

Collaboration Between Teachers and Learning Advisors to Improve Learner Outcomes

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Abstract

Qualitative research conducted at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology investigated how kaiako (teachers) have been interacting with learning advisors (LAs) and how they would like to engage with them to capitalise on their specialist skills to improve student outcomes. The research consisted of semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers from six campuses in the region, from a variety of teaching contexts including on-campus, online/distance, and mixed-mode learning. Teachers in a wide variety of subject areas were chosen to ascertain if there are different needs in any of those areas. The teachers were interviewed either in person or using Teams Meet software. Voice or video recordings were made and used for analysis and discussion. The results were tabulated and discussed by a panel of LAs to find important implications of the study. The research determined that the experiences of teachers with LAs are widely varied across the institute depending on factors such as geography, teaching styles, course duration, teacher and academic leader introductions to services, and other factors. All interviewees saw the value of LAs but many were uncertain about how to engage with them and collaborate effectively at a classroom level. Where engagement exists at a classroom level, teachers are most satisfied with LA outcomes. The research indicates that closer collaboration can be achieved by increasing LA involvement in the classroom environment, particularly in areas identified as high needs. Critical to this collaboration is teachers' facilitating contact with LAs in the classroom. This collaboration will help identify student needs to enable timely interventions.

Vocational training institutes are constantly seeking to improve outcomes for learners, striving to optimise the teaching resources available while mitigating barriers to student success. The role of learning advisor (LA) varies considerably among tertiary institutes: some provide centralised services, where students may engage by appointment; others work at a classroom level, striving to develop relationships with students and teachers. LA resources are stretched between the two approaches, balancing effectiveness with efficiency. Student feedback strongly endorses learning support as a critical factor in success, but some students are failing without ever engaging with academic support (Manalo et al., 2010). Notably, there are many reasons why students may fail, not all academic; however, there may be ways in which LAs can improve student engagement by working collaboratively with teachers to provide extra support where it is needed.

Background

LAs play a critical role as the first line of support for both learners and teachers. Students at technical institutes in Aotearoa come from very diverse backgrounds with a wide range of academic support needs. Barriers to their academic success may include literacy, numeracy, IT skills, equity situations, and academic writing skills. Studies have identified that students are more likely to succeed in their studies when they engage with LAs (Manalo et al., 2010). They feel added security knowing that in addition to their teachers, there is specialist academic support available to them.

Teachers at technical institutes also come from diverse backgrounds. Many have come from a non-educational background and yet are required to guide students academically as well as vocationally. For this reason, LAs may provide supplementary support for teachers when called upon. Despite the implied synergies and alignment of interests, there is sometimes a disconnect between teachers and LAs that could limit students accessing the services they need. Where relationships exist, they may be further enhanced by more effective communication and collaboration strategies. This research investigates these observations and makes recommendations derived from teacher feedback that may be valuable in vocational training institutes.

Impact of Academic Initiatives

Quantifying the impact that LAs have on student success has proven to be a challenging prospect historically (Acheson, 2006). Recently, however, studies conducted in Aotearoa and abroad have demonstrated that learning support can have a quantifiable positive effect on student outcomes. A study by Lear and Prentice (2010) conducted at The University of Canberra quantified the influence of learning support as increasing course completions by 15% and pass rates by at least 10%. Breen and Protheroe (2015) in a full-year study conducted at Wellington Institute of Technology (WelTec), were able to show that the effect of interventions by LAs was not only quantifiable but predictable, based on the average number of student sessions spent with LA. They estimated that an average of at least one visit per student in a class significantly improved learning outcomes. Many other studies have focused on determining whether specific initiatives had been successful in improving outcomes (Henning & Manalo, 2012; Manalo et al., 2010). These initiatives have included study skills courses, introductory academic writing and IT workshops, and Individual Learning Programmes (ILPs).

The Role of Learning Advisors

While there is evidence that the above strategies have been effective in improving outcomes in tertiary studies (Manalo et al., 2010), there have been few studies that research the collaborative relationship between teachers and LAs as one of those strategies. Rivers (2005) conducted significant research about what constitutes effective student support services. They proposed that:

Institutional services and facilities play a role in the social and academic integration of students, which in turn leads to their retention and success. These services are often separated into those that focus on personal, social, and emotional needs and those that focus on academic needs. However, combining the two groups may encourage greater cooperation between academic staff and student services staff, and enable more students to make use of the services (Rivers, 2005, p13).

Implicit in this statement is the collaboration among providers of course content (teachers), academic support (LA), and personal, social, and emotional support (student support services). This study presents feedback from teachers that identifies ways that they can collaborate more closely with LAs to “enable more students to make use of the services”. While Rivers’ report identifies the need for close collaboration, the execution of a plan to achieve this goal requires specific qualitative research to identify actions that will influence teachers and LAs directly to improve the quality of their engagement with each other.

Research Method

The above investigation consisted of qualitative research in February 2022 at Toi Ohomai. The research team consisted of eight LAs from all the campuses of the institution: Rotorua, Taupō, Tauranga, Tokoroa, Waipa, and Whakatāne. Fifteen teachers, selected from these campuses and online courses, were invited to participate in the study which consisted of a 30-minute semi-structured interview. The selection of teachers was not random but attempted to cover a diverse range of locations, subjects, levels of learning, teacher experience levels, and modes of learning. Fifteen interviews were conducted either in person or online using Teams Meet technology. Trial interviews were conducted to reduce inconsistencies in the interview method. Voice recordings, videos, and transcripts were used to record the interviews. Full disclosure was given in writing and signed consent was obtained from all participants. Six interviewers conducted the interviews due to geographical considerations. All aspects of the research were conducted with the approval of the institute’s ethics committee (approval number 2021.108).

Candidates were asked questions relating to their relationship with LA, what they considered to be effective LA support, and how the services might be improved. A ‘review panel’ of eight LAs (the six interviewers and two other LA) extensively reviewed the recordings, transcripts, and impressions in the notes from the interviewers, to identify common themes and implications. The questions and responses are summarised in results.

Results

The following responses were collected from the interviews and paraphrased by the review panel:

Are you using LAs in your classroom?

- All interviewees reported working with LAs in their teaching programs; however, the level of engagement with their services varied.

Why?

- Improvement in learners' results in the past has fostered trust in LA services.
- LAs make teaching easier, allowing teachers to focus on content and spend less time working with students on basic skills such as IT, academic writing, researching, and understanding assessment tasks.

Why not?

- One teacher stated that she had avoided using LAs to try to build unity (kotahitanga) within the class and to establish internal support networks.
- Two teachers said that they had limited experience using LA support. Both were new teachers.

How well-informed are you about LA services?

- Five of the interviewees admitted not fully understanding the scope of services provided by LAs and how to engage with them.
- Others were well-informed, both personally from communications with LAs and other networks.

What LA support has been effective for you?

- In-class introductions of students to LAs and other support services.
- Involvement of LAs in the classroom to develop recognition and rapport.
- Informing LAs of specific assessment requirements to prepare them for students.
- Asking LAs for feedback about specific assessments.
- LAs providing IT or academic training workshops in the classroom, developing student relationships.

- Providing effective online support. This has been a big help for all students, but especially distance learners.
- Internet support including the LA website, and 24-hour support from Studiosity, and LinkedIn Learning (Online support services provided free to students).

What LA support is less effective for you?

- LA workshops offered during holiday periods or semester breaks since attendance has been poor.

How do you view your relationship with LAs?

- It is a partnership that will not succeed without both parties working effectively together.
- Collaboration with LA services is an important element in student success; it will significantly improve the likelihood of students succeeding in their studies.

What would you like to see change with LA services?

- More LA/student feedback about how assessments can be made more user-friendly, without losing their efficacy.
- More classroom contact with LAs to break down barriers to students engaging with the services.
- More LA-generated web resources since these are available 24-hours a day.
- How can LAs collaborate more closely with you to improve student outcomes?
- LAs need to maintain close connections with teachers and students by:
 - Introducing themselves to all students and explaining their role during induction.
 - Discussing individual students' needs, particularly when an intervention is needed.
 - Discussing assessments and new programs in advance so that LAs are prepared to meet student needs.
- Attending academic group meetings so that they are familiar with needs that may arise.

Discussion

Analysis of the research highlighted these themes:

- Partnership among teachers/learners/LAs is necessary to optimise support.
- Face-to-face interactions develop quality relationships.
- Ongoing, consistent engagement with learners and teachers is the most effective.
- Trust is important for teachers to refer students for learning advice.
- Teachers would benefit from knowing more details about the scope of LA provisions.
- LAs developing whanaungatanga and kotahitanga relationships is important

Partnership Among Teachers / Learners / LAs is Necessary to Optimise Support

All participants commented that they viewed the relationship between learners, teachers, and LAs as a partnership. Authors including Cousin and Deepwell (2005), Viskovic (2007), and Vescio et al. (2008) highlight the importance of developing a ‘community of practice’ environment where teachers feel they are part of a support network that has learners at the centre. Teachers commented that they felt better supported because they had specialist LA support available to complement their content knowledge. These relationships are illustrated in Figure 1 below:

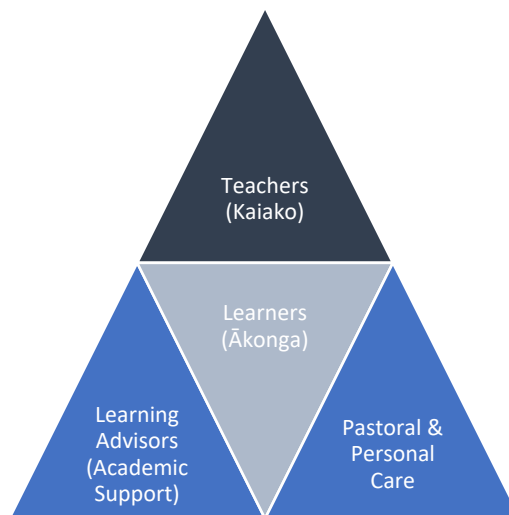


Figure 1. Support Structures Around Learners – The Learning Family (whānau ako).

(Image created by author)

Figure 1 shows how support surrounds the learner (ākonga) completely, creating a learning family (or whānau ako). This emulates the value of whanaungatanga, which is a value known to impact outcomes for learners, particularly Māori (Bishop et al., 2014; Smith, 2017).

Face-to-face Interactions Develop Quality Relationships

Teachers believe that it is vital for LAs to engage face-to-face with learners. As one participant commented, “The focus on face-to-face availability creates a nurturing environment that is unique within vocational education.” It is evident that teachers directing learners to LA support increases probability of engagement. It is therefore vital that LAs maintain a strong presence within the learning space in the form of regular ‘pop-ins’ or spontaneous visits. Putting a face to a name can be a positive outcome in this interaction.

A theme that arose from the review panel’s discussions was the importance of social proximity in student engagement. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006 as cited in El Zataari & Maalouf, 2022) describe the effect of social proximity on influence. The closer contact one has with an individual the more influence they experience. Figure 2 shows a simplified diagram of influences on students in a learning environment, adapted from Bronfenbrenner’s theory of social proximity:

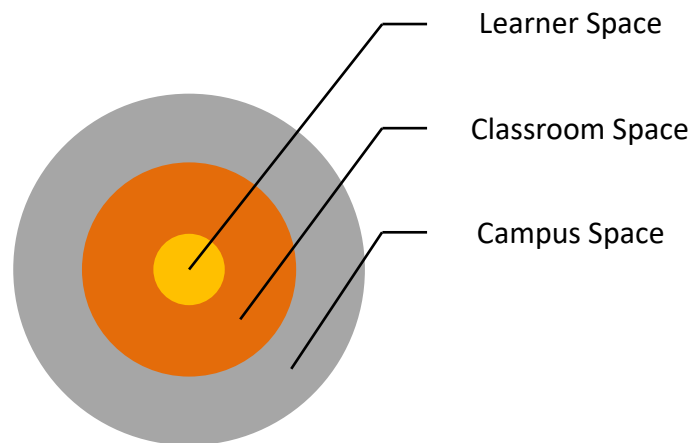


Figure 2. Areas of influence on learners.

(Adapted from Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006 as cited in El Zataari & Maalouf, 2022)

Influences in the *learner space* can have the most profound effect on students. These influences include family changes, relationships, and financial or welfare issues. Pastoral and personal care provided by the institute can help to support students during these changes of circumstance. Relationships with LAs can also be supportive in this space, as the stress of tertiary study is a significant factor in students feeling overwhelmed and opting to withdraw.

The *classroom space* is the metaphorical space of learning for ākongā. In this physical or online space, teachers help to provide a safe environment for learning, where student-centred pedagogy and classroom values of whanaungatanga (close relationships) and kotahitanga (unity of purpose) can be strong influences. LAs need to have a presence in the classroom space to develop trusting relationships with learners and teachers. Notably, this presence is dependent on the teacher facilitating contact with LAs at an early stage, usually through a formal introduction to the class. This should be followed up regularly with additional contacts to establish a place in the learning family (whānau ako) of the classroom. Teachers reiterated that this relationship is important, particularly for male students who tended to feel whakamā (embarrassed) when asking for help. Several teachers commented that they felt a high degree of trust when referring students to LAs for support if they “have any problems”. This trust has been established over a period of time, not only with individual LAs but with LA services in general.

The *campus space* in this context refers to influences outside those that are encountered daily in classroom spaces. Services such as campus events, health, accessibility, administration, library, and pastoral support often exist here. The availability of these services can contribute significantly to students feeling comfortable and safe in the campus environment.

Ongoing Consistent LA Engagement with Students and Teachers Is Important

Teachers commented on the importance of LAs maintaining contact with classes, to cement introductions made at course commencement. Often learners are overwhelmed during the first week of study and require follow-up visits to engender sufficient confidence to engage with services. Furthermore, male students tend to be embarrassed and therefore reticent, and extra effort is needed in their case. LAs can help by regularly ‘popping in’ to classes. The panel noted

that further opportunities for engagement exist in the form of academic skills workshops, conducted in the classroom, for example, introductions to LA services, Moodle or Google Classroom training, logging on/induction, essay writing, and other workshops serve the combined purposes of building rapport and developing important academic skills.

Consistency in LA support for both learners and teachers is a major contributor to developing quality relationships within this environment. Ernst and Erickson (2018) discuss how structure and consistency allow a connection within this tripartite relationship. In summary, LAs must be in the classroom as often as possible to continue to develop relationships that will reduce barriers to student engagement.

Trust Is Important for Teachers to Refer Students for Learning Advice

An observation in the research findings was the importance of relationships in the effectiveness of LA services. According to teachers, students are more likely to avail themselves of help if they have at least met LA. This underscores the findings of Breen and Protheroe (2015) mentioned above. Uniquely though, this study also underlines the importance of the LA relationships with teachers. The review panel noted that teachers' engagement increased significantly when they had trust in LAs as part of the learning family. Teachers are a conduit for student engagement with LA. This may be in the form of a direct personal referral for learners seen to need support, or a class recommendation or requirement to seek LA support. Being able to refer students who are having difficulties academically enables teachers to focus their attention more directly on the delivery of course content, their area of expertise. Referrals also feature in situations where a student has failed an assessment that might not have occurred had they visited LA services. Increasingly, teachers will brief LAs about assignments to help them to understand what they are looking for from students. This has the benefit of allowing LAs to give feedback to teachers about how assignments might be improved to help students to understand requirements more clearly.

Teachers will Benefit from Knowing More About LA Provisions

Teachers were reasonably well informed about LA provisions for students; however, five out of the 15 respondents stated they potentially needed to know more of ‘the detail’ of what LAs can do to support them. Spreading success stories from other teachers will potentially motivate new teachers to learn about the services offered, but explicit training would add additional confidence in how they can personally collaborate with LAs for the benefit of their students. Teachers suggested that training in how to collaborate with LAs and other student services could be offered as part of new teacher induction to provide an opportunity for LAs to develop the relationships of the learning family described here.

Applying the Values of Whanaungatanga and Kotahitanga Is Important

Developing an environment where relationships are embraced in the classroom was identified by teachers as a key to improving learner outcomes. Consequently, the Māori concepts of whānaungatanga and kotahitanga are promoted in educational settings (Bishop et al., 2014). Teachers discussed how important these values are, not only for effective teaching but for the engagement of students with LA. As mentioned, a strong emphasis already exists for teachers to develop whanaungatanga and kotahitanga in learning environments. The challenge, therefore, is to extend those cultures to include LAs as a key partner in the learning family (whānau ako).

Recommendations

This study highlights several opportunities to develop closer collaboration with teachers. Specifically, the recommendations are:

1. More formal and informal contact of LAs with learners and teachers in classroom spaces may mitigate barriers stopping learners from engaging with LA services. This may include introductions to LA services, follow-up visits, pop-ins, non-curricular activities, and academic skills workshops. Regularity is important to maintain rapport and trust.
2. Maintaining strong relationships among LAs, teachers, and learners is important to create a whānau ako (learning family) environment, where learners, teachers, and LAs practice the principles of whanaungatanga and kotahitanga. Teachers and learners will feel that

they are better supported. Important learner feedback from LAs can inform teachers' practices. LAs will be able to be more responsive at an earlier stage in learners' education, enabling more timely interventions if needed.

3. Promotion and training of all teachers about the scope of LA services is the first step to more effective engagement. New teachers, in particular, will benefit from knowing how to engage with the support available. LAs will benefit by having better access to classroom spaces, which is critical in learner engagement with services.

Conclusion

Teachers' importance in influencing, directing, introducing, and reinforcing the role of LAs to learners cannot be overestimated. Teachers remain the key to learner engagement, translating directly to increased success. However, LAs can play a strong supportive role when they are able to collaborate effectively at the classroom level. Collaboration between teachers and LAs forms a learning family that is learner-centred, reinforcing the principles of *whanaungatanga* and *kotahitanga*. There is a dual benefit in this learning family in that learners will be more likely to engage with LA services, and teachers will also feel better supported in their role, having specialists in academic skills to support their content expertise. Diverse student profiles are inevitable in tertiary education, and this is not likely to change. Therefore, to maximise the benefits to learners, teachers and LAs should collaborate purposefully with each other.

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