Changes to our learning advisor role, challenges, and success stories

Otago Polytechnic learning advisor team

Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand

academicsupport@op.ac.nz

The learning advisors at Otago Polytechnic (OP), Ross, Kristen, Marje, Aaron and Sarah, have taken this opportunity to reflect on our role, initially verbally, as a team, and then decided to each focus on one aspect of our experience. Collectively these reflections highlight the changes to our learning advisor role and some of the challenges and success stories we have encountered over the last 10 or so years.

Ross

Embedded support

I have recently celebrated 10 years as a learning advisor here at OP. During that time, I have changed location, worked with different colleagues and teachers, grappled with an onslaught of education technologies, and moved in and out of Te Pūkenga. What hasn't changed is students having the need to be supported in their studies. One gradual change in how we operate and connect with these students is working in a more embedded way within a school. Rather than waiting for students to make an appointment to see me, I have been seeking them out by working closely with a couple of schools. They introduce me to their classes at the beginning of the year, have me sit in on classes when explaining assessments, and refer students straight to me when they feel extra support is needed. Developing a close relationship with the teachers, being more au fait with the content and expectations around assessments and being a recognisable face to the students has led to more targeted and timely support.

Kristen

Neurodivergent learners

One of the key changes I notice is how much more open students are about being neurodivergent, and the increased support for them. Now, many students disclose on enrolment, or after starting their programme, that they have a diagnosis, or suspect they are dyslexic, have ADHD, are autistic, and that they have additional support needs. We added a field to our Student Management System, 'support required', in addition to 'disability support' to try to better capture data on neurodivergence. Currently, we don't have an easy way to separate this data, but we estimate 75% of the students we see identify as neurodivergent.

There is greater awareness among staff of how we can help neurodivergent learners flourish. Several programmes have achieved the Dyslexia-Friendly Quality Mark and others are working towards this. Three members of our Student Success team, including a learning advisor, have completed dyslexia training (DAST – Dyslexia Adult Screening for Adults) with Mike Styles and Steve Russell and can screen students in-house; previously, if a student self-identified or we suspected they might be dyslexic, we had a limited fund to pay for assessments, which were done by an external provider. OP has purchased licences for tools such as Helperbird, Glean, and Grammarly for Education; learning advisors and accessibility advisors help allocate these. In addition, we alert students to appropriate AI tools that may be helpful. Learning advisors can participate in a range of online communities of practice that support our learning about neurodiversity, for example, OP's Neurodiversity Community of Practice and the Ako Aotearoa-facilitated Neurodiversity Community of Practice.

Marje

Peer tutor support

When I first started working as a learning advisor, there were many things I did not know much about. One of those was our peer tutor service. I had a basic understanding, I thought, of what a peer tutor was and what they could help with, but that was all. Over my time as a learning advisor – seven and a bit years – I had the privilege of meeting many of the peer tutors and

working alongside them in my role. In addition to helping ākonga with 'getting to grips' with content such as bioscience for nursing, I have experienced peer tutors assisting learning advisors in a variety of situations. During an assessment drop-in session, I saw firsthand how a peer tutor was helpful in many ways by clarifying expectations, sharing some tips on referencing, showing how to lay out a cover page, and encouraging ākonga. This peer tutor was an example to me. I like the inherent reciprocity or the concept of ako I experienced through being involved with peer tutors; we learn from each other. We also involved peer tutors in running drop-in sessions for new ākonga at the beginning of the year. The peer tutors resolved issues, showed exemplary empathy and enthusiasm, and helped build confidence. I like the way Ruegg et al. (2017) sum up the benefits of peer tutoring by highlighting confidence building, motivation, and developing learner autonomy. I cannot help but reflect on the fact that these are all created through 'human' social connection, and it would be difficult for artificial intelligence to replace these, which means, I think, that there is still a role for learning advisors and peer tutors in the future of education.

Aaron

Artificial intelligence

I've been in the role of learning advisor for just a couple of years but have seen rapid change in terms of our organisation working out how to integrate AI policy, principles and guidelines into programmes, assessment, and workflow. In our daily interactions with learners, we have seen the associated shifts up close – last year academic staff were generally discouraging AI use in assignments, and there was a focus on the threat to academic integrity. We would meet students and talk with them about how they were using AI and what information they were receiving about whether or how to use it. This year we have seen more assignments with the use of AI built explicitly into the tasks and questions, including recommendations for which tools to potentially use, how to use them critically, and how to acknowledge their use in AI statements.

During this transition, learning advisors have needed to tread carefully. We have seen it as an important part of our role to engage in critical conversations with students about their use

of AI, and we touch base with academic staff about their expectations of students. We have also identified and consistently recommended some specific AI tools for researching and for summarising. We can see that these tools might make a real difference for particular students.

Because we have a bit of a privileged position in seeing how different programmes and assignments are integrating AI, and because we see how students are navigating the AI rapids, I joined the AI steering committee here at Otago Polytechnic and have been able to offer some of those insights. By the end of this year, a solid framework of policy, principles and guidelines (for staff and students) will be in place, with a capability development programme being rolled out in parallel. This should provide a bit more structure for Learning Advisors to provide consistent advice and guidance for students.

Sarah

Working online

To say a lot has happened since I joined the team five years ago is an understatement. One month into my role as a learning advisor, just finding my feet, I was thrust into a new way of working. I was told to take my laptop home and was issued a headset. The country was going into lockdown. Resurfacing, in a post-COVID era, working with learners online has become a natural and integral part of the work we do. We now offer online workshops in classes and evening online appointments, where uptake is steady.

Research shows that distance education programmes can be isolating and demotivating, with generally lower student retention rates (Stone, 2019). Frustration occurs on both sides of a call when grappling with technology, whether it's poor connectivity in a rural area, or a student working off their phone instead of a laptop. Issues for further investigation: How does online delivery work for neurodivergent learners? How do we address issues of access?

Working online can provide flexibility for our learners, both distance and local. If a parent is home with a sick child, they can opt for a Teams call instead of meeting in person. Someone working full-time might arrange a lunchtime Teams meeting from their workplace. I'm often surprised at how relaxed students appear onscreen. I guess it's second nature for our digital

natives. Over lockdown, it wasn't unusual for a student to appear in their hoodie, from the comfort of their bed! Often, a pet will join a call with a brush of a tail or a friendly bark at the door, and this becomes a point of connection. Sometimes learners don't want to appear on camera, and learning advisors respect this.

COVID shifted the degree to which and how we work online with learners. Arguably, in-person is best, but if COVID has taught us anything, it's that we can connect with learners online, and we can be nimble and adapt.

References

Ruegg, R., Sudo, T., Takeuchi, H., & Sato, Y. (2017). Peer tutoring: Active and collaborative learning in practice. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 8*(3), 255–267. https://doi.org/10.37237/080306

Stone, C. (2019). Online learning in Australian higher education: Opportunities, challenges and transformations. *Student Success, 10*(2), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v10i2.1299