

Deb Laurs' journey

Deb Laurs (retired)

Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand (formerly)

Past ATLAANZ President & Current ATLAANZ Life Member

I came from a background in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, and side-stepped from English literature and drama into academic-, business- and creative-writing courses at Massey University. From there, I took up a tertiary learning adviser position at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington in 2000, until my retirement as Assistant Manager [Te Taiako Student Learning](#) in mid-2024.

I have observed changes in the student cohorts over the years, most notably the shift in university entrance requirements from Bursary examinations to massification and NCEA units, which seem to prepare students less well for self-directed learning. Likewise, COVID (2019-2021) has continued to impact students' learning patterns and resilience, as have increasing personal and financial pressures, and it was a privilege to work with those who sought learning advice as a way to stay on track.

Our centre's attendance statistics note a preponderance of first-year and postgraduate students, more females than males, and a higher percentage of international students than on campus as a whole. Students often came seeking help for one issue, initially unclear how 'learning advice' worked. Once they realised, however, that the 50-minute one-to-one session was entirely theirs, conversations flowed from assignment-specific matters to accommodation woes, health concerns, personal relationships, pastimes and future plans, frequently necessitating a gentle 'what do you need to do next?' prompt before the session's end to recall the task in hand. Some students came only once or twice, others more regularly, seeking different advice as their learning situations changed.

Interestingly, while the sector places considerable emphasis on linking learning advice and study success among first-years (with Orientations, ongoing skills-based workshops and provision of online resources), the transitions thereafter are often less well supported. Although assessment requirements and reading loads become more complex and time-consuming as studies progress, second and third-year students rarely seek advice unless a crisis, such as poor grades, plagiarism or time-management pressures, forces the issue. Students' levels of anxiety and self-doubt are further exacerbated by COVID-disrupted study patterns, associated challenges of neurodiversity, pressures around whānau, work and travel commitments, and generalised global uncertainty. Learning advisors can play an important role in fostering students' resilience and self-belief, by normalising help-seeking behaviours.

A key role during my time at VUW was setting up a Peer Assisted Study programme (PASS), significantly adapting overseas peer-learning and leadership models to incorporate the [Māori values](#) of manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, akoranga, kaitiakitanga, rangatiratanga and whai matauranga. While my primary aim was to create supportive communities of learning within core first-year courses, the PASS programme also offered valuable [opportunities](#) for study-group leaders in terms of personal growth and self-reflection. During my twenty plus years coordinating this programme, I witnessed a pleasing synergy, with many study group participants going on to become PASS leaders in their own right, although such high-achievers also need protection against burnout in these challenging times.

Postgraduate students experience significant pressures of their own and often find comfort sharing their personal stories with a learning advisor who is operating alongside, rather than from an institutional position of power. Working within the postgraduate space has been a particular privilege. I have [researched](#) and [collaborated](#) with international colleagues, and met hundreds of higher degree research students (both domestic and international) throughout their thesis journeys, acting as a critical friend and sounding board, guiding them in the ways of the academy, and (in the words of one), challenging them to think "higher, wider, deeper".

I concede that having a doctorate (and an Advance HE [Senior Fellowship](#)) undoubtedly enhanced my mana within the university environment (and encouraged fellow members to upskill wherever possible). I also acknowledge the efforts of my many colleagues (2000-2024), in particular Jan Stewart, Xiaodan Gao and Louise Falepau, whose professionalism, academic

expertise, relationship-building and advocacy have cemented Student Learning's status as intrinsic to student success and wellbeing at VUW.

I have been a member of ATLAANZ since 2001, helped organise three conferences (2002, 2018 and 2022), served as national President (2019-2020) and [*Journal*](#) Editor (2017-2023), established international connections within [ICALLD](#), and spearheaded the recent establishment of a [Professional Accreditation Award](#) scheme to showcase members' contributions to student success. I was honoured to be made a Life Member in 2024.

Over the years, I have witnessed the ATLAANZ whanau flourish, its membership growing in size, stability, and expertise, as evidenced by the high calibre of conversations at regional hui and conferences year on year. Despite ever-present challenges within the tertiary sector, the learning advising profession is in good heart: kia kaha!

Ngā mihinui

Deborah Laurs