

Collaborating with postgraduate supervisors

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Abstract

Contrary to the commonly-held perception that learning support is merely a remedial proofreading service, Postgraduate Learning Advisors have the capacity to contribute impartial, institution-wide expertise as sounding boards throughout the doctoral journey. Currently, however, the confidential nature of our role means we frequently work in isolation, having to deduce whether a supervisor's comment such as 'meaning unclear' calls for simple rephrasing of a sentence or reconceptualisation of the entire argument. Moreover, students' needs often extend beyond the written draft itself, blurring the boundaries between 'learning support' and 'supervision'. By presenting a student scenario, the findings of a recent survey on postgraduate coordinators' attitudes towards learning support, and informal responses from ATLAANZ members, this paper investigates the possibility of collaborating more closely with doctoral supervisors in order to best support them support their students.

Introduction

Helping undergraduate students succeed at university, in Kate Chanock's words, to make the transition from "mystery to mastery" (2002, p. 1), constitutes a significant part of tertiary learning advisors' roles. Learning support centres generally offer introductory workshops on everything from study routines and time management to writing essays and exam preparation. They also deliver customised programmes within core courses, and conduct one-to-one consultations on a regular basis (Craswell & Bartlett, 2001). Less well-known is the support Learning Advisors provide for postgraduate students, who – having successfully mastered the academy's rules on one level – are now embarking on a further journey with new mysteries of its own.

At Victoria, University of Wellington (VUW), between February 2008² and October 2009, a total of 2841 students attended 10235 one-to-one consultations with Student Learning Support Service (SLSS) advisors (Student Learning Support Service, 2009b). Of these, 130 Honours or Diploma students, 331 Master's students, and 77 doctoral candidates – in all, 538 postgraduates – attended 3078 appointments: 19% of our clientele taking up 30% of our time (Student Learning Support Service, 2009b). This demand, particularly at the doctoral level where candidates are expected to produce

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² When we began keeping records online.

original work, occasions a number of issues for Learning Advisors to consider, not least that our role may – over time – end up not dissimilar to that of a supervisor. Beginning with a postgraduate student-Learning Advisor scenario, this paper outlines a recent survey canvassing academics’ understanding of what learning support entails, followed by informal feedback from ATLAANZ members on their experiences of the Learning Advisor/student/supervisor relationship.

Postgraduate learning support

For many postgraduate students and academics, there appears to be a perception that ‘learning support’ is solely a remedial service (Clerehan, 2007). VUW currently has over 4000 postgraduate enrolments, the majority of whom complete their higher degrees without recourse to our services other than occasional workshops on topics of interest such as research proposals and the like (SLSS, 2009a). At best, postgraduates do not require learning support. At worst, they consider they *should* not require it, which places those referred to SLSS in an awkward position, as evidenced by the following scenario:

Subject: Meeting

I am a new PhD student at VUW, having started in March this year. This mail has reference to your conversation with my supervisor, Dr ____.

I wish to improve my writing skills, which is very essential for my thesis. So I was wondering whether we would be able to meet a couple of times and sort this problem out.

I understand that my writing is not very academic and this is a serious problem. I hope to rectify it as soon as possible.

Figure 1. Student email to Learning Advisor

The student¹, whom I will call John, was not averse to the notion of “rectifying” problems *per se*; he was, however, mortified to have been referred for learning support. Moreover, at our initial meeting, it became clear that any attempt to improve John’s writing would be complicated by his feelings about his supervisor: reluctant awe (in recognition of his international reputation in the field) coupled with resentment that his feedback, exemplified in Figure 2 below, seemed to make no allowance that this was John’s very first attempt at a literature review:

¹ An International doctoral scholarship recipient, who had completed a Master’s degree in his home country, entirely by coursework.

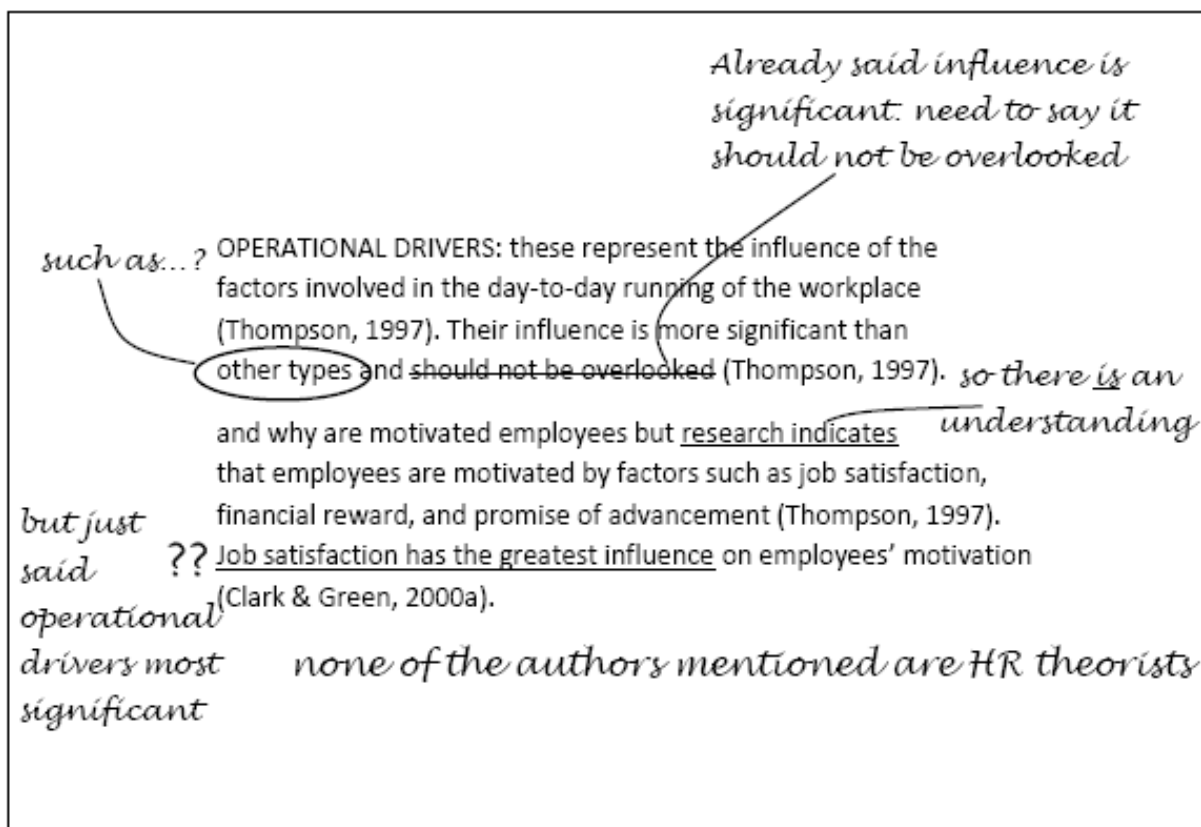


Figure 2. Supervisor's feedback¹ on student's draft

In fact, one could argue that the supervisory comments above demonstrate considerable appreciation of the writer's inexperience. The marginalia challenge John to clarify his statements, reinforcing the fact (as Learning Advisors well know) that making one's work "more academic" has as much to do with thinking as with writing. Accordingly, the supervisor seeks to initiate academic debate as a step towards helping the novice develop independence as a researcher (Dlaskova, Miroso, & Murachver, 2008; Grant, 2003). From the student's perspective, however, the barrage of (barely legible) notes² on every single page was totally demoralising.

The supervisor-student interaction has long been recognised as a power relationship (Grant, 2005; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes, & Creighton, 2003), one which often remains "uninterrogated" (McWilliam & Palmer, 1995, p. 32). Ideally, expectations should be negotiated at the outset of the candidature, yet cultural and interpersonal assumptions tend to remain "unknowable" (Grant, 2003, p. 185). In terms of the resultant potential for "obstacles and derailments [in] communication", Barbara Grant (2003, p. 184) awards both parties equal power. For example, in the scenario above, the first-time supervisor presumably considered he was providing

¹ Content altered, but tenor representative.

² Not all of which are, in themselves, well articulated. Arguably, the top RH comment should read, "no need to say [influence] should not be overlooked". Moreover, only one, the directive to broaden the literature search ("*none of the authors mentioned here...*"), is of any relevance at this early draft stage.

“constructive criticism” (Dlaskova, Miroso, & Murachver, 2008, p. 3), with the decision to refer John to SLSS an obvious next step to ensure satisfactory progress towards doctoral completion. Had the supervisor talked through his feedback, rather than depositing the annotated draft in the student’s pigeonhole, resultant tensions might have been avoided. As it was, John regarded the comments as “rude” and his referral to SLSS a sign of disrespect for the educational standards of his home country. As Grant (2003) notes,

In the delicate zone between encouragement and discipline that makes up much of supervision, the workings of identity and desire provide fertile ground for misreadings, resentments, confusions. (p. 187)

The dilemma for the Learning Advisor is how to negotiate a place within such a “differently positioned” relationship (Grant, 2005, p. 338). In attempting to serve both masters, Learning Advisors are akin to Wenger’s concept of “broker”, working on the boundaries” (2002, as cited in Loads, 2007, p. 242). Although not all situations are as complex as the scenario above, even everyday advice about how to structure an argument or when to begin revising segues into the realm of quasi-supervision. Yet learning support is confidential; supervisors only know of our involvement if students share that information. Of the 77 PhD candidates supported by SLSS during 2008-2009, three-way dialogue (student/supervisor/Learning Advisor) occurred in relation to only the six highest-users (who attended more than 40 individual appointments over that period). Similar interaction might well have benefited the further twenty students who attended between 20-40 appointments, and others as a one-off, in order to ensure we were on the right track. In this way, Learning Advisors could act as a further member of the supervisory team (Grant, 2003), serving as an impartial sounding board, and, if necessary, mediating between student and supervisor to facilitate understanding.

In this case, I suspected Dr _____ was oblivious to his student’s reaction, yet John would not permit me to broach anything other than thesis-related matters such as “ratio of literature review to Research Proposal as a whole”. Accordingly, I endeavoured to support John in isolation as best I could: focusing on how to refine the literature search, synthesise material and restructure the literature review to justify the proposed research project. By our next meeting, however, frustration levels had escalated: John reported that his revised literature review (not unexpectedly, to my mind) had received “just as many comments” as the first, and his supervisor was now being deliberately unhelpful, typically responding to questions about research design, for example, with, “It’s your project; you decide.” Despite my recommendation that John seek third-party advice from the Head of School or university mediator, academic records reveal that he “abandoned” his qualification shortly thereafter and presumably left the country, without further contact with SLSS.

Collaborating with supervisors

In an attempt to foster greater awareness of how Learning Advisors can support academics to support their students, I undertook a survey of postgraduate coordinators in November 2009 via VUW's Faculty of Graduate Research mailing list (69 Bcc emails, 22 replies: a 35% response rate). The study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee and all responses were treated confidentially. The questionnaire had three parts:

- Are you aware of existing SLSS support for postgraduates? YES/NO
- In which areas do you consider a learning advisor could support postgraduate students?
(5-point Likert scale, ranging from '1: strongly agree' to '5: strongly disagree')
- Are you open to the possibility of collaborating with learning advisors?
YES/NO.

Academics' awareness of learning support

SLSS offers a range of postgraduate programmes: specialist seminars on topics such as Research Proposals, Literature Reviews, Ethical Approval, Qualitative and Quantitative Research, Relationships with Supervisors, Database Searches, and Academic Integrity; thesis-writing workshops; one-to-one appointments on two campuses; and *PostgradLife*, a student-centred website with online resources and links. Although 60% of respondents (13/22) knew about the research skills seminars series (its brochure disseminated via the postgraduate coordinators' mailing list), and 50% knew of the web-based support, less than a quarter were aware of our 'bread-and-butter', daily 50 minute one-to-one consultations. Representative remarks ranged from "Basically I've been unaware of these resources" to "very handy to now be aware of all the stuff you offer due to filling in this questionnaire!", while others advocated having an annual SLSS newsletter or "orientation session" to notify staff of available support. Comments expressing dissatisfaction with the delivery of tutor-training and academic writing courses revealed a further level of ignorance, in that SLSS is involved in neither. The general lack of academics' understanding (60% overall) may be a direct result of the confidential nature of our service; students know full well what we do.

The second survey question investigated academics' appreciation of the range of services Learning Advisors typically provide during one-to-one appointments, with the findings presented here in two parts: research skills and quasi-supervision.

Skills-based support

As expected, the majority of academics regarded the prime function of Learning Advisors as providing "technical" linguistic and writing assistance (Chanock, East, & Maxwell, 2004), particularly for non-native speakers of English, as illustrated in Figure 3 below:

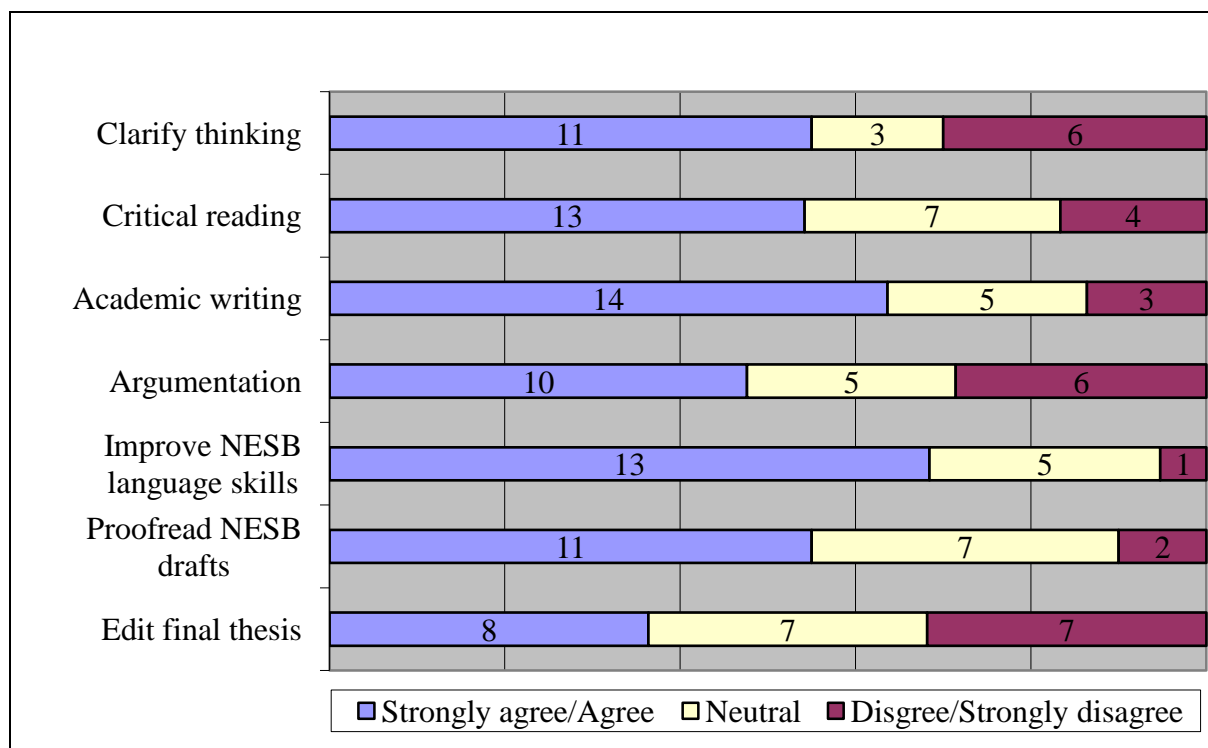


Figure 3. Research skills: ‘I consider learning advisors could support PhD candidates in the following ways’ [n=22]¹

This remedial perception may, in fact, be largely self-inflicted, given the presence of ‘support’ or ‘development’ within many Learning Centre titles. As Chanock (2007) laments:

Frequently, our centres seem to be regarded as a form of crash repair shop where welding, panel-beating and polishing can be carried out on students’ texts—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. (p. 273)

Pleasingly, however, despite the high proportion who expected us to proofread and improve language skills, respondents were less convinced that we should edit, recommending that we “instead support ... the student to learn to edit their own work.” Nonetheless, in reality, supervisors often look to us at the eleventh hour to pull a thesis together².

¹ Not all respondents answered all questions.

² The ‘ethics of editing’ merit a discussion of their own, in that Learning Advisors may feel tempted to undertake the task rather than having students resort to professional editors unfamiliar with the academic environment.

Moreover, Learning Centres in New Zealand tend to align with service units such as Counselling and Financial Advice rather than academic development, a pragmatic focus that led two respondents to call our competence into question:

As the answers in part 1 indicate, I don't know what a 'learning advisor' is or what your office does. I looked at your webpage, specifically at the 'about us' link, and the only thing I learned about the training of staff members is that most of you do not claim a Doctoral title.

I certainly send undergraduates to SLSS, and indeed I think it's one of the university's best services, bar none. I have been less quick to send PhD students to SLSS, however. This may reflect my own ignorance, but in order to provide PhD students with effective advice, it seems that Learning Advisors should have PhDs themselves.

Such attitudes demand response. Clearly, we need to look to our image. SLSS's primary audience is undergraduates, hence the tenor of the "About Us" online information. Had respondents accessed our 'Info for Staff' page, they would have seen the following:

The professional staff at SLSS can support academic staff to best meet the learning needs of all students throughout the university, for example, by:

- Discussing student learning issues [plagiarism; Internationalisation]
- Assessing needs and providing on-going support for individual students you refer to us
- Working with individuals in the light of your feedback
- Advising students at each stage of the drafting process
- Facilitating regular Seminars and workshops

As part of good teaching practice, we do not proofread. Rather, Learning Advisors act as a sounding board, encouraging students to clarify their thought processes and organise their ideas (Student Learning Support Service, 2005).

The presumption that information reaches its audience is flawed. Not only did this survey reveal that SLSS needs to spell out that 'all students throughout the university' means 'all students, *including* postgraduates' and that 'we do not proofread' constitutes exactly that, we need to highlight our credentials.

Chanock et al.'s paper, 'Academic and/or general?' (2004), investigated the status of our counterparts, Language and Academic Skills (LAS) professionals, in Australia. There, the current budget-driven environment has seen a number of institutions reclassify formerly academic LAS as "cheaper" general staff (Chanock et al., 2004, p. 44). In New Zealand, status varies. An informal survey of delegates attending the 2009 ATLAANZ conference at Massey, Albany revealed that colleagues at Auckland, Massey, Palmerston North, Lincoln, Waikato, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic and Unitec

are classed as ‘academics’: some lecturers, others tutors. On the other hand, Learning Advisors at VUW are general staff, which – while relieving us of certain PBRF demands – potentially lessens our credibility within the academy. Academic qualifications are a significant marker of rank. Currently, on our website, the title ‘Dr’ is the only indication an Advisor has any degree at all. In fact, alongside three PhDs (a fourth completing this year), all our team members¹ have teaching, TESOL and/or specialist qualifications, the majority at Master’s level. This supports Katherine Samuelowicz’s survey of Australian “learning skills counsellors” (1990, p. 100), which found 84% (48/57 respondents) held at least two (and, in one case, four) degrees. It would be interesting to conduct a similar study of ATLAANZ members. However, notwithstanding the need to enhance our status in the eyes of academics, a doctorate is not a prerequisite. Not all doctoral supervisors have PhDs (Faculty of Graduate Research, 2010), nor – given that our role is, by its very nature, generic and impartial – is having a doctorate necessary in order to be an ‘intelligent reader’.

Overall, most survey respondents saw merit in Learning Advisors working with postgraduate students – albeit primarily in a skills-based capacity:

There is no one-size-fits all doctorate, so I am not sure that Learning Advice fits the more academic tasks, and might be best for the skills and general academic requirements. In my experience, candidates value having an extra pair of support hands, which is fairly labour intensive.

In fact, one could argue that Learning Advisors are even better equipped than supervisors, given our breadth of “perspective across the disciplines, across the various phases of higher education, and across the cultures from which our students come” (Chanock, 2007, p. 275), not to mention the sheer volume of postgraduates we encounter each year.

‘Supervisory’ support

The survey also sought postgraduate coordinators’ views on Learning Advisors’ capacity to contribute to the doctoral journey itself, as shown in Figure 4 below:

¹ As at November 2009, five full-time and eight part-time staff.

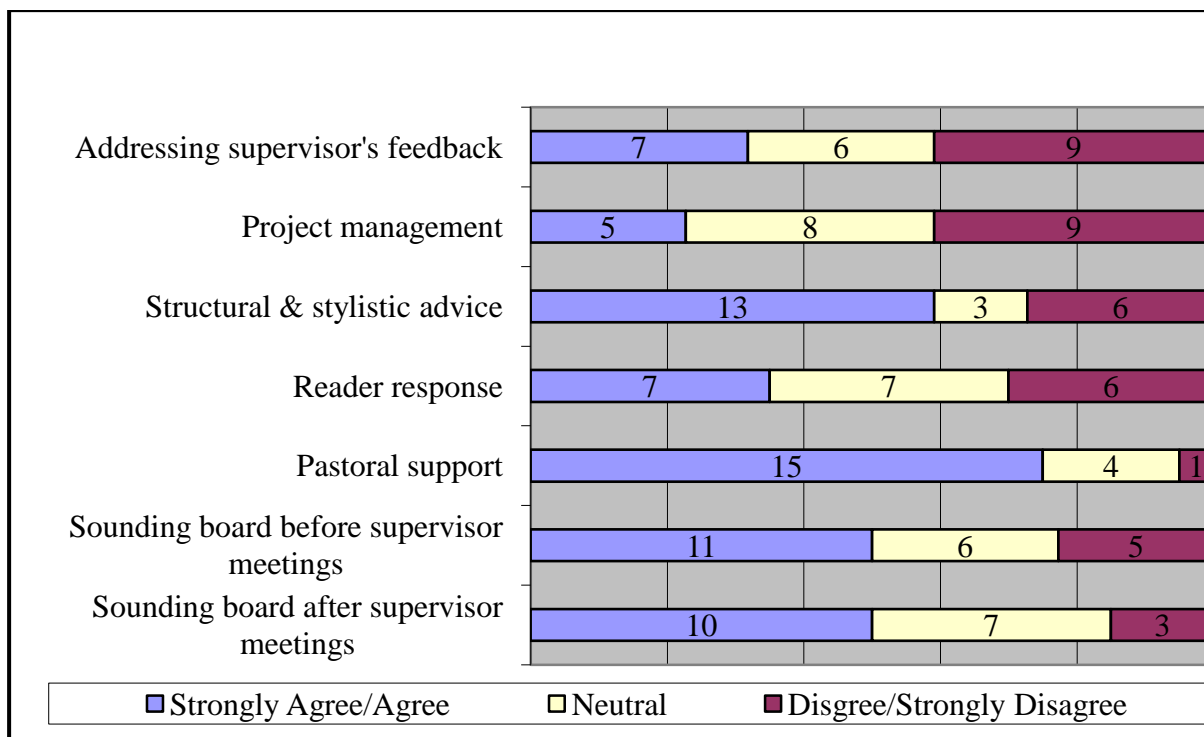


Figure 4. Doctoral journey: ‘I consider learning advisors could support PhD candidates in the following ways’ [n=22]

Academics felt much less comfortable with the thought that Learning Advisors were undertaking ‘things a supervisor should be doing’, with respondents reiterating that we should concentrate on ‘teaching essential skills to students who may lack them, most importantly, writing skills’. Unbeknownst to them, it is exactly this (quasi-supervisory) ability to provide ‘big picture’ feedback that students value most, as the following comments reveal:

Through the improved writing techniques I learned at SLSS... I have been able to take my research analysis to a higher level — a kind of spiral effect of writing and analysis development (Domestic PhD candidate in Religious Studies).

I benefitted tremendously from speaking with the learning advisors at SLSS. I received feedback on my thinking process, shared and discussed my ideas and received valuable input. Although the advisor had no special training in my field I found that the questions she asked helped me to clarify my own thinking and even to think about aspects of the topic which I had not considered before (International PhD candidate in Law).

Acting as an impartial audience is one of our key roles, in which lack of ‘special training in the field’ is a strength, not a disadvantage. One student, for example, the recipient of an industry-related doctoral scholarship, had a pre-determined topic, but little idea of where to begin. After a single session with a Learning Advisor –

brainstorming, drawing diagrams and ‘thinking out loud’ in order to explain her topic in layman’s terms – she had several A3 sheets of ideas to discuss with her supervisor, ultimately resulting in a viable project. For other students, the ‘spiral effect of writing and analysis development’ develops into a long-term relationship: “Whenever I am stuck with my thesis I approach SLSS to bounce ideas with someone who is ‘external’ in order to get some fresh insights” (International PhD candidate in Information Management). In this way, Learning Advisors play an important role in helping postgraduates clarify their thoughts, meet informal deadlines (and/or discuss why things have not gone as anticipated) and obtain a ‘second opinion’: basically sharing the postgraduate experience in general.

Academics’ openness to collaboration

The final section of the questionnaire asked whether supervisors already referred students for learning support, whether they might do so in the future, and – most importantly – whether they were willing to collaborate with a Learning Advisor in order to best meet individual student needs. Learning Advisors’ potential to support supervisors as well as students is endorsed by the fact that nearly 75% (16/22) of academics who completed the survey were open to three-way interaction (student/Learning Advisor/supervisor) ‘if appropriate’¹, with a number actively welcoming third-party involvement: “there are times when help for supervisors to manage a supervision relationship is needed...” and “Hearing from SLSS advisors on common problems students come to them with would be useful for PhD supervisors, I reckon”.

Of those unwilling to entertain such a relationship, only one² was patently averse:

I would react with suspicion if a ‘learning advisor’ attempted to insert him or herself as a partner in the supervision of a graduate degree.... I think your last questions, each appended with the clause ‘if appropriate’, are dishonest. The questions rightly posed should ask ‘Do I consider it appropriate to refer candidates to SLSS?’ and so forth. The answer, at the doctoral level, is essentially ‘no’.

Others were less opinionated, but rightly advocated the need for careful negotiation of roles and responsibilities:

The 3-way student supervisor/s LA relationship is very tricky. I certainly think that if the LA is significantly involved with a particular student the supervisors should know about it. It is important for the LA not to second guess or undermine the supervisor. LAs are not always able to interpret supervisor feedback etc. in all disciplinary situations. There are also times when students attempt to manipulate this triangular relationship, as you will be aware.

¹ The phrasing in the survey, intended to allow for individual circumstances.

² The same respondent who questioned our “claim to Doctoral titles”.

These very reservations emphasise the desirability of working together; the way seems open for collaboration, should we choose to take it.

Learning Advisors' views

My ATLAANZ conference workshop presented these survey findings to colleagues: some academic, some general staff, actively involved with postgraduates or about to commence. Discussion centred on the perception that we exist solely to fix problems (often when a supervisor reaches desperation point); channels of communication with supervisors (largely individualised; occasionally via pan-university committees, newsletters, co-taught writing workshops or supervisor training); students' appreciation of our role as 'sounding board' – and academics *per se*. The session culminated in an informal SWOT analysis:

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>STRENGTHS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing students with alternative avenue of feedback & support - Independent voice for students (can say things fearful to say to supervisor) - Can discuss what questions to ask supervisor next | <p>WEAKNESSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of disciplinary knowledge/expertise - Perception of 'magic wand'; some supervisors think we can do everything, - Expected to proofread International students' language |
| <p>OPPORTUNITIES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expertise in data analysis, computer analysis, writing/language skills - Opportunity to develop own skills - Help students formulate process & questions to which they need answers from supervisor | <p>THREATS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supervisors protective of student/thesis - Some supervisors threatened by having another person in the loop - Different supervisors have different ideas about what is acceptable/right & wrong |

Figure 5: Working with postgraduates and supervisors (feedback from ATLAANZ conference workshop, November 21, 2009)

It is perhaps inherent within Learning Advisors' nature that colleagues also considered the needs of other players, with supervisors' 'patch-protection' probably the hardest area to tackle. Not all postgraduate students require learning support nor is liaison with supervisors always appropriate. Nevertheless, for some students – and some supervisors – working with a Learning Advisor in possession of insight into institution-wide postgraduate issues might have significant benefits. Currently, individual Learning Advisors at New Zealand tertiary institutions have strong relationships with individual supervisors¹, yet wider networking is vital to counter the

¹ I myself am a doctoral supervisor, currently co-supervising a candidate investigating how the application of certain management theories might contribute to postgraduate students' successful completion.

remedial label and promulgate the advantages of non-discipline-specific expertise. For the very reason that there is 'no one-size-fits all doctorate', tertiary Learning Advisors have the potential to provide learning support for all.

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Postscript: as a consequence of my 2009 survey of postgraduate coordinators, the 2010 SLSS workshops and seminars have, for the first time, attracted postgraduates from every School and faculty, students have been referred from a wider range of disciplines, and several academics have sought to establish collaborative relations.