Tertiary Learning Advisors in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Part One: Building a Profile of Our Profession

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Abstract

Defining and re-defining identity is important for any profession, particularly so for tertiary learning advisors (TLAs) in the increasingly uncertain tertiary education environment in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the past ten years, two national surveys of learning centres in tertiary institutions sketched the professional status of TLAs, based on data from managers; there has been little research, however, on individual TLAs' perspectives of their professional status. This special issue, 'Identity and Opportunity', reports on a project designed to address that gap, in three parts: building a professional profile, acknowledging learning advisors' contribution, and rewards and challenges of the role. The findings indicate that TLAs are highly qualified and experienced but – for many – their skills and experience are not adequately recognised by institutions. There are significant barriers to progression within their institution, stemming mainly from organisational policies. Despite that lack of clear career opportunities, and other frustrations, overall satisfaction with the TLA role is high. Underpinning the findings, however, are issues of identity and recognition that should be addressed to ensure a resilient profession.

Keywords: professional identity, tertiary learning advisor, higher education, career, job satisfaction

Introduction:

Since the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ) was formally constituted in 2000, questions of identity and professionalism have been regularly traversed in hui and conferences. Through that discussion, tertiary learning advisors (TLAs) have developed a strong community of

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practice and a common understanding of our professional identity. In 2012, for example, ATLAANZ officially adopted a professional practice document (Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2012) that described the principles and values, knowledge and skills, and roles and responsibilities of TLAs in this country. Far from being an end point, however, the adoption was another step on the journey, and the document's impermanence was made clear in the consensus that it should be reaffirmed by members every two years.

The profession's focus on defining and re-defining itself is not simply a theoretical exercise: as Cameron and Catt (2014), pointed out, being able to clearly articulate 'who we are' and 'how we fit' within our institutions has become increasingly important in the uncertain tertiary education environment. Nor is it limited to Aotearoa New Zealand, but echoes discussions amongst colleagues in Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada (for example, see Malkin & Chanock, 2018; Samuels, 2013). Arguably, however, the conversation is more complex in the Aotearoa New Zealand environment, since ATLAANZ represents learning advisors in a broad range of tertiary institutions, including universities, institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), wānanga, and private training organisations (PTOs).

One approach taken in examining professional identity is what has been described by many as 'mapping the field'[1]. In 2008, the first full scale survey of tertiary learning centres in Aotearoa New Zealand was carried out (Cameron & Catt, 2008). This project surveyed learning centre managers. Five years later, the survey was repeated (with some revisions) to chart the changes occurring in the intervening period (Cameron & Catt, 2014). Those two projects provided an overview of the services learning advisors provided for students, the professional status of TLAs, and their place within institutional structures, from the managers' perspectives. In their responses, learning centre managers described a community of highly skilled professionals, actively engaged in research, and exerting a positive influence on learning and teaching

[1] This term has been widely used in the scholarship of teaching and learning; for example, see Gosling (2009) in relation to academic developers.

in their institutions. It was an optimistic picture suggesting TLAs were "moving in from the margins of their institutions and increasing in influence" (ibid, p.17).

The survey's conclusions, however, included some caveats. It was unclear the extent to which TLAs' level of skills and experience was actually recognised by institutions. Surveys of managers can provide only limited information on learning advisor demographics, qualifications and experience, and the links between these features and salary, conditions and role. In addition, the literature suggests that managers are more 'positive' than their staff when responding to evaluative questions (e.g. Sutherland, Wilson & Williams, 2013); if this is the case, managers' responses in relation to morale and career satisfaction may not have reflected the views of TLAs. So, while the 2013 survey of learning centres provided a valuable snapshot of the state of the sector, it was clear that surveying individual TLAs would allow a more nuanced picture. This, then, became the focus of the current project, designed to elaborate on the TLA personal and professional profile, and explore learning advisors' perceptions of their professional status. In this project, learning advisors in in universities, institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), wānanga, and private training organisations were surveyed (in 2014) on their demographic characteristics, qualifications and experience, contractual arrangements, role, career opportunities, and role satisfaction.

The project results are presented in this paper in three parts. This first part, "Building a Profile of Our Profession, as well as describing the project, provides an overview of TLAs in Aotearoa New Zealand. In part two, 'Acknowledging our Contribution' (Cameron,2018c), the focus is on how institutions recognise the contribution of TLAs to learning, teaching and research. Part three, 'Why Do We Stay: Rewards ad Challenges' (Cameron, 2018b) examines learning advisors' satisfaction with their role. In the Appendices (Cameron, 2018a), key data tables (including some data not included in the paper) are provided, along with the survey questions and recommendations for improvement.

Building a profile of our profession

Part one sets the scene by describing the three-part project a as whole. In the remainder of this paper, the focus is on providing a profile of tertiary learning advisors (TLAs) in Aotearoa New Zealand – their demographic characteristics, prior career experience and qualifications – and highlighting some challenges for building a sustainable professional cohort.

The project

Questionnaire design

Following on from a previous survey of learning centre managers (Cameron & Catt, 2013), I developed a draft questionnaire to focus on building a more fine-grain profile of learning advisors in Aotearoa New Zealand. The questionnaire reworded items similar to those in the 2013 managers' survey to suit individual participants (for example, type of institution, contractual arrangements), as well as introducing new items to elicit individual demographic data, perceptions of career opportunities and role satisfaction. Feedback on the draft questionnaire was sought at the ATLAANZ southern regional hui in mid-2014 and further modified as a result. The project was then reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee (HEC2014-23).

The final version of the questionnaire[2] contained a combination of closed and open questions and focused on six key areas:

1. personal characteristics (ethnicity, age, gender);
2. qualifications and experience (level and focus of qualifications, and prior roles);
3. contractual arrangements (employment agreement, tenure type, salary);
4. role characteristics (role focus, management component, research activity, wider institutional role);
5. career opportunities (promotion, career pathways, professional development); and
6. role satisfaction (overall satisfaction, morale, rewards & challenges).

[2] The full questionnaire is included in the appendices published along with this paper.

Survey recruitment

The primary channel for recruitment was the ATLAANZ mailing list, through which I sent an invitation to complete an online or PDF version of the survey. At the time (August 2014), there were 265 on the members' mailing list, representing all but four of the public tertiary institutions, some wānanga, and several private training organisations (PTOs). Of the 265, 215 were current members or had been in 2013; a further 50 had not been members for at least two years, but several of these were known to be still working in the field. To widen the sample beyond those associated with the professional organisation, the recruitment email encouraged recipients to forward the invitation to any colleagues who might not have received it. I directly emailed contacts at the four public tertiary institutions not represented amongst the list membership, asking them to forward it to learning advisors at their institution. I also made additional effort to contact learning advisors in wānanga, who have always been under-represented in ATLAANZ, approaching some individuals directly or via personal contacts. In addition, I contacted all wānanga and asked managers to distribute the survey invitation, although not all agreed to do so.

The survey was left open for three weeks, with a reminder email sent at the end of weeks one and two. Useable responses were received from 106 learning advisors: 102 via Qualtrics, and a further four in PDF/Word format (which were then transcribed into Qualtrics). Five other respondents began, but completed less than 15% of the questions and did not submit; those responses were not included in the analysis.

Analysis

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, analysis was limited to basic descriptive statistics. Where appropriate, associations were tested for significance using chi-square tests. Qualitative data from the open-ended questions were analysed manually and coded according to themes.

In this paper, I have aggregated data to avoid possible identification of respondents. For the same reason, while information related to wānanga, PTOs and 'Other'

institutions has been included in descriptions of the whole sample, their data have been omitted in discussion of institutional differences because the low response rates from those sectors would have made it difficult to preserve respondents' anonymity. In the analysis, blank responses were included in calculations of percentages and noted in figure titles but, for clarity, have not been displayed in the figures.

Who responded – and were they representative?

Since those contacted were encouraged to forward the invitation to others, it is not possible to calculate a precise response rate among learning advisors employed at the time, but the rate can be estimated. Respondents represented 40% of those in the original ATLAANZ mailing list, but a more useful comparison would be with the estimated TLA population at the time: based on the staffing data supplied by managers in 2013, respondents comprised approximately 50% of TLAs working in institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), 50% in universities and 20% in wānanga. Another comparison would be in relation to the number of financial members of ATLAANZ: 85 current members responded, representing 48% of members at the time of the survey. It is reasonable to assume, then, that the survey captured responses from between 40% and 50% of all TLAs employed in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2014.

Comparing the survey data on employment arrangements (such as type of institution and contractual conditions) with that reported by managers in 2013 (see Cameron & Catt, 2014) offers some conclusions about the representativeness of the respondents in this project. In general, the data suggest the respondents were representative of the TLA population, with two exceptions. One is the under-representation of those from wānanga. The other relates to employment status: while the full-time/part-time profile was similar to that reported in 2013 (Cameron & Catt, 2014), the current study contained a much higher proportion of continuing staff (92%, compared to 79% in 2013) and an even greater proportion from ITPs (94% compared to 72% in 2013). The low response rate from learning advisors on fixed term or casual contracts may be because they were less motivated than continuing staff to engage in the current study, or less likely to have received the survey invitation. Both limitations need to be borne in mind when considering the study findings.

Findings

Organisational profiles

As the 2013 centre survey (Cameron & Catt, 2014) has already provided robust data on institutional arrangements (such as employment tenure and types of employment agreements), the purpose of seeking this information from individual TLAs was to shed light on any association between different institutional arrangements and factors such as salary, career progression and satisfaction. For that reason, organisational data are outlined here only briefly, in order to illuminate the findings on demographic characteristics, qualifications and experience.

As noted earlier, the majority of respondents were employed in ITPs and universities (see Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' employing institution (n = 106)

Institution type	Number	Percent
ITPs[1]	47	44.3
Universities	47	44.3
Wānanga	9	8.5
Other (includes PTOs & specialist units)	2	1.9
Unstated	1	0.9

[1] For the purposes of this project, the Telford Division of Lincoln University (formerly Telford Rural Polytechnic) was included in ITP category.

In terms of employment status overall, 92% of respondents were employed in permanent positions (89% in universities, 94% in ITPs, and 100% in wānanga). Of these, 56% worked full time, with sector differences apparent: 47% of those in ITPs (N=22) were full time, 60% in universities (N=28), and 100% in wānanga (N=9). Almost three quarters (72%) described their role as 'solely TLA'; the remainder

indicated their work included a management, supervision and/or coordination component, with only two characterising their roles as 'solely management'.[3]

Particular aspects of the role had implications for learning advisors' place, and career path, within the institution. Approximately 70% of participants reported being involved in staff development, either formally or (more usually) informally, with similar rates in ITPs and universities. A lower proportion (26%) were members of institutional committees or working groups, the focus of which was primarily academic (three quarters of the committees cited concentrated on teaching, learning or research). Committee membership was more likely among learning advisors in universities (36%, compared with 17% in ITPs), and those with a management component in their role (50%, compared with just under 20% of those describing their role as 'solely TLA'). Approximately half of all participants (53%) said they had been active in research in the past five years, more so amongst those in universities (60% compared to 43% in ITPs).

As expected, given the findings of the previous centre-level study (Cameron & Catt 2014), the employment profile was complex. Learning advisors were employed on a range of contractual agreements: academic, general (sometimes called 'professional' or 'allied') and 'other' (usually individual agreements.) Just over 80% of participants from ITPs were employed on an academic agreement, compared to fewer than 50% of those in universities. In the wānanga sample, six out of the nine respondents were employed on an academic contract. Within the broad types of contract, there was further delineation between those employed on the same scale as colleagues in other areas of their institution and those on a separate scale[4]; these distinctions are illustrated, for ITPs and universities, in Figure 1:

[3] Of those indicating a significant management role, all but one reported working concurrently with students as a learning advisor. Given this finding, and the fact the survey invitation was directed to 'learning advisors', it was assumed all participants self-identified as TLAs. Any differences in data associated with management roles have been highlighted throughout the paper.

[4] This distinction over-simplifies the variety of contractual arrangements, since some tertiary institutions provide different conditions for subgroups within the same agreement. (For example, some ITPs designate TLAs as 'non-teaching academics' within an academic employment agreement.) Examining in detail the diverse agreements was beyond the scope of this survey.

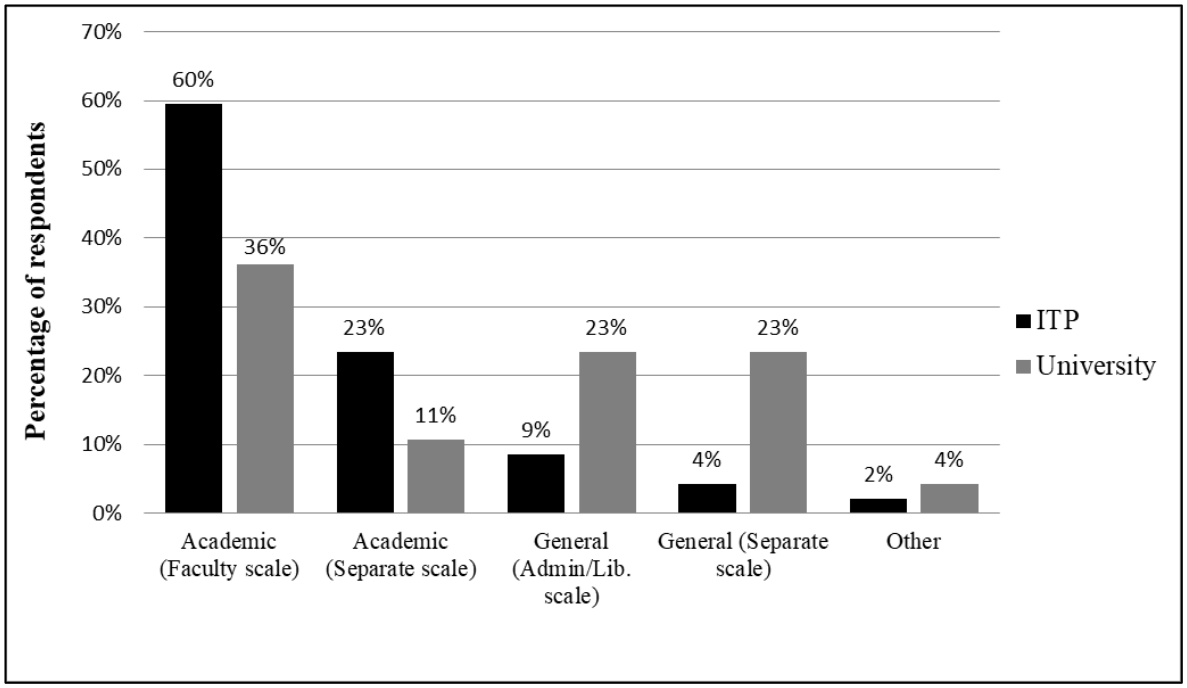

Figure 1. Type of employment agreement for ITP and university respondents (n = 94, including 2 'no response')

Demographic profiles

Ethnicity

The data in Table 2 report the proportion of respondents identifying with each ethnicity. As is usual, the questionnaire allowed respondents to identify with more than one ethnic group and, in this survey, nine did so; the total, therefore, is greater than 100%.

Table 2. *Respondent ethnicity (n = 106)*

Ethnicity	Number	Percent
Pakeha/NZ European	72	68
Māori	15	14
Pacific	8	8
Other European	13	12
Asian	6	6
Latin American	1	1
No ethnicity stated	2	2

The overall proportions disguise important institutional differences. The majority of respondents from wānanga identified as Māori (8/9). Few identified as Māori or Pacific, however, in ITPs (9% Māori; 6% Pacific) or universities (4% Māori, 11% Pacific), although there was a slightly more even spread of ethnicity amongst those aged under 40. These figures are roughly in line with other indicators: between 2014 and 2017, for instance, approximately 7% of ATLAANZ members identified as Māori and 8% as Pacific (M. Simkin, personal communication, May 30, 2017).

Most tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand aspire to an ethnic mix of academic teaching staff that closely matches that of their (in particular, domestic) students (for example, see Nana, Stokes & Lynn, 2010), and the Tertiary Education Strategy 2014-2019 provides a strong incentive for institutions to do so (New Zealand Ministry of Education & Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2014). There is still a significant gap to bridge, however. According to Ministry of Education figures, in 2014, Māori represented 23% of ITP students, and 11% of university domestic enrolments; Pacific students comprised 9% and 7% respectively (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2016a). In the same year, only 8% of academic staff in ITPs, and 5% of universities, identified as Māori, and 3% and 2% respectively as Pacific (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2016b). Māori and Pacific peoples, therefore, are significantly under-represented amongst ITP and university teaching staff as a whole. The data in the current study suggests that Māori are similarly under-represented among the TLA cohort, although the proportion of Pacific learning advisors more closely matches the domestic student population.

Since this study is the first to gather data on learning advisor ethnicity in Aotearoa New Zealand, it would be useful to continue to monitor the proportion of Māori and Pacific in the ATLAANZ community. The fact that there appeared a slightly more representative ethnic mix amongst younger TLAs in the current study may indicate a move towards better ethnic representation. It is worth noting, though, that data from the university sector suggests academic staff ethnic mix is slow to change: Nana et al (2010, p.80), for example, pointed out that the proportion of Māori university lecturers grew little between the early 1990s and 2006. If learning centres are to ensure an ethnic mix that better reflects the student cohort, therefore, institutions need to place

more emphasis on recruiting and retaining Māori and Pacific TLAs.

Age and gender

The age and gender[5] distribution in the different types of institution was similar. Almost 90% of respondents were over 40 years of age (see Figure 2) and 82% were women. There was no apparent relationship between age and gender – males, albeit at lower levels, were represented across all age ranges.

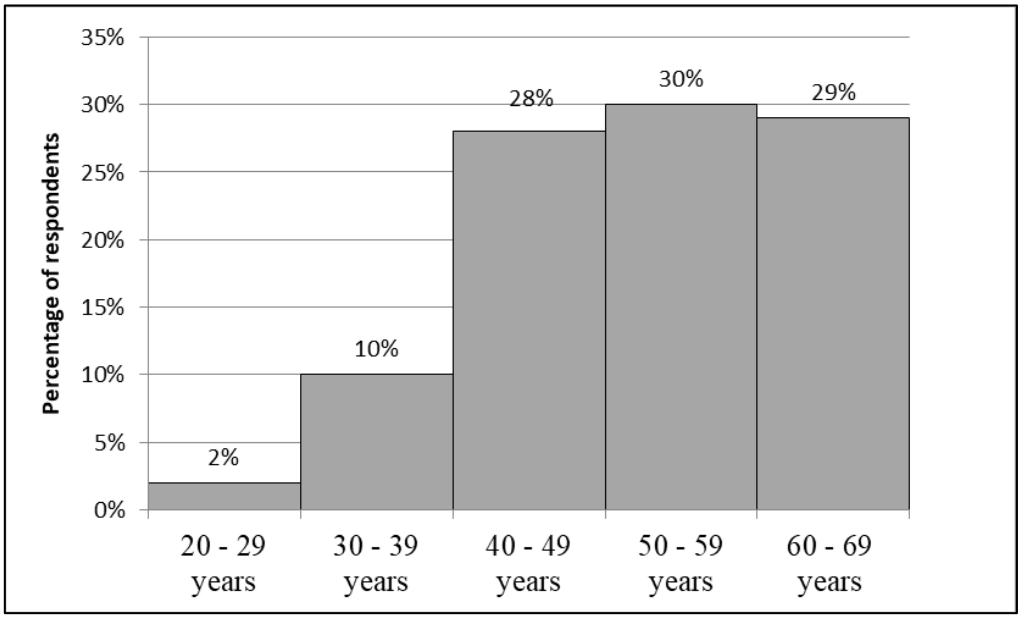

Figure 2. Age (n = 106, incl. 1 'no response')

Anecdotal evidence suggests this profile accurately represent the age and gender distribution of TLAs in Aotearoa New Zealand: the survey data was not a surprise, for example, to attendees at the 2014 ATLAANZ conference workshop, at which I outlined the initial results of this study. It is also remarkably similar to the profile of Academic Language and Learning practitioners in Australia, according to Malkin and Chanock's (2018) recent findings.

Are such uneven age and gender profiles ideal? Learning advisors are not necessarily unanimous in their responses: for instance, while some noted (in both this survey and

[5] Only a binary option was included in the survey, so no data is available on non-binary gender profiles.

the 2014 ATLAANZ conference workshop) the value of a more balanced age profile, others pointed out that the role benefits from TLAs having 'years of experience'. The skewed age profile, however, may hinder succession planning, as has been recognised in the tertiary teaching sector as a whole (Nana et al, 2010). The findings in this study suggest the challenge might be even greater for the TLA profession as the proportion of respondents over 50 years of age (60%) was higher than among academic staff as a whole (46%; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2016b).

Demographic imbalances tend not to correct without action, and there is evidence that there has been little successful intervention in the past two decades. In the only other national data set, Hoffman (2002) reported that 90% of learning advisors employed in 1998 were aged 31 - 60 years. Given the well-documented aging tertiary teaching population (for example, see Doyle, Wylie, Hogden & Else, 2005; Nana *et al*., 2010), and the low mobility revealed by the current study (to be discussed in the next section), the age profile in Figure 2 suggests there has been little active recruitment of younger staff. Similarly, the proportion of men in the current study is hardly more than in Hoffman's survey (13%), suggesting minimal success in attracting a more balanced gender profile.

There are, of course, a range of reasons why moving to a more representative profile may be slow. Hargens and Long (2002), for instance, point out that – even with intervention – slow changes in overall representation may be a result of demographic inertia; and the continued under-representation of males in roles considered low status (which, arguably, is the case with the TLA role) is well documented (for example, see Doyle et al, 2005). Regardless of these obstacles, tertiary institutions that wish to build a more representative cohort, and plan for succession, will need to actively recruit a broader range of individuals to the profession.

Career experience and qualifications

Learning advisor role tenure

The patterns of role tenure were similar across ITPs and universities. Almost half the ITP and university respondents had been in a TLA role between 6 and 15 years (See

Figure 3), although a sizable group (37%) were in their first five years in the role. The distribution of the small number of wānanga respondents was more heavily weighted towards shorter tenure – seven of the nine had been in the role five years or fewer. Interestingly, the proportion of those relatively new to the role was higher than that recently reported in Australia, where only 22% had been in the role fewer than five years (Malkin & Chanock, 2018), suggesting possibly higher turnover in Aotearoa New Zealand.

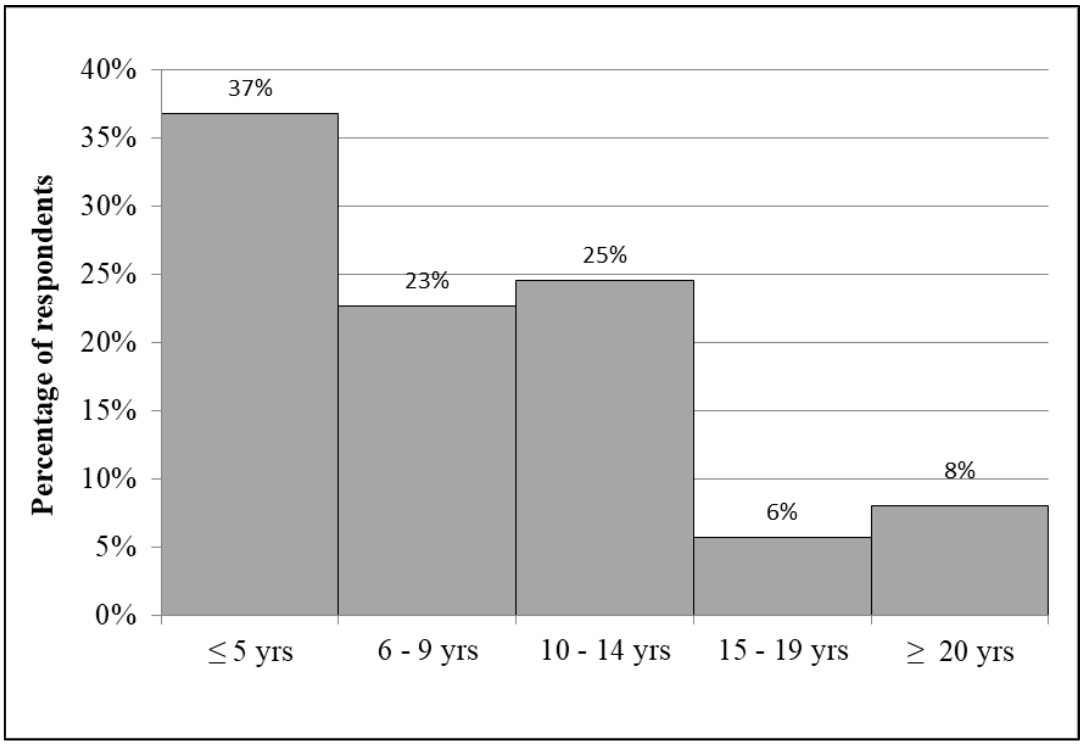

Figure 3. TLA role tenure (n = 106, incl. 3 'no response')

The TLA role appears to be one people enter at all ages. Those in their first five years in the role were spread across the age ranges, although there was a higher proportion of respondents under 40 or 50 years of age among 'new' learning advisors (26% in ITPs & 67% universities) than among those in the role for six or more years (3% & 24%).

Respondents reported low mobility in the TLA role: fewer than 12% had worked in other institutions as a learning advisor, a figure that varied little across the range of total years' TLA experience. This is not surprising: outside Auckland and Wellington there are limited options to move to another tertiary institution without moving cities.

Prior experience

As one might expect, participants brought a diverse array of prior experience to the role. In fact, only one respondent, who had been in the role for over 20 years, reported having always been a learning advisor.

A broad range of prior roles was apparent in the sample as a whole, as well as for individuals. The single most common feature was teaching experience: over 90% of participants had worked as ITP tutors, university lecturers/tutors, primary/secondary school teachers, and/or English language teachers, prior to taking on the TLA role. This is consistent with the comments from managers in 2013 (Cameron & Catt, 2014) that teaching experience and/or teaching qualifications were pre-requisites when employing staff.

Many respondents provided rich commentary on the value of their previous roles to their work with students and staff. Those who had teaching backgrounds frequently commented on the value of prior classroom experiences (from primary to tertiary) not only in developing their own teaching skills and understanding of student needs, but also in enabling a better understanding of the pressures faced by their faculty colleagues:

> This has given me insight into the academic staff perspective and taught me to plan lessons and devise marking criteria. It also provided me with insight into the student psyche. (Respondent 44)

> My experience as a secondary science teacher help[s] me understand the structure of science teaching on campus and talk with students about the demands of science tests and exams. (Respondent 25)

> Prior tutoring positions taught me how to plan and deliver courses to NZQA standards, and therefore understand the tutor's perspective. I also learnt about the barriers students have to learning. (Respondent 54)

Others commented on the value of their prior roles in developing skills in the employment areas their students hoped to enter:

> The … role had flow-on benefits for my learning advisor role in enabling me to develop expertise in the management of information (which is an important skill-set for postgraduates). (Respondent 8)

> [Working] in engineering environment provided good background for working with engineers, trade & technology students. (Respondent 59)

> [These private contracts] have required ICT experience e.g. database creation, systems analysis, design, implementation and maintenance,… [and] the current learning advisor role is ICT. (Respondent 3)

Another common theme was the value of prior experience in community and youth development, particularly with a range of ethnic communities, in building an understanding of those from diverse backgrounds:

> Work in Maori community development projects and kohanga reo has given me some understanding of issues faced by Maori students in tertiary study. Life experience, such as participation in Samoan community … has given me a broader understanding of diversity, both at a social level and an individual level. (Respondent 39)

> VSO and [overseas youth development experience] were all valuable in intercultural interaction and student engagement. (Respondent 14)

Highest qualification

The previous learning centre studies (Cameron & Catt, 2008, 2014) showed a high proportion of learning advisors had a postgraduate qualification; a finding echoed in the current study, in which 79% of respondents had a postgraduate qualification. There were clear sector differences, with higher proportions of those in universities (91%) and wānanga (78%) having a postgraduate qualification than those in ITPs (68%). (See Figure 4.)

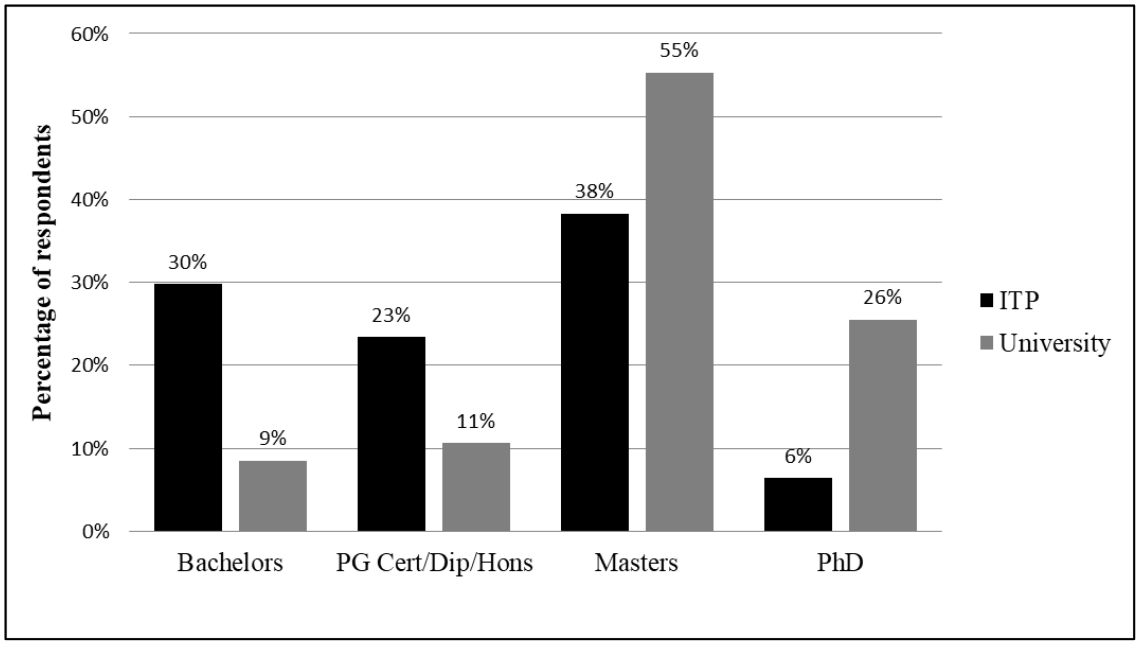

Figure 4. Highest qualification (n = 94, incl. 1 'no response')

Overall the level of qualifications was higher than that reported by managers in 2013: for instance, all respondents had a highest qualification of at least Level 7 (Bachelor's degree) compared with 92% in 2013) and 61% reported Level 9 (Master's) or 10 (PhD) qualifications (cf 41% in 2013). However, the higher levels of qualification reportedin the current study may have been an artefact of the under-representation of casual and fixed term staff in this study.

The qualification profile of TLAs is highly dynamic. In both this and the 2014 Cameron and Catt learning centre studies, a considerable proportion of learning advisors reported being enrolled in further qualifications (30% and 25% respectively). In most cases, this was optional or encouraged by their institution, rather than required. Most had some form of support from their institution (such as fee payments or time allowance), but few said they would receive a salary increase or other reward once the qualification was completed.

Breadth and relevance of qualifications

Unlike the previous learning centre studies (Cameron & Catt, 2008; 2014), this survey not only examined the level of qualifications, but also sought more detail on the type of

qualifications and perceived relevance to the TLA role. Almost 90% of participants reported holding at least one teaching qualification (just under 50% had two or more), with similar rates reported by those from ITPs, universities and wānanga. It was clear, however, that not all respondents adopted the same definition of a 'teaching' qualification[6]. To clarify, responses were recoded to delineate the types of qualifications. This analysis indicated almost three quarters (73%) of respondents had a practicum-based teaching qualification, the remaining 16% an unspecified education qualification.[7] Regardless of definition, therefore, a significant proportion of respondents held a recognised teaching qualification.

The practicum-based teaching qualifications mostly comprised three types:

- Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme qualifications[8] (e.g. Dip Teaching, B Teaching & Learning, Grad Dip Education):36% of all respondents;
- adult or higher education qualifications (e.g. NCALE, Cert Adult Teaching, PG Dip Tertiary Teaching): 28% of respondents;
- and language teaching qualifications (e.g. CELTA, PG Dip Second Language Teaching, M App Linguistics): 25% of respondents.

Adult/higher education qualifications were more common amongst respondents from ITPs, unsurprising given that many ITPs require a Cert. Adult Teaching, or equivalent, for promotion. Particularly noticeable, in all institutions, was the breadth and depth of teaching/education qualifications held by individuals, with many having multiple qualifications across a range of levels.

[6] Respondents were asked to list their 'teaching' and 'other' qualifications. Some included in the 'teaching' category only those qualifications required to teach in the primary and secondary school system (i.e. Initial Teacher Education programme qualifications prescribed by the Teachers' Council) and listed specialist qualifications with a substantial teaching practicum component (such as adult education or language teaching qualifications) as 'other'. Other respondents included all education-related qualifications (e.g. B Ed) as 'teaching' qualifications or failed to give the qualification title.

[7] Some of these qualifications may have included a practicum, but only those clearly specifying a practicum component were classified as such in the analysis.

[8] In this study, inclusion in this category was determined using the New Zealand Ministry of Education classification (New Zealand Ministry of Education (1999) and advice from the Post Primary Teachers' Association (Pers. Comm, B. Cross, 31 March 2016)

Similar breadth and depth were apparent in the "other" (non-teaching) qualifications reported. There was a wide array of discipline-specific qualifications, the majority in Social Sciences and Arts. There was also considerable depth at the individual level: at least two thirds of participants had two or more Level 7 or above qualifications in different disciplines, many pairing a teaching/education qualification with a discipline-specific qualification (or, with two distinct disciplines, as was the case for 22 respondents).

Respondents were invited to rate each of their qualifications in terms of relevance to their role, as well to make open-ended comments. Almost 80% of individuals who had a teaching or education qualification considered at least one of those qualifications to be 'very relevant' to their role, and 70% of all the teaching or education qualifications reported were rated 'very relevant'.

In contrast, fewer than half considered their discipline-specific qualifications 'very relevant', although many commented that, while the content may not have been particularly relevant to their role, their personal study experience was of significant value, particularly in completing postgraduate degrees with a research component:

> Having studied to Honours level at a tertiary institution myself has been the most relevant experience to the learning advisor role. (Respondent 54)

> The experiences of writing a thesis, interacting with supervisors and organising my own work have equipped me to help PhD students in the areas of writing, study skills and time management. … It helps to know what is expected. (Respondent 44)

Recognising TLA competencies

The survey findings indicate that tertiary learning advisors in Aotearoa New Zealand are highly qualified and bring a diverse range of relevant prior experience to the role. There is, however, no *formal* recognition of the qualifications and experience (or other competencies) required for the role, as Lisa Emerson pointed out in 2000 when ATLAANZ was formally inaugurated (Hoffman, 2002). The lack of a formal recognition scheme, or accreditation, has been widely discussed over the past two decades and currently attracts significant interest internationally.

Establishing an accreditation regime requires consensus on two points: that core competencies can be identified for the role, and that accreditation will benefit the profession. There has been considerable work on the former. In Australia, the Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) first agreed a position statement in 1999 (Association for Academic Language and Learning, 2010) that included a set of core qualifications, experience and competencies. ATLAANZ embarked on a similar journey in 2003, with a series of workshops to develop a document that encapsulated the principles and values, knowledge and skills, and roles and responsibilities of tertiary learning advisors (Cameron, Fraser, Looser & Thorns, 2005). Agreement on minimum recommended qualifications and experience gradually evolved over a decade and the *ATLAANZ Professional Practice Document*, officially adopted in 2012, identifies three key requirements:

> TLAs have
>
> - a graduate qualification in an appropriate discipline,
> - a teaching qualification and/or significant relevant experience at the tertiary level,
> - and specialist qualifications and experience relevant to the specific institutional role (Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa, 2012).

In the past two years, similar projects have been underway in Canada (R. Hilton-Eddy, Learning Specialists Association of Canada, 29 June 2017, Pers Comm) and the United Kingdom (Association for Learning Development in Higher Education, 2016; C. Buckley, 29 June 2017, Pers Comm). In both countries, the focus has been explicitly on accreditation. In the UK, in particular, the project has considerable momentum, with a professional recognition scheme trialled[9] in 2017 and launched in April 2018 (Briggs, 2018).

Given the recent moves in the UK and Canada, it would be timely to consider accreditation in Aotearoa New Zealand. While ATLAANZ members have agreed on core competencies, there has been little discussion on whether accreditation would benefit the profession. This may be contentious, albeit perhaps less so than ten years ago. For example, formally adopting a professional practice document was hotly

[9] ALDinHE-Certified Practitioner and Certified Leading Practitioner

debated in 2004 (Cameron et al, 2005), yet accepted unanimously in 2012. Similarly, when the first learning centre survey was carried out in 2008, ATLAANZ members were reluctant to have data on qualifications published for fear such information could be used to their disadvantage; by 2013 that reticence was no longer apparent (Cameron & Catt, 2008; 2014). The current study's findings, in which all but one respondent met the minimum qualifications and experience set out the *ATLAANZ Professional Practice Document,* should further reinforce this growth in professional confidence.

Accreditation, or a formal recognition scheme, could have a number of benefits for leaning advisors in Aotearoa New Zealand. There is currently no formal pathway into the profession: it is a role, as Percy (2011, p.39) argues in relation to our Australian colleagues, which many enter 'by accident'. An accreditation scheme might help make the role more visible as a potential career to a wider range of prospective learning advisors. After entry, such a scheme could provide relatively inexperienced TLAs with a clear focus for ongoing mentoring and training, particularly important if we want to address the under-representation of younger staff. Finally, for those well established in the role, accreditation would provide meaningful recognition from one's peers, and hence strengthen retention.

Conclusions

Constructing a professional identity involves an iterative process of debate and discussion, one learning advisors in Aotearoa New Zealand have been engaged in for well over two decades. Mapping the field informs that discussion. The previous surveys of learning centre managers (Cameron & Catt, 2008; 2014) painted a broad strokes profile of our community, but it was clear that surveying individual learning advisors would add more detail and colour. This project was designed to do so by elaborating on learning advisors' personal and professional profile, and exploring perceptions of their professional status.

As a first step in the project, this paper provides a clearer map of TLAs' ethnicity, gender and age, as well as their qualifications and experience: data that can be used to benchmark and inform future research. We are, as the previous surveys indicated, a

community of highly skilled professionals. However, this study's findings have also identified key challenges and decision points as we continue to develop as a profession.

The first of these challenges concerns whether or not our current profile is representative and sustainable. Despite the fact that tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand aspire to an ethnic mix of teaching staff that closely matches that of their domestic students, the findings suggest Māori, and to a lesser degree Pacific, are under-represented in the TLA cohort (as they are amongst ITP and university teaching staff as a whole). We need to encourage more Māori and Pacific into the role. The profession is also heavily skewed in gender (and may well under-represent the Rainbow community), so we should explore ways to build a more representative profile. We should also plan for succession: as with our academic colleagues, we are 'greying' and need to actively recruit, develop and retain younger staff. ATLAANZ is well-placed to monitor progress towards these goals and could do so by regularly surveying learning advisors and stakeholder groups within our institutions.

The second challenge is the lack of formal recognition of the role. The survey findings show that tertiary learning advisors are highly qualified and bring a diverse range of relevant prior experience to the role. There is, however, no formal, visible acknowledgement of that knowledge and skill. That could be provided through an ATLAANZ accreditation or professional recognition scheme, not as 'gatekeeping', but as a valuable recruitment, development and retention tool.

Neither of these challenges is one we can resolve on our own – they will require collaboration with our employing institutions – but, as a profession, we can (and should) be raising these issues.

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