Establishing a Professional Accreditation Framework and Core Competencies for Tertiary Learning Advisors in Aotearoa: Reflection

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Abstract

Professional accreditation frameworks specifically for Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) have been implemented in various countries; however, Aotearoa New Zealand is yet to follow suit. There have been ongoing conversations about this since the early 2000s and this article highlights some of the recent discussions had by TLAs at the 2022 ATLAANZ Conference. In particular, this article presents a critical reflection of two sessions attended, entitled *Core Competencies for Learning Advisors*, and *Proposal to Establish ATLAANZ Professional Recognition Scheme*.

Keywords: Professional accreditation, core competencies, tertiary learning advisors

While accreditation frameworks or models of learning exist in several countries for learning advisors, Aotearoa has yet to implement one. However, plans to develop and establish one have been topic of many discussions for quite some time. For example, since the formation of the Tertiary Learning Centres Network of Aotearoa in 1998, which then evolved into The Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa (ATLAANZ) in 2000 (ATLAANZ, n.d.), the idea of an accreditation framework has been highlighted and discussed multiple times (see for example, Cameron, 2018a, 2018b; Carter, 2008; Laurs et al., 2022; Malik, 2021, 2022). Within Aotearoa, ATLAANZ is the only formalised organisation that provides a space for learning advisors to come together as a professional body, which actively seeks to improve and enhance its practice.

In this article, I present a reflective discussion that firstly begins with an overview and rationale concerning reflective practice. Secondly, I briefly highlight my position as a TLA, which is followed by a discussion of the two presentations that were delivered at the

ATLAANZ 2022 conference. In particular, I highlight the potential benefits and issues raised by the audience members/participants regarding the establishment of a professional framework, which were both evident via the in-depth analysis provided by Malik, and demonstrated via the collaborative and participatory nature of the conference session delivered by Laurs et al.

Looking Back

The decision to write this article in the form of a reflective piece was deliberate. First, as someone who works as a learning advisor, within a tertiary environment that typically shows little recognition of the skills we employ to be effective in our roles, it did not seem appropriate to write from an objective position about a topic about which I am passionate. In this sense, I do not claim to be objective. Second, for this reason, a reflective writing approach/methodology allows me to write in a manner that involves critical analysis of experiences and the ways in which they impact on professional identity and practice (Scanlan & Chernomas, 2008).

While there are various definitions of reflective practice, one of the earliest comes from Boud et al. (1985), who state it is a "generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation" (p. 19). Moreover, Scanlan and Chernomas (2008) reflect on work by Schon (1983, 1987), which highlights the different stages of reflection, referring to 'during' and 'after' practice. They go on to note that "while the former thinking facilitates reshaping of practice, during practice, the latter enables the practitioner to think about how the experience may have contributed to an intended or unintended outcome" (p. 1139). These discussions emphasise how the act of reflection can provide a space for the professional to evaluate their own practice and from their new discoveries, come empowerment and new levels of learning. Hence, it is via reflection that one can begin to develop one's own unique framework of practice, and in a manner that facilitates ongoing development of professional knowledge. Moreover, there is a synergy between reflective practice and two 2022 ATLAANZ "Toitū te tangata: the whole person" conference sessions that are the focus of this article. For example, the data presented by Laurs et al. incorporated reflective practice elements as their information was gained via their participants' engagement in critical

reflection activities (discussed in more detail later). Also, Malik's session engaged in reflective 'Q&A' based discussions with participants.

As this article is a reflection piece, it is only fitting that I fill you in with some of my backstory. It was never my ambition to work as a Tertiary Learning Advisor (TLA). Rather, my aim in attending Waikato University was to graduate as qualified social science researcher. However, even the most carefully laid plans can go astray. By the time I reached the third year of my Bachelor's degree, I had learnt how to be an A+ student, and so forged ahead with my graduate degrees. I would like to say that I got there with the help of TLAs, but in truth, I did not know they existed. This particular point is not so surprising, as it speaks to the problematic academic environment that TLAs often find themselves positioned within, where there is a lack of emphasis and promotion concerning the services they offer, as well as acknowledgement of their identities as academic professionals who possess a specific skill set embedded within a range of core competencies (Allan, 2021; Cameron, 2018a; Malik, 2021).

During my time as a student, I was oblivious to the identity issues confronting TLAs, yet it was during my Honours that my carefully planned career path started to diverge, and I found myself regularly supporting other graduate students with their academic writing development. Moreover, I did this without thinking. Then later, I found myself sharing in the happiness of their success. Thus, when the chance came for me to take on a casual tutor role within my discipline, I jumped at it. It was a role I occupied for approximately six years, working as a "senior" tutor, mentoring new teams of junior tutors each semester, and working more hours than what I was being paid for, simply because I loved it.

Similarly, this experience speaks to another ongoing issue concerning role performance and progression, where staff take on senior roles in a manner that is unrecognised and/or not acknowledged. Also highlighting the problematic environment most TLAs are situated within, there is little to no opportunity for promotion/career progression in the learning advising profession (Cameron, 2018b; Strauss, 2013; Tanner & Gao, 2021), not to mention the wider academic context in which a myriad of literature draws attention to other issues contributing to stalled career progression (Stringer et al., 2018; McAllister, 2019; Naepi, 2019). After completing my PhD, I spent a year as the Pacific tutor for my university, before leaving and finding new employment as a TLA for Massey University. In hindsight, although happenstance led me down this career path, I do not regret it one bit. Yes, it has

come with the challenges mentioned above; however, I feel extremely fortunate to occupy a role and vocation that I am truly passionate about.

A Reflective Discussion about Two ATLAANZ Conference Sessions

While I attended several sessions during the ATLAANZ Conference 2022, the two sessions I am reflecting on in this article include: "*Core Competencies for Learning Advisors*" by Mona Malik, and "*Proposal to Establish ATLAANZ Professional Recognition Scheme*" by Deborah Laurs, Mona Malik and Ruth Thomas. For the former, the purpose of Malik's session was to provide relevant, comprehensive and detailed information on specific sets of core competencies currently being observed by other organisations, with particular emphasis on how these sets might be used to enhance our understanding of the TLA role, and their potential to inform a future practice framework in Aotearoa. More importantly, Malik stressed the necessity of an appropriate core competency model in order to formulate and implement an accredited professional recognition scheme. For the latter presentation, Laurs et al. took a similar approach to the previous 2021 Northern, Central and Southern regional hui (led solely by Laurs), which engaged audience members in an activity-based workshop for the purpose of defining and clarifying contextually and culturally appropriate parameters for a professional accreditation scheme for learning advisors in Aotearoa. Consequently, the sessions by Malik and Laurs et al. share an intrinsic connection, due to their overarching focus on the future development of TLA professional practice.

As professionals who support students with their academic literacy development, TLAs occupy a critical role within tertiary institutions, for which Malik's presentation concerning core competencies highlighted several reasons (Malik, 2022). In particular, she noted that, in the current climate, Aotearoa's education sector is experiencing increasing pressure to pass a greater percentage of students (Narayan, 2020). To expedite this outcome, many institutions are reporting more students being admitted to programmes without necessary pre-requisites or prior experience/skills (Oosterman et al., 2017; Sedgwick & Proctor-Thomson, 2019). Understandably, this approach is problematic and has an immediate flow-on effect for many tertiary staff, including those who occupy support roles, such as TLAs. Moreover, Malik discussed the lack of role definition for TLAs, and argued that the role was often misunderstood, resulting in various impacts such as high-job-turnover, mismanagement, and inaccurate job descriptions being used to attract new staff to the role.

As Malik pointed out, there is also a dissonance between how TLAs perceive themselves and the identity their institutions assume for them (e.g., academic vs. general). Moreover, there is a significant amount of literature that highlights the various challenges facing many TLAs, including a lack of career progression pathways or formal accreditation framework that recognises experience and core competencies required for the role (Tanner & Gao, 2021). The latter in particular, compounds issues when advertising and interviewing potential candidates for a TLA role as those new to the profession may not have an accurate understanding of what the job entails (Cameron, 2018a; Malik, 2021).

With core competencies as a focus, Malik delivered an insightful overview of two core competency models being utilised in other countries. The first model, from North America, is the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). The second, from the UK, is the United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring (UKAT). With the understanding that these two models could be used to inform the construction of a new model for the Aotearoa context, Malik went on to compare the models which elicited many questions from the audience during the Q & A period towards the end. For some there was particular interest in how some of the core competency elements could be reshaped in a manner that expanded and enhanced their level of diversity and inclusivity. For others, there was a particular focus on where to next, alongside the topic of how these core competencies might fit into a professional accreditation framework.

This latter point was the primary focus of the session titled "*Proposal to establish ATLAANZ professional recognition scheme*" by Deborah Laurs, Mona Malik and Ruth Thomas (Laurs et al., 2022). Similar to Malik, they also expressed concern regarding the lack of role definition for TLAs. For instance, to help set the scene in their introduction, excerpts from past literature were highlighted and cited, including authors such as Chanock (2007), who asserts that "[learning] centres seem to be regarded as a form of crash repair shop where welding, panel-beating and polishing can be carried out on students' texts" (p. 273) and Huijser et al. (2008), who argue that there is an "institutional positioning of learning advisors 'on the margins'" (p. A23). However, as an audience member, one of the quotes I found most compelling came from Percy and Stirling (2004), who note that "the bodies of knowledge on which we draw to inform our practice often tend to become invisible, even to ourselves" (p. 40). This quote stood out because ultimately, it made me ask *why?* Moreover, this question prompted a sense of frustration and anger: anger due to the long-term marginalised positioning of TLAs, which has become the norm within tertiary institutions, and frustration

with the seemingly endless struggle for recognition. Perhaps this was the presenters' intent, and if so, it worked well because when they began emphasising arguments in favour of constructing a professional recognition scheme, I started to see a glimmer of hope, a potential way to make our situation better. In short, Laurs et al. argued that a framework would aid in

- Promoting learning advising as a profession,
- Acknowledging TLAs as professionals with specialised knowledge and practice,
- The building of a national network and expertise directory, and
- Showcasing ATLAANZ as an association.

Following this, Laurs et al. highlighted their ongoing research and provided an overview of the data they had gathered from the previous 2021 ATLAANZ regional hui, where Laurs canvassed members' thoughts and feedback on what they might expect, or want to see, across various sections of a proposed accreditation framework. These sections included: Values, Criteria, Evidence, and Evaluation.

Overall, their recap was particularly useful for those, like myself, who had not participated in the previous year's regional hui, as it gave us a better understanding of the prominent areas of discussion that had already occurred. Lastly, Laurs et al. presented a comparison of two professional recognition schemes currently being used in other countries. Here, as with Malik's presentation, they chose to compare the recognition scheme used by UKAT and the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education's (ALDinHE) framework. As an audience member, I was quite impressed with the level of detail and comprehensiveness Laurs et al. managed to capture in their deconstruction of both schemes. For example, they observed and noted how each scheme was targeted towards professional groups, outlined their rationale and purpose, implemented varying levels of recognition, assessed applications, varied their content requirements, provided feedback and outcomes, defined the expenses involved, and promoted the benefits/gains associated with successful applications.

After the presentation component, Laurs et al. asked audience members to participate in a Miro board[1], with the aim of identifying key areas that might contribute towards building a professional accreditation framework. Similar to the 2021 ATLAANZ regional hui, the audience members/participants contributed their thoughts and ideas to the key areas: Values,

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[1] Miro is essentially an online whiteboard that allows users to brainstorm ideas by adding virtual 'post-it' notes, which includes the option to embed additional comments within specific notes.

Criteria, Evidence, and Evaluation. Laurs et al. provided a list of questions for each section to help the audience gain a deeper understanding of each concept:

> For instance, questions related to the first section **Values** included, "What components of ATLAANZ Professional Practice document and/or other guidelines may be useful to include? Existing values – Adopt or adapt?"

> For the **Criteria** section, questions posed were "How many levels of recognition may be included? What titles may be used?".

> The third section, **Evidence,** listed questions such as "What types of valid evident may be specified in application requirements? How can evidence be submitted?"

> Lastly, the fourth section, **Evaluation**, contained questions such as "How would review panel assessors be selected? What may be the eligibility criteria and/or formal engagement requirements for assessors? How possible results/outcomes of application review (for any level of award) be communicated? What kind of mentoring and/or study resources (if any) can be arranged for supporting applicants?" (Laurs et al., 2022).

After presenting the questions, Laurs et al. invited audience members to transition to the online Miro board (Miro, 2023).

A high level of discussion and debate occurred while participants were completing each section. For example, under **Values**, participants originally added more than 20 suggestions, which were discussed and condensed down to a total of nine: *Manaakitanga* (hospitality, kindness, generosity, and support), *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *kaitiakitanga, ako* (teach and learn via a reciprocal, non-hierarchical relationship between student and teacher), *whanaungatanga* (kinship and connection), *tautua* (service), *inclusion, rangatiratanga* (autonomy, and self-determination), and *akoranga* (teaching and place of learning). Here, the additional comments were embedded in the notes, which contained definitions for some of the concepts.

The same reflective process was used for **Criteria**, which saw a total of 13 suggestions from participants, including *differing levels of professional accreditation, a framework that embraces diverse ways of working, ongoing professional development and enhancement of practice, standards and consistency, experience, work history*, and more.

In the third area **Evidence**, more than 20 suggestions were collected. Some included *case studies, self-reflections, formal reviews, short presentations, peer reviews, workshop*

content, evidence-based results, student evaluations, publications, qualifications, portfolios, and more. While adding to this area, some participants (including myself) reflected on the accreditation frameworks currently used within Aotearoa education settings, such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA), also known as Advance HE (2020). In brief, some stated that while this was one option open to them, they did not feel that the UK-based process was truly reflective of their work as TLAs. Moreover, although HEA acknowledges various levels of accreditation, the majority of applications are made up of large written components and therefore lacking in diversity regarding how one could potentially showcase core competencies.

In the fourth and final area **Evaluation**, 15 suggestions were added to *how* evaluation might occur and *who* would be performing the evaluation. From participants, the *how* post-it notes highlighted particular needs: For example, evaluation needs to *Recognise and value the range of roles TLAs perform, recognise varying levels of accreditation, be modelled on existing frameworks/processes and adapted for use within Aotearoa, recognise career progression,* and *it needs to be 'real' and contained.* In contrast, suggestions for *who* received fewer post-it notes but included A portfolio approach, senior or experienced TLAs to review applications, and/or panel or group from diverse institutions. This section, more than any other, attracted the largest number of embedded comments, comprising crucial questions that required further discussion, such as *What would this accreditation framework look like for TLAs who are situated within roles that focus mainly on mathematics, trades, etc? What would TLAs get in terms of institutional acknowledgement?*

What was immediately evident was participants' ability to capture complex ideas and values (some the same as expressed in the UK and North American models). However, one important distinction was participants' preference to move away from reusing Eurocentric terms and concepts, and instead use language and holistic concepts culturally relevant to the Aotearoa context. More than anything, this activity effectively produced a high-level critical analysis and reflection from the participants, which can be drawn on at a later date for the purpose of informing the development of the accreditation framework.

Upon concluding, Laurs et al. encouraged participants to contact them directly if they were interested in becoming involved in this area of development. Consequently, their presentation successfully captured both my attention, and my willingness to become involved. Overall, the way in which this session was conducted demonstrated effective

engagement with a targeted audience and, more importantly, provided an important opportunity for a specific group of professionals to inform the approach and development of a vital framework for TLAs in Aotearoa.

Looking Ahead (Conclusion)

As highlighted in the discussion above, the presentations by Malik and Laurs et al. demonstrate a shared focus concerning the future practice and professional development of learning advisors in Aotearoa. Both sessions made valuable contributions to the conference, with Malik offering a comprehensive and insightful discussion that was supported by an extensive deep-dive into various other accreditation schemes, which then focused on highly relevant examples that seemed most useful for informing the development of an accreditation framework for TLAs in Aotearoa. Moreover, the presentation by Laurs et al. was equally as impactful. Not only did it result in a high level of engagement with participants, but it also provided a critically reflective and collaborative space for TLAs to contribute to the development of a professional accreditation framework, conducted across two consultations, two years in a row. In other words, any accreditation framework subsequently constructed will evolve from a space that has actively sought a high level of diverse reflections, ideas, and opinions from learning advisors who occupy positions within various tertiary institutions across Aotearoa.

As noted in the introduction, I may not have envisioned my career as a TLA, but it is a role I am happy to say I enjoy and am passionate about. However, my experience as a tutor and TLA has taught me that recognition of my profession (from within academia) is unlikely to occur. Rather, it will be up to us as TLAs to fight for the recognition we deserve. The two conference sessions I attended were beneficial as the shared korero reinforced my understanding of how vital the TLA role is, and the wide array of skills and competencies that we draw on every day to excel in our work. However, at present, the opportunities for TLAs to invest in professional development activities are limited by their institutions' budgets and their managers' awareness, who too often, do not have an adequate understanding of the role and the skill-set/experience required, not to mention the high turnover of staff due to poorly conceived job descriptions. As emphasised in both sessions, there is some notable work occurring within the TLA space, and all without the support of an official accreditation framework. So, one can imagine how a well-developed accreditation

scheme might aid in enhancing and supporting the ongoing professional development of TLAs. More importantly, these sessions left me with not only a sense of hope, but also a newfound determination to become more actively involved in this collaborative building process, which ultimately leads to a professional accreditation framework for TLAs in Aotearoa, and to see that level of recognition carry over into the wider academic environment.

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