

AUT University, New Zealand

Pat Strauss

‘I don’t think we’re seen as a nuisance’: the positioning of postgraduate learning advisors in New Zealand universities

Abstract:

New Zealand universities host linguistically and culturally diverse cohorts of students. Many of these students, both first and second language speakers of English, struggle to achieve their potential because their academic language skills do not meet the requirements of the academy. Despite the acknowledged need to facilitate the improvement of all students’ language skills, in particular the ability to write clearly and cogently, the learning advisors at each university who are tasked with assisting this development are, on the whole, not held in high esteem by the institutions they serve. This lack of regard makes it difficult for them to be effective in helping students reach their full potential. This article sought to capture the perspectives of postgraduate learning advisors at universities around New Zealand, which might have relevance for those based elsewhere. It concludes with some suggestions as to how advisors might strengthen their position and gain recognition for the contribution they make in the postgraduate sector.

Biographical note:

Pat Strauss is an Associate Professor in the School of Language and Culture at AUT University. Her research interests include the role of academic literacies at all levels in tertiary institutions, and the embedding of academic literacy in postgraduate vocational education. In addition she is interested in the use of assessments in universities, in particular the language in which assessments are couched, and the widespread use of group assessments in the multicultural environment of the modern university classroom.

Keywords:

Writing – Postgraduate students – Academic language – Learning advisors

Introduction

The most important change in higher education over the past two decades has been the massification of institutions (Guri-Rosenblit, Šebková & Teichler 2007; Tynjälä, Välimaa & Sarja 2003; Alexander 2000). We now teach cohorts that are more linguistically and ethnically diverse than ever before (Hyland 2009; Tones, Fraser, Elder & White 2009; Robotham 2008). At the same time, while multimodal literacies are widely practised throughout the world, at universities written literacy assessments are, to a large extent, still the norm (Goodfellow 2004). The ability to write well, Leki and Carson (1994: 83) argue, 'is necessary both to achieve academic success and to demonstrate that achievement'.

There is ample evidence that students drawn from non-traditional backgrounds, and those for whom the language of instruction is not their mother tongue are most at risk (Lea 2004; Borland and Pearce 2002; Paltridge 2002; Lea and Stierer 2000; Allison et al. 1998; Zamel 1998). However, there is also a growing recognition that virtually all students, regardless of their linguistic background, require some type of writing support (Wingate & Tribble 2009; Casanave 2008; North 2005; Strauss & Walton 2005; Baynham 2000). It would seem logical, then, to assume that the contribution of those staff members who are charged with helping students develop the requisite level of academic writing would be greatly valued.

Unfortunately there is overwhelming evidence that they are not. The claim that their work is 'securely located on the periphery of higher education' (Turner 2011: 29), is echoed by a large number of researchers (Laurs 2010; Craven 2009; Emerson & Clerehan 2009; Velautham & Picard 2009; Carter & Bartlett-Trafford 2007; Chanock, 2007; Clerehan 2007; Crozier 2007; Stevenson & Kokkin 2007; Woodward-Kron 2007; Alexander 2005; Craswell & Bartlett 2002). Their lack of status is reflected in the language used to describe their positioning in the academic world. They are 'the writing ladies' (Alexander 2005), and the 'servants' (Pennycook 1997) and 'butlers' (Raimes 1991) to the faculty masters. The attitude appears to be the result of 'the predominantly technicist discourse which assumes that language is easily dealt with, and easily fixed' (Turner 2011: 18). Students just need a little help with spelling and grammar, and those who provide this superficial aid are mere technicians.

This lack of status has serious consequences. Churchman and King explored institutional and individual stories in higher education institutions, noting that there 'are those that dominate the landscape and those that are marginalised' (2009: 514). The setup becomes accepted practice and it is very difficult for those who are marginalised to contest their status. Parkinson, in his article on teacher identity, argues that the social and political structures in which teachers work contribute to the development of 'a sense of belonging and purpose' (2008: 52). If teachers' contributions are positively received, they develop a strong sense of agency. However, if they are not well regarded, they might become 'alienated and institutionally victimised' (2008: 55). The literature would appear to indicate that the work of learning advisors at New Zealand universities would be compromised because of their social and political positioning in the academic world. I was interested in capturing the perspectives of learning advisors at the eight New Zealand

universities, to determine how practitioners saw themselves positioned in their institutions, and how this positioning influenced on their work. In particular, I wished to focus on those advisors who work with postgraduate students because these students are required to produce lengthy texts. Many will embark on theses and dissertations, which Hyland (2004: 134) describes as ‘perhaps the most significant piece of writing that any student will ever do, a formidable task of intimidating length and exacting expectations’.

Learning advisors were asked to describe their interactions with postgraduate faculty staff (lecturers, supervisors and programme leaders) as well as middle and upper management. They discussed the challenges they encounter in their work and how they address these challenges. They were also asked what institutional changes would enable them to better serve the students who sought their assistance.

The research project

In order to carry out the investigation I approached the student learning centres at all eight New Zealand universities. Staff who work with postgraduate students were invited to take part in the research. Seven of the Centres accepted the invitation and 21 advisors were interviewed. Participants were asked about their relations with faculty staff and how they saw themselves positioned at their institutions. Transcriptions of the interviews were returned to participants to be checked.

Of the 21 advisors, 11 had doctoral qualifications and the rest had masters degrees. They had worked at the centres for periods ranging from less than a year to more than 20. Fifteen of the interviewees had at least six years’ experience. Only one of the advisors interviewed was on a fixed term contract; the rest were all tenured, employed either as academic or general staff.

The term ‘learning advisor’ (abbreviated to advisors) has been adopted to refer to the participants in this study. Cameron and Catt (2008) report that this is the preferred title of staff members whose work involves facilitating ‘the academic achievement of all students’ (ATLAANZ Professional Practice Document 2012: 3). ‘Student learning centre’ (referred to as learning centres or centres) has been adopted as the generic title of the sections in which these learning advisors are housed. This name can, and does, differ from university to university but is used in this article to refer to that section of the university concerned with student learning as distinct from staff development. Direct quotations from the interviewees are presented in italics.

Findings

The key issues that emerged from the analysis of the interviews were that: the valuing of advisors’ contributions differed widely across and among institutions; it was difficult to build and maintain relationships with faculty staff; they were concerned about their limited ability to influence teaching and learning at their institutions; most were frustrated by institutional barriers limiting their research and career progression; and, on the whole they felt marginalised and vulnerable

The valuing of their contributions

Faculty

It was apparent that those relatively few staff members (lecturers and supervisors) who understand their work, and had regular contact with the Centres, had great appreciation for what they did, and the contribution they made to student learning. Interviewees talked of *overwhelmingly positive* feedback, of being described as *a godsend*, and being *embarrassingly* overvalued. However, it appears that the widespread nature of technisist discourse often undermines others' perception of their worth. Many advisors believe that they are viewed as a service for students whose English is poor, and that the work they do is remedial. They are *low grade language teachers who are paid by the university to provide a proof reading service for students whose English isn't up to scratch*. One advisor recounted being asked *if students can't read and write what are they doing at university anyway*. A few advisors reported that a number of students experienced a sense of shame at needing assistance and wanted their visits to the learning centres kept secret from their supervisors.

Management

The importance of supportive management was underlined in the interviews. One advisor noted that the appointment of a sympathetic Director had led to their greater integration into the university's doctoral programme. Most found their immediate line managers sympathetic but an unfortunate few answered to administrative staff who had no understanding of the challenges of teaching. One remarked that *they don't always seem to understand what it is that we do – why we want to do it in a particular way and even some of the language we use. I think the word 'pedagogy' was used in one of our meetings and we were taken to task by an individual who felt that sort of language was putting up barriers*. Presumably what was implied was barriers between the advisors and their managers. Not surprisingly the advisors on this campus felt that they and their managers were *talking past each other*. On some campuses upper management appeared to have a good understanding of what the advisors' work was and the challenges they faced, but for the most part advisors believed that management was indifferent to them.

Another area of concern was the restructuring and reviews that most of the Centres had been subjected to in the recent past. The advisors were not positive about these reviews and were suspicious of the motivation for launching them. Advisors expressed their frustration with restructuring that seemed pointless or even damaging. Advisors would find themselves the only academics in a section, and would feel no real affinity with other services, such as student financial services and student accommodation services, that were housed with them. They noted that merging learning centres with university libraries is becoming increasingly popular but many had reservations about the wisdom of this move. They argued that their role was about the process of learning while the libraries' focus was on information gathering, and

that it was *a battle* to be recognised as a teaching and learning unit. One advisor argued that student learning should be *the carrier of student development – not submerged into another organisation where our identity is somehow confused or seems minor and not important*. One Centre was told that the move to the library was for good pedagogical reasons but the advisors felt that the move was a cost saving one. Advisors were either not consulted about the move, or they were convinced that the consultation was done for appearances only, and that a decision had been made prior to the consultation process.

One point of disagreement among advisors was whether student leaning services should be housed with academic development centres catering for the professional development of lecturers. On the whole advisors believed that such a joint operation would be in their best interests. Staff in academic development units are all classed as academics and appear to enjoy far higher status than their learning advisor colleagues. However, one advisor who is linked with staff development thought that this joint operation detracted from a focus on student learning. Another argued that while such a merger might improve their status, the trade-off could be a loss of autonomy.

Initiating and maintaining relationships

The initiation and maintenance of relationships with faculty staff was not always easy. A number of participants were aware that their overtures were regarded with a certain amount of suspicion by lecturers and supervisors. *I think we're treated with a certain degree of mistrust like 'who are you really and what credentials do you have to be getting yourself involved with our students?'* There was also concern that advisors would be doing too much for the students, that advisors would play too great a role in the structuring of theses and that the work would not be the students' own. Even getting an opportunity to talk to faculty members was often problematic. A number of the interviewees referred to Schools and Departments as *silos*. One advisor approached staff at conferences to suggest that advisors meet with students before they start their research. She noted that her suggestion was enthusiastically received at the time but her follow-up emails were ignored. Another approached a department to inform lecturers about a critical thinking workshop which was very popular with postgraduate students but this information was met with indifference.

One of the ways of making contact with Faculty staff is to serve on university committees. Not only does this help to lessen the distance between advisors and Faculty but it also provides the former with an opportunity to promote their work. One interviewee was able to maintain a high profile at her university. She not only sits on a number of committees but has chaired working groups. Others are not as fortunate. While they are able to attend meetings they cannot participate as members. One participant noted that while, as a representative of the learning centre, she has attendance rights only, representatives of the library and student union are full members. Unfortunately, while these meetings did afford advisors opportunities to promote the work of the learning centres, such opportunities were rare and advisors could ill afford the time spent listening to matters that, on the whole, they felt had little relevance to them.

The relationships that did yield benefit relied heavily on personal networking. One advisor said, *I've got a connection with person X and therefore because X trusts me, knows what I can do then it will flow on.* The problem of course is that *if X goes, then these things tend to fall back into abeyance for a while.* The fact that most universities experience large staff turnovers exacerbates the problem. People sympathetic to their work moved on and advisors were not always sure who was the best person to contact in the faculty. Some sent global emails, providing information about the Centres but were concerned that this approach was at best inefficient and at worst highly irritating. *The individual contacts with teaching staff ... that's pretty haphazard, there's no systematic process of connection.* There did not appear to be a formal structure in place that facilitated contact between the learning centres and the Faculties. It was generally agreed that a structure to support such formal networking would make it far easier to form and maintain relationships with discipline staff.

Limited ability to influence teaching and learning at their institutions

One of the greatest frustrations that advisors experienced was the difficulty they had in influencing teaching and learning. They have, unsurprisingly, a great deal of knowledge about the challenges postgraduate students face. One pointed out that their ongoing contact with students meant that *we see the university through student eyes.* Those who work almost exclusively at postgraduate level may see over a hundred masters and doctoral students each year which is a great deal more than any individual supervisor. This ongoing contact with the work of students drawn from all over the university gave them a perspective across disciplines. *Because we've read other students' work we've learnt quite a lot about what makes for effective or ineffective postgraduate work.* Primarily, at postgraduate level participants saw their contributions relating to the writing process and the supervisory relationship.

The writing process

There was a strong feeling that lecturers /supervisors were often not best positioned to help students with their writing. This feeling was summed up by one participant:

A lot of staff members don't have time, nor do they have the knowledge about how language works. They've often internalised it through exposure or they've been able to work it out how to write well and how to fit. It's something that is kind of innate. They've never looked at it and it's become automatic. So they find it really hard to understand what it is that students are finding difficult so they'll send them to us and we're actually much more interested in what is going on with the students in terms of their thinking round their writing and analysing what it is that's wrong. Yeah cos often it is just go and get your grammar fixed up. Well sometimes the supervisors don't really understand what grammar is, what syntax is.

Many discipline staff view learning centres as largely remedial, a place where students can go to have spelling and grammar corrected by proof readers. It is therefore understandable that students told to get their language 'fixed' see this as their primary focus, appearing to believe that if their grammar is perfect *then the*

whole thing will hang together, as one advisor remarked caustically. Advisors were disinclined to provide feedback on text that made little sense, *I see no point in getting the grammar right if they're not even sure what they are saying*. There was also concern that the feedback provided by discipline staff was not always helpful and at times was disempowering. This happens when a supervisor objects to a student's English, not because it is grammatically incorrect, but because the supervisor does not like the style. As Schmitt points out, supervisors might well be condemning the language used because it does not accord with the 'shared set of memorized stock phrases that native speakers understand and tacitly agree are efficient and *expected* (my italics) ways of expressing ideas' (as cited in Ryan & Viete, 2009: 305). Effectively then, the supervisors are forcing students into the mould with which the supervisors are familiar. Advisors are therefore concerned about helping students find their voice in *some English that is theirs*. One advisor said that it was empowering for students to realise that their language was not incorrect, it just did not meet the supervisor's expectations. *I think it's important for their self-esteem to know that they weren't actually wrong*.

With such important issues at stake it is of concern that tripartite meetings between student, supervisor and learning advisor are rare. One advisor talked of how useful such meetings were for all parties. She had opportunities to discuss writing issues with the supervisor and noted that *they pick up on advice you are giving about the process and you can see them sort of commenting on that and rehearsing that themselves and think well they will use that with their next student*. Regrettably, such encounters usually occur only when the supervisory relationship is in serious trouble.

The supervisory relationship

Much of the advisors' work concerns the *worried well*, postgraduate students unnecessarily worried about their writing ability, who just need reassurance and the chance to talk through their research with a sympathetic audience. *Very often they'll solve it themselves and then they'll say 'Thank you thank you, you've been wonderful'*.

However, there are numerous encounters that are precipitated by breakdowns in the supervisory relationship. One that is becoming increasingly common is what Wisker and Robinson refer to as an 'orphan' experience (2012: 2), where a supervisor or even a full supervisory team changes or leaves the university. The supervision then has to be picked up by colleagues. An advisor remarked they *don't really want to do it. They're doing it to be good sports and their degree of good sportedness varies hugely*. Often advisors are forced to act as interim supervisors.

While advisors regularly see situations that cause them concern, most are reluctant to approach the supervisors unless there are exceptional circumstances. Even so, this is a last resort. An advisor who had serious concerns about a student's emotional wellbeing emailed her every day and saw her weekly until the crisis had passed. To a large extent this reluctance can be ascribed to the fact that advisors regard their dealings with students as confidential, and students are rarely willing to give their consent for such an approach. However, there was general acknowledgement that it is

politically very difficult to feed student concern back to staff involved. *Staff are tetchy about interference outside the content area.* If difficulties persist or escalate there are *ostensibly* a number of avenues open to students but the inherent power imbalance in the student/supervisor relationship means that students are often reluctant to avail themselves of these remedies. *Sometimes they don't know how to, sometimes they think it's going to be more trouble than it's worth.*

Advisors who are linked to staff development units are able to provide feedback to supervisors about student concerns but often it is those supervisors most in need of guidance who are the least likely to attend these workshops. It is quite possible that because there are no channels in place for advisors to provide feedback, supervisors could remain unaware of student issues until it is too late to remedy the situation.

Institutional barriers limiting learning advisors' research and career progression

Research

Almost all the interviewees regretted not being able to devote more time to research. Very few had allocated research time although most were funded to attend conferences. Despite the lack of time allocation, most still engage in research activities *at the absolute margins of our jobs and in our own free time* because *it's what keeps us sane.* Advisors wanted to research their own work practices. There was general consensus that if they were to be competent practitioners, such research was necessary. They want an opportunity to reflect on what they do and modify their own practices as a result of that reflection but the short term urgency of student needs often overrides the long term importance of research. This is regrettable for, as numerous participants pointed out, research is necessary not only to inform teaching but also to raise the status of the profession.

The lack of interest in research carried out by advisors appears to be political. Of the 21 advisors interviewed, only two are classified as PBRF active. PBRF is the acronym for Performance Based Research Funding which is used to allocate government funding to universities according to the quantity and quality of their research outputs (Roa, Beggs, Williams, & Moller 2009). Only staff who are deemed PBRF active count toward funding. While advisors acknowledge that they do not miss the bureaucracy involved in participating in the funding rounds, their exclusion is still seen as both hurtful and detrimental to their careers. One noted *I can understand why the university wants us out – it's the realities of funding but it doesn't make me feel particularly good.* The result is that *nobody gives a hoot when we do publish.* The institutions' lack of interest in advisors' research has ramifications for their job satisfaction and career ambitions.

Career progression

One of the interviewees, an active researcher who has published widely, commented: *I've realised that in student learning the intention was always that we would not be like a department where if you did well you could manoeuvre and advance yourself.*

We would just be here to be tutors. She added that her desire for promotion was not about the money but about recognition for the work advisors do. This concept that promotion carries with it an acknowledgement for the worth of their contribution was reinforced by another advisor. Talking about the lack of promotion possibilities, she questioned *Does that signal something? Does that mean student learning, and researching student learning, is actually not recognised? Do they want to keep it as remedial and assistance?*

Another area of concern involved advisors' appointment as academic or general staff. In their report on a survey into learning centre practice in New Zealand in 2007, Cameron and Catt reported that approximately 60 percent of advisors were on academic contracts, 30 percent on general contracts and the remainder on individual agreements. This was roughly the breakdown among the interviewees although a number expressed concern that their academic status could be in jeopardy, particularly in light of projected mergers with the libraries. Most of those employed on general contracts would prefer to be classified as academics. At one of the Centres it had been suggested by management that any new staff be appointed as general staff members. Although this was successfully countered by current staff who view it as a *dumbing down* of their work, there are no guarantees that such proposals will not surface again.

The move to merge learning centres with university libraries was also viewed as detrimental to career progression. In addition, there are concerns that it will prove difficult to attract well-qualified motivated staff to learning centres in the future, an issue underlined by Challis et al. (2009). There were also fears that the position of learning advisor could be seen as an interim post while the holder was looking for a *real job*.

Marginalisation and vulnerability

Marginalisation

Part of the difficulty that advisors experienced was that their existence did not appear to be widely known. One advisor surveyed postgraduate supervisors at her university and found that only 40 percent of them were aware of the support available for postgraduates. Another noted that staff who had been at his institution for nearly a decade had only just discovered the Centre. The large staff turnover at most universities was also problematic. Contacts that had been established with faculty staff needed to be re-established on a regular basis. Sending general emails was viewed as inefficient and irritating. The move to integrate learning centres with university libraries was also seen as a barrier to promoting their work. One participant noted *we've lost visibility ... we've been completely submerged and lost our identity*; another felt that the merger had resulted in the loss of *their public face*.

Vulnerability

A few of the advisors felt that their positions were not at risk but they were the minority. One noted that she did not fear redundancy because their unit was small and

inexpensive and the importance of their contribution was widely recognised. Others who were not concerned about job security argued that they had built up strong relationships around the university at all levels and this should be sufficient to guarantee their jobs. However, even these advisors who felt reasonably secure were aware that their positions could easily become precarious. *Learning support areas are always in danger basically and when it comes down to the crunch and there's not much money, can we just be sliced off the side?*

Others were not so sanguine. *I don't think there has been a moment in the last five years when I felt at the beginning of one year that I would survive to the end of the next. Going to the trade unions has become part of the job description.* There were very real concerns about the financial cost of the Centres. Advisors felt that they were regarded by some as a waste of university money and were conscious that they did not contribute directly to university coffers, *the university really likes people who bring in money.* In difficult financial times it is easy for institutions to rid themselves of ancillary research and teaching services so the fact that advisors were regarded as peripheral contributed to their sense of unease. *So we're older. We're not young and sexy so I think we take too much money in wages.*

Another issue which contributed to advisors' sense of insecurity was the vagueness around their professionalism. One advisor noted that although she was highly regarded at her university she still felt like a *second class citizen*:

I think there is something quite deeply ingrained in the role because it's that kind of helping and facilitating role ... and maybe the language that is used leads people in that role to thinking that somehow they are not quite as good whether or not they are treated that way. I think it is quite subtle and the lack of being able to say 'here is my clearly defined role' and 'here are the well-recognised qualifications and experiences that stand behind me' because people came into this through different routes.

Others echoed the concern about the disciplinary status of language support, that they were not viewed as a profession and that this was one of the reasons for the continual restructuring.

Discussion

This research accords with the evidence put forward in the literature that learning advisors are, on the whole, not highly regarded, and the area of language support at universities is not accorded the attention it deserves. This, of course, does not apply to all advisors. There are many including those in management who do value the advisors and the work they do very highly, particularly at two of the country's universities. However, at one of these institutions advisors are appointed as general staff, not particularly well paid and not given any time allocation for research. So while they are well regarded, this does not translate into any real material benefits. At the other universities, unfortunately, knowledge about language support work appears to be limited. Indeed for some discipline staff, knowledge of the existence of student learning centres is limited. This has serious ramifications for the advisors themselves and the students they serve.

Because most academics have little understanding of the complexities of academic language, they view it from the technisist perspective as something mechanical that can to be easily fixed. There is little understanding that language and thought cannot be separated. Chanock comments:

Frequently our centres seem to be regarded as a form of a crash repair shop where welding, panel-beating and polishing can be carried out on students' texts - an idea that makes sense only if you regard the text as a vehicle for the writer's thoughts and separable from the thoughts themselves (2007: 273).

Woodward-Kron (2007: 255) cites an instruction to a learning advisor, 'Fix the grammar. Don't touch the content'. The devaluing of the advisors' work, and hence of the advisors themselves, impacts on their ability to assist their students as much as they would wish.

This seems to have reached a stage where advisors are not willing to approach academics directly despite having, as one put it, *so much to offer*. One way around this is to work with students, raising their self confidence to a level that the students themselves could address concerns directly with supervisors and lecturers. While this appears a sound pedagogical approach to adopt, there are issues with it. While advisors appear to be low down on the hierarchical order at universities, as staff members they should have more standing with their colleagues. If they find it difficult to challenge academic staff, it is unlikely to be easier for students. In particular the majority of international students and those drawn from non-Western backgrounds are unlikely to see this as an option.

On the whole, advisors appear to have adopted a *softly, softly* approach trying to get a foot in the door by accommodating academic staff needs, adopting to a certain extent the servant mantel. Advisors are trapped in a vicious circle. Because they are not highly regarded, their concerns are not treated with the respect they deserve. Because they are effectively prevented from raising these issues, they continue to be treated as low grade language teachers by many academics. However, I do not believe that advisors can simply be viewed as victims. They are, to some extent, responsible for the unenviable position in which they now find themselves. The combination of an ever-accommodating approach to faculty requests, and a reluctance to confront problematic issues with staff as equals, has led to the not unjustified perception of them as filling a menial role.

It is possible that advisors are not respected because they do not show sufficient reason as to why they deserve such respect. They are aware that their work gives them a perspective across the institutions they serve, and that few are better positioned to identify and describe student challenges (Holt, Palmer & Challis 2011; Chanock 2007), and they are also fully aware of the intellectual rigour of the work they do. If they are to develop a strong sense of identity they need to be acknowledged by their academic peers but even more importantly they need to overcome their own perception that they are second-class citizens. If one New Zealand university regards the work of its advisors as teaching, and views them as PBRF eligible, other universities could surely be persuaded to adopt the same stance. This

acknowledgment of the importance of advisors' research and teaching would go a long way toward increasing the overall status of the profession.

A strong sense of identity is essential if advisors are to bring the issue of language support to the forefront. From identity 'comes a sense of agency, of empowerment to move ideas forward, to reach goals or even transform the context' (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009: 183). I suggest that another essential improvement that needs to be put in place is a formal networking structure. Chanock argues that what is needed is 'regular institutional means of bringing [learning advisors and faculties] into the same conversation to share what we know on a basis of mutual respect' (2007: 274). However, I believe there are also a number of other strategies that could be implemented that are more directly under the control of the learning advisors themselves. These include:

- finding a champion. Those learning advisors who feel themselves acknowledged and supported have friends in high places.
- uniting to form a strong unified representative body to take up the cudgels. New Zealand is too small to have a number of associations representing the concerns of learning advisors at different levels.
- attending and presenting at wider educational conferences that discipline lecturers attend. Talking only to each other is preaching to the converted.
- inviting discipline staff (with time allowances) to lead research projects.

However, the main difficulty advisors face is that their ability to affect change appears, to a large extent, to be dependent on the personal relationships they build with staff members. While advisors may be valued for their individual work, the language support work itself is not valued. This means that a change in managerial positions and a downturn in the economy have the potential to undermine their work and job security. It is simply not sufficient to persuade university staff that *advisors* are doing a good job. They need to convince university staff that language support is a *job* worth doing. Turner notes (2011: 31) 'there is a need for a much more robust conceptualisation of language work, particularly in the university context'. Unless the technisist model is successfully challenged there will be no institutional recognition for the 'intellectual rigour and arduous labour' (ibid.) it involves, and advisors will remain institutionally marginalized.

Works cited

- Alexander, K 2000 'The changing face of accountability: monitoring and assessing institutional performance in higher education' *The journal of higher education* 71: 44, 411–3
- Allison, D, L Cooley, J Lewkowicz & D Nunan 1998 'Dissertation writing in action: the development of a dissertation writing support program for ESL graduate research students' *English for specific purposes* 17: 2, 199–217
- ATLAANZ 2012 *ATLAANZ professional practice document*, at <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbXhdGxhYW56fGd4OjNkNDExNTc1NDJjYmQ0NDI> (accessed 1 September 2013)

- Baynham, M 2000 'Academic writing in new and emergent discipline areas', in M Lea and B Stierer (eds) *Student writing in higher education*, Buckingham: Open University P, 17–31
- Beauchamp, C & L Thomas 2009 'Understanding teacher identity: an overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education' *Cambridge journal of education* 39: 2, 175–89
- Borland H & A Pearce 2002 'Identifying key dimensions of language and cultural disadvantage at university' *Australian review of applied linguistics* 25: 2, 101–27
- Cameron, C & C Catt 2008 *Learning centre practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand*. Report on workshop presented at 2008 ATLAANZ Conference, Wellington
- Carter S & J Bartlett-Trafford 2007 'Who are we? Aotearoa New Zealand tertiary learning advisors talk about themselves', in E Manalo, J Bartlett-Trafford & S Crozier (eds) *Walking a tightrope: the balancing act of learning advising*. Refereed proceedings of the 2007 Association of Tertiary learning advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand, Auckland: ATLAANZ, 39–61
- Casanave, C 2008 'Learning participatory practices in graduate school: some perspective-taking by a mainstream editor', in C Casanave & X Li (eds) *Learning the literacy practices of graduate school: insiders' reflections on academic enculturation*, Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 14–31
- Challis, D, D Holt & S Palmer 2009 'Teaching and learning centres: towards maturation' *Higher education research and development* 28: 4, 371–83
- Chanock, K 2007 'What academic language and learning advisors bring to the scholarship of teaching and learning: Problems and possibilities for dialogue with the disciplines' *Higher education research and development* 26: 3, 269–80
- Churchman, D & S King 2009 'Academic practice in transition: hidden stories of academic identity' *Teaching in higher education* 14: 5, 507–16
- Clerehan, R 2007 'Language staff lose academic ranking: what's new managerialism got to do with it?' *Journal of academic language and learning* 1: 1, A68–77
- Craswell, G & A Bartlett 2002 'Changing identities: LAS advisers', in B James, A Percy, J Skillen & N Trivett (eds) *Changing identities*. Refereed proceedings of 2002 academic language advisers conference, Wollongong: U of Wollongong
- Craven, E 2009 'International students: sojourners or immigrants? A changing role for tertiary learning advisors', in MAF Silvester (ed) *Transformations*. Proceedings of the 2008 annual international conference of the association of tertiary learning advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand, Auckland: ATLAANZ, 13–20
- Crozier, S 2007 'Out damned spot: removing the taint of the remedial from learning development', in C Fraser and L Ayo (eds) *Anchoring our practice: perspectives, partnerships, projections*. Proceedings of the 2006 association of tertiary learning advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand conference, Auckland: ATLAANZ, 2–13
- Emerson, L & Clerehan R 2009 'Writing program administration outside the North American context', in D Strickland & J Gunner (eds) *The writing program interrupted: making space for critical discourse*, Portsmouth NH, United States: Boynton/Cook, 166–74
- Goodfellow, R 2004 'Online literacies and learning: operational, cultural and critical dimensions' *Language and education* 18: 5, 379–99
- Guri-Rosenblit, S, H Šebková & U Teichler 2007 'Massification and diversity of higher education systems: Interplay of complex dimensions' *Higher education policy* 20: 373–89
- Hyland, K 2004 'Disciplinary interactions: metadiscourse in L2 postgraduate writing' *Journal of second language writing* 13, 133–51
- Hyland, K 2009 'Genre and academic writing in the disciplines', in Chiung-Wen Chang (ed) *Proceedings of the fourth international symposium on ESP and its teaching*, China: Wuhan UP
- Kovacic, Z & J Green 2004 'A strategy for reaching students and increasing their motivation', in *Proceedings of the Pan Commonwealth forum*, Dunedin, New Zealand, 1–12, at http://www.col.org/pcf3/Papers/PDFs/Kovacic_%20Green.pdf (accessed 1 September 2013)

- Laur, D 2010 'Collaborating with postgraduate supervisors', in V van der Ham, L Sevillano & L George (eds) *Shifting sands, firm foundations*. Proceedings of the 2009 Association of tertiary learning advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand conference, Auckland: ATLAANZ, 18–30
- Lea, M & B Stierer 2000 'Editors' introduction', in M Lea & B Stierer (eds) *Student writing in higher education: new contexts*, Buckingham: Open UP, 1–13
- Lea, R 2004 'Academic literacies: a pedagogy for course design' *Studies in higher education* 29: 6, 739–56
- Leki, I & J Carson 1994 'Students' perceptions of EAP writing instruction and writing needs across the disciplines' *TESOL quarterly* 28: 1, 81–101
- North, S 2005 'Different values, different skills?: a comparison of essay writing by students from arts and science backgrounds' *Studies in higher education* 30: 5, 517–33
- Palmer, S, D Holt & D Challis 2011 'Strategic leadership of teaching and learning centres: from reality to ideal' *Higher education research and development* 30: 6, 807–21
- Paltridge, B 2002 'Academic literacies and changing university communities' *Revista canaria de estudios ingleses* April, 15–28
- Parkinson, P 2008 'Space for performing teacher identity: through the lens of Kafka and Hegel' *Teachers and teaching: theory and practice*, 14: 1, 51–60
- Pennycook A 1997 'Vulgar pragmatism, critical pragmatism and EAP' *English for specific purposes* 16: 4, 253–69
- Raines, A 1991 'Out of the woods: traditions in the teaching of writing' *TESOL quarterly* 25, 407–30
- Roa, T, J Beggs, J Williams & H Moller 2009 'New Zealand's Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) model undermines Maori research' *Journal of the royal society of New Zealand* 39: 4, 233–38
- Robotham, D 2008 'Stress among higher education students: towards a research agenda'. *Higher education* 56, 735–46
- Ryan, J & R Viète 2009 'Respectful interactions: learning with international students in the English-speaking academy' *Teaching in higher education* 14: 3, 303–14
- Stevenson, M & B Kokkin 2007 'Pinned to the margins?: the contextual shaping of academic language and learning practice' *Journal of academic language and learning* 1: 1, A44–54
- Strauss, P & J Walton 2005 'Authorship, voice and the EAL thesis', in E Manalo & G Wong-Toi (eds), *Communication skills in university education: the international dimension*, Auckland: Pearson Education, 51–61
- Tones, M, J Fraser, R Elder & K White 2009 'Supporting mature-aged students from a low socioeconomic background' *Higher education* 58, 505–29
- Turner, J 2011 *Language in the academy: cultural reflexivity and Intercultural dynamics* Bristol: Multilingual Matters
- Tynjälä, P, J Välimaa & A Sarja 2003 'Pedagogical perspectives on the relationship between higher education and working life' *Higher education* 46, 147–66
- Wingate, U & C Tribble, C 2012 'The best of both worlds?: towards an English for academic purposes/academic literacies writing pedagogy' *Studies in higher education* 37: 4, 481–95
- Wisker, G & G Robinson 2013 'Doctoral 'orphans': nurturing and supporting the success of postgraduates who have lost their supervisors' *Higher education research & development* 32: 2, 300–13
- Woodward-Kron, R 2007 'Negotiating meanings and scaffolding learning: writing support for non-English speaking background postgraduate students' *Higher education research and development* 26: 3, 253–68

Zamel, V 1998 'Strangers in academia: the experiences of faculty and ESL students across the curriculum', in V Zamel and R Spack (eds) *Negotiating academic literacies*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 249–64