybody I’ve ever seen after the librarians who have come away with a real positive kind of experience.

D: The only thing I’ve asked librarians about at all in the last twelve months that I can bring to mind is problems with the SNAP account, and having them reset the password. Literally, I haven’t gone to them for anything else. I wouldn’t consider them as a resource.

DP: So do you see any similarities in the work that the Learning Advisers do and the Librarians – is there any connection there when you’re looking at doing an assignment?

D: I can see where there might be. Where you might go to them for help, but I would say that the librarians would be an earlier stepping stone. Where do I find the references? What databases should I be using? When you’ve got that information, you’ve got the LAU. But I wouldn’t go to them to ask that question.

DP: But theoretically…

D: Theoretically, yeah. They are like steps in the path.

C: But they don’t want to know, really, when you go – this sounds awful doesn’t it – they really don’t want to know if you go to the desk and ask them anything, they really don’t.
DP: But potentially they could be providing you with stepping stones as you
described it.

D: They would be prior in you actual path to the LAU.

DP: Well, just trying to stick with that sort of picture then of the librarians, the
Learning Advisers. What about if we bring the academic staff into that context of
the work that you’re involved in. One of the things I’m interested in is the sort of
experiences students have moving between say the library, the LAU and the
faculty or the school. Do you see any connections between the academic staff and
school and the LAU and the Learning Advising staff?

C: There could be a closer link there. But I don’t think the academics want to
know that you have a specific problem. They assume you know it and that you’ll
get through it. But there are quite a few who will point you to the LAU as a
source of help.

D: I don’t know. I think the academics sometimes – when I’ve prepared
work as a result of a consultation with the LAU and then run a draft past a tutor.
If you make mention of the fact that you’ve had LAU help, they tend to not make
changes that they would otherwise do. They tend to back off and leave it alone.

DP: That’s interesting. Why do you think they do that?

D: Because they don’t want to tread on another professional’s toes, I should
imagine.

DP: So you are sensing some sense of professional respect there in terms of the
role of the Learning Advisers in relation to that?

D: Yep, yeah. If I take a draft that’s being come out as a result of work with
LAU gone to the tutor with it, he has said in my experience when I’ve mentioned
the LAU’s involvement, “Yeah, it’s ok. It’s fine.” I’m 99% convinced that there
would have been alterations made had that not been the case.

DP: So, it hasn’t just been a time saving thing where someone’s already looked
at it so I don’t need to look at it.

D: It may have been that it wasn’t the impression that I got. I got the
impression it was more a case of that if they said it was ok, I’m not going to again
say that.

C: But then again it becomes the problem when they’ve got to mark it and
you’re not really sure if that’s what they’re looking for. I’ve had an experience
where the LAU’s said, “Yes, this is fine, this is going on quite nicely,” and got it
to the marking stage and just happen to run it past the tutor and he said, “Hmm it’s
not really what I’m looking for,” and had to completely unpack it from a different
angle. So perhaps if there was more cooperation between even the tutors and the
LAU would be a good thing, because they are the final ones that they are going to
mark it.
DP: One of the issues that comes to mind when you’re talking is that the LAU doesn’t look at content, it looks at process, so how as a student do you make the links or how you transfer what you talk about in the LAU from processes that differ from the content area.

D: I would use pretty much what they’d discussed as a framework and used that as an aid or a crutch if you like. Come up with a rough draft content wise and that is then what I would take to the tutor. Because the LAU don’t look at the actual filling in the sandwich, if you like, they’ll tell you this is the bread, off you go and put the filling in it.

DP: Is that problematic for you, I mean, is it difficult to do that?

C: It can be, it can be really daunting, especially, well we just had an incident this morning whether the first year who doesn’t know where she’s heading with an assignment and thinking back, I mean, even now I’m still the same but sometimes yes it can be really problematic because you don’t know what to put in even if you do find anything. You don’t know where to go and whether you are heading in the right direction before you get it back to that second or third stage and that’s only if you can get an appointment to get back in there before its due again.

D: The other thing, the bottom line is, the person who has given you the mark, you’re tutor, they’re the ones whose hoop you have to jump through. LAU can give you nice general advice and guidance, but when it comes to actually fine tuning and making the filling in there, you’ve really got to be doing what your tutor wants. And the only way you can find that out of course is with consultation with them.

DP: It’s interesting to hear you say that because part of my research argument is that what drives the work of the LAU is the academic requirements. So it’s the assessment that is really driving the work of the LAU. So you come in with a task that you have to do and that’s what motivated you to come there in the first place. It’s also what motivates the Learning Adviser to give you the help. Trying to make it as relevant as possible to what you want to achieve. And in that sense if the links between the Learning Assistance Unit and the faculty are very wide, and there isn’t that closer communication – I’m really concerned that it makes it very difficult for the student to make sense of it. You could almost, sort of, be popping in here and you get to this, you pop over to the library and you get told something else, you go over to the faculty and you get something else again. I mean, how – is that confusing? Is that how you see it, or am I being too…?

D: No, I think there’s a very broad …. I think one of the skills you require as a student is selective amnesia. You get all the bits of information, you put them together, you see which bits suit, which bits fit and you forget the rest. But yes, you’re right. You often get conflicting information for various sources, don’t you? I think what would be nice would be – I don’t know if it would benefit the LAU – if there was some provision for feedback whereby we could say this was the mark I got for the assignment that you helped me with, these were the comments I received from the academic on it. I don’t know whether that would help LAU perhaps finetune their work. But it would certainly mean I went in
there informally and told them how pleased I was with the grade that I got. But
there’s no formal reporting back.

**DP:** No, and I do know that those students that do come back – the Learning
Advisers are very happy to hear the outcome, because it gives them something to
reflect on in terms of what happened in that consultation time, or the workshop, or
whatever. But no, we don’t have a formal mechanism. But that’s an interesting
strategy that we could look at. And this is what my project is really about. It’s not
looking for rocket science stuff. It’s looking for these sorts of suggestions that
could make a difference. And it could actually make a difference to both the
student and the Learning Adviser, so thank you. If you’ve got any other ideas,
you’ve mentioned already closer collaboration or communication between the
tutor and the adviser, and that strategy – any of those sorts of practical things, I’m
really interested to hear.

**D:** The problem with that is going to be if you raise the profile of the LAU
any higher, all you’re doing is increasing demand and it’s already stressed beyond
being able to cope.

**C:** You’d have to put on more advisers

**D:** Oh, twice as many easily.

**C:** There is a big issue of anybody, not being able to get an appointment. It’s
the time of getting the appointment but it’s also the time spent at the appointment.
I could probably spend a good hour in there. By the time you unpack and sort of
come up with what suggestions you’ve got or whatever, and you’re sort of
confined to a half hour or fifteen minutes. You just don’t get anything. I mean,
that’s not the LAU’s fault. …..

**DP:** It’s trying to see as many students as possible.

**D:** I mean, we used to run a […] association. And we would say to people
when they’d come to us and say, “Look we’re struggling academically,” - “Oh, well
use the LAU.” And the feedback we almost invariably got was, “Oh, well I
called past be the door was locked, there was nobody there, there was no spaces
on the sheet for the drop-in sessions or the one I want.” So I think that it’s an
excellent provision – it’s brilliant, but anything that comes from this that’s going
to result in more people wanting to use its services, that’s going to be self
destructive as it stands.

**DP:** I suppose we have to face reality and that is yes, there will only ever be
this amount of funding and how can we best use that to do what we do effectively.
That’s why we continue to try and do things like introduce group consultations
instead of individual consultations. Restricting the time on those drop-ins. It is a
matter of just trying different strategies and coming up with those solutions. Ok,
well, is there anything else you want to add about …?

**C:** No, not that I can think of.
D: Just that if must be a damn good system because we know for a fact that they haven’t got it at (refers to university by name) and we keep getting refers to university by name) students up here that try to get in.

DP: Is that right?!

D: It’s got to be a damn fine system.

C: They’ve got to pay for it down there.

DP: I mean, I think the university was very genuine in its establishment of the Unit. It really had some clear ideas about trying to make it equitable and accessible. I don’t think anybody predicted the demand that would eventually be created. Because the service was seen as valuable and adding value to the learning experience.

D: There’s a tremendous need for it.

C: You could probably put on another half a dozen advisers and they’d still be jam packed with people.

DP: Well that’s the other thing with any of these sort of support services. One of the arguments is that you could throw money at it ad infinitum and you still wouldn’t meet the need, so how do you use what you’ve got most effectively? I think one of the comments that I make quite often is that the success of students in the university is not the sole responsibility of the Learning Assistance Unit. It’s a shared responsibility with students of course. But also with the faculty staff. So there needs to be some questioning about how the faculty budgets have shrunk, and they’ve got less and less tutoring time and that sort of thing, to provide support. The last thing we need to do is set ourselves up as the answer. Because then we will just be unable to do anything effectively, and we’ll also be copping all the flack.

C: The only thing is now that they’ve got the student portal (>). I think everybody has got it. All the subjects, I think they’ve been changed to courses or… they’ve had a name change. They’re on there. Perhaps if the Learning Assistance Unit could put something direct on someone’s portal. Just to generalise things saying, “These are the workshops coming up in January and February,” or something, and “Register on line.” I think that’s half the thing. If people would come to more workshops, if they’re locked in to coming to a workshop – but because it’s a drop-in thing – if I’m there on the day I’ll go.

DP: So they won’t show, you mean?

C: So maybe if they had to register on-line. I’m not saying you would cut it off. But make people more… once people have done that they tend to put it in a diary, whereas if it’s just a day, they might not bother.

D: That’s good. I think students need to value the service more. And those of us who do use it, I would say use it properly. We REALLY value it. There’s an awful lot of people out there who are very……… in their use of it. You know,
they’ll book a slot and then not turn up. Put their names down for workshops and then not bother.

DP: Just on that issue of who’s using it and who isn’t. Do you think from your observations, is there a particular client group that’s using the service more than others? Do you think it’s attractive to all students, regardless of their backgrounds, or..?

C: No, young ones think it’s a remedial centre. They have a real thing that they think it’s a remedial centre and you only use that if you’re a real dummy.

D: I think there’s a lot of mature age students, and I think a lot of international students do as well.

DP: Use it?

D: Yeah. From my observations when I’ve been in, it’s either been an older student or an international student who’s in there.

DP: So that issue of the younger students dismissing it as remedial. Where are they getting the support, then, that they need?

D: They’re not.

C: I don’t think they are.

DP: Can you think of any strategies to try and change that image?

D: The only thing that would change that, I think, is more information being given out on it. And possibly if it was coming from a creditable source like perhaps lecturers and/or tutors. Actually recommending the services of the LAU and briefly explaining exactly what it is. Word of mouth from students like us helps as well. But, we don’t have that much direct contact with the younger end of the first year students. Which is where it needs to be. They need to get hold of the idea early on, that it’s there to help. It’s not a remedial centre.

DP: Yeah, we’ve been conscious of that in our marketing and the way that we do what we do, by not doing things like grammar checking and the types of topics that we offer. The other student interview that I did last week, the same issue came up, and she was a mature age person and she felt that the younger students didn’t see it as… they saw it as remedial and weren’t going to use the services.

D: I don’t think there’s anything that you could do to make younger students interested because - I don’t know, they seem to have a very strange attitude to learning, whereas the mature age student is here to get as much out of it as they can. The kids are just here to not wear uniforms, drink a lot of coffee and booze. I know it’s a stereotype.

DP: Different priorities

D: You know, if you’re offering practical help with the learning side of things, I think a lot of them are just going to be totally turned off.
C: I don’t think it hits them until they’ve failed the whole year, and then suddenly..

DP: ... they’re in crisis mode

C: That’s when it suddenly hits them. They’ve got no idea where they’re going and what they’re doing. And the student admin, they don’t actually inform anybody that the LAU’s there. The student services does, but not the actual admin. So if you went up there looking for some sort of help, you know, they could actually refer people to the LAU as well.

DP: You’ve come up with some good strategies in a very short period of time under pressure. So there’s at least half a dozen things that you’ve suggested there, that we will look at and try and incorporate somehow into what we do. The next step with the project is to analyse all of this data and pull the themes out and suggestions and then talk about it as a work group. It may be that I’ll need to come back to you at some stage, if that’s all right. If I’ve got the questions. Thank you very much, both of you, for your time.
Interview with Learning Adviser ‘A’, Griffith University, 16 March, 2001

DP: A, thank you very much for agreeing to participate in my research project. We’ve already talked quite a bit about the aim of the project, so I wonder if I could just start by asking you, what do you think the role of the Learning Assistance Unit is?

A: I see the role of the Learning Assistance Unit as being very student focused and that we’re aiming to assist the students with their learning to become independent learners, to develop those skills that are going to help them to be lifelong learners. In lots of cases it’s to give them confidence with their learning. Sometimes, we have students where I can think of situations where it is just reinforcing and reassuring them that what they’re doing is ok. In other cases it’s really helping them with skills and strategies and processes that they can use and apply. Firstly in their work here at university and then things that they’ll take away with them.

DP: Can you explain what you think motivates the work of the Learning Adviser?

A: Well I think probably for all of our team it’s working with the students and being in that role of helping them, meeting their needs with regards to learning and really just that interaction with the students. Getting the positive feedback from them. It’s nice when they express their appreciation or tell you how much it’s helped them to see something more clearly. Sometimes they’ll indicate how they’re going to transfer what we’ve said about a particular assessment task to other things that they’re going to do. So I think, for me, and most of us, it’s enjoying working with the students.

DP: We’ve talked a lot lately about our relationship with academic staff and with library staff. When you think about the student experience of interacting with those three systems, because as you know my project is based on this activity theory which has activity systems as part of it, what do you think the student experience is like moving between those three areas?

A: I think the students see them as probably really distinct areas and that if they go - I’m just thinking for instance, to get assistance - if they approached an academic staff member, probably what they would expect to get from that staff member would be different from what they expect to get from us. Because sometimes they might actually say, or you might raise an issue and indicate that it might be good to talk to a lecturer or tutor and they will agree on that point or they’ll say yes I was intending to do that. So I think in terms of the academics and ourselves they do see that we have a slightly different role to play for them. I guess that’s also reinforced if an academic suggests that they come and see us. Once again, they see that there’s something slightly different. I think that they see, certainly in relation to things that librarians do are quite different as well. That there’ll be just a really different focus on what we bring up and what the librarians will help them with. Sometimes that comes through in some of the questions that they’re asking us and we might even have to say, “That is something specifically to ask the library.” Sometimes with us being located in the library they think we will be able to address those areas as well.
DP: One of the things I’m looking for in my study is evidence of trouble, or contradiction, or tension, and then looking at ways of changing work practices to address those issues. Can you think of any specific tensions or troubles between - the relationship between the Learning Assistance Unit and the library; the Learning Assistance Unit and the faculty?

A: I think possibly, particularly more between the library and ourselves, probably just because we liaise more with them, or work more closely with them. It’s probably the different focus that we have. They don’t approach things from the student centred focus. It’s more content focused or “using this database” focused. Sometimes it comes to light that they don’t really have a full understanding of what it is that we do and how we approach things. Perhaps they don’t see that there’s quite the same differences in what we’re doing. I’m picking up (because I’ve only been here in the job for a short time) that there’s a more positive perception of what we do from the academic staff, or certainly some of them, that our profile has certainly been raised. It’s in a more positive way. It’s not for remediation and those sorts of issues. Even getting away from the grammar, spell checks. I think that’s coming through in conversations I’ve had with some academic staff. Even ones who don’t really know what we do, and asked me, and listened with interest and said, “Yes, that’s great.” Clarified what sorts of things they might send students to us for. Then requests that we’re getting to come and do things in discipline for them. I also have a sense that there’s still academic staff who don’t fully understand what we do, or still perhaps see us as just this real “Out there”... possibly still in the remediation model.

DP: That creates a problem or a contradiction.

A: It does create a contradiction. It’s a problem in that it’s not a collaboration and they don’t see the positives and the assistance that we can be giving both to them and their students in their teaching work. Students’ learning.

DP: When you think about the everyday practice of the Learning Advisers - as you know, I’ve videotaped some examples of that with workshop and drop-in - can you think of any ways that we could be improving our daily practice?

A: I think that it is hard to comment on in a general sense, because probably a lot of us tend to reflect on what we do. I know I certainly do and I know from conversations, that there’s a debriefing type thing. From those types of conversations you pick up ideas and tips from the others and listen to how they approach things or how people have done something. I find that that is useful. You do tend to reflect yourself. Even just in how you’ve dealt with a particular issue. Saying, “I did that. How might I approach it differently? I can’t afford to spend that much time with a student. What strategies can I use to help them clarify what they need to get out of the drop-in and how could I do that more efficiently and still be effective - or be more effective?”

DP: That’s reinforced through the literature, too, on teaching being a very individual endeavour. Yes you’re in the classroom and you’re making decisions and judgements in terms of how you’ll do things or what you’ll do differently next time.
A: Probably from a student perspective, they would think of things like accessibility and us having more availability for drop in sessions and things like that. I think in terms of our practice, we, as a group of individuals, tend to do quite a bit of reflection and brainstorm ways of being able to do things better. Even when it comes to doing in discipline workshops, we brainstorm about how we will approach it. Whether it’s one of us doing it or a small group of us doing it. We tend to bounce ideas off each other. I think that’s really good for helping to improve our practice. Not just approaching those in disciplines with a bit of an add-on to something generic. Sure, the generic is a base, but a lot of thought and time and effort goes into those sorts of things. We are always striving to improve our practice. I never get the perception that any of us are sitting there thinking, “This is going really well.” Nor is anyone in a groove or a rut. That’s one of the things that make it a really dynamic job. It makes it interesting.

You were asking about the motivations before. Going back to that everything is different. Particularly in a drop-in. You might see six people in two hours.

Interview with Learning Adviser ‘A’ continued...

DP: It’s interesting what you’re saying about that motivation and that diversity, because I do see that as a motivating factor for the work of the Learning Adviser. You’re constantly being challenged.

A: Exactly. It’s always keeping you on your toes. So, mentally it’s providing that challenge and keeping you alert. Basically, it doesn’t get boring or mundane or routine. I’m not saying this as a criticism but perhaps that’s where there’s a big difference between us and even the librarians. A lot of their work is routine and similar. Resetting a SNAP account. There’s only so many ways you can tell people how to search a database. So, that’s where our difference lies. We are dealing with people rather than things like the databases or the catalogue.

DP: Is there anything else you want to add?

A: No. Probably just the fact that we have to be involved with tuning into the students’ needs. Even at times helping them ascertain what their needs are.

DP: How can we do that?

A: I think we do it a lot through our communication with them. That is verbally and non-verbally. That’s what can be harder about things such as assignments having been sent to the mailbox. When you’re doing a drop-in face to face, you can pick up that they’re not really understanding what you’re saying, or you’re overloading because there’s too many factors you are picking up on that they need to make some changes to, or something like that. I think it is that questioning process. Effective communication principles underlie a lot of it, in terms of sorting out what it is that they are needing or wanting us to help them with. Maybe the need and the want of the help is sometimes different too.

DP: Clarifying those expectations. It’s often a case of negotiating what is realistic.
A: What is realistic. I was thinking even the spelling and grammar checks. They might want that but even when we say we don’t do it and we will look at other aspects and structure, there’s still a lot of benefit in that for them. Benefit that they hadn’t even realised could be gained. I think that is important as well. Showing them - any student - that what they think they might be needing, might not be the only area that’s requiring some help.
Interview with Learning Adviser ‘B’, Griffith University, 15 March, 2001

DP: B, thanks very much for agreeing to participate in my research project about the Learning Assistance Unit and ways of improving our practice. I wanted to start by asking you what do you perceive as the role of the Learning Assistance Unit?

B: I suppose at the core of its role I see its function as being to assist student learning. So, I suppose I see students at the centre of what the Learning Assistance Unit is about.

DP: What do you think motivates the work of the Learning Adviser within that Unit?

B: “Student-centred” was sort of just a phrase to me before I came here. It was thrown about and I knew that is was in the literature. Actually, it’s lived on a daily basis here and it’s really nice to be part of that. The Learning Advisers that I’m working with really have the students at the core of what they’re doing.

DP: Can you think of some explicit examples where you see that being demonstrated in daily practice?

B: When I first came […] and in the first week, before I actually did drop-in sessions, I sat in on a few drop-in sessions so I was able to observe the Learning Advisers actually interacting with students. And it was so different from what often goes on, I suspect. What certainly did for me and as a student, what often goes on in interactions between academics and students. Largely, I supposed because academics don’t have a lot of time - or think that they don’t. Their focus was definitely on “Not telling”, on drawing the problems and the solutions and the possibilities out of the student. That was immediately obvious in the very first session that I sat in on. I really like that idea. And it fits with - I know a little about counselling methodologies and counselling theory - and that really fits in with what seems to me to be useful and workable in human relationships generally, but certainly in a counselling situation. My feeling has been that it would apply well to teaching. I found it difficult to do that because there’s always this content driving, this need to get across a certain amount of content, that drives what happens in a classroom. In a drop-in situation, I’m finding it really interesting to be able to sit with that process and develop that process and refine it. I know that I’ve got a long way to go but that’s my aim and that’s what I’m trying to do all the time. It’s harder in a workshop situation, because there again there is - even though it’s generic skills - there’s a certain amount of content, but I try to make that as active as possible too.

DP: Can you explain how you do that?

B: By asking questions and by making the questions open-ended. Questions that don’t usually invite a yes or no response. Sometimes if that doesn’t work immediately, I might have tried to do it too early. I’m still playing with all of these things. So sometimes I think I’m doing it a little too early and that the best thing to do is to introduce myself and be relaxed and to maybe even have a few jokes. Not too many - maybe one even. Just in the beginning. Try to make them
relaxed and welcome, before I begin to ask them to participate. Today for
instance, I didn’t try to get them involved except by saying where they were all
from - what disciplines they were from. Until we started unpacking the question,
I did Academic Writing 1 today. That seemed to work well. Then by the time I
really turned the session over to their questions, they were very active indeed.

DP: One of the things I’m interested in, as I said earlier, is the student
experience in the learning environment and if you think of the Learning
Assistance Unit as one element or one system within the learning environment
and the library as another and the faculty as another, do you have any notions
about the student experience? Do they see this as three logical interrelated
components of this learning experience when they move between these different
systems or not?

B: I think it would be hard to generalise but I certainly have had a lot of
students come to drop in and they really don’t know the difference between -
they’re just coming for assistance and they’re desperate and they see that this is
learning assistance and so that’s why they’re here. Quite often they ask us to do
things that the Learning Assistance Unit doesn’t do and so we refer them...

DP: For example?

B: Help with the English language. Especially international students and
students for whom English is a second language. Proof reading, spell checking,
grammar checking, that sort of thing. There are also counselling type problems
and there it is quite obvious where to refer them. Quite often library type things.
Research questions but they’re really about how to use the library databases and
there again it’s easy to refer them.

DP: So what you’re saying is that from the students’ perspectives it’s not clear
of the role, or?

B: For quite a few students it’s not clear. For some it is. Some have been
very methodical in going through the material they got in O-week. I’m talking
first year students. Most of the second year students I’ve seen experienced the
Learning Assistance Unit last year and that’s why they’re here this year. So
they’re very clear about what we do. Masters or postgraduate students, I’ve had a
mixture. Either some of them are quite clear and some are not.

DP: What about your own perceptions about the differences or the similarities
or overlaps between the role of the Learning Adviser, the academic and the
librarian? What’s your own interpretation of those relationships? Are there
relationships?

B: From the students’ point of view?

DP: No. From your point of view as a Learning Adviser

B: Certainly there are overlaps. In some cases it would be possible or easy
for me to fill in and respond to the students from, for instance, the librarian’s point
of view. But then that would take up the time - for instance, if I’m in a drop-in
session, there’s twenty minutes and the best use of that time would be made if I
use that time to help them in a way that I’m geared to do and that the Learning Assistance is geared to do. Is your question about whether these divisions are useful?


B: Well there are some problems in that some academics seem to be advising students to come to the Learning Assistance Unit to get grammar and spell checks and proof reading. So, clearly we could get better information out to the academics in certain areas. I don’t think there need to be tensions, but I know that there are, and I know that there are academics who are hostile to the notion of generic skills. They imagine that they can’t be taught. They perhaps imagine that we teach them in a pristine environment. That’s got no relation to their content. Whereas in fact we are sensitive to the content. That’s what the students are bringing to us and we’re merely trying to assist the students to know what these skills are and how they can apply them specifically to their content areas. So, perhaps I think educators could be better educated as to what we can do. Some would be better educated if they had some education in education. I think that a lot of educators aren’t teachers and aren’t trained to be and aren’t interested in it. That’s one problem with our university system and the way it is now. Probably it’s not as bad now as it was traditionally. I don’t know. There are obviously studies about that. But we’re here really - we’re interested in the teaching side of education. So I think that we’ve got a lot to offer.

DP: Can I just return to the daily practice? Can you think of some ways that the Learning Assistance Unit and the Learning Advisers could improve what they’re do in daily practice. You’ve mentioned already better communication in terms of what the role is, so that you get over those problems about missed expectations about grammar checking or language assistance. But can you think of any other examples of ways we could improve what we do.

B: I could think of ways that I could improve what I do. I need to be more organised in getting my materials sorted, because as I’m preparing PowerPoint displays for instance, I’m going back to all sorts of other things that I’ve done before, instead of having a database, for instance, of graphics. Which I haven’t got around to doing, which would make it, save me time anyway. So in that sense I’d be more efficient and that would make me better at what I’m doing because my time would be better used. I might not be well qualified to answer that sort of question because I’ve had so little time in the Unit. I think that Learning Advisers generally relate really well - well the one’s that I’ve seen - relate really well to the students. They really put the student at the centre and are respectful and welcoming and friendly towards them and sort of try to relax them initially. So, I don’t think that that part of the practice needs improvement at all. I think that that is excellent. I haven’t observed anybody else in a workshop so I can’t really comment on that either. I’m still really juggling with workshops and how to run them and when to make which parts more interactive. So, really don’t think that I’ve got a lot that’s meaningful.

DP: Is there anything else you want to add to any... Well I’ll turn that off.
B: One important thing is, I think, that we do, as individuals, you do drop-in sessions which are one on one interactions with students and we do workshops because they inform each other. I take things from the workshop experience through to how I’m helping someone in a drop-in session and vice versa. It’s also interesting because you get feedback at drop-in sessions. A student in a drop-in session will come to the workshop and tell you what happened as a result of your intervention. That’s good. Another thing I’d like to say - one really positive part of this job is you continually get really positive feedback. It’s a feel good job.
Interview with Learning Adviser ‘C’, Griffith University, 15 March, 2001

**DP:** The first thing I wanted to ask you about is what you see as the role of the Learning Assistance Unit?

**C:** I see they’re primarily to help learners. That tends to be primarily students. But from time to time it’s also other groups of learners, whether that be staff or community groups, with a range of learning assistance type needs. I’m not sure what else.

**DP:** As we’ve talked about in the past, part of my research is about improving the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit. I’m just wondering how you would describe what motivates the work of the Learning Adviser?

**C:** Do you mean in terms of why they apply for a job? The job? Or in terms of their day-to-day..?

**DP:** In their daily practice. What motivates their work?

**C:** Um, probably a range of reasons. I think the thing that probably motivates myself and, I think, my colleagues, is that it’s the personal satisfaction that they get from the work. That they can see the improvement that the student is able to make as a result of a drop-in or a workshop or an email. That improvement that that person has made - they are obviously satisfied and they often express that. Or if they don’t you can still see the growth and development which is still satisfying in itself.

**DP:** When you think of the student experience, coming to the Learning Assistance Unit, the student in most cases goes to the library as well and interacts with the librarians. They’ve come from the faculty or the school where they’ve interacted with lecturers and tutors. Do you have any notions about how students find that experience? I mean, is a coherent sort of moving from one element to another or is it confusing? How do you think students experience that interaction?

**C:** I think they are, many times, confuse about roles of various parts played. The people within those systems are also confused about - you know not just the students but the staff that work in the library or academic areas and maybe even Learning Assistance - are sometimes confused about the different roles each element plays. For example academics often talk to a student about coming to Learning Assistance for the purpose of grammar checks and English type things, which isn’t the role we play. So, I think there are areas of confusion. I think our placement in the library might facilitate that transition between library and learning assistance type support, more. It really depends, too, if academics, I guess, endorse our service as to whether that transition is smooth too, as to whether that person is even able to have the awareness that we exist and if so, if it’s endorsed, than then maybe more people will come and use the service than if it’s just something that’s just mentioned for a particular group of students. You know, that it’s for non-English speaking.

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DP: I’m interested in the point you’ve made about some academics either endorsing or not endorsing the LAU. Why do you think they would do either? Why would they endorse it? Why wouldn’t they endorse it?

C: I think in terms of endorsing it they see, I guess, we can reduce their workloads in some ways. But they don’t have to necessarily cover the skills that we can develop in the students. They can see, too, the benefits after a student has been to see someone, perhaps they can see that the work has obviously improved. I’m not sure whether they put it down to us or the stuff that they’re doing in their own classes but, I’m sure some academics would recognise it. That the role we play has been valuable in improving that. I think some reasons why they don’t, perhaps, is just a misconception of our role. They see us as the ... Maybe, that we’re not content focused enough, perhaps in some ways. That we are more generic in what we do. And question the value of that in discipline type stuff. Or that they are just expecting us to do different things. Maybe they’re expecting tutoring type - they’re actually expecting us to do content and that’s not we do. So then they think, oh well, we don’t need that. Or they’re expecting us to do, again, their grammar and that’s not something that we do. So they don’t look for other ways that we can help. They’re perhaps looking for a particular thing. Ok, you don’t service that... You know, they’re not looking for other, I guess, possibilities where we can help out.

DP: So you’ve identified what maybe could be described as some tensions, or contradictions between the Learning Adviser and the academic. If you look at between the Learning Adviser and the librarian, you’ve already mentioned that being co-located has sort of maybe helped or facilitated some of those connections. Can you see any tensions, or gaps, or issues between the role of the librarian and the role of the Learning Adviser?

C: I guess coming up into this realignment process there are tensions there about how enmeshed we see our roles. That perhaps some people think - particularly librarians might think that they could take on the role of the Learning Adviser. I guess there are some librarians that have some skills in that context of teaching. I guess it’s very individually based, too. Working with one librarian is very different from working with another. There’s tensions there, I guess, in terms of role overlap or something. That perhaps students might see us as doing very similar things. That’s, I guess, good, in terms of we are able to dovetail into each other in workshops and things like that. In terms of academic writing, we can work really well with reference librarians on topics like that because there is that overlap to some extent. But I guess it’s the level to which librarians can take that compared to the level to which we can take it. Where I guess, although there’s overlap, there’s specialisation too, that we have to recognise.

DP: When you think about the daily practice of the Learning Assistance Unit and my project which is about trying to improve those practices, can you give me any suggestions, or examples of where you think our practice could be improved? Either in terms of our relationship with the other systems like the faculty and the library, and also internally. And I guess the student experiences - that link in factor?

C: I think we’re doing very well in terms of the student, and I’m only basing this on the sorts of evaluations and things, that we have always done quite well in
terms of student satisfaction and things like that. So, improving at that high level is always difficult. Perhaps I guess, one thing that is being realised more and more is that our unit is becoming more popular with students and that’s I guess a concern in terms of whether we can continue to meet that high demand. Getting our staffing levels and things like that. So, I guess there’s area for improvement in terms of maybe - I don’t know whether it’s reconfiguring an existing staff or increasing staffing levels or - something to accommodate the increase in demand. Particularly around teaching times. When it’s peak time it’s very difficult for staff to cope with and also the student that’s trying to get into a service.

DP: In terms of how we provide the service, more at that practical level of how you conduct your workshop or a consultation. Can you think of any ways of improving those processes or interactions?

C: I think. I can’t think of really anything there. I guess we have tried to develop collaborative relationships with librarians for example, to try and improve our practice, in particular topic areas, where it’s appropriate. In terms of - we’re also trying to do that with academics and I guess we could do more with that. But again it’s a question of how much can you stretch the existing load. I don’t know if there’s a way to do things more efficiently in a drop-in or a workshop or an email. I can’t think of anything at this stage.

DP: Is there anything else you want to add at this point?

C: One thing I would add in terms of if we are looking at any opportunities for improving would be to be more proactive, rather than reactionary. In terms of getting in there early with, particularly academics, rather than having last minute requests. Coming to us and us having to fit them in. Which often leads to disappointment when we can’t fit them in. Be more proactive in that way, rather than reactionary.
DP: As I’ve explained a number of times, what I am attempting to do here is use activity theory as a framework for exploring, and making visible, the work practices of the Learning Assistance Unit, in an attempt to look for contradictions and gaps in what we do. Then looking for solutions and ways of improving our work. I’m also interested in how we operate in that broader context. Particularly our relationship with other key players. I’ve identified the librarians, because we are organisationally placed within the library. Obviously the students and the faculty staff. And how our work is similar and is different to the staff in those different areas. So I wonder if you wouldn’t mind by starting from a more general perspective and that is what would you describe as the work of the Learning Assistance Unit?

D: The work is to obviously help the student to achieve, to be successful. That’s not just to get good grades, but it’s to enjoy learning, to have fun at learning, to get something out of the whole university experience. I think that’s our main, global thing, is to make some provisions for that to happen. That’s probably an untouchable and a tangible that you could say, “Well this is how we do it.” But I do believe that’s what we’re here for. To help students have a successful learning experience while they are here for three years. Obviously it’s a means to an end that they go out as better Griffith graduates, or better graduates, with a whole lot of learning skills, for independent, life-long learning. While they are here with us, our main thing is to make the experience a successful one for them. And successful, as I said, in whatever way they want to define success. Which could be, and is, quite interesting to actually ask a student what they want from university. And you get a very broad range. They’re our clients and we have to meet that broad range. It might just be to pass, it might be to get high distinctions. It might even just be to be more curious or learning any number of things. That’s our role, I believe.

DP: So what would you say motivates the work of the Learning Adviser? They’re sort of the aims, or the purpose, but what motivates you, as a Learning Adviser, to do what you do?

D: A whole number of things. Having been a learning, and still a learner myself, I know how exciting it can be to have a win, to be successful, to see yourself move from one point to another, to make some jump, some “Ah-ha” experience or “Oh I could have done it that way” or “I didn’t think of it that way” or “Hey that’s interesting. I could pursue that further.”

DP: So in your day-to-day practices, they’re the things that motivate you?

D: Very much.

DP: What about from the students’ perspectives? What motivates them to come to the LAU?

D: I think as I said before, they come with a whole range of objectives for themselves, which is just help me pass this assignment, this assignment, this exam. Some of them are just at that level of motivation. Just want to pass.
Others are, “I want to survive,” which is slightly different to a pass. “I want to
pass, but I also want to survive, so how can I manage all of this and survive it?”

Others are really just turned on, a little bit like myself and obviously I would key
in to those people very keenly, who are just hungry. And you can see it. You can
see it in their eyes, in everything they do. Their motivation is much more linked
to mine. They’re just excited by things, by learning, by openness, by newness.

But I think there is that whole gamut that we have to identify in the students.

Part of our role is really finding out where is the student coming from? Where are
they at?

DP: Can I just switch to the relationship between the librarians and the
Learning Advisers and ask you to think about that relationship and think about
what the links are and what the synergies are in the work that the Learning
Adviser does with the student.

D: Well I’d like to think that they were motivated at the same... they saw their
role very similarly. That is, to give the student a great experience. An experience
of the library and of finding information, of moving in and around the library, of
making the library a place where they want to be, or a place where they know for
the rest of their life is going to be really important to them. Something they’re
going to take on in the long term.

DP: So is that in practice what is happening?

D: I don’t think so. I think they’re very much more the point of contact -
meet that need. I don’t think they insightfully see themselves as a role. This is
not fair to be talking about what I think they see in some ways. I think most of
them are just there like the complaints department, or the information department
in a shopping centre. “I want this - give it to me!” “Where’s the shoe
department?” “It’s in that direction.” “Where is this?” “It’s in that direction.” Or
“How do I access this?” They demonstrate it on the computer. In front of them
maybe. Or they give them a handout. But I don’t think they look at the person as
a person who has a context around them, who maybe has a reason for what they’re
asking. Very often, one of the things we will find in a consultation with a student
is they come in saying what they want, but the minute you start to unpack that
with them, it’s not really what they want at all. You see something else. You
know it’s something else that they’re heading in the direction for. I don’t think
perhaps their questioning techniques, maybe it’s their time frame. Maybe they
just don’t have the time. Maybe it is even the sitting behind, opposite at a counter
which makes it - the student standing up behind a counter - it makes it very much
the information counter. Here’s my question - here’s the answer. So even the
physical setting doesn’t lend itself towards, “Why do you want this? Where do
you plan to take this?” Doing any of that deeper - finding out what the student
really wants and what’s motivating the student and what are their real needs? I
don’t think they have time for it. I’m not sure if they acknowledge it. I’m not
sure if they would even be aware that that would be important. But for me it
would be.

DP: So in terms of any overlaps or synergies or similarities, are there any
between the role of the librarian and the Learning Adviser?
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D: For me, still, I think there are some, just like we have students dropping in here who say, “Oh, can you tell me where...?” We do that function, but it’s very quick and very brief. We don’t have them lining up. So, I think that function is still there at the library, but probably you don’t need to be a librarian to do most of it. Probably the lending service across the counter could answer those questions fairly easily. Maybe there’s even a computer that could have some program that they can just ask those frequently asked questions. I think their role shouldn’t be too dissimilar to ours. That the student is a learner who comes from a context, with a context. They come from a faculty. They come generally in the context of an assignment or a purpose that is bigger than just the inquiry that they are making. And that the librarian can probably do a little bit more than just answer the immediate question. That would take a change. It would take making the communication setting different. Probably more like ours. Where you can make eye contact. Where you’re not lining up in the line and you’ve got five other people behind you where you’ve got to rush through and get these inquiries out of the way. They’ve made an appointment so they can do that stuff. So that they have the time. I think the synergies are almost very similar on many of the issues. I walk past that desk and I can hear students say, “Well, I’ve got to do...” and they say, “Well, you’ll find that there.” “Oh but my assignment...” And the student is crying out to explain further. A little bit like going to a doctor and having the secretary or the doctor’s attendant saying, “Well, what’s wrong with you?” And you’re saying, “That’s why I’m at the doctors.” That same level of information but the patient is actually crying out to tell the story, because they’re not quite sure what it is. I think the librarians have that role. Even in the information literacy; the context we provide. It’s then saying, their role would be one of providing skills that will allow them to be independent next time, so they don’t have to come back and ask, “Well I’ve done that, now what do I do?” You actually fill the rounded context. Help them learn the skills for solving their own problems and the principles behind not only where they’re going, why they’re going and how they can extend that.

DP: I wanted to also ask you about the faculty staff. The tutors, the lecturers. What similarities and differences do you see between the role of the Learning Adviser and the academic staff? As you’ve already identified the students come from a context - an academic context or a faculty context. What are the similarities and differences?

D: Again it is about perceptions. How do the lecturers actually think they’re actually similar or different versus how do I see they’re different?

DP: Well how do you as a Learning Adviser see the similarities and differences?

D: I think we’re in almost identical roles in terms of the commitment to developing skills that they can use about learning. I believe that’s what a lecturer should be doing. And I think we have more and more instances of that sort of thing happening. The [...] agreement that I’ve got at the moment, collaboration that we’re doing at the moment - the lecturer and myself are both tuned in to the same understanding of what we’re doing. Now obviously they’ve still got the content stuff but I think the younger lecturers are really concerned about how the student is learning, about modelling how they’re learning and about providing the skills about learning, more than they are about just content. Whereas you’ve still
got a lot of the old school - the just stand up, lecture, content and walk out. And
then they pay lip service to the skills and say, “Well, here’s a group assignment -
do it,” but provide no modelling, no guidance for that sort of thing to happen. As
far as I’m concerned, separating those two boundaries is just not right. So, it’s not
so dissimilar to the librarian. Provide the context.

DP: Can I just ask you how those differences impact on the way Learning
Advisers relate to academic staff? You’ve identified some academic staff who are
interested in skill development and student progress. And others that stand and
deliver and exit. How does that impact on the sort of relationships that ....?

D: Between us and them or the student?

DP: Between the Learning Adviser and the academic staff

D: I think the result is that those lecturers who do think similarly treat us as a
valuable part, and as part of the team. I feel very much a part of the team. They’ll
actually ask advice, they’ll float assessment criteria past us, they’ll phone up.
More and more are asking for resources. They phone up for a coffee and talk –
“Will you have a look at this?” More and more I think we’re seen as both
working towards the same goal. There’s probably three categories. The old
school don’t make any contact with us. When we make contact they sort of say,
“Oh yeah, we’ll put your timetable in our course outline.” And don’t really want
to have anything more to do with us. Then there’s the lecturers in the middle who
say, “That’s a good idea. You run the workshops.” I think it just takes building
relationships all the time. [...] and with some of those who were like that, they
are now very much collaborating. Even though we’re running separate
workshops, not going over or doing anything right in there or having any input
into their booklets or anything. They are more and more talking to us about what
they would like and what they want and how they want it. So, I think they’re
coming ‘round. I think it is the same with the librarians. There’s probably
degrees of all of that happening. Probably the same with Learning Advisers.
We’ve probably got a few Learning Advisers who see themselves as very
separate.

DP: Just to think about those different contexts. The faculty context, the
library context and the Learning Assistance Unit context, what are your thoughts
on the student experience? A student who has contact with all three activity
systems or elements or units, whatever you want to call them? What is that
experience like, do you think, for the student?

D: First time they enter university, I think it must be very confusing. I see
them lining up, particularly the ones who are keen, to sign up for anything and
everything. But just when they come in for a workshop and they announce that
they thought that they were going to get something about computers, and they’re
in here for critical thinking or note taking - indicates that they’re very confused
about who is what, where. The same, I think, at the library desk. They’re asking
information there. So, I don’t think it is a seamless experience for them. I think
they know all these things are happening and they’re all just little bits and pieces
of things. Everybody is telling them they should be there, convincing them - and
they’re convinced, and they’re keen, and they’re doing them. But I don’t for one
minute think that the student sees it as aligned. In fact I think they see us in those
first few weeks as somebody they can come and talk to about the other two experiences. Again, maybe the fact that we do sit down around the table, eye to eye contact, we do try to listen to the context, we do try to listen to the person rather than the inquiry, I think probably gives them that security. I think tapers off as they get to know the systems, but I don’t think it is at all obvious at the beginning. Again, I would say with the [...], I think that became very obvious, because we went right in - the two of us together - and saw the students in the very first contact. She did some, I did some and then they had me for the tutorial. So the students are now dropping in talking and that alignment is very, very strong. That’s an example. I wouldn’t say that any of the lecturers are going to head to that, but it’s an example of the students feeling comfortable that this is going on. I can see their experience. Now, the library bit is out separate. Because the [...] is going to do databases with them, but it’s not until week 7 or 8. They are actually wanting it now. That is sitting out there as something quite separate, but it’s already impacting on what the lecturer and I are doing. They really need it now but we weren’t really consulted on when that workshop should take place. I think initially most students are confused, but they’re just in there getting everything. But then again, orientation, first week or two, is survival.

DP:  And for other students once they’ve passed through that transition phase, what is it that motivates them to come into, say the library, and have dealings with the librarians and the Learning Advisers?

D:  Completing an assignment. I think it would be very assignment oriented, targeted. I don’t think it’s fully for us still assignment oriented because we’ve got things like time management and reading effectively, which have nothing to do with an individual assignment. So there’s enough of those other generic things, critical thinking, that aren’t assignment oriented. So they’re still coming to us for learning environment issues. Just learning issues, that aren’t assignment oriented.

DP:  Can you suggest some strategies that might make that more coherent for the student moving between those three systems? What sort of strategies could we as a unit develop in?

D:  I was going to say co-location, but I don’t think that’s necessarily the point. It might help.

DP:  With whom?

D:  With the library at least.

DP:  I thought we already were!

D:  My feeling is that the one strategy that we initially tried of having co-teaching, I don’t think it worked. I think we were still seen as doing two very different tasks. I don’t think it streamlined it very much at all for the student, no.

DP:  No strategies?

D:  Can’t think of it at this point. Other than a closer co-location. So maybe if the librarians were doing sign-on drop-in sessions. Using similar strategies to what we are. If they were within our vicinity we could call upon each other so
that there were drop-ins going on at the same time. Drop-ins for library work as well as.

DP: Wasn’t that the model at (refers to campus by name) at one stage though?
The combined drop-in.

D: Yeah but it got advertised differently. It got advertised as “Do you want help with your PowerPoint for your oral presentation?” and at the same time, “Do you want to speak to a Learning Adviser?” But it operated as two separate systems. In fact it didn’t operate. There were three or four students that went to all of them! Students didn’t go to them.

DP: So, co-location with the library staff, you’re not convinced that that is a strategy that might help it be less confusing?

D: No, I don’t think so. When we had our sign-on drop-in, there was a sign-on drop-in sheet that if the student felt they had library issues or that there was a reference librarian […] at that same time, then students could make appointments and therefore be consulted. But if the student didn’t make an appointment but the librarian was here, then we could tell the student to go in and talk to the librarian or not. Now what percentage of our time, of the students who come to us, need that, I’m not sure. I think it’s fairly minimal. But maybe if it was something that the students got used to, that every Tuesday, or every Tuesday morning and Thursday morning… We did try that strategy. (Refers to library staff member by name) and I tried it. But it was up […]. So suddenly the Learning Advisers disappeared into the library. Students were still coming down here to the Learning Assistance Unit because we had concurrent drop-in times. They never went up there to me, nor did they go up there, because it was tucked away in a training room. People didn’t go.

DP: So what about strategies for closing the gap between the academic staff and the Learning Advisers? Have you got any suggestions?

D: Yes, I think some of the strategies are working. I really think - besides the generic skills project - although that’s interesting… the ones who are up in that lighthouse are going off on their own tangents now. They see themselves as totally independent, do their own thing. And they’re actually replicating some of the work we’re doing - which is fascinating. I feel a little bit out of the loop on that because students are coming to us to explain what is being down in the Lighthouse Project. So, it’s sort of an interesting phenomenon, that one.

I guess I have been operating at a personal level strategy. Develop at rapport, develop a relationship, a communication. But I have know flies on it, that the minute that lecturer moved on or moved out that that relationship would fall and I would then have to develop a relationship with the individual lecturer again. But it is worth it. One of the strategies I have been using is targeting the first year convenors or coordinators because they’re usually the young ones. They’re usually the people who are interested in the generic skills and they’re also very grateful for any help that you can give them. In doing that targeting, what we are developing is - I’m finding anyway down here - quite a strong rapport between, not just a single subject and a single lecturer, but a convenor and a whole area of a
subject or a course or a program. I think that’s the holistic approach to get to that level.

DP: Some strategies to improve the performance or work practices generally of the Learning Assistance Unit? I know that you’ve mentioned previously about professional practice and the issue of preparation. Are there other things like that you can talk about briefly?

D: I do think we can be too ad lib about it. Treat them “Oh, that’s just a generic workshop. It’s just a repeat of note taking and I’ve done it six hundred times and I’m going to do it again. So I’ll just grab the notes out of the PowerPoint or draw and go.” I think that’s a real shame. I think for any teaching experience - for me anyway - you have to get yourself ready for it. Part of that getting ready is knowing what your objectives are. I don’t know, I haven’t asked anybody else, but I suspect no one else actually prepares objectives for each of their generic workshops. Then for the indiscipline ones, to prepare a set of objectives for that too. And why do I do that, because that makes me focus on what it is I’m really doing. It makes me rethink the timing. It makes me go back and look at the last workshop I did and how it went. Not just grab the audio-visuals. But it makes me look at my teaching notes, what the objectives were there, what my teaching notes were and how I responded at the end of that. Did I meet those objectives?

DP: So is there a reason do you think, why that doesn’t happen in every case? Is it because there isn’t enough time? Or is it because people have become blasé about it?

D: I think probably some people might not know how to write objectives or know that objectives might be important. That’s something that’s very much from an education background. What do you want to achieve? What do you want the students to achieve? I think at the higher level, we’ve all agreed to the goals and purposes of the generic workshops. But for me it’s sitting down say, “Note-taking. Has it changed?” We’re now into much more technology. We’ve shifted. Actually sitting down from last year to this year and seeing if note taking is different. And yes it is. Each year it changes. Is there anything new in the literature? Has any research been done? That, to me, is a professional approach. That is what I would expect a lecturer to do. I know that there are lots of lecturers who have their lecture notes in their filing cabinet or on PowerPoint, pull them out every year, and they’re off. They say it is time. But I don’t believe that it is time. I think the priority should be given to preparation time. We get preparation time. You make it a priority to spend an hour on preparation time. Be prepared. Have your pens. Have your overhead. But really have those objectives and when you come out - I come out and on my teaching notes I might write “YUCK.” If I do that I usually have some gut feeling about why that was and I might just scribble a note to myself, so that next time I do that I know I’m not going to do a “Yuck” again. If we don’t do that - where’s the improvement. We can talk about improving our PowerPoint. [...] if the PowerPoints aren’t tuned to what it is we’re doing at this roots level, they’re useless. I get the feeling that we are being lead by these wonderful resources that are all on ‘I’ Drive. We just pluck them out, personalise them and customise them to how we like them, but I don’t think we spend much time thinking, “What, really, do I want the students to be able to do, or have, by the end of the day?” And then thinking at the end, “Did I really
get that?” I think we have become a little bit blasé because we are resource driven. But secondly I think there are a few staff that wouldn’t 1. Be convinced or know the importance, or 2. How to write it and how to think about it. And that’s a bit of a worry because that is what the improvement is about, if we’re going to improve our practice.

DP: Can you just describe some of the other tools. You’ve mentioned the PowerPoint slides and all of the stuff we have listed on the server. What other sorts of tools do we use as Learning Advisers in our daily practices?

D: Do you mean strategies or actual hands-on tools?

DP: Actual tools. The other day at the staff meeting you held up a sign-on sheet. It’s a tool of practice where students actually identify which subject or which assignment they are coming to see you about and you’ve introduced that as a tool because it helps you to get groups together or be prepared for that consultation. So that’s one tool, the PowerPoint is another, the server list of folders, I guess, is another.

D: I guess having the brochure holders outside and changing those brochures. So, letting them know that they can get that information here, in the hard copy, and directing them. I think the whole - even our noticeboard. Again, I think we can be very blasé about that. Putting up a pretty noticeboard. Is it informative? Is it actually telling what you would like them to get? Are you really thinking about - well this is the first week; this is survival week. I looked at our noticeboard and it’s got clutter. It’s got oral presentation, time management, note taking. It has all of those. Whereas I think if I’d done it, I maybe would have focused on survival for the first two weeks. Then put some questions around it. Really thought about a surviving, first year, undergraduate student and put my marketing thing, and changed it after two weeks. So, again, not be blasé about media. I think we package ourselves a little bit too much. The glossy package, the glossy brochure, the glossy everything. Maybe not glossy. But once that’s done, it’s done. I don’t believe that happens. I talked to you about the sandwich board out the front. I don’t think just putting out the information... That information is everywhere. What you’re trying to do out there is get students who are already coming to the LAU and others that haven’t yet come, to look at it. So it has to be more. It has to change; it has to capture the eye. It has to target one part of the population, but next week target a different population. So you have to be alert to who are these students? What range are they? Targeting some of their needs.

DP: What about tools that you use in the actual teaching context? In the drop-in or in a workshop?

D: I must say I will use handouts or maps that I have done myself. So I might have a concept map of the learning process. My concept map. I might use that, and talk to that to the student. Say, “This is how is see it.” I might then get them to do their own concept map. Sometimes they’ve even asked for a photocopy of it. I let them go and copy it. I do a lot of drawings, a lot of visual stuff. So whenever I go to a drop-in, I always take a handful of recycled paper and checking that it’s not somebody’s email, but recycled paper that I draw as I talk. More often than not they say, “Can I have that?” Because it’s something that is
concrete that they can take away with them. Rather than try to keep it all in their
head and when they walk out they forget it.

DP: And tools that the student might bring with them. You’ve talked a lot
about subject outlines.

D: We have a list out there and we talk to the students all the time about,
“Please bring your subject outline. Please bring your textbook or your book of
readings.” Because very often you say to them, “Do you have a textbook?” “Yes,
but I didn’t bring that.” More often than not, it is the textbook you want to teach
them the first port of call for information. How do you scan it? Where do you
find it? There’s a glossary, there’s an index, there’s a contents list. How do I
scan down to find that information? To read effectively? What sort of notes
might I take? All of those sorts of things can be demonstrated just on a basic
textbook. Book of readings - the same. Very often they’ve bought or they’ve got
it at home, but they’ve never looked at. More often than not there is a lot of
information in the book of readings. It actually is divided and organised into
topics. Or it has little notes at the beginning of the book of readings. The lecturer
didn’t point it out. It’s our role to make meaning out of other tools that have been
given. So we’re working with the lecturer. I’d like to say the lecturer walked the
student through it. They don’t. So I see it as our role to say, “Well what are all
the tools you’ve got?” Bring it all in and try to bring it back into the context of
their learning or their assignment, and make meaning out of it for them.

DP: If you were to try to put what you’ve been describing into the context of
the LAU as an activity system, as part of a division of labour in that consultation
or in that drop-in between the Learning Adviser, what do you see as your role and
what do you see as the student’s role in terms of responsibilities in that
engagement? In terms or bringing material with them? In terms of using the
material?

D: I think it is all their responsibility. Absolutely. I’m not going to try to
keep a copy of all the textbooks here. I’m not going to get a copy from every
lecture on every subject outline. I don’t see that’s my role at all. If they don’t
bring it. I’ll either say, “Well, there’s not much we can do.” Particularly if it’s a
subject outline or the criteria. “Make another appointment and come back.” The
signs are up, we try to communicate that. It’s their responsibility.

DP: So just at a conceptual level, in terms of what happens in that consultation,
apart from bringing those materials or tools, what other responsibilities do you
think the Learning Adviser has and the student has?

D: I think ours is a modelling responsibility. That’s how I would use it. How
do I use the tools that have been provided by the academic or the faculty,
usefully? When do I use them? Where do I use them? So having modelled once,
hopefully, for their other subjects at a later date, begin to realise which is the first
point of call. This is where I need to go first. Then D showed me how to look for
information, to apply. If they don’t do it. If they come back a second time and
they require it again, purely and simply because they were too lazy. More often
than not if it’s the same student I’ve had, I will know that. I’ll let the student
know that I know that. That you didn’t do that. Go away and try it them come
back again.
Can I go back to the Unit concept and the team of Learning Advisers and that notion of division of labour within the Unit. We talked over coffee earlier today about things like the generic email address and the need to have that rotating. That’s an example where we’re trying to divide the labour other than what we do in our day-to-day teaching role. Can you think of other examples where there seems to be a division of labour within the Unit? It might be between Learning Advisers or between the manager and the Learning Advisers.

That one is hard. I guess my first thing would be, for the team that is operating together at the grass roots, to try to work out as a team what are the strengths and weaknesses. So somebody’s good at marketing and they’re happy to do it - let them do it. Let them run with it. If all three of you are not good at it, then maybe it needs to rotate. We need to sit down and talk about it, but maybe that becomes one person’s role to perpetually do, and another one to do the drop-in sign and another one to do the blackboard out the front. I think that can be done. I think that’s just talking about how a team is going to operate and I don’t think there are any rules to that. I think the team - micro team at the campus level - has to make those decisions. I don’t think they can be given from above.

Operation al issues.

Maybe at a macro level we could all decide or have a list of the things to do. But I’ve tried that several times and I get bored of doing it and I get sick of doing it. Because a lot of them are teensy weensy little things that you think “Oh stuff it.” I guess as a Unit there has been a fair bit of change from the day we started where we had a coordinator who was actually doing more of the coordination role, the grass roots stuff, to now having a manager who is much more out managing us as a Unit within a bigger context. So I think coordination roles have now come back to the campuses and I think that needs to be acknowledged. This has been a pretty hectic semester for me, but that coordinator needs to get some acknowledged time - 3 or 4 hours a week. That person is actually there. They’re doing it anyway, but acknowledging them. I think it probably needs to be a full timer. Because it is about keeping continuity. About keeping the communication between different part timers - what’s going on. Just an acknowledgment of having 3 hours or 5 hours to do coordinate. Now that could end up being a problem in that others will then not jump in and offer. I can see that happening. Or the coordinator becoming bossy and delegating. Doing all delegating and not doing anything themselves. That could become a problem. So maybe it’s the team level, I don’t know.

I’m just wondering as you’re talking whether this will be one of the issues that after the realignment, it may be the time to look at those sorts of workplace issues as far as coordinating work that’s going on at campus level.

Interview with Learning Adviser ‘D’ 27/2/01 continued

D, the last question I wanted to ask you before we close was whether or not you can suggest any strategies or ways of improving our practice, either in what we do and how we do it, or in our relationships with others?

No, because I’m writing a paper on it.
DP: Do tell!

D: ..... Let me think. This is becoming like a teleconference. I think we do a pretty good job. I think the staff meetings are really a place, they’ve become so much better than they used to be, a forum where we do actually just focus back on improvement practice. Whereas before they were sort of just meetings for meetings’ sake and sort of getting planning sort of stuff done. Now I believe with each of presenting KPI or something like that. The only problem is that it’s not being followed through. So if somebody does do a presentation on cooperative learning, it’s not – it might change everybody – it’s like training, it might change everybody at the moment that we’re talking about it, but then there doesn’t seem to get somehow, somebody carrying it to link into the planning day, or link into a bigger issue, or to actually follow it through. So we’re sort of touching base with lots of interesting issues, doing lots of interesting things, but I think maybe they’re not building into a bigger movement forward, a progression forward. So maybe we could think about some ways that might happen. Or even for one semester saying, well we’re going to concentrate on writing objectives, and developing objectives. So that it became something fairly continuous and a serious project. Ok three or four people might have KPI’s on it but that it got integrated so that it became a unit improvement, rather than just an improvement for the person who did the KPI. Which, the KPI’s do tend to be very individualistic, very singular, very one off. So, maybe that’s ... I’m just thinking as I talk here.

DP: It’s interesting and as you’re talking I’m thinking about an interview that I did with an academic staff member who was trying to describe his/her perception of how it’s different to be a staff member in the LAU to being a staff member in a faculty or a school. The sorts of comments that were made were about the sort of relationship and collegiate culture that you develop in a school is different to the LAU because a lot of stuff that the LAU does is sort of one off, as you said. It’s not that over that semester period or twelve month period, there’s not the constant engagement with peers about different issues. At the moment anybody could be doing any number of different things and they may not teach this particular topic again for another six or twelve months. So the person, I guess, was trying to, in this person’s view, it was more stimulating and rewarding in some ways to be part of a faculty group, whereas in the LAU there’s more support and a sense of team. I don’t know whether you agree with that?

D: Yes and no. A sense of team about the role we’re doing, but I’m not sure about a sense of continuity and global improvement. Even if I look at our strategic plan from the first one to the second one, I didn’t see a huge amount of continuity. It’s there, but it didn’t seem to me – and you and I would know it because we knew the history of the two documents – but I didn’t see it in terms of still following through and strengthening what was in the first and keeping it. We actually left some out. Although, because we believed that had been done, versus, holding on to it and then sort of saying well we’ll broaden that to this and to this and to this. Then focusing in KPIs to it, then focusing research to it. Targeting conferences that would take that research so that we’re getting a much stronger faculty sort of sense of we’re taking this. We are the learning unit and our whole knowledge of learning per say is being promoted rather than, I did a KPI on the emails, or I did a KPI on this. To me, they’re important, but they are one offs.
DP: But they’re a vehicle, hopefully leading to something else, so the KPI on the email is actually informing

D: Going to make something better for… But I guess I’d like to see the concept of looking at learning, because that’s what we’re on about. Looking at issues in learning. Which I thought the reflective practice was going to start doing. And I think it might, and I’d like to see that one get up. We’re we all do a reflective practice exercise. Everybody does it. Almost – not as compulsory, because you can’t do that with a unit like ours – but we all somehow engage in it. Which your assignment is starting to have. Everybody focusing in on a learning issue. I would like to see that and I thinking this writing objectives or thinking about objectives might be – we’re on about learning and – facilitating learning. One of the ways I see is being very clear about what our objectives are and why they might change? How they might change … discipline? What does it mean to a student when you put an objective up? Does it mean anything? What does it mean to you as a teacher when you’re devising? What does it mean to you as a teacher when you’re evaluating? What does it mean to us as a unit when we do our planning? Same with the database. I still have a real problem with it, because we do this one off thing with it. We dive in and take a piece of pie out of it for a purpose, but we don’t seem to be using it as a macro thing about improving learning, generally. So to me it’s only a tool that will inform a whole thing about the improvement of learning or learning as an issue. And I’d like to see a little bit more of that, focusing back in on what are we really about? We’re about learning. Are we really researching that? Are we really improving that? Are we really on top of that? Do we know what the latest literature is saying about it? What are other universities doing? As a continuous global thing, rather than a poke in here and I do a fifteen minute workshop on cooperative groups and somebody else does a ten minute workshop on international students and learning. To me it’s sort of getting.. but maybe that’s part of the history of our unit and we’ll move to something more consolidated. Which, when you start thinking about the library, could also fit in to that. So if you went back and started talking about objectives and if we became mores clustered with them, it mightn’t be a bad thing to start. Well, what are our objectives for note taking? Let the library people listen, contribute, do they have part to play? And listen to them and see if they’ve got something to contribute. Because we’re making assumptions that they maybe don’t – but they do.

DP: Thank you, D.
# APPENDIX B

## COLLATION OF FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Trigger for discussion (excerpts from interview transcripts)</th>
<th>Collation of focus group comments (verbal and written)</th>
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| self directed learner and victim of the system | Excerpts from academic staff interviews:  
the biggest problem always seemed to be with those who had ah, a learning, a particular learning difficulty Not didn’t have - just didn’t have the conceptual skills but, you know the dyslexic student or whatever it might be something. I never knew what to…quite what to do with them (Academic A)  
My hope is that it has two roles. One is as a safety net for students as they make the transition into higher education. By that I mean as an enabling vehicle to help them make that transition to a new form of learning. And I hope is that it furthers the agenda of learning as a process within the University. In other words it holds up the value of understanding learning and the way students learn. Helping academics come to better terms with what learning means. It has a focus on students, but also a focus for the University environment on keeping the agenda of learning per se, as a process, more visible (Academic E)  
So I see a sort of pseudo rescue advocacy role. I see a genuine helping role. I kind of see a socialisation role as well. Inculcation or orientation - helping these kids cope with what’s going on for them. I often wonder whether that fades nicely into a sort of counselling role; a study skills counselling role which, typically the University has put somewhere else in student services. But I think it may be more meaningfully placed in this context, where you are actually dealing with the phenomenon of how to cope with University, but using this particular piece of work - what does this say about how you study. So I think it’s a more grounded study skills counsellor role (Academic E) | Is AA suggesting that LAU help dyslexic students? (Learning Adviser E)  
LAU is not where ‘we do to them’ it is not diagnostic. It is the ‘unknown’ of the academic which needs to be addressed as well as the perceived issue of the student / (Learning Adviser F)  
Interesting but potentially dangerous to market ourselves in this way (Learning Adviser E) |
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<td>There’s a real tension there between dependency and independency. I’m not sure we’ve got that balance right in higher education. There’s a real danger that students increasingly are seen as consumers or clients and therefore we’re trying to provide coherent, customer happy type services to them, to keep them happy and get good CQ ratings and to make it a satisfying experience. But I’m not sure that necessarily equates with a transforming educational experience which actually helps them to become more self reliant, more self critical and blah blah. So I think there’s some educational values that have to be teased out here. We talk about generic skills. I think there are generic metavalues about what education is about. That the University might, if it thinks of the students as clients and customer satisfaction, fall into an unbalanced analysis of - really at the end of the day, what is it we want students to be able to do when they graduate? Ok, we want them to be critical thinkers and blah blah, but do you want them to be self-managing professionals who are able to be coherent in the way they approach a learning environment, deconstructive managers? Because that, in a way, is a metaskill for managing life. So if we make it too easy for them, have we really done them a service or not? So I think that’s the kind of tension for me. And that speaks to the role of any service group. How do you help someone, but not disable them in the helping process to help themselves next time? I don’t know. I don’t think we’ve got it right yet (Academic E)</td>
<td>Dependency vs independence is something that we struggle with too! (Learning Adviser A)</td>
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<td>We’ve been concerned that some students appeared to drop out. What we are trying to do is identify if there is a key period of time where they’re really at risk and will drop out. Also to try to follow up students who may have submitted a first assignment but then don’t go on and submit any other assignments. We haven’t really got a large enough sample really to be able to do anything really valid. It appears obviously that they are quite vulnerable at the beginning and if they get some feedback that they perceive as being negative, or they feel they are not getting enough support or whatever, then they’re going to drop out (Academic C)</td>
<td>Working together to deal with these tensions is an interesting idea (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>Useful in context of new university culture of ‘dependency’ (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>Theme</td>
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<td>What is your guiding framework for intervention? Is it that you get satisfaction when a student who would’ve failed, now passes? Is that an indication of success? Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. Maybe that student only passed because they were given an artificial level of assistance that, once it’s withdrawn, doesn’t do them any service - that’s one question. One that you hear students talk about is the role that of social justice and equity in intervention. Student A didn’t get help, student B did - student B does better. How does that work itself out in the grading process in terms of management of opportunity and resources? It’s an imponderable question. But it’s an important question. What is the role of enablement versus help? The thing about…..(?) that speaks to what type of help. How much support one gives versus how much challenge. So when a student comes for help with an assignment question, does one use a Socratic method of interview that helps them tease out what they think is actually means, or do they say, “There, there, never mind, here are the three key points. Can’t you see them? I’ve highlighted them for you”. These are really important questions. Because in some ways academic systems are saying they want to challenge students to think. Students are then interpreting that in a variety of ways, one of which is helplessness, another one of which is anxiety - emotion focused coping. They run to somebody who then says “Don’t worry, we’ll help you over that problem. Here are the three quick answers to it.” The student feels rescued and happy about that, but then, in a way, that process is subverting the other process. We haven’t got our shit together. But if we had a higher order set of values about, “What does this University really want to do with students”, it could work in partnership, I think (Academic E)</td>
<td>I wonder how this person thinks this addressing this issue? (Learning Adviser A)</td>
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<td>I think that the role of the people that work in the Learning Assistance Unit is to guide and to give knowledge of some skills of how to cope with the university studies. Some advice and help you to understand or find yourself some new ways of how to cope or study skills. (Learning Adviser A)</td>
<td>Ideas for supporting each other (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>Excerpts from student interviews:</td>
<td>Interesting approach to decrease loss of students who may be at risk, ie. Using the LAU as a support for students at risk (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>Great to have LAU expertise and knowledge (Learning Adviser A)</td>
<td>This academics perception that we create dependency is important – we might need to address that (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>We need to be cognisant of the expertise we have available and get that message to others around us (Learning Adviser A)</td>
<td>Tension between intervention and non intervention, between counsellor and advocate. We really do live in these tensions, it is a balancing act that is difficult (general comment)</td>
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### Theme

**Trigger for discussion** *(excerpts from interview transcripts)*

((Student A)

Also I think, for students - and there are a lot at Griffith - who do not have English as their first language. It must be very, very difficult for them. I think the Learning Assistance Unit would be a great support to them. And certainly in my case for mature age students, it’s terrific. There’s not always people at home to bounce ideas off and who don’t understand. So with that expertise of really just guiding you, they might just say one or two sentences and you think, “Oh yeah!” and away you go with some new ideas (Student B)

young ones think it’s a remedial centre. They have a real thing that they think it’s a remedial centre and you only use that if you’re a real dummy (Student C check this one??)

…I don’t think it hits them (u/grads) until they’ve failed the whole year, and then suddenly…That’s when it suddenly hits them. They’ve got no idea where they’re going and what they’re doing (Student C)

But I would say something about the lecturers and the tutors is that I find that the Learning Assistance Unit is much more prepared and aware of things than the lecturers and the tutors in many ways (Student A)

What I have found out here is that the lecturers, they are experts in their areas, but not necessarily good teachers. So, they give a lot of trouble to students, because they’re thinking in their area and they’re not thinking, how should I teach so they learn. Some of them don’t show any interest of (having) you learn. Because you can tell when someone wants you to learn, they talk to you and you see their interest for them to learn. But some others they just are there. They just read their thing. Where if you pass you pass if you don’t - it’s up to you. You do it (Student A)

The thing is, I have rarely gone to tutors. And I know that I should, but the problem is, with me trying to manage my time and all the things that I have to do, it has been a real big

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### Collation of focus group comments

*(verbal and written)*

acknowledged (Learning Adviser G)

Focus on skills but not on transforming skills into knowledge (Learning Adviser E)

Good – this shows that our student-centred approach is both appreciated and helpful (Learning Adviser E)

Ok – so do we need a different approach to target the ‘young’ students? (Learning Adviser E)
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<td>problem last year and it was worse because I had a lot of the skills that I had to learn. So I never had the time to go and see the tutor because he only has two hours at certain times and by the time – I just couldn’t match, you see, so I just couldn’t (Student A)</td>
<td>Age old problem - anecdotal for GIHE (Learning Adviser H)</td>
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<td>What are the Learning Advisers providing that the tutors aren’t? (DP)</td>
<td>There is a danger in the LAU being seen as interpreters for the academics (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>Again, I would think, analysing a question for an assignment. Breaking it down into pieces, interpreting what the tutor wants. As I’ve seen it in year one, the tutors that I’ve had certainly haven’t got the time to do that. They say, “You choose a question that you like and away you go and we’ll see it when it’s passed in on the special day that we’ve nominated.” The Learning Assistance people, as far as I’ve found, are there to bounce ideas off. You certainly need to have your ideas there ready first and they really expand, I find, on the ideas (Student B)</td>
<td>Independent learning as culturally alien – important for LAU – shows need for a ‘softly softly’ approach with some international students (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>So I think the common thing between here and overseas students, a student or an Australian student, is that we don’t have those skills, and we find that to do all this work, and we don’t know how to. And everybody gets desperate (Student A)</td>
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<td>…Some were very good. Others did not understand. Sometimes I had some problems because when people are not treating me well, or sometimes it is the cultural background that they think that you are an overseas student and you are English – one thing is a language problem and another thing is being stupid. Sometimes you feel that they are treating you as if you are stupid (Student A)</td>
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<td>I see the tutors as very busy people. I’m quite amazed to find that a tutor I had this semester is also the Dean of the faculty. That just staggered me. I thought that guy must have enough to do. He’s only taking one lecture and tutorial. Never the less, he obviously has</td>
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<td>papers and things...(Student B)</td>
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<td>It all gets down again to the big fat word of funding. I find, also, with some of the tutors and lecturers, some of them are very academic. They’re extremely qualified, but not very good at conveying what they mean. Even when you go to see them in their study, sometimes - I can remember in semester one of year one, I thought my goodness, what is she trying to get at here. I went to see her in her study and I really came away none-the-wiser. A very academic person but unable to get across. If I had a problem with that now, I would go straight to the Learning Adviser and say, “Look I have been here, I just don’t know where to start on this.” Also, I think there is a great place interlinked with the workshops. The workshops that the library offers. I think they’re all wonderful. They’re all very good in helping you. For instance in the case that I have just said. In semester one I hadn’t done a workshop on how to critically think about questions and to break them down, and obviously I very badly needed to do that. So again, I think perhaps if Learning Assistance can guide people to appropriate workshops if the people for some reason have overlooked the fact that they are being offered by the library. Again, there’s that link with the library, and the more remote link with the lecturer and tutor (Student B)</td>
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<td>...I think the workshops are kind of informative. They tell you, like in the writing one, they tell you how to write, what skills to use, how to apply it in different contexts. The same with everything. They make you aware of what it is and show you all that you can do. Then it’s up to you to decide what you do and how to apply it to your own studies. I would say so that the drop-ins would be to try to learn a specific context. Like if I have a problem specifically, I come there and say, “Look I have this problem, what should I do with it?” With regards to the drop-in sessions I always found that when I came to a problem – last year I found that I was looking for answers. I didn’t know what was wrong and why I couldn’t cope. So, I was looking for help but I didn’t know exactly what things. I didn’t know how to define what was going wrong with me. The people couldn’t actually help me. They said, “Come and we will help you.” But then I couldn’t … myself. But the few times I came and I actually talked with the people I found that there is a problem (Student A)</td>
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<td>This keeps being brought up – tutors as too busy for students – perhaps we need to liaise with GIHE re this? (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>Interesting information that needs to be shared with academics, librarians and LAU (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>Excerpts from librarian interviews:</td>
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<td>…the name Learning Assistance Unit really aptly describes what you do and your place in the university and I see the group very much as assisting students and staff. I don’t know whether the brief, you know, expands to staff as well but in terms of helping assisting probably mainly students with their progress through university studies. So it involves assisting them with all sorts of things, all the things that you advertise and which are very visible in terms of the courses like the critical thinking, research skills, writing assignments, all of those things and especially the workshops that you do I think in at the start of the semester - the bridging sort of ones. I see it as a unit that’s really there to assist students with all aspects of their study and research and writing (Librarian A)</td>
<td>Good understanding of role of LAU (general staff comment)</td>
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<td>courses that the library staff run for students that are working at a very operational level mostly, in teaching students to use the various um data bases and um information retrieval systems that we have. They’ll be working at a very operational level, and not necessarily highlighting to students skills that are behind that helping - not helping students to reflect on those skills, so that means that often the students aren’t able to transfer necessarily what they’ve learnt to the next context (Librarian C)</td>
<td>No mention of attitudes only skills yet attitudes is what we want to influence that is the need to articulate at meta level (general staff comment)</td>
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<td>If we’re talking about a generic group coming to a workshop upstairs, I would say they would find trouble seeing a connection between their faculty and what we’re doing, because we’re operating independently essentially. It’s a drop-in - not a drop-in thing, but it’s a sign-up yourself; your own initiative. Nobody’s pushing you to do this (Librarian B)</td>
<td>Interesting immediate and long term view (general staff comment)</td>
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<td>if in the course of conversation it became obvious that their problem was really a writing issue or something like that, then sure that, because I know that the LAU doesn’t discriminate between, levels of students, I’ve got no problems with referring them</td>
<td>Critical that library have role in unpacking question and using boolean operators but the purpose for librarian to unpack question is</td>
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<td>on... (Librarian B)</td>
<td>I certainly recommend LAU ah, in my own sessions and, rightly or wrongly, I will often make - put great emphasis on the fact that the LAU is not a remedial unit. The LAU deals with - and if I’m dealing with an undergraduate group, I say, “The LAU deals with PhD students.” And if I’m dealing - talking to PhD students I say, “The LAU deals with PhD students.” It’s not about remediation of any sort; it’s about helping you where you run into difficulty along the way, and you will run into difficulty, [Mm] because you are not h Einstein or something you know, your - maybe you’re not (laughing) (Librarian B)</td>
<td>different to learning advisers. That is, librarians unpack to find information and they only look at words learning adviser unpacks to start critical analysis that is we go to concepts, recognising assumptions, LAU is all about transfer we’re not just taking them through a process we’re working more at a meta level. Whereas information literacy is demonstration only not ‘thinking out loud’ to help students understand. Librarians don’t look at organising information they go straight to search (general staff comment)</td>
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Excerpts from learning adviser interviews:

In lots of cases it’s to give them confidence with their learning. Sometimes, we have students where I can think of situations where it is just reinforcing and reassuring them that what they’re doing is ok. In other cases it’s really helping them with skills and strategies and processes that they can use and apply (Learning Adviser A)

When I first came I was able to observe the Learning Advisers actually interacting with students. And it was so different from what often goes on, I suspect. What certainly did for me and as a student, what often goes on in interactions between academics and students. Largely, I supposed because academics don’t have a lot of time - or think that they don’t. (Learning Adviser B)

The […] agreement that I’ve got at the moment, collaboration that we’re doing at the moment - the lecturer and myself are both tuned in to the same understanding of what we’re doing. Now obviously they’ve still got the content stuff but I think the younger lecturers are really concerned about how the student is learning, about modelling how they’re learning |

To see ourselves in the role of helping could be seen as disempowering the student. Also meeting their needs may not be what is required if the student has a narrow view of what is required (Learning Adviser F) |

The LA interviews reflect a ‘good and correct’ emphasis on life long learning and generic skills. The student interviews highlight the quasi counsellor role of learning adviser and yet the learning adviser interviews don’t acknowledge this at all. Even though we know we do it perhaps we’re uncomfortable because we aren’t trained but we do reassure ‘yes you can do this’. We’re a friendly, approachable
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<td>and about providing the skills about learning, more than they are about just content. Whereas you’ve still got a lot of the old school - the just stand up, lecture, content and walk out. And then they pay lip service to the skills and say, “Well, here’s a group assignment - do it,” but provide no modelling, no guidance for that sort of thing to happen. As far as I’m concerned, separating those two boundaries is just not right. So, it’s not so dissimilar to the librarian. Provide the context (Learning Adviser D)</td>
<td>port of call. A lot of what we do is diagnostic but counselling is not what we want to emphasise (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>That the student is a learner who comes from a context, with a context. They come from a faculty. They come generally in the context of an assignment or a purpose that is bigger than just the inquiry that they are making. And that the librarian can probably do a little bit more than just answer the immediate question. That would take a change. It would take making the communication setting different. Probably more like ours. Where you can make eye contact. Where you’re not lining up in the line and you’ve got five other people behind you where you’ve got to rush through and get these inquiries out of the way. They’ve made an appointment so they can do that stuff. So that they have the time. I think the synergies are almost very similar on many of the issues. I walk past that desk and I can hear students say, “Well, I’ve got to do...” and they say, “Well, you’ll find that there.” “Oh but my assignment...” And the student is crying out to explain further. A little bit like going to a doctor and having the secretary or the doctor’s attendant saying, “Well, what’s wrong with you?” And you’re saying, “That’s why I’m at the doctors.” That same level of information but the patient is actually crying out to tell the story, because they’re not quite sure what it is. I think the librarians have that role. Even in the information literacy; the context we provide (Learning Adviser D)</td>
<td>These ‘questioning techniques’ reveal the level of commitment to student centred learning and actually contributing to building the attributes of the Griffith Graduate (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>I think it would be hard to generalise but I certainly have had a lot of students come to drop in and they really don’t know the difference between - they’re just coming for assistance and they’re desperate and they see that this is learning assistance and so that’s why they’re here. Quite often they ask us to do things that the Learning Assistance Unit doesn’t do and so we refer them...(Learning Adviser B)</td>
<td>Does this change from semester beginning to semester end? Does grapevine filter information down about what we/library/academics will and will not handle? (Learning Adviser H)</td>
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<td>While they are here with us, our main thing is to make the experience a successful one for them. And successful, as I said, in whatever way they want to define success. Which could be, and is, quite interesting to actually ask a student what they want from university. And you get a very broad range. They’re our clients and we have to meet that broad range. It might just be to pass, it might be to get high distinctions. It might even just be to be more curious or learning any number of things. That’s our role, I believe <em>(Learning Adviser D)</em></td>
<td>Partnership relationship is very effective <em>(Learning Adviser G)</em></td>
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<td><em>(Learning Adviser G)</em> That works for me too <em>(Learning Adviser F)</em></td>
<td>That works for me too <em>(Learning Adviser F)</em></td>
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<td>I think we need to take a step back from this. They are not necessarily ‘our’ clients …whether clients of GU? <em>(Learning Adviser F)</em></td>
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<td><strong>cost effectiveness and quality</strong></td>
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|       | *Excerpts from academic interviews:*  
…to be honest. It was me who discovered the LAU and I knew that we wanted to teach generic skills and I knew none of us had the skills to do that, so I went looking we didn’t know if we’d have to pay for it or not. If I was the LAU I’d be advertising that. The fact that Schools don’t have to pay for this because we were just astounded. We could you know get five workshops or five lectures and it wasn’t going to cost the School anything. It should be in every first year degree course *(Academic D)* | Perception that we are underselling our talents! *(Learning Adviser E)* |
<p>|       | LAU does not seem to be visible enough <em>(Learning Adviser E)</em> | |
|       | It’s like how far can your brief go, as well. You know, it’s a limited number of individuals within a system that’s a lot of variety in terms of what it does offer. <em>(Academic A)</em> | |</p>
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<td>(excerpts from interview transcripts)</td>
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<td>I actually do think it is just about being more visible. And again, I know that that’s balanced by what it is that can be done (Academic A)</td>
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<td><strong>Excerpts from student interviews:</strong></td>
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<td>I’ve actually missed out on consultations for that exact reason, where I’ve set a time, say at one, and I’ve had a lecture at two, and I still haven’t had the consult, so I’ve had to walk away, because somebody else has just overlapped. It’s been their time, and it’s been helpful to them, but it’s also thrown me right out into a spin as well (Student C)</td>
<td>Quite a common response (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>I feel that Learning Assistance could be given better marketing. Particularly towards students who are having issues with English as a second language. These Scandinavian people I was referring to were half way through second semester and they hadn’t even thought of going to the Learning Assistance people. To me that’s your first stop for some problem like that. I feel that here it is good in the library. I think if it was in another building somewhere else, students wouldn’t have that same idea of it being interlinked. (Student B)</td>
<td>Marketing is always an issue…conveying an inclusive image informing lecturers, tutors, student services, INS staff, various student groups (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>The thing is that I was so lost with everything that I didn’t find time to come here. But that’s another issue of mine. Last year I got help from the Learning Assistance Unit but I was running from one place to another and I just – every time that I needed help and I wanted to put my name down it was all full. Sometimes I wanted to come and I was running from one place to another and I couldn’t make it. So that was my history last year with that! (Student A)</td>
<td>Never enough time a the right time – a constant challenge (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>One thing I found difficult - I’m a part time student - is they’re only there certain times. I know that this is because of staff cutbacks and shortages and things like that. Sometimes it’s difficult to make an appointment. Particularly if you’ve got a deadline and dread, you’ve left it to a fairly late date to see somebody and have time with them to discuss that.</td>
<td>Suggest research using students entering the library – what do you know about LAU, have you ever consulted the LAU website, general feel from friends and peers ie useful/hopeless (Learning Adviser H)</td>
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<td>So, yes, that wonderful thing of more staff. (Student B)</td>
<td>Some research about how the younger students perceive the LAU might be useful here. If there is a correlation between the LAU as ‘remedial’ and poor usage from this client group then further work on how to dispel this perception is warranted (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>There’s one thing about publicity.  I don’t know if it is publicised enough about the website. I only found it accidentally last semester. Maybe that should be more prominent too for students. The students like the 16-17 year olds that feel the peer group pressure, who feel it’s for dumbs, maybe at home, they could get through on the computer, if they had the website (Student B)</td>
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<td><strong>Excerpts from librarian interviews:</strong></td>
<td>Learning advisers move beyond just locating information and encourage students to ask is it valid? Current? Reliable?, we look at appropriateness by linking back to course objectives that is, we embed in a context and our processes are more aware of academic expectations (general staff comment)</td>
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<td>What we’ve got to avoid is the trap of thinking that generic skills have to be addressed generically, which is so much the way the library thinks…What’s the cheap option? The cheap option is the mass audience, and then, where’s the mass audience? Nobody’s coming to our sessions. Why not? Because nobody wants to be dealt with as [as no depth] a blob (laughing). They want to be an individual and they have individual needs (Librarian B)</td>
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<td>my only concern is when, you know, you do start to set guidelines, you know, we do this and then after this it goes to someone. What it does take away is the discretion and judgement that you would anticipate a professional person would use in either setting. You know, I might feel quite confident to, you know, to just take it that one little step further, but if the piece of paper - the guideline says to me you only ever take it to this point, then I think you’ve just got to try and weigh the balances between, you know, allowing the person in a professional setting to use their own knowledge and judgement (Librarian E)</td>
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<td><strong>Excerpts from academic staff interviews:</strong></td>
<td>Mainly sees us as offering support to students in how to address essay topics etc, no sense of the critical thinking we do with them (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>…I see the role as being well, obviously a support service of providing students with a port of call where they can go to clarify predominantly their writing analysis skills (Academic</td>
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*Appendix B*
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<td>assistance</td>
<td>A) it strikes me that any particular issue that a student has with dealing with their assessment at uni, learning assess - learn… - the unit is a place that they can go and get a level of support, that’d be satisfactory I’d imagine for the vast majority of students (Academic A)</td>
<td>Reassuring, confirming that academics know how we help (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>It almost becomes an impossible task for the Adviser. How can you really know what’s in the mind of the academics out there? When you are dealing with fifteen students a day who all come from a different discipline or different subject even, or, to make it even more complex, tutor, within a subject. Because that’s what it gets down to, is that each tutor raises different expectations…And they’ve got two people’s demands that they’re interpreting. The Adviser, as well as the lecturer. I think that going to an Adviser would be a very positive effect for the student in terms of clarifying their thinking and their understanding. There would be much more congruence, rather than lack of congruence in what’s happening across the subjects. But that’s always the worry (Academic B)</td>
<td>Overall they don’t know what we can offer students in metaconginition. There is still a sense of ‘remedial’, ‘transition’. We’re useful to them for the start but we’re not just about coping (general staff comment)</td>
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<td>there’s three areas that I see the learning assistance playing in terms of the university life. One is working with beginning students to help them into the university. And that’s, you know, I know that there’s a range of programs that you engage in for that, and I think that that’s very important to try and help students make that bridge between the learning culture that they’re leaving and the one that they’re moving into. So that’s one role that I’m aware of. And in the second role is that ongoing support at an individual level, and in term…a…it’s not…yeah, it is an individual level where the learning assistance, meeting the a…self identified needs of students, and that might be from the appointments that you offer or from the workshops that you offer, but it’s still sort of self identification. And thirdly, it’s the academic identification, where you’ve got the academics who are actually seeking you out and saying, “Look, I’ve got the problem with this group of students” or “I need them to be able to do this and, can you help in that area?” (Academic B)</td>
<td>Interesting argument from academic for LAU to be more assertive (but not too assertive!) (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>we see the role of the LAU as being crucial to assisting our students with coping with entry</td>
<td>Close the gap (Learning Adviser H)</td>
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<td>Reassuring, confirming that academics know how we help (Learning Adviser G)</td>
<td>Confirms accurate understanding of LAU support (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>Overall they don’t know what we can offer students in metaconginition. There is still a sense of ‘remedial’, ‘transition’. We’re useful to them for the start but we’re not just about coping (general staff comment)</td>
<td>We need to build academics into our processes more! (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>LAU is recognised as a collective unit and this</td>
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<td>into university. We see our role as to assist them with that entry and success within their course, but certainly the role of the LAU not only to assist in orientation of the students, but also to support them. Particularly in the first semester of study - it’s really crucial (Academic C)</td>
<td>is repeated whereas librarians are personalised as individuals and therefore in ‘weaker’ position (general staff comment)</td>
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<td>the LAU for our side of the School of […] is to be able to present tools of information to our students that will help them get through the rest of their degree and hopefully set them up in future in their careers. We’re just looking for the basic generic skills. This is the subject that we’ve got the LAU involved is generic skills. And we’re looking for those basics of generic skills that, although we practice, we’re not involved in the teaching of them. That’s why the LAU has been helpful in that regard (Academic D)</td>
<td>Narrow focus – transitional issues (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>But I think over time that we have very collaborative arrangements, and that what we do is very compatible, I think. Certainly from my perspective or the position that I come from, I think would be very similar to the position of most staff. Even to the way that we present. Last year when (refers to Academic B by name) was working with us, we looked at each other’s material and said, “Well it’s almost identical.” So we were coming from the same position. I think that way it’s great (Academic C)</td>
<td>Students acknowledge LAU expertise for teaching g skills (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>Whereas I think the LAU probably is more involved in the main game of learning, because they actually get involved with helping kids with assessment and that sort of stuff. So, I think that there’s the perception that “What the hell is the LAU doing in the library because it doesn’t quite fit there - because they are quite different activities and they’re quite different Activity Systems?” Although it is interesting to note that now we find the library</td>
<td>Acknowledgment of our speciality role – where/how we can collaborate with academics (Learning Adviser A)</td>
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<td>Students acknowledge LAU expertise for teaching g skills (Learning Adviser G)</td>
<td>LAU should hang ‘banner’ on GG generic skills and our expertise in learning skills (general staff comment)</td>
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<td>Can we teach g skills? I thought students developed these skills- with LAU guidance? (Learning Adviser F)</td>
<td>Can we teach g skills? I thought students developed these skills- with LAU guidance? (Learning Adviser F)</td>
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<td>This is useful as I think most academics do not want to be responsible for generic skills teaching (Learning Adviser G)</td>
<td>Sees collaboration as good and the</td>
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<td>being very assertive about the library tutorial, and wanting now academics to make that as part of their assessment. That’s been an example of tension in this School, for example, where one member of staff was approached by the library to use the library tutorial and the library suggested that they make it compulsory and assessable. The reaction was, “Hello! You’ve just stepped across the line here.” So you could see that the Systems were rubbing against each other in terms of what was appropriate way of thinking about them. The point I was making is that I think the library is following the LAU’s interventionist line. So I think in many ways it’s following that a bit. So I think there’s a convergence in ideology about the need for centralist agencies to get more actively involved and to get more involved in the main game of learning with the Schools. If that’s a Partnership Model, where “We’re doing this together, let’s work out a partnership”, but with this comes some overarching centralist, “You will do this” I don’t know. There’s lots of stuff to be worked through there (Academic E)</td>
<td>compatibility issue is good, because it suggests confidence in what we do and the level at which we do it (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>…I think there needs to be a level of - like within our school, if I should get a first semester, first year subject next year, then I would, I would like to formalise that link by having Whoever come in, talk to them, say this, this, this, this, you know, this not just the ten minute grab, or, “We’ve got workshops, we’ve got…” but, to actually be specific and tease some things out so that they can see a real value and that it’s not just for you who struggle, so it’s - that it’s broad. [It’s validated] I mean we don’t want to overload this - the unit, obviously, but everyone needs to be aware of the opportunities (Academic A)</td>
<td>A working partnership is essential (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>Yes, I think they are then in the danger of being wishy-washy. By saying, “Well, I don’t want to advise you here, go back to the lecturer!” So what good are you doing if you are not in the position to say, “I think that this is what you should do.” And if you’re not</td>
<td>Library equals support and LAU equals involved. An interesting perception that the librarians would not like! Differentiation between LAU and library from a view point that suggests that the LAUs is not perceived as similar to library and that we might lose some academic confidence if we pursue amalgamation (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>Formalised links with 1st year 1st semester subjects incorporating valuable skills in a</td>
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<td>convinced that that is right, well then you need to. I think you still need to be able to give some feedback to them in some way. Those assumptions that you talk about, one would have to expect that the Advisers have got certain skills and talents in being able to make those judgements themselves that probably in most cases are correct. It’s only in the rare case that there’s a problem and then you have to deal with it. But I wouldn’t like to think that they were going to make changes in their practice, based on fact that there maybe a lack of coherence, or tensions and conflicts that are going to occur. I think that they need to advise, and they need to take a position, and then qualify that in some way (Academic B)</td>
<td>workshop or workshop series eg QCGU (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>we’ve also engaged the Learning Assistance Unit to come along and help with that. This</td>
<td>Need for greater LAU involvement in indiscipline workshops for 1st semester (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>That only needs to be said when the verbal directions don’t match the written or the written are very unclear (Learning Adviser A)</td>
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<td>As we reflect and talk about our work I’d say we do advise, take a position and support that position (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>Students come in and the 1st thing we ask them for is their assessment but we’ve got to keep reminding ourselves its about process and to be metacognitive (Learning Adviser A)</td>
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<td>This notion of joint collaboration between LAU, library and academics seen as useful (also again differentiation between LAU and librarians) (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>time what we’re looking at is yes, having that, but on the second day to take it</td>
<td>Highlights problems of dual partnerships but doesn’t mention positives student advocacy role seen as good (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>turns of an assignment all the way through. So we’re actually going to</td>
<td>Who do we partner with and who else would we like to partner with? LAU as advocate for student voices based on an understanding of learning theory (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>get them to start looking at what the question is and so on. Now how</td>
<td>What is the advocacy role of the LAU? What is the student feeling? Not just about ‘working face to face’ it’s skills and knowledge in diagnosis of student voice. That is, library is involved in technical processing vs LAU which is involved in learning processes (general staff comment)</td>
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<td>are you going to find the information? So they’re actually</td>
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<td>physically have to go to the library to do researching and so on to get them engaged in all of that, to come back and start unpacking it. Well what are you going to do with all this now? And so on. So you follow that through as a day. Which we’re hoping will get them involved with the Learning Assistance Unit, with the library and with us, so that there is a triangle effect there (Academic C)</td>
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I guess what you guys are already doing - you’re exploring partnerships. I think that’s an important way to go. I don’t think it’s - do you want to be part of the main game, or do you want to support students as they go through the main game. No one else in the University really champions the cause of learning as you guys can and should do. GIHE talks about it, but it’s staff development or this that and the other. Really in terms of the felt experience of the learner, you are the guys that should be doing that and bringing that as a visible voice into the agenda. I think it’s about voices at the end of the day. So, yes, I see you as an advocate for the student voice in that. Without having to be the defender - everybody else has got to be bad in order to do that (Academic E)
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<th>Theme</th>
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<th>Collation of focus group comments <em>(verbal and written)</em></th>
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<td><strong>Excerpts from student interviews:</strong></td>
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<td>Your steps are you get your question for your assignment, you look at it and decide what you are going to do, what avenues you’re going to take, which hypotheses, and you go to the library and you start looking at that and you start to build it up. Then, in my case, I feel that I don’t have people that I can bounce ideas off. Often the students in the groups in the seminars are all busy in their own groups. At home, my husband loves to manage me, so I keep university separate. This is my thing. So my assignments - he’s never read one! I want to keep it that way. So I go to the Learning Assistance to bounce ideas off. To say, “Have I got this right? This is what I’m going to do. I’ve got my plan here. Am I on the right track? Do you think this is what the tutor is wanting?” So I see it being connected with the library and remotely connected with the tutor. That’s how I use Learning Assistance. But I do feel it could be better publicised (Student B)</td>
<td>Unpacking questions – this has happened and reveals how poorly written some questions cause students problems (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>But then again it becomes the problem when they’ve got to mark it and you’re not really sure if that’s what they’re looking for. I’ve had an experience where the LAU’s said, “Yes, this is fine, this is going on quite nicely,” and got it to the marking stage and just happen to run it past the tutor and he said “Hmm it’s not really what I’m looking for,” and had to completely unpack it from a different angle. So perhaps if there was more cooperation between even the tutors and the LAU would be a good thing, because they are the final ones that they are going to mark it (Student C)</td>
<td>Bad question setting? More cooperation sounds very reasonable – would also help clarify tutor methodologies (Learning Adviser H)</td>
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<td>It can be, it can be really daunting, especially, well we just had an incident this morning whether the first year who doesn’t know where she’s heading with an assignment and thinking back, I mean, even now I’m still the same but sometimes yes it can be really problematic cause you don’t know what to put in even if you do find anything. You don’t know where to go and whether you are heading in the right direction before you get it back to that second or third stage and that’s only if you can get an appointment to get back in there before its due again (Student C)</td>
<td>This is where LAU needs to be involved in staff development work with people who want students to hand in formulised assignments – this angle, this style, this little variation on a standard referencing style etc (Learning Adviser A)</td>
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<td>Again this perception of the LAU as interpreters for academics bothers me. Unpacking the question is about students critically evaluating what is needed (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>Yes, a concern when the academics have a particular angle they are looking for (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>Does a standard exist about turn around time for assignments so that students get feedback</td>
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<td>Well certainly that one specific instance that I was referring to then, where I got that individual help. The grade I got on that assignment, I’m convinced, went up substantially because of the help I got here. Because I was floundering around I got no direction and no sense of purpose. I’d done a load of work, but it was all “messy”. It had no form of cohesion to it. And I was helped just to go back and unpack the question and say, right, which information is relevant, discard the rest and file it down this way. Very, very helpful. (Student D)</td>
<td>before another assignment is due? (Learning Adviser F)</td>
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<td>the bottom line is, the person who has given you the mark, you’re tutor, they’re the ones whose hoop you have to jump through. LAU can give you nice general advice and guidance, but when it comes to actually fine tuning and making the filling in there you’ve really got to be doing what your tutor wants. And the only way you can find that out of course is with consultation with them (Student D)</td>
<td>This is a comment I have heard many times and students even come back to say thank you. They do the work and we provide a sounding board or we listen and question their arguments (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>… think one of the skills you require as a student is selective amnesia. You get all the bits of information, you put them together, you see which bits suit, which bits fit and you forget the rest. But yes, you’re right. You often get conflicting information for various sources, don’t you. I think what would be nice would be – I don’t know if it would benefit the LAU – if there was some provision for feedback whereby we could say this was the mark I got for the assignment that you helped me with, these were the comments I received from the academic on it. I don’t know whether that would help LAU perhaps finetune their work. But it would certainly mean I went in there informally and told them how pleased I was with the grade that I got. But there’s no formal reporting back (Student D)</td>
<td>Ok – but on future assignments? (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>The Learning Assistance Unit give you the orientation or show you how to use your skills, how to learn your skills, suggesting different ways as to how to cope with the study and the work of university (Student A)</td>
<td>In essence a very good idea – time constraints, is marker typical of School in terms of importance of layout, referencing/leniency etc? (Learning Adviser H)</td>
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<td>I don’t know. I think the academics sometimes – when I’ve prepared work as a result of a</td>
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Appendix B  Collation of Focus Group Responses  281
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Trigger for discussion (excerpts from interview transcripts)</th>
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<td>consultation with the LAU and then run a draft past a tutor. If you make mention of the fact that you’ve had LAU help, they tend to not make changes that they would otherwise do. They tend to back off and leave it alone. <em>That’s interesting. Why do you think they do that? (DP)</em></td>
<td>which I guess is how we are able to be student focussed (Learning Adviser A)</td>
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<td>Because they don’t want to tread on another professional’s toes, I should imagine. …If I take a draft that’s being come out as a result of work with LAU gone to the tutor with it, he has said in my experience when I’ve mentioned the LAU’s involvement, “Yeah, it’s ok. It’s fine.” I’m 99% convinced that there would have been alterations made had that not been the case Student D)</td>
<td>This is a really interesting comment (Learning Adviser A)</td>
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<td>I would use pretty much what they’d discussed as a frame work and used that as an aid or a crutch if you like. Come up with a rough draft content wise and that is then what I would take to the tutor. Because the LAU don’t look at the actual filling in the sandwich, if you like, they’ll tell you this is the bread, off you go and put the filling in it. (Student D)</td>
<td>Huge endorsement. Perception of professionalism of the LAU (Learning Adviser H)</td>
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<td>There were Learning Assistance people that went to the class. They explained some things about how to do assignments and showed some power point shows. It was really good. (Student A)</td>
<td>Are both tutor and student acknowledging the quality of our work? (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>Probably, like I said, we do things differently in my country. So, we are explained “How To” step by step. This is step one, this is step two, this is step three. You do a lot of things without doing that, probably, your step one and your step two – in between for me there are five steps. Because I haven’t done it before in the way you are doing it. The thing is the tutors – as well as I had a lot of problems with councillors with the same thing – they cannot tell you how to. But things from my context where I come from, I needed to know how to – see one person’s. See exactly step by step. Probably the first time I would do it exactly the same, but the second time I would find my own one. The way we learn, as I remember, is we use somebody’s way and then we develop our own. That is the way we learn (Student</td>
<td>A problem given that we don’t intervene in content issues (Learning Adviser E)</td>
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<td>Acknowledging the ‘generic skills’ (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>LAU indiscipline is often mentioned by students as effective general information (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>Useful information for us to reflect on and consider how we can clarify some ‘generic skill’ necessary for university (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>More modelling needed in workshops? More practical sessions needed? (Learning Adviser</td>
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*Appendix B*  
*Collation of Focus Group Responses*  
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<td>A)</td>
<td><em>Excerpts from librarian interviews:</em>&lt;br&gt;we send the students up to the Learning Assistance Unit when they come to us at the desk when they say, “Look, I’m having troubles with um writing this assignment,” and we sort of pick up on that and say, “Oh look yep, we can help you with the information but the actual assistance with writing it, putting it together, you know formulating paragraphs and everything- best to make an appointment with our little drop-in session with the Learning Assistance Unit.” (Librarian A)&lt;br&gt;I think with the faculty we’re never quite sure we refer our students back to the lecturer or the tutor to clarify some points where we feel we don’t want to you know wade in and give them the wrong sort of information and advice and I think probably your unit may find the same; you’re not quite sure unless there’s some kind of very close collaboration and a really good example of that was last year when I think it was (refers to Academic A by name) did the with the (refers to School by name) and we all got together to start with and all three were represented the faculty member who was convening the whole course and I thought that was a really good approach ‘cause we saw what they wanted, what their difficulties were with the students and then from the Learning Assistance point of view you could say, “Well yes, we’ve had students come in,” and from the library you know from a retrieval point of view getting stuff for their assignments, so I saw that that was a really a good integrated approach ...(Librarian A)&lt;br&gt;I mean I know we talk - spend a lot of money talking about generic skills and lifelong</td>
<td>E) Learning advisers argue that student needs to have a plan and need to understand the context (eg skim first otherwise hours are wasted in retrieving information (general staff comment)&lt;br&gt;Learning adviser continue to integrate information so how do librarians imagine that they do ‘synthesis’? (general staff comment)</td>
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<td>learning, but for the majority of undergraduate students the reality of life for them, is to get in, they all work, to get in the shortest possible time, get by. You know, they put in as much effort as they can within the restraints that they’ve already got with work, and lectures, and home and social life. And they give it what they can, and some of them are really dedicated, they all want HDs and some of them just want passes, just get by in the shortest amount of effort. But I don’t know that what we see as important of lifelong learning and developing skills cuts a lot of ice with the majority of students (Librarian E)</td>
<td>Learning advisers see group teaching as very important because of the opportunities for engagement, interaction and discussion, librarians don’t teach they demonstrate (general staff comment)</td>
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<td>How much better, if in that subject they actually are taken in hand at certain points by people who have either worked with us to see our approach, or who are actually from us and who are dealing with real exercises that really relate to their assessment and will help them to pass that particular subject, while giving them the general skills that we’re trying to impart (Librarian B)</td>
<td>Learning advisers use learning frameworks to inform their work, they cater for individual differences and individual tasks unlike trainers, what we do in one to one consultations magnifies and guides what we do (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>for us in the library to take a more educational view of what we’re doing, because I think that while students expect us to run the sort of workshops that we do, and we can’t not do those. We need to go that extra distance and start trying to take the - try to offer courses that will make more explicit to students what the skills are that they’re using. And I think with all of us working more closely with the academic staff, you know, towards embedding more what we’re doing into courses, that helps a lot as well. I think it - the more we can work with academic staff, that we explain to them or work with them, so that they understand what we’re trying to do, and we understand better what they’re trying to do (Librarian C)</td>
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<td><strong>Excerpts from learning adviser interviews:</strong></td>
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<td>The work is to obviously help the student to achieve, to be successful. That’s not just to get good grades, but it’s to enjoy learning, to have fun at learning, to get something out of the whole university experience. I think that’s our main, global thing, is to make some</td>
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<td>This could be seen as contradictory. If we have to define ‘how we do it’ we may not always be making the right decision (Learning Adviser F)</td>
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<td>provisions for that to happen. That’s probably an untouchable and a tangible that you could say, “Well this is how we do it.” But I do believe that’s what we’re here for. To help students have a successful learning experience (Learning Adviser D)</td>
<td>Completing assignments is the common reason students come to see the LAU staff and librarians. The difference in our services is that we do offer generic skills (critical thinking, reading, time management etc) to help students complete assignments as well as specific academic writing information about specific assignment tasks (Learning Adviser G)</td>
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<td>It’s nice when they express their appreciation or tell you how much it’s helped them to see something more clearly. Sometimes they’ll indicate how they’re going to transfer what we’ve said about a particular assessment task to other things that they’re going to do (Learning Adviser A)</td>
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<td>Completing an assignment. I think it would be very assignment oriented, targeted. I don’t think it’s fully for us still assignment oriented because we’ve got things like time management and reading effectively, which have nothing to do with an individual assignment. So there’s enough of those other generic things, critical thinking, that aren’t assignment oriented. So they’re still coming to us for learning environment issues. Just learning issues, that aren’t assignment oriented (Learning Adviser D)</td>
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<td>I think ours is a modelling responsibility. That’s how I would use it. How do I use the tools that have been provided by the academic or the faculty, usefully? When do I use them? Where do I use them? So having modelled once, hopefully, for their other subjects at a later date, begin to realise which is the first point of call. This is where I need to go first. Then [...] showed me how to look for information, to apply. If they don’t do it. If they come back a second time and they require it again, purely and simply because they were too lazy. More often than not if it’s the same student I’ve had, I will know that. I’ll let the student know that I know that. That you didn’t do that. Go away and try it them come back again. (Learning Adviser D)</td>
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<td>I know a little about counselling methodologies and counselling theory - and that really fits in with what seems to me to be useful and workable in human relationships generally, but certainly in a counselling situation. My feeling has been that it would apply well to teaching. I found it difficult to do that because there’s always this content driving, this need</td>
<td>It’s called ‘client centred therapy’ – hard to do</td>
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<td>to get across a certain amount of content, that drives what happens in a classroom. In a drop-in situation, I’m finding it really interesting to be able to sit with that process and develop that process and refine it. I know that I’ve got a long way to go but that’s my aim and that’s what I’m trying to do all the time. It’s harder in a workshop situation, because there again there is - even though it’s generic skills - there’s a certain amount of content, but I try to make that as active as possible too (Learning Adviser B)</td>
<td>in a short time such as drop in (Learning Adviser F)</td>
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<td>there’s a more positive perception of what we do from the academic staff, or certainly some of them, that our profile has certainly been raised. It’s in a more positive way. It’s not for remediation and those sorts of issues. Even getting away from the grammar, spell checks. I think that’s coming through in conversations I’ve had with some academic staff. Even ones who don’t really know what we do, and asked me, and listened with interest and said, “Yes, that’s great.” Clarified what sorts of things they might send students to us for. Then requests that we’re getting to come and do things in discipline for them. I also have a sense that there’s still academic staff who don’t fully understand what we do, or still perhaps see us as just this real “Out there”... possibly still in the remediation model (Learning Adviser A)</td>
<td>Overall it comes down to the difference between the training model and the learning model. Training can be something that is done to the student. Also is precluding the trainer from engaging in a personal 1:1 relationship this is difficult from behind the desk (Learning Adviser F)</td>
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<td>One thing I would add in terms of if we are looking at any opportunities for improving would be to be more pro-active, rather than reactionary. In terms of getting in their early with, particularly academics, rather than having last minute requests. Coming to us and us having to fit them in. Which often leads to disappointment when we can’t fit them in. Be more pro-active in that way, rather than reactionary (Learning Adviser C)</td>
<td>Thoroughly agree Head of School /Course convenors involved in wash up sessions at end of semester looking at failure drop out and talk about program for next year (Learning Adviser H)</td>
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SUMMARY OF APRIL, 2001 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROBLEMS AND TENSIONS IN UNIT'S WORK PRACTICES IDENTIFIED BY LEARNING ADVISERS</th>
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<tr>
<td>• 24% increase in student numbers over 3 years</td>
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<td>• Lack of time for effective planning, preparation, development of materials and administration (such as reception duties and data entry)</td>
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<td>• Changing student profile (equity, entry levels, course work postgraduates, full fee paying students, variations in enrolment status eg. part time, full-time, flexible)</td>
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<td>• Learning Advisers who don’t know how to say NO and students and academics who want it NOW</td>
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<td>• Increased email and phone consultations requires different questioning techniques and management strategies</td>
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<td>• Increased demand from academics for in-discipline teaching and staff development on issues such as assessment/criteria/resources.</td>
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<td>• Problems include ad hoc requests, time tabling conflicts, after hours requests, poor construction of assessment items.</td>
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<td>• Trial of targeting first year core courses just created too many workshops</td>
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<td>• Continuity of LAU staff a problem in the past 3 years</td>
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<td>• Perceived imbalance of workload picked up by full time and part time learning advisers</td>
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<td>• Expected to do more but budget stays the same</td>
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<td>• Impact of competing demands eg. fee for service, realignment program</td>
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<td>• Expectations of staff skills in using technology (eg web development and maintenance, database)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased time needed to coordinate off-campus and across campus service delivery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>