

Learning advisors at UCOL Manawatu

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I joined the Library team at UCOL Manawatu in 2018 as a library assistant. In 2019, I moved into the role of learning advisor. At that time, UCOL had three learning advisors in Manawatu who each had a number of faculty they liaised with. In addition, all three advisors helped out with Nursing, which was the biggest cohort.

Learning advisors at UCOL Manawatu at that time were involved with one-on-one appointments with students regarding writing skills, understanding assessments, referencing, time management, and making referrals to counsellors, disability, or wellbeing within the wider Student Success team when appropriate. In addition, the learning advisors also ran workshops on academic writing, essay writing, time management, and oral presentations.

One of the developments of this role at UCOL Manawatu has been a concerted effort to connect more closely with teaching staff. In particular, learning advisors have worked hard to develop new workshops based on the particular needs that academic staff identify. This has resulted in new workshops on critical thinking, breaking down the assignment, paraphrasing, note taking and study skills, and many others. The number of workshops requested has increased steadily as a result of this closer working relationship with academic staff.

Learning Advisors have also given feedback to academic staff on the wording of assessments where students have had trouble understanding the instructions. As a result, several assessments have been rewritten to clarify instructions. Learning advisors have also been involved in NZQA course approvals meetings.

Learning advisors at UCOL Manawatu also work closely with academic staff when there are academic issues with particular students. Staff will often refer a student to the learning advisors with quite detailed information on what they see as being the issues. Learning advisors then meet with the students, and when required, set up weekly appointments to assist the students with their time management and/or writing skills. Oftentimes, the issues students mention first when they arrive are not the main issue they are facing. It sometimes takes a lot of listening and careful questioning to get to the bottom of the actual issue. Many students have complex issues that go beyond writing or time management, hence our Student Success team has been set up as a one stop shop for support.

In addition, learning advisors have reviewed handouts on writing, grammar, researching, and study skills. These handouts have been added to as particular issues come to light through discussion with academic staff, or as identified in one-on-one appointments. In 2024, the formatting of the handouts was adapted to be more dyslexia friendly. A LibGuide has also been developed containing links to the handouts, useful YouTube clips, and relevant books held by the UCOL Library.

Other LibGuides have been developed by learning advisors based on student need. These include APA7 referencing, Mathematics, and Research and Information Skills. A new LibGuide will soon be published on Conducting Research Projects, which is aimed at postgraduate students and Bachelor level students who have a research component in their degree.

As well as the in-class workshops, learning advisors also offer study groups and in-class support. The one-on-one and in-class support is complemented by learning advisors taking part in regular events organised by the wider Student Success Team. Students can see learning advisors dishing out free food at lunchtime, cooking sausages or burgers on the barbecue, running stalls at an event, or serving breakfast on a Wednesday morning. All these extras help to build a close working relationship with students who are then more willing to ask for help as they see another side of their learning advisor.

Feedback from students consistently includes comments about the helpfulness of learning advisor appointments and that they appreciate having this service available to them. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, appointments were held via Zoom or email. Several students mentioned that, had it not been for this support, they would probably not have completed their qualification.

For me, the role of learning advisor has been my favourite job. While the role has its frustrations, seeing students grow and succeed in their qualifications is a real joy. I think of the Nursing student who was so excited to gain their registration that they sent me a photograph of their medal. This made all the struggle and hard work with this student so worthwhile. It really is the best job in the world.