

## **Win-Win for Staff and Students: the ‘Peer-Writer’ Programme at Victoria University of Wellington.**

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Universities have the unique advantage of working with senior students to enhance their leadership and employability skills. One successful pan-university initiative at Victoria University of Wellington has been to employ senior students as ‘Peer Writers’ within the well-established Student Learning *Te Taiako* centre. Peer Writers work alongside Learning Advisors to offer free one-on-one writing and study assistance for all students. Postgraduate students are best suited to the position of Peer Writers, as they have more advanced levels of tertiary writing, flexible lecture schedules, experience across different disciplines, and a ‘been there and done that’ attitude in terms of the student experience. As Peer Writers, current postgraduate students are recruited, trained and paid to typically conduct 600 student appointments throughout the academic year. From 1999-2003, VUW’s former International Office employed ‘Peer Editors’ to work with English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, before becoming part of Student Learning (SL) in 2004. The change of name from ‘Peer Editors’ to ‘Peer Writers’ was undertaken to clarify that the service provided by SL is ‘teaching-based’ rather than proof-reading or professional editing. In this way, Peer Writers complement the Learning Advisors’ role by attending to academic-writing-related issues. Any student, from first year to postgraduate, can make an appointment with a Learning Advisor or a Peer Writer through the Student Learning reception, with bookings made in person, by email or over the phone. The “Peer Writer” service is advertised in university publications, at first-year orientation events, on the Student Learning website and by word of mouth. This collaborative approach enables the busy Student Learning service to offer academic support for as many students as possible throughout the university.

### **Key features of ‘Peer-Writer’ scheme**

Typically, Student Learning *Te Taiako* employs five Peer Writers on a casual basis during Trimester one and two. To be selected, candidates must demonstrate a high level of written

and oral English communication competency, sound achievement in their postgraduate studies, and the ability to work alongside a diverse range of students in a constructive way. A high level of critical thinking enables them to utilise their initiative, evaluate and problem-solve effectively. Peer-Writers receive comprehensive training on how to work with and respond to student queries and on the day-to-day operation of Student Learning as a unit. Peer Writers also observe experienced Learning Advisors working with students, undergo advanced grammar training and attend regular team meetings with the Learning Advisor responsible for overseeing the programme. Peer Writers report that such training and support strengthens their capacity to work confidently with students, particularly when assisting with writing, study and grammar issues. Moreover, the acquisition of transferable skills in leadership, communication, and trust building (Ladyshevsky, 2006) helps equip Peer Writers for their future. Peer Writers say that they feel well supported, the environment is enjoyable and the role provides an extremely rewarding work experience.

Given the nature of this casual position, individual Peer Writers' commitment depends on their study schedules and student demand, but usually entails around 8-12 hours a week. Peer Writers are well equipped to deal with SL's busy periods, as they do not have the same assessment demands as undergraduates. Peer Writers also do reception duties and assist with administrative data entry tasks. As with Learning Advisors, Peer Writer appointments are organised through Outlook and 'George', our in-house database. Following each 50 minute student appointment, all Peer Writers and Learning Advisors record details in George: information that provides all those working at SL with a common ground from which to build on students' strengths and track progress. Careful recruitment, meaningful training and inclusion of the Peer Writers as members of the SL staff are critical factors for the programme's ongoing success.

### **Working with students**

Peer Writers can draw on Student Learning's wide range of study, academic writing and grammar materials to support their teaching. The resources (both online and paper-based) help clarify problem areas for students and provide an overview of points discussed in their appointment. Students highly respect Peer Writers' advice, with many requesting to work again with a specific Peer Writer. Student feedback from surveys shows that students are very satisfied with the Peer Writer service in terms of developing their academic and study independence. Furthermore the relationship between Peer Writers and SL staff is highly

collegial so any more serious issues around plagiarism or more students' emotional well-being are discussed and managed with senior colleagues.

A study by Kassab et al (2006, cited in Yew & Yong, 2014, p.3) highlighted the importance of 'social congruence', which is aptly demonstrated by Peer Writers' ability "to build a good rapport with students, for example by respecting their opinion, understanding their feelings and building good relationships". Furthermore, our experience has shown that Peer Writers' support and encouragement helps to reduce learner anxiety. The Peer Writers use their professional roles to establish a conducive learning environment for learning, thus benefitting the learner. In that regard, Peer Writers offer a dedicated and excellent service to help fellow students understand the academic writing and study challenges of university life..

Alongside social congruence, Cornwall (1979) stressed the importance of 'cognitive congruence', whereby peer tutors have the ability to "communicate in language that students would understand as well as explain concepts in ways that are easily grasped by them" (cited in Yew & Yong, 2014, p.3). Through this process Peer Writers use questioning to help guide students to learn and develop independent writing and study skills. Peer Writers also make sure to identify clear expectations at the outset of the session as a way of meeting each learner's needs. At the end of the session, Peer Writer and student discuss follow up strategies and create a plan of action, a learner-centred approach that encourages students to manage their own learning.

### **High demand for Peer Writer services**

Dramatic growth in student demand at Victoria University of Wellington over the past decade has necessitated an increase in the range of services Student Learning *Te Taiako* offers. Individual appointments and generic study workshops are core to our service but we also offer online resources, PASS programmes, embedded skills-workshops in lectures and support for international and postgraduate students as well as equity groups such as Māori, Pasifika, refugee background, disability and distance students. Student Learning *Te Taiako* uses an 'integrated transition' approach (Kift, 2010) spanning the whole university. This extensive range of customised and generic workshop offerings stretches our high calibre staff especially during busy 'assignment' weeks, when demand for individual appointments with Learning Advisors is high. Having the additional capacity provided by Peer Writers prevents lengthy wait time for student appointments. Typically, four or five Peer Writers are employed each year, complementing SL's 13 permanent Learning Advisors.

Much has been gained from employing senior students as Peer Writers. They keep Learning Advisors grounded in current pedagogical practice. Their student voice informs us about what is current with new and existing students. They have become ‘go to’ people to assess whether any of our new ideas will work. In a sense they are similar to a student advisory group and bring fresh ideas and focus to SL’s delivery of over 17,000 student hours of teaching and learning each year. We believe having the Peer Writers’ critical student voice to support our work is unique and invaluable. The opportunities for peer to peer learning are inclusive of diversity, as well as a forum for senior students to share and build on their personal and learning experiences, thus contributing to their sense of belonging at university. As Victoria University of Wellington is committed to “working with students to foster an effective and inclusive learning environment” (VUW Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2017-2021, p.3) SL expects the Peer Writer service will continue to be sustainable.

The additional role of paid Peer Writers within Student Learning *Te Taiako* is a win-win for students and staff. Monitoring in terms of student feedback, database notes recording individual appointments and anecdotal evidence reinforces that their contribution enhances opportunities for fellow students to develop and optimise their writing and study skills necessary to meet the academic workload with more confidence. Students working with a Peer Writer experience first-hand SL’s inclusive philosophy (in line with VUW’s core values of *akoranga*, *manaakitanga* and *rangatiratanga*<sup>1</sup>), which equips them to be more inquiring, capable, confident and autonomous learners. Collaboratively, Peer Writers act as role models for students in teaching skills critical for university success. For the Peer Writers themselves, this initiation into learning and teaching-related employment has led them to further postgraduate study in Europe and the United States, to Learning Advisor positions at VUW and in Australia, and to advanced roles in academic publishing and government sectors. Student and staff feedback certainly endorses the value of employing senior students in this role. Not only does this win-win situation contribute to Victoria’s commitment to an effective, inclusive learning environment, it also reinforces Student Learning *Te Taiako*’s philosophy of fostering student success at all levels.

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<sup>1</sup> *Akoranga*: reciprocal teaching and learning; *manaakitanga*: mutual respect; *rangatiratanga*: leadership (Victoria University of Wellington, 2017)

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