

# I Support U and U Support We at UWI

## Examining the Symbiotic Staff-Student Support Services of the Academic Literacies Programme at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine

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### *Abstract*

*Against the backdrop of the ever-increasing physiological and sociological ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became necessary for the Academic Literacies Programme (ALP), at The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine Campus (The UWISTA), to recalibrate its student support mechanisms. The existing pre-pandemic system was recalibrated to maximise the highest probability for student success and simultaneous staff development through an eight-prong support system. This encompassed the enhanced utilisation of the exciting capabilities of the e-Learning portal; the transformation of the services of The Writing Centre into an energised virtual forum; continuous academic advising; small-group grammar and writing workshops; increased opportunities for non-credit practice writing; additional consultations; special one-on-one tutorials for academically at-risk students; and, the amplification of the student voice. In so doing, the ALP's staff grew in related competencies as well, encouraged by the positive synergies of an appreciative student body, resulting in a new-found symbiotic relationship between staff development and student learning.*

**Keywords:** student support; academic writing; Academic Literacies Programme (ALP)

## Preamble

That The University of the West Indies' (UWI) current five-year Triple A Strategic Plan – hinged on *Access*, *Alignment* and *Agility* – is nearing completion of tenure may be aptly juxtaposed with the success of The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus' (The UWISTA) Academic Literacies Programme's (ALP) efforts to ensure all three watchwords characterise students' current support systems within the Unit.<sup>1</sup> The ALP is responsible for the delivery of academic writing courses, as well as the English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT), to six faculties at The UWISTA and three Tertiary Level Institutions (TLIs) in St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Perhaps the pivot around which the related huge cosmopolitan student body revolves is the fact that it generally constitutes diverse English-based Creole speakers. This is the indisputable primary element that buffers against fulfilment of the aims and objectives of related courses with Caribbean Standard English as its target. According to Mufwene (1999, 4), it is noteworthy that the difficulties faced in Caribbean education systems are alike in theory but widely divergent in particulars since there are no linguistic features shared by all [Caribbean] creole languages.

Numbering approximately 2,500 annually, the student body is exceedingly diverse in interests, writing experiences, communicative competencies, technological skills, attitude towards academia, individual and collective needs, and capacity for throughput. Such miscellany has always issued a clarion call for support services that are apt, timely, and meaningful for today's Caribbean tertiary student. The COVID-19 pandemic that saw instructional strategies adopt a virtual mode for the past two years further underscored the critical need for novel, relevant, and practical student support systems. The ALP was now tasked with marrying existing support measures with educational technology that would ensure positive outcomes and student success, in ways that were hitherto different.

To answer the new pandemic call, The UWISTA's ALP carefully and strategically planned and implemented an eight-prong support system that focused principally on acute challenges students encounter in the new space. Such challenges entail producing active writing and academic oracy, engaging in reflective and critical thinking, conducting scholarly research, and fulfilling citation and documentation tasks. And all of this is expected to be done through the available technology support system that will assist students to achieve personal and academic success transferable to their programme of study, further graduate work, and their careers.

It meant that formative student feedback to the support measures became crucial in order for staff to generate any necessary emendations, while they themselves grow and develop their own skills and competencies.

Adopting the recalibrated pandemic-motivated support system, which relied on the Unit's existing human and material resources, has borne much fruit in the orchard of students' communicative competencies. Individual differences are catered for and the resultant skills of Caribbean Creole English speakers have been honed with high success in all ALP courses.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, in supporting students, the staff themselves benefited immensely as they emerged with new skills that married educational technologies with their own pedagogy and practices of academic literacies instruction within an Anglophone Caribbean tertiary landscape.

## **Operational Context and Major Challenge of The UWISTA's Academic Literacies Programme**

Arguably, academic literacies remain the cornerstone for the success of any university's vision, particularly during the highly challenging current pandemic. After all, if an institution's graduates cannot communicate effectively by means of speech and writing, then how can such persons resolve problems while simultaneously steering progressive development of society, country and region? As Baldwin (2009) surmised, "To succeed in the face of challenges, we should not forget what we are 'administering' for – the advancement of learning and knowledge in society by teaching and research and the provision of a University education" (95).

To generate such success, the ALP's offerings are hinged on a currency of best practices as well as traditional and new literacies. In this regard, the seven ALP courses at The UWISTA are either generic or discipline-specific, but they are all characterised by rhetoric and pragmatism, critical thinking and critical reading, oral and written communicative competencies, problem solving skills, research and documentation abilities, and a hybridity of face-to-face and virtual technologies.

Still, despite such diversity in foci and approach within the academic literacies classroom, the reality is that many students, whose first love is anything other than English, writing or rhetoric, remain unconvinced of the value of academic literacies. Worse, the prevailing attitude of some academics, in non-language disciplines, exacerbates the situation negatively. Milson-Whyte's (2008) related experience at The UWI Mona leads her to declare that "Academics there have

perpetuated a certain tacit assumption that writing is a natural process” (12). But Winford (1973) argues that ALP offerings are essential, given that courses emerged out of a need to develop university students’ language competencies.

This perspective is supported by Dyche (1996) and Ramsay (2011) who argue that such courses became necessary to address the inadequate development of students’ written language proficiency, both within academia and in the world of work. And in her unpublished M. Phil thesis, Alleyne (2010) speaks of the delicate position of Caribbean students and Caribbean Creole or Creole-influence vernacular speakers in general. She highlights this by J.W. Tollefson’s (2000) comments regarding the spread of English as an international language: [indent below]

For those who already speak English, the economic value of the language translates directly into greater opportunities in education, business and employment. For those who must learn English, however, particularly those who do not have access to high-quality English language education, the spread of English presents a formidable obstacle to education, employment and other activities requiring English proficiency. (9)

The relevance of this utilitarian and fiscal value of language learning cannot be understated at The UWISTA. It dovetails directly with the student experience, thereby solidifying the need for cutting edge, 21<sup>st</sup> century support measures that maximise opportunities for success.

Until 2020, ALP operations were predicated on a tripartite mode encompassing face-to-face plenary lectures and tutorials, and reliance on The UWI’s Moodle e-platform, termed myeLearning, at The UWISTA. Whereas plenary lectures saw up to 250 students per session being exposed to core concepts and related teaching points, the small group tutorials facilitated twenty students participating in practical speaking and writing elements of the plenary lecture’s content. These large numbers – for both face-to-face offerings – become testimony to the woefully understaffed situation at The UWISTA, despite two Quality Assurance Review exercises and countless ALP appeals to higher administration for additional staff.

The myeLearning technology was used largely as a repository, replete with postings of Power Point presentations, additional reading material, an avenue for notices and announcements, a means of selecting tutorial groups, and the portal by which students would attempt online quizzes. A student body that was sometimes technological-resistant, coupled with just one or two members of staff who were not amenable to expanding their technological skills beyond that which was deemed necessary for effective functioning within a largely face-

to-face instructional environment, limited the ALP's heavier incorporation of educational technology.

But perhaps the pandemic was the double-edged sword that allowed both students and staff to recognise and appreciate the need for all that the programme can offer, to ensure successful attainment of related programme goals, course aims and lesson objectives. Likewise, the past two years witnessed a discernible increase in staff of various faculties seeking the services of The ALP for some of its students deemed academically at-risk. Educational technology became the stone that the builders rejected and The ALP, already leaps and bounds ahead of other academic departments and faculties vis-à-vis the instructional use of myLearning, engaged in an immediate and almost overnight educational advancement using the technology. Not only did this facilitate both teaching and learning, but it also incorporated a comprehensive set of pertinent student support mechanisms. Within one short week of the entire Campus shutting down its face-to-face operations in mid-March 2020, the ALP rose to the challenge and swiftly and efficiently engaged a deeply appreciative and highly respondent student body, exploring and pushing the innovative pluses of the myLearning technology.

## Preparing Student Support Measures for the Pandemic

Perhaps the boon for The ALP in its readiness for the pandemic was its entrenched familiarity with online instructional strategies, and reliance on myLearning in ways that were seemingly ahead of its time. Over the years, teaching staff capitalised on several opportunities for expansion of their technological competencies by participating in several developmental workshops and training sessions offered by The UWISTA's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), as well as The Microsoft Academy. The then ALP Coordinator had a history of strongly encouraging both academic and administrative support staff to enrol and attend sessions on Moodle Capabilities, Using the Zoom Platform, Virtual Modes of Alternative Assessment, Preparing Your Course for Online Instruction, etc., that were impactful in creating new opportunities for academic literacies instruction.

In pre-pandemic times, the ALP had a track record of working closely with other arms of the Campus such as the libraries, student support divisions and units, and even the counselling centres to determine how students can access services without having to physically be on the Campus. In January 2020, The ALP developed and housed a repertoire of student-accessible resources, for

possible use in advising and assisting students, should the physical closure of the Campus became a reality. Similarly, YouTube videos that reflected how language practitioners relied on virtual means of educating tertiary level students were sourced and added to the repository as these would undoubtedly be useful should the Campus adopt a virtual mode of delivery.

During the first two months of 2020, the ALP's customary Tuesday staff development sessions that habitually addressed curriculum challenges and possible solutions, organised and planned for the impending transformation to the virtual classroom. Staff engaged in robust debates and healthy discussions with a focus on a recalibration of existing instructional strategies and student support systems. The ALP researched and explored both best practices in language teaching and learning, as well as offering support for students in a virtual mode, at various universities across the Global South primarily since the Caribbean shares many similarities with such territories. This was done with the view to adapting them for use among English-based Creole speakers of the Anglophone Caribbean. More technologically-skilled Instructors volunteered to hold training sessions for others in the use of myeLearning, for what would invariably convert the ALP into a fully functional virtual Unit. The emphasis was on the capacity to deliver plenary lectures, tutorial sessions, formative and summative assessment, office hours, student feedback, application of examiners' rubrics, student consultations, individual and collaborative learning techniques, cooperative learning, and the engagement of other Campus support services, as new core dimensions of academic literacies.

Not only did the ALP consider the immediate pedagogical needs of its nine-strong full-time teaching staff but also those of its fifteen part-time Tutors as, together, these twenty-four persons were responsible for the development of academic literacies among the 2,500 strong student body annually. In this regard, several documents were created then honed to assist everyone to engage online instruction efficiently and support students' immediate learning needs. Inclusive were new instructional material and practices that depicted how to plan, organise, and utilise Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate (BbC) sessions. These depicted how to download student submissions on various e-Learning platforms; navigate assessment portals; grade students' work; provide feedback; grant and remove privileges in a virtual space; and utilise various quick guides to other portals, etc. Juxtaposing these, The ALP successfully sourced documents and videos from CETL and other institutions of higher learning that would serve as

demonstrations for students in navigating the online space. These were made available on the various course pages of myeLearning and included support measures that addressed plagiarism; links to upload assignments; guides to navigate e-Learning; and specific directions to adopt to access plenary lectures, tutorial sessions, and staff office hours.

All of these were initiated and some were completed even before mid-March 2020 when The UWISTA's higher management declared a suspension of face-to-face classes and the need to prepare for a virtual replacement. In effect, such strides speak volumes about the forward-thinking capacities and deeply imbedded positive approaches of The ALP towards both students and staff who were about to engage the one hundred per cent virtual instructional space. And perhaps the feather in the ALP's cap through what was to unfold was its foresight in catering for all students, with the mantra that no student would be left behind. The Unit ensured that every single student was catered for through both synchronous and asynchronous instruction since then, and even now. In this regard, The ALP ensured that its gamut of student support measures – recalibrated in philosophy, approach, and measures – was ready, available and current to offer critical and substantial aid during the pandemic.

### **The ALP's Enhanced Utilisation of The UWISTA's e-Learning Portal**

The ALP's immediate transition and sole reliance on myeLearning for teaching, assessment, feedback, communication, and a repertoire of support mechanisms, since mid-March 2020, was almost seamless and problem-free. No doubt, the previous fourteen years of utilising of myeLearning as a pivotal arm of The ALP's slew of academic literacies courses served as a springboard for the full shift to a virtual space. The ALP capitalised on its already existing strengths by revamping its various course shells on the platform as, apart from email correspondence, these now became the sole means of course delivery.

Indeed, the internet has proven to be an invaluable resource as students were exposed to all course notices, timetables, policies, announcements, and lists of internal and external support measures. Virtual classes were launched on BbC for plenary lectures and tutorial sessions, and staff's office hours were linked to BbC rooms for interfacing with students. The ALP created and posted guides for students' use in accessing these various links. Likewise, all credit assignments as well as examiners' rubrics for these were shared on myeLearning. Students

were given tutorials and access to videos on utilising Turnitin as a self-check tool for plagiarism, and submission portals were created for the upload of student assignments.

In an effort to further assist students, some courses created an informal Students' Lounge on myeLearning that was accessible only by students. This facilitated opportunities for student interaction, communication, sharing of ideas, jokes, motivational quips, etc., and so presented the high probability of students interacting with one another, in much the same informal way they would have been doing on the physical Campus. Online interactions developed and were fostered as, during actual classes, staff encouraged the use of audio and video in an effort to create an atmosphere of comfort with visibility of attendees, so everyone would attach faces to voices. This made students feel at ease as they began to learn about one another as colleagues in the courses.

Lecturers were encouraged to make their sessions' recordings available to students in an effort to assist students navigate the course content at their own pace and in an individualistic manner. This was deemed important since students learn differently and the lecture or tutorial may pose questions for the students that are answered when they navigate the audio recordings after the sessions. Thus, The ALP allowed for the adoption of various links as students engaged Camtasia, software that links PowerPoint presentations with audio feed, MP3 and MP4 audio, and video recordings of lectures. This was done in conjunction with a network of websites that assist in the learning of Caribbean Standard English (CSE) by English-based Creole speakers. Such an integrated approach in the new virtual academic literacies classroom lends credence to Morgan's (2000) claim that the implementation of a judicious mix of face-to-face customary techniques and distance learning strategies has the capability to demolish the gulf between these modes and to create measurable enhancement in students' writing performance.

A major development with the use of myeLearning in academic literacies classrooms has been the technology-driven tutorial sessions. Hayter and Egan (2009) declare, "It is possible to argue that curricula should be radically transformed by the existence of the computer – in the approach to learning, and also in what is appropriate to learn with the power of the computer in the classroom and with a technological world outside" (140). Such a transformation, though not seen as radical, becomes evident through incorporating the educational principle of flipping the session (Brame 2013).

Tutors introduced this strategy to encourage students to spend reflective and



focused time in preparing tutorial activities outside of class time, and then attend sessions with their finished work. This enabled tutors to deliver tutorials using either whole class approaches or small group strategies for students to present, discuss, critique and comment on their colleagues' work. If students attended unprepared, the tutor created break-out rooms and directed such students to these rooms to work independently, continuing the session with the remaining students most effectively. This would not at all have been possible in pre-pandemic times where physical space was already very difficult to source.

Electronic break-out rooms became a most desirable feature while ensuring that all students remained on task throughout the session. Additionally, tutors utilised the technology of myeLearning to encourage discourse with students using the in-built chat feature and encouraged students to present their work using the whiteboard feature. Multiple students were able to work simultaneously and this created a very industrious tutorial hour that was well-received by the student body. Staff as well have voiced their excitement about the myeLearning capabilities, thereby fostering additional intrigue and willingness to delve further into the use of educational technology within language teaching and learning.

Staff also benefited immensely with other aspects of online teaching. Assignments were now easily graded using myeLearning's electronic grade book capabilities that were previously irrelevant because of the practice of physically grading students' scripts. The online technology made grading a faster exercise with the tabulation of students' scores being done automatically by the related software. Second marking and moderating of scripts no longer relied on the physical handover of script which was sometimes delayed depending on whether or not markers visited the Campus. Rather, as soon as one level of grading was done, an automatic notification was sent to the next category of markers. The overall exercise facilitated a more timely grading undertaking and the earlier release of students' grades along with feedback. All of this was deeply appreciated by the student body who felt early and detailed release of grades and feedback were depictive of The ALP's support for their learning during the pandemic. Staff, in turn, became more motivated as they responded to the synergies of the student body, and so many were enthused about learning more about myeLearning and its capacity to make the instructional process even more impactful, meaningful and relevant. As a result, staff development became directly proportionate, juxtaposed with student growth in The ALP.

Positive sentiments and staff feedback became a feature of the critical

post-mortem exercise held at the end of each semester. These explored the courses delivered virtually during a semester with a view to ascertaining strengths and limitations that were to be addressed in the forthcoming semester. Full-time staff were tasked with the additional staff development exercise as a weekly two-hour session was held to discuss new teaching strategies, time management concerns, and means of improving and shaping the academic writing curriculum to foster success in what was undoubtedly becoming online operations for the foreseeable future.

The pandemic has also facilitated a greater awareness of additional capabilities of myeLearning within The ALP's operational framework. For instance, previously, academic literacies courses that engaged group work relied on students being placed into groups along very traditional means of opting to work with one another. This would have depended on class attendance to make such choices. The online platform, however, allows for an easy navigation of group formation. Further to this, staff can even access scripts belonging to all group members far more easily because of electronic group calibration, making grading scripts far easier.

Perhaps the seminal plus associated with group formation via myeLearning is that when one group member is graded, all group members instantly get the same feedback and grade as the technology facilitates this. Such a boon is highly appreciated by students who sing the praises of a system that makes feedback timely, precise, and impactful. And, for their part, staff welcomed such feedback which in turn inspired them further to engage myeLearning in a quest to uncover other capabilities.

It is therefore no surprise that student attainment of academic literacies courses' behavioural objectives have increased since The ALP recalibrated its use of myeLearning. Reliance on this virtual platform has positively impacted student performance over the past semesters that saw an increase in the pass rate of all ALP courses. This is reflected in tables 1 to 4.

**Table 1.** ‘Pre-Pandemic’ Student Performance in Four ALP Courses – Semester 1: 2019/2020

COURSE	SEMESTER 1: 2019/2020				
	Number Completed	Number Passed	Number Failed	% Passed	% Failed
FDMU0005	26	22	4	84.8	15.4
FOUN1001	491	403	88	82.1	17.9
FOUN1103	198	152	46	76.8	23.2
FOUN1106	557	500	57	89.8	10.2

**Table 2.** ‘Pandemic’ Student Performance in Four ALP Courses – Semester 1: 2020/2021

COURSE	SEMESTER 1: 2020/2021				
	Number Completed	Number Passed	Number Failed	% Passed	% Failed
FDMU0005	18	17	1	94.4	5.6
FOUN1001	588	496	92	84.4	15.6
FOUN1103	212	212	0	100	0
FOUN1106	446	414	32	92.8	7.2

**Table 3.** ‘Pre-Pandemic’ Student Performance in Three ALP Courses – Semester 2: 2019/2020

COURSE	SEMESTER 2: 2019/2020				
	Number Completed	Number Passed	Number Failed	% Passed	% Failed
FOUN1104	93	81	12	87.1	12.9
FOUN1105	703	646	57	91.9	8.1
FOUN1107	110	100	10	90.9	9.1

**Table 4.** ‘Pandemic’ Student Performance in Three ALP Courses – Semester 2: 2020/2021

COURSE	SEMESTER 2: 2020/2021				
	Number Completed	Number Passed	Number Failed	% Passed	% Failed
FOUN1104	102	97	5	95.1	4.9
FOUN1105	635	583	52	91.8	8.2
FOUN1107	72	68	4	94.4	5.6

## Transforming the Support Services of The Writing Centre

Founded in 2008, The Writing Centre (TWC) at The UWISTA remained a physical offering until mid-March 2020 when the pandemic caused the physical closure of the Campus. For many undergraduate and post graduate students, and quite a number of staff members across the Campus, TWC has always been an integral support to their development of communicative competencies. So there was an understandable degree of alarm with the prevailing sentiment that this vital support measure would no longer be available during the pandemic. But TWC was only closed for two weeks to facilitate online restructuring of operations and the retraining of writing coaches to operate within a virtual space. Since then, The ALP ensured that this most vital support measure became constantly and readily available with varied operational hours, much to the collective relief of the entire student body and several staff members associated with other arms and faculties of the Campus.

The shift to virtual operations continued to offer free 30-minute sessions with writing coaches and 112 such sessions were booked and attended during the past year. TWC utilised the Air Table app, which was implemented during the first year of the pandemic as part of the ongoing modernisation of its services.<sup>3</sup> This app functioned well and allowed information to be immediately accessible to all writing coaches, making for a more cohesive team in supporting students and other staff.

Likewise, TWC's files continued to be hosted in Google Drive to allow appropriate accessibility to relevant TWC staff as every effort was made for a more streamlined virtual offering of services. MyeLearning remained the dominant forum for student appointments with coaches, while Campus staff booked sessions via email. Twitter and Facebook accounts became more prominent in use in the virtual space allowing for timely and current communication with all clients. The major areas of attention in TWC this past year encompassed formal language use, grammatical competencies, research and documentation skills, the mechanics of writing, essay-writing, and vocabulary development.

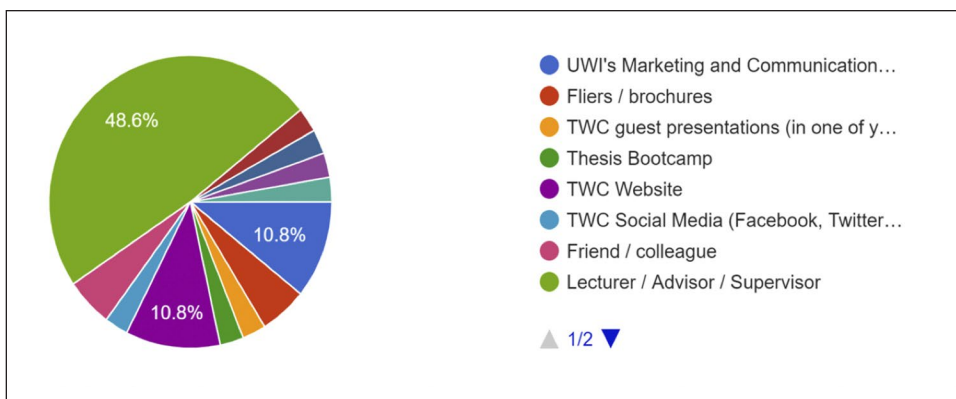
As The UWISTA entered the new academic year, 2020/2021, writing coaches and the Coordinator of TWC ensured that every effort was made to launch sessions in line with students' new availability caused by the pandemic. This resulted in offering a total of 546 sessions in the first semester alone, as reflected in table 5, with coaches' initials, and days and times of service.

**Table 5.** TWC Schedule of Operations for Semester 1: 2020/2021, with Coaches' Initials

DAY	9-10	10-11	11-12	12-1	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	5-6	6-7	7-8
MON.	RJL	RJL			AL				AA	DWB	AL
TUE.				RJL					AA	DWB	CW
WED.					AL				AA	DWB	AA
THU.					ES	ES	ES	CW	CW	CW	AL

All writing coaches were fully trained in the use of BbC and utilised online resources such as email, myLearning, and Air Table for record-keeping. The Coordinator of TWC regularly updated the social media platforms of Facebook and Twitter to ensure clients were kept abreast of the new changes. Related queries were responded to via all these electronic means to facilitate the smooth running of online coaching. In this regard, students became very au courant with the online technology and by relying heavily on this for all access and activities associated with TWC, they themselves began to cultivate skills in educational technology.

In response, writing coaches were encouraged to match strides, making the symbiotic relationship between staff development and student learning even more pronounced within a highly re-energised virtual forum. In fact, a user survey done in 2020/2021 indicated that most clients learned about the services of TWC via a virtual mode, pointing even more forcefully to the potential of TWC’s operations as a virtual support during the pandemic, as reflected in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Means of Learning about The Writing Centre during Semester 1: 2020/2021

## Supporting Students through Robust Academic Advising

Academic advising has always been a core element of the student experience in terms of course selection, some degree of career guidance, and mitigation against untoward student issues.<sup>4</sup> With the pandemic, The ALP, in conjunction with the Faculty of Humanities and Education, recalibrated its role in academic advising. Whereas the bulk of the exercise usually occurs at the commencement of a semester, students benefited from what amounted to an ongoing system of academic advising throughout the semester. More frequent sessions were conducted via email and the BbC portal. So ongoing was the need for assurance on the part of some students that the then Coordinator of The ALP found himself becoming an informal academic advisor all through the year for students. More and more, he relied on YouTube videos and other links that depicted the value of what students were studying at other universities containing testimonies of the merit of their educational pursuits. And such endeavours on his part were characterised by a high degree of mentorship support that the students grew to appreciate in uncertain times, offering related feedback of such.

This resonates with Mc Gill et al's (2020) declaration that, "Academic advising and personal tutoring has moved from the fringes of higher education to find its place at the center of student success initiatives in higher education" (1). And indeed, the supportive efforts of The ALP were validated as one year later, in March 2021, similar efforts were explored and strongly encouraged when The UWISTA held its first virtual "Academic Advising and Mentoring in Higher Education" Symposium.<sup>5</sup> This was the culmination of two years of preparation covering academic advising models; institutional culture and advising practices; mentorship thinking and practices; and the well-being of students and advisors.

## Small Group Workshops to Augment Student Communicative Competencies

Having satisfied the university's matriculation requirements as well as pre-requisites for academic literacies U courses does not equate to students' sustained proficiency in the requisite language competencies for mastery of a course's objectives. Matriculation is merely the fundamental building block that tertiary level negotiation of pedagogy builds on during a student's tenure. With this in mind, and against the historical backdrop of student performance in related courses, The

ALP would have introduced weekly one-hour, small group grammar workshops and writing workshops specially geared to supplement the content and concepts of the manifest academic literacies courses, approximately a decade ago. Since then, these have undergone several changes in curricula and instructional strategy to become relevant for the imminent 21<sup>st</sup> century distinctive UWI graduate. The pandemic underscored the need for additional changes and a menu-type offering of various modules was put forward to coincide with students' preferred times on the virtual platform. Previously, this was not possible as the face-to-face offerings of these depended on available physical classrooms. The drawback then has always been clashes with student timetables and limited availability of space that often resulted in students with the direst needs for such developmental assistance not being able to attend and participate.

Not wanting to surrender this most vital support measure, The ALP expanded its service availability online in ways that appreciatively fit all students' schedules. Preferred times were noted and the actual calendar of classes was recalibrated so that the most sought-after modules within these workshops were offered multiple times over a fortnight so that no student lost any learning opportunity. This became especially critical before credit assignments were due. And whereas, in pre-pandemic times, if students missed the workshop then this impacted their grammatical and writing skills, with the virtual platform during the pandemic, students were able to revisit recorded sessions and interface with instructional material at their own pace.

In addition to these advantages, students were also able to benefit from additional workshop modules in oral competencies since The ALP realised that many students were seemingly more willing to speak and participate in an online space than in the physical space of yesteryear's workshops. As such, this was capitalised on as a means of boosting students' oral language communicative competencies while developing general language awareness via the online platform. Such a scenario dovetails with Craig's (2006) perspective that, "the computer can be a strong influence for the development of language awareness, and the motivation to learn English, the major natural language of computing and of information storage" (127).

## Increased Opportunities for Student Writing, Consultation and Feedback

The ALP adheres to the paradigm that champions writing as a process, as opposed to a product. Further, The ALP believes that all students have a right to engage in the process of writing and so measures must be introduced that foster related competencies in a responsible manner that produces sound written products. As Ramsey (2009) opined, “Writing may be an activity in which, as human beings, we all believe we have a right to indulge (and we probably do) . . . This right comes with responsibilities which we are obliged to fulfil, especially in formal written discourse” (151).

Pre-pandemic, The ALP created opportunities for students to develop an appreciation for writing *without* the accompanying stress of formal assessment for credit. But relatively few students accepted the offer. One reason for this was that the time that the Examiners provided feedback was often when the latter was available but the former was not, within a physical space. But during the pandemic, the focused transformation of this practice using the virtual platform has been of immense practical value. Students and staff now negotiate available times in an electronic classroom, and since there is now no need for staff to lobby for available physical space to conduct related student consultations, the practice has seen appreciable growth.

Additionally, the pandemic has also created the need for virtual staff office hours which have become a notable boon for students. Since staff do not have to traverse to and from the Campus daily, The ALP has been able to facilitate more students by offering office hours at times that would have otherwise been unavailable due to staff travelling to and from work. This has been highly beneficial to students as they themselves are also available to interface with staff during these times. Rather than have a condensed work day for all courses pursued, students can now enjoy a more protracted day and so access feedback, guidance, and counsel; clarify expectations and erase doubts; and, glean personal motivation on all aspects of their work from one-on-one consultations.

Moreover, since the pandemic has created a sole virtual space for all teacher/student interaction, staff have found students to be far more receptive as they navigate other related support instructional material for use during student consultations. For example, pre-pandemic times saw a pronounced hesitation



on students' part to leave the comfort of their face-to-face interactions to visit support links, videos and sites that were highly recommended to boost their development of communicative competencies. But the pandemic has caused all links and related sites to be one click away, a measure far more amenable to the same student body that previously saw it as bothersome. In fact, accessing and utilising these resources have fostered independent work on students' part, many of whom now virtually attend office hours to discuss related content matter harnessed from these.

### **Supporting At-Risk Students with One-on-One Tutorials**

A major bonus emerging from the pandemic has been the opportunity for The ALP to lend support to students' who are deemed at-risk academically. The psychological impact of the pandemic has been far-reaching with a number of students testifying about now having to work part-time while studying in order to supplement household income. This is because the primary breadwinner has either lost their employment or have had their services substantially reduced, thereby negatively affecting income. Others have had to engage the assistance of the Campus's Psychological and Counselling Services as the pandemic has had serious mental repercussions for them. For a number of such students, their academic throughput has suffered making them at risk of being placed on the Campus's system of Academic Warning before they may be required to withdraw.

Although The ALP has always offered additional support to students deemed at-risk, a recalibration of this support measure has seen The ALP now offering several individual one-on-one special tutorials for these students. Such sessions are available at different times throughout the day and so students who are forced to divide their time between registered classes and work now benefit from a very convenient weekly hour. Sessions resemble different lesson types as, for some, concretising concepts becomes necessary. For others, the lessons are tailor-made to reflect the needs of the at-risk students and may run the gamut of reinforcement, remediation, problem-solving; evaluation and/or enrichment. In this regard, The ALP caters for special needs and learning differences among students by paying heed to Howard Gardner's (1999) Theory of Multiple Intelligences. For the past year, at-risk students have voiced their deep gratitude for this support measure that has been created because of the pandemic as, for many, it has allowed them to rise above the label of at-risk.

## The Amplified Student Voice

Prior to the pandemic, The ALP made strides in capturing the student voice and their feedback on courses, curricula, policies, and practices established in the Unit. This was done largely through dual means. First, staff operated an open-door policy for students to visit and share their concerns; second, a robust Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) has been in operation for close to fifteen years with meetings twice per semester for students to provide feedback. Interestingly, the pandemic has served to amplify the student voice and The ALP had capitalised on this as a valuable support measure for students.

Since there are no face-to-face classes, all students reading academic literacies courses are bound to a virtual space which has created the opportunity for further navigation of related course links and sites, inclusive of SSLC phenomena, that were hitherto seldom visited. In so doing, students no longer see the SSLC as simply a filler in their school life. Rather, The ALP has reorganised the SSLC in a far more structured and professional manner, replete with an enumeration of student representative responsibilities, a pragmatic timeline for activities during the semester, and frequent notification, feedback, and events associated with the SSLC. Since everything is reflected in the same space, the SSLC now takes on greater meaning and resonates far more profoundly than before as an avenue for student feedback and recommendations.

Student representatives have testified that with The ALP's additional thrust of the SSLC during the pandemic, they have fostered their own sense of personal commitment, collective responsibility, and desirable traits of grit and determination. These are underpinned by having a positive attitude, the capacity to engage in sound decision-making, and a deeper understanding and appreciation of the operations of The ALP and the rationale for such when it comes to tertiary level language teaching and learning. They find themselves comparing The ALP with their respective departments and are often in high praise for this focused, streamlined, and highly appreciated avenue that offers an amplification of the student voice during the pandemic.

But related feedback from the student body gleaned from the SSLC does not remain within the pages of official minutes. Rather, all concerns, issues and recommendations are duly considered by the staff of The ALP. In fact, the Unit has developed a working system by which SSLC feedback is aired and discussed in specially convened meetings for all staff. These facilitate staff's own appreciation

for what students are experiencing during the pandemic and how the Unit's services actually assist them get through their studies daily, while offering insight for additional strategies and techniques that may be of assistance to students.

Measures are discussed during weekly online curriculum meetings for all full-time and part-time ALP staff, and, moving forward during the semester, worthwhile ones are planned and integrated as pilot activities in the various academic literacies courses. One example from students has been the creation of a list of tasks that members in cooperative learning groups are to adhere to with opportunities for peer feedback and evaluation. This has proven immensely useful for students who are also proud of having their suggestions become reality, thereby impacting their sense of self, their confidence and their worth in the midst of the pandemic. In this regard, The ALP has secured a working partnership with its student body during the pandemic, one that has become of symbiotic value to staff and students alike.

## **Challenges and the Potential to Build On**

Despite highly commendable success, the ALP's two-year old transformation to a virtual platform has not been without its challenges. Chief among these has been the acute shortage of human resources within the ALP. Although the annual 2500-strong student body being catered to across all academic literacies courses resembles a similar number at The UWI Mona sister Campus, the full-time staff of two full-time lecturers and seven full-time instructors at The UWISTA are a far cry from the twenty-one lecturers and seventeen instructors at the Mona Campus. Overwork and burnout are two related ills that court teaching staff daily at The UWISTA's ALP. Lobbying for increased academic and administrative support staff, along with a discrete ELPT Testing Unit and an official Coordinator's position for TWC have all but been ignored by higher management, even though these have been highly recommended in the two Quality Assurance Review exercises of The ALP in 2011 and then in 2019.

Further, available time to effectively brainstorm, discuss, plan, implement, and evaluate the success of each measure becomes elusive quite often. The sheer disparity in teacher-student ratio vis-à-vis teaching and script-marking, as well as student consultations, makes further development and utilisation of educational technology in the academic literacies classroom more visionary than pragmatic at times.

Finally, a major conundrum within The ALP has been the determination as to whose responsibility it is for the exploration, adaptation, and application of the technical dimensions of myeLearning and the virtual instructional platform. Whereas some staff members take full responsibility for this, others are more prone to adopting the position that The ALP needs a specific e-Learning specialist attached to the Unit for these purposes. Academic staff can be the end user as long as the technical dimensions are facilitated by an e-Learning specialist. The UWISTA's position on this is to have CETL offer myriad workshops for staff to develop the technical expertise, rather than employ an e-Learning Specialist. But the amount of work placed on the shoulders of academic staff oftentimes makes attendance and participation at these workshops difficult. And even when it is possible, the practice of related competencies warrants time to perfect before infusion in the classroom.

Still, The ALP fully recognises the potential for continued success within its academic literacies framework. Staff continue to avail themselves of related educational technology workshops when time permits; staff development sessions continue on a weekly basis, and there is the continuous development and sharing of related guides and instruments that all work together to foster student support. The promise of additional human resources is something that The ALP continues to hold on to, especially as this has been reaffirmed at every cross-campus meeting organised by The Board of Undergraduate Studies (OBUS), Writing Symposia since 2005, and most recently by The University Council in 2017. Further, the 2011 Quality Assurance Review conducted at The UWISTA highlighted the progressive operations of The ALP at The UWISTA and signalled the belief in “the programme’s potential to be of robust growth and academic allure to local, regional and international students” (Quality Assurance Unit 2011, 12).

## Conclusion

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have not been unique to The UWISTA and certainly not to The ALP. But the challenge to navigate a virtual platform as the sole space of all instructional activity associated with academic literacies courses has been one that was immediately accepted and overcome by the Unit.

Indeed, The ALP is characterised by myriad challenges that will seemingly remain for some time. An awareness of this has not stifled its members. Rather, the converse occurred with the onslaught of the pandemic. Staff rose to the occasion

to maximise opportunities for student success using an eight-prong approach that proved very successful. Student testimonies became the benchmark by which related success was measured; it also served as the impetus for staff to continue to develop themselves along the lines of educational technology.

In so doing, a symbiotic relationship evolved, as with every episode of student success and satisfaction, staff gleaned the synergies necessary to plod along further. In so doing, a true symbiotic relationship has evolved between student learning and staff development. This is the living testimony of The ALP at The UWISTA today: that out of the ashes of the pandemic, the ALP phoenix rises with broad wings, ready to soar.

## Notes

1. The UWI Triple A Strategy 2017–2022 Revitalizing Caribbean Development.
2. Refer to comparative statistics in course performance on pp. 15–16.
3. The Writing Centre Report, Faculty of Humanities and Education, The UWISTA.
4. Faculty of Humanities and Education Academic Advising Training Workshop Power Point Presentation.
5. Annual Report 2020/2021. Office of The Deputy Principal. The UWISTA.

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