Transformation of student academic support at the Waitakere campus of Unitec: Issues and directions

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Abstract

Academic advising has transformed to encompass a greater emphasis on retention and completion, connection with community, and ensuring a quality student experience for an increasingly diverse population of students across a number of demographic dimensions. Unitec offers both trade focused and traditional academic certificate, diploma and degree programmes in Auckland. This year a new multicultural team of five academic advisors was created to provide a holistic focus that facilitates equity of access to a diverse range of students at the rapidly expanding Waitakere campus. This paper describes the guiding philosophy and structure of this team, its relationship to other learning support services at Unitec, and reflects on issues encountered in this first year of operation, and our future directions.

Introduction

The profession of academic advising has become increasingly complex over time. Advisors currently assist students to become accustomed to academic disciplines and modes of thought, and to integrate this with what they know so they can make sense of their educational experience (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) recommend that academic advising units should record their local growth histories. These histories should be shared with the wider advising community so that connections between national and international development of the profession can be made. Academic advising has changed in response to the increasing diversity of students (Upcraft & Stephens, 2000). The degree of diversity may vary across geographical regions. Therefore it is necessary to understand the local profile of students as this may differ from national profiles (Teitelbaum, 2000; Upcraft & Stephens, 2000). This paper is a description of the establishment and first year of operation of a multicultural academic advising team located within a broader student services team at the West Auckland campus of Unitec.

Industry and our local context

Unitec is a tertiary education institution that offers both trade focused and traditional academic certificate, diploma and degree programmes in Auckland. There are three campuses: the main one at Mt Albert, one in Henderson, West Auckland, and recently a small campus has been established in Takapuna on the North Shore of Auckland. The Henderson campus was established in 2002 by the city council in response to the need for a tertiary educational institution in Waitakere city (Unitec, 2007).

Waitakere city is part of the Auckland region and is New Zealand's fifth largest city. It is ethnically diverse with increasing populations of Asian, Pacific Island and Māori residents. The population is relatively young (61percent were aged under 40 in 2006), and 34 percent were born overseas in 2006. Compared with national figures, educational attainment in Waitakere city is lower as approximately a fifth of school leavers left school with little or no formal qualifications (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). Therefore tertiary education providers in Waitakere city need to consider the ethnic diversity, students with English as a second language, a young demographic and the considerable number of students who are not familiar with tertiary education institutional culture.

Advising practices should follow the local context (Singh, 2000) and the local goals should be located within the institution's values and aims (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). The Unitec academic strategy aims to "educate people for work, in work and through work" and to "ensure that students can learn, grow and succeed within a consistent and supportive environment" (p. 2). The guiding culture and philosophy (Unitec, March, 2008) includes the directive to:
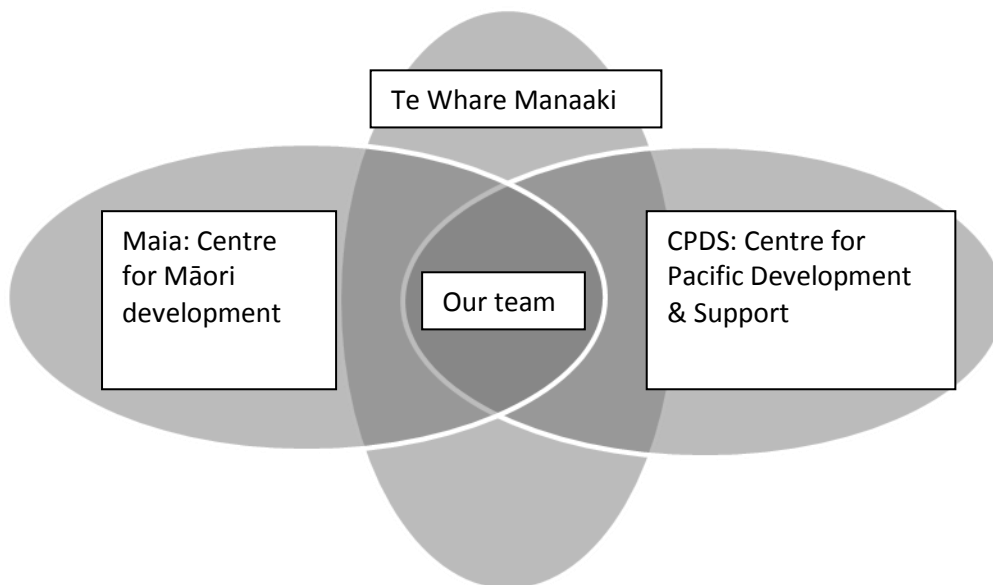
> Recognise and celebrate the diverse backgrounds of our students and commit ourselves to providing them with a socially, culturally and spiritually responsive environment. In particular, we will seek to provide excellent academic and pastoral support for, and to interact with, students in whatever ways best suit their learning needs and their physical and intellectual capacities (p. 3).

Part of the key performance indicators are that there will be an increase in students accessing learning/pastoral support at the Waitakere campus (Unitec, 2007). This support is particularly important for Pacific Island, Māori and migrant students. Up until this year the learning service providers were Maia, the Centre for Pacific Development and Support (CPDS), and Te Tari Awhina (TTA). In 2001 Maia and TTA worked together to support Māori and Pacific students (prior to the establishment of CPDS) (Pelling & Utumapu-McBride, 2004). Linda Aumua, the current head of CPDS says of the establishment of the unit that, "it evolved ... didn't really establish...but if you need a date when two Pacific people decided to bring their desks together in building 48 - it was in 2001" (Personal communication, August 9, 2008). There is a history of collaborative support between these learning service providers. In 2006 academic development support at Waitakere was provided by one full time staff member from Maia and TTA staff were rostered part time to provide service to the Waitakere students. Due to the growing demand for the services of TTA at the Mt

Albert and Waitakere campuses, a new team was established in 2008 to be based full time within Te Whare Manaaki student services at the Waitakere campus (Unitec, 2008).

Te Whare Manaaki - student support services at Waitakere

To support students, especially those who are unfamiliar with tertiary education requirements, Te Whare Manaaki student support services at the Waitakere campus are located together to provide a one-stop-shop model of service provision. This model is underpinned by the philosophy of holistic care where students can access both academic and pastoral care. A student satisfaction report showed that students were positive towards this model and felt that it contributed to their success (Unitec, 2006). Figure 1 shows the team structure and the list below describes the services available within Whare Manaaki.

Te Whare Manaaki

Maia: Centre for Māori development

Our team

CPDS: Centre for Pacific Development & Support

Figure 1. Overlapping team structure of Te Whare Manaaki with Maia and CPDS

Student funding
- Advises students on financial matters such as Study Link, Work and Income, Scholarships and Awards

Career and employment
- Facilitates student assessment of their values, interests and skills for making informed decisions about employment, training and study

Māori development centre (Maia)
- Focuses holistic support on Māori students, their whanau and staff to achieve well-being through academic achievement, career advancement, and cultural validation

- This also includes support of any student or staff member who identifies with kaupapa Māori
- Whanaungatanga (relationship building) events include shared lunches, kapa haka and noho marae (marae stay)

Centre for Pacific development and support (CPDS)
- Provides holistic support of Pacific peoples through academic and pastoral care to achieve academic success, and career advancement
- Organised events and clubs aim to strengthen the Pacific student community

Te Tari Awhina learning centre
- Provides academic assistance to develop skills to study independently and successfully
- Rostered on a part time basis

General academic development
- Provides academic assistance to develop skills to study independently and successfully
- Available full time

English additional language support
- Basic grammar, conversational language and spelling assistance for students with English as an additional language
- Embedded within this support is guidance on New Zealand colloquial language and culture, and issues relating to students' integration into New Zealand society

Disability liaison
- Supports students with disabilities to maximise their academic potential

Counselling
- Helps students address issues that may affect wellbeing and academic progress

Chaplaincy
- Guidance is offered to students and staff of all faiths and beliefs

Student Union
- Assists students make maximise their time at Unitec through services such as advocacy, events and clubs, student discounts, student job search and a free student magazine.

Extra services
- Student plus – a programme in which extended hours are offered on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings until 8pm
- A children's activity programme is run so that student parents are free to focus on their studies

The following section describes in more detail the academic development support staff.

The academic development team

Modern academic advisors come from a diverse range of academic and professional backgrounds (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). Having a range of experiences and skills within a team also helps meet a variety of student needs (Reinarz, 2000). The five full time and one part time members of our academic development team also reflect this diversity. The first member began in February, 2008 and the last member joined in September. We are listed as academic positions as academic advisors. In terms of individual backgrounds:

Centre for Pacific development and support
There are two Pasifika learning support advisors. One has a background in New Zealand literature and Pacific History. She worked at the Auckland University of Technology in student services, and at University of Auckland in multiple roles including Pacific mentor in the Department of History, High School Pasifika mentoring programmes, and as a Recruitment and Course Advisor.

The other has been at Unitec for four months and has previously worked at University of Auckland as a tutor at the Centre for Pacific Studies. He has been involved in a number of research projects on issues such as literacy, obesity amongst Pasifika teenagers and the effectiveness of Work and Income initiatives in reducing unemployment.

EAL focused support
The EAL support person has six years experience with EAL students at Unitec prior to joining the team. She is skilled in helping students cope with their English language course requirements and language requirements for adapting to life in New Zealand.

General
There are two general learning support advisors. One has a background in psychology and teaching English. She has experience with students through tutoring at the University of Auckland, and experience with educational materials development and teaching English during her ten years in Japan. The other joined the team in April of this year after spending 11 years teaching in foundation education with Unitec's School of Foundation Studies. He balances the pastoral and academic needs of students.

Maia
There is one Māori learning support advisor. She has a background in physical education and at secondary school taught physical education, Te Reo Māori, and assisted students with social studies, English and life skills. Currently she actively offers support for the pastoral, cultural and academic needs of Māori students and any students who identify with tikanga Māori.

Thus our team consists of advisors working together from three different teams (Maia, CPDS and Te Whare Manaaki – general and EAL support) that focus on different student groups.

Teitelbaum (2000) states that coordination of academic advising across units helps toward working on advising issues collaboratively. This is achieved at Te Whare Manaaki through members of the academic team being from Maia and CPDS, and also TTA connections are maintained as some TTA staff are still rostered part time for tutorials and in class workshops. In addition, minutes of the TTA meetings are shared between TTA and Te Whare Manaaki academic advisors.

Our service

In general we all provide academic development assistance to students through one-to-one tutorials (support friends welcome), generic academic skills workshops, and assignment specific in-class workshops that preferably include the participation of the class lecturer. Students may actively seek us out or be referred by staff. Our services include not only remedial level assistance but help to any student who wishes to improve. We focus on providing students with skills and strategies to obtain their goals rather than fixing mistakes.

There is also a focus on targeted populations of students. The presence of two CPDS staff in the team is part of the main CPDS strategy based on the Na Kuita (Fijian for octopus) model. This model strategically places Pasifika support within the mainstream. The strategy manifests in our team with the placement of two CPDS staff to work collaboratively as part of a one stop shop. The two staff members facilitate the CPDS to build a relationship with other staff in the student services. In addition the model also allows for the sprinkling of Pacific Academic Support all over Waitakere campus as it suits a multi-disciplinary campus institute (Talakai et al., 2008). The Pacific staff members facilitate tutorial sessions for the Talanoa Pasifika paper within the Bachelor of Social Practice, provide workshops for the Pasifika students' tutorial sessions for Nursing, and hold events such as a joint Māori and Pasifika financial information session and Pasifika BBQs. They also participate in CPDS events, such as graduation, across all of Unitec.

Māori student success is supported by Maia. On the Mt Albert campus Maia was established in July 1998 as one of Unitec's initiatives to improve the participation and success of Māori students on campus. Maia's mission statement is: Maia provides matauranga Māori leadership, education and support for all of Unitec's communities. Maia plays an important role in achieving one of Unitec's key strategic goals to "build the aspirations of Māori students and communities" (Unitec, 2007, p. 30). In practical terms institutional support is provided through activities such as guest lecturing on Te Tiriti o Waitangi, giving support at powhiri and organising and facilitating orientation events. Holistic support is about having a one stop shop system that students can feel comfortable about accessing. Maia operates to validate te ao Māori (Māori world-

view) and epistemologies in a traditionally Euro-centric context. Community engagement manifests in initiatives such as attendance at the ASB polyfest, many kōrero, the AUT Māori expo and free te reo Māori classes.

At Waitakere the Maia staff member notices the advantage of her location out at Waitakere:

> Being situated in with all the other services contributes to my accessibility to Māori students. I see them studying in the commons area and often stop and chat to see how their progress is, but in addition to this, students don't have to go looking for me in another location (as is the case for Maia at the Mt Albert campus), I'm just there, where they go for everything else.

She also points out the opportunity for professional development as a result of staff collaboration. She says of her role at Waitakere that:

> I am still part of a team, therefore, I can work collaboratively with my Whare Manaaki colleagues on projects. This allows the exchange of many things, one of them being wisdom from a range of perspectives. I can share wisdom from the perspective of a Māori world view that my colleagues might not have been aware of, and vice versa.

Our team structure allows us to share generic service provision in addition to services for targeted populations. In addition, as our team(s) are located together we are able to direct students easily to other services such as counselling, career guidance and financial assistance. Furthermore, our close proximity allows us to learn from each other and establish strong networks.

Issues and directions

This section describes some the issues most noticeable for our team in our daily work, and our plans to address these in the coming year.

English as another language

Many students do not speak English as their first language (Unitec, 2007). The lower level students study for a certificate or diploma in English. We have a part time language tutor who is available to support the lower level English language students with their literacy needs in relation to their study and everyday life in New Zealand. Even though English support is offered through tutorials and workshops on grammar checking, there is not enough time for all students to have appointments outside of classes, and grammar workshops are not well attended. Many of these students are adults with families who have to leave promptly after class to care for children.

A possible future direction would be to hold workshops focused on helping students to engage in a group discussion and to hold grammar checking strategies workshops in one of the guided study hours available within their programmes.

The other team members frequently see students who are non-native speakers of English in degree programmes such as nursing or social practice. Mostly their academic concerns are the same as those of native speakers such as organising their writing or learning referencing conventions. Other times their concerns are English language related such as use of tenses, understanding vocabulary, or checking for grammar they do not know is incorrect. In these individual tutorials, students can participate well as the session is tailored to the particular student. In classroom situations, however, students can often feel lost when they have to interact in groups. Students comment that they have trouble understanding conversations in groups and then in being able to express their ideas. These students also do not attend grammar checking workshops, possibly due to time constraints.

A possible future direction to assist these students could be to work with the course teacher to arrange a workshop at a suitable time that would focus on participating in group discussions and strategies for checking grammar in written work.

Multi-team membership tensions
One of the issues is that sitting within the matrix of two teams creates tension if any visions or plans disagree between the teams. Having to be accountable to the main CPDS body at Mt Albert, yet working daily within another team at Waitakere, creates disconnection at times with the central body for the CPDS and Maia staff members.

As a current and future direction regular meetings and constant communication via email or phone are needed. Even thought this can be time consuming, it is worth it to ensure quality of service to students.

The advisor from Maia points out that as part of two teams with very similar and yet very different objectives she constantly needs to reflect on how her work in either team might complement or contradict the objectives of the other. For example, generic workshops not targeted at Māori students may not validate a Māori world-view. In addition some of the development undertaken that is valuable to the success of one team might not be as valuable in the other team. Whilst the provision of funding to participate in dual manners of professional development has not been an issue, the provision of time for dual development has been overlooked. This is an issue for future discussion.

Establishing relationships
As the Waitakere campus increases in student numbers, it is important for Pacific and Māori students to have the opportunity to form supportive study groups. This year the Māori staff and student shared lunch was continued. This was also attended by non-Māori staff and students. Future directions for the Pacific students include using the Na Kuita Model and CPDS would like to look at forming a Pacific Students' Club as well as establishing a mentoring programme. In addition, we envisage establishing joint events and activities with CPDS and Whare Manaaki Staff to strengthen the staff networks.

Access to Maia services by non-Māori
Although Maia is underpinned by Kaupapa Māori principles, service is not refused to non-Māori who identify with this. The tension here is that many non-Māori in the past have enjoyed the way Maia works and taken advantage of the services provided. This is positive; however, it reduces availability of service for Māori students, and therefore sustains disparities.

The future direction is to continue to manage this on a case by case basis to ensure equity of service delivery. This may be less of a problem in the future as there are many full time academic advising staff at Waitakere now, whereas in previous times the only full time staff member was from Maia. In addition, the staff members at the front desk direct Māori students and any others who specifically ask for the Maia staff member to her, and they refer non-Māori students to other available staff.

Researching and teaching balance
It is well noted that academic advisors are under pressure to perform in both research and teaching areas (Kreber, 2006). This pressure arises in part from wider economic pressures that transform businesses and higher education alike towards greater efficiency, cost effectiveness and competitiveness (Teitelbaum, 2000). Reductions in funding have been accompanied by the promotion of accountability and performance indicators to measure it (Polster & Newson, 1998). This pressure also exists from the movement to develop the scholarly identity of the academic advising profession. Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) state, "we believe that all those who practice academic advising have a responsibility to also participate in scholarly endeavours related to academic advising" (p. 44). They consider it important to consider the identity of academic advising in terms of its practical service, the theoretical base underlying practice and continued scholarly investigation of practice. They see academic advisors as being in a good position to research questions (alone or collaboratively) based on practice. Furthermore, advisors can bring their diversity of perspectives into research to develop useful applications. Institution specific research also needs to be located within the wider professional community. Use of, and participation in scholarship should be supported by administrators for both the development of the advisors and for the field itself (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). The Unitec academic strategy values the "inter-dependence of teaching and research" (Unitec, March, 2008, p. 10). Research is an important activity to promote research informed practice that will contribute to student success.

Directions for next year include to carefully plan availability for research and student contact hours. Research will be based on issues related to service provision for students. Opportunities for participating in relationship building events will also form part of the direction for the coming year. I have noticed the importance placed on relationship building between staff and students in the Maia and CPDS staff.

Evaluation

Universities are increasingly modelling their practices on those of the corporate world where efficiency, effectiveness and profit are valued (Kreber, 2006). However, corporate based measures of evaluation will not capture the complete picture of good practice within our service at Unitec. It is necessary to use multiple measures of evaluation to consider multicultural perspectives on good practice. Knowledge is related to culture and value systems so evaluation should contain elements that are generated from these values (House, 2008). The general evaluation of Te Whare Manaaki includes focus on the provision of interconnected services that represents the diversity found in students and the community. This diversity is also reflected in the staff.

The evaluation of Whare Manaaki involves both common milestones and targeted achievements. Common milestones across interrelated teams include professional development, research projects, contact hours and the provision of services. Targeted achievements include retention and completion statistics for Māori and Pacific Island students that reach projected increases. The one stop shop model also helps to keep costs down through the sharing of spaces, resources and expertise.

Evaluations over the coming year will include not only the quantitative measures such as number of contact hours, workshops and student demographics, but also qualitative measures of the students' experiences. These evaluations may be conducted within each sub team to be inclusive of the cultural values that underpin service provision.

Workshops on demand
A number of authors have noted low attendance at generic academic skills workshops that are not embedded within a discipline-specific curriculum (Bartlett & Chanock, 2003; Singh, 2000). This is problematic because the proportion of learning development services resources used to create these workshops is disproportionate to the number of students using them. In the first year of our team, we also noticed low attendance at generic workshops. It is difficult to schedule workshops at times that will suit many students and there is a wide variety of course class times during the week, and even within classes some students may be on off-campus placements while others begin new topics in class. During tutorials students have mentioned an interest in the workshops but said that they were not scheduled at times they could attend.

Like other institutions, we also aim to increase our course-specific workshops in collaboration with course lecturers. In response to the inefficiency of scheduled generic workshops, we are also considering introducing a modified procedure for these workshops. We will still offer these workshops by scheduling fewer of them and encouraging students to gather at least three students together and arrange the workshop time with one of us. Workshops on demand will enable students to come with their friends and possibly work on the same assignment. This would make the workshop more context specific. In addition, workshops on demand would also help us to match Māori and Pacific Island groups with the appropriate academic development lecturers.

Conclusion

This transition year from mostly part time academic advising staff to a full-time multicultural team has progressed relatively smoothly. We have gained an understanding of our students' needs and the possibilities for collaborative work within our team and with other staff members. The directions identified provide exciting challenges for the development of quality service to the rich diversity of Unitec's students.

Acknowledgements

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