

Whakawhanaungatanga: Student leadership training at Victoria, University of Wellington

Dr. Deborah Laurs¹
Victoria, University of Wellington

Abstract

As one way of building learning connections within an ever-changing environment, Victoria, University of Wellington offers a range of peer leadership opportunities, such as PASS (Peer Assisted Study Support), Campus Coaches (Orientation Week guides), Māori and Pasifika mentoring (Te Pūtahi Atawhai), and cross-cultural workshops for International students (ExcelL). Involvement in such programmes contributes to the Victoria Plus Award, which acknowledges extra-curricular activities within the university and wider community. Each leadership programme has its own targeted training, and, since 2012, colleagues from Student Learning Support, Disability Services and Te Pūtahi Atawhai (Māori and Pacific mentoring scheme) have also developed a core (1 hour) training module that precedes and complements role-specific training. This article will briefly outline the Victoria Plus Leadership programme, before highlighting the components of the collaborative core leader training module, in particular, its focus on holistic Māori values: an innovative approach to fostering inclusive communities of learning that has recently also been extended into mainstream tutor-training.

Introduction

Victoria, University of Wellington offers its students the opportunity to participate in a range of leadership activities that contribute towards Victoria Plus, an award offered by Victoria Careers in recognition of the university's obligation to foster students' graduate attributes and employability skills. Highly-prestigious, the Victoria Plus scheme² recognises extra-curricular contributions to the university and wider community, such as acting as class rep, office bearer in a club or society, study group leader or Disability Services van driver, or volunteering for organisations such as the Refugee Homework Centre, Foundation for the Blind, and Forest and Bird Society (Vic Careers, 2013a). To fulfil the programme's requirements, participants earn points for each activity, attend personal development seminars on topics such as

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² Completed over three years, the Victoria Plus Award is presented on degree completion at a ceremony presided over by the Vice-Chancellor, and noted on recipients' academic transcripts. The option of a one-year "Victoria Plus Certificate" has also recently been introduced.

CV preparation and interview skills, and complete a reflective e-portfolio about the experience.

Learning Advisors from Student Learning Support (SLSS) train student leaders for a number of contributing programmes, as do colleagues from the Māori and Pasifika mentoring programme *Te Pūtahi Atawhai* (TPA), Disability Services (DS), and Student Recruitment and Orientation (SRAO). Until 2012, each unit trained its leaders separately, even though, thanks to the success of the Victoria Plus scheme, students often took part in multiple leadership programmes. For example, a student taking languages may well participate in the Conversation programme³, cross-cultural Excell workshops⁴ and “international buddy” scheme.⁵ Similarly, someone who signs up to be a Campus Coach⁶ is also likely to be a volunteer note-taker, TPA mentor and PASS study group leader⁷. The impact of these overlapping leadership roles became particularly obvious for SLSS staff delivering leader-training across a range of programmes:

- **2000-present:** Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) leaders for SLSS;
- **2005-present:** Campus Coaches for Student Recruitment and Orientation;
- **2011:** International student “buddies” for Victoria International;
- **2011-present:** Tutors⁸ for SLSS and Centre for Academic Development (CAD).

In each case, although Learning Advisors endeavoured to customise resources for each training session, the basic content was identical, which meant that some leaders received the same message two or three times over.

³ **Conversation volunteers:** Kiwi students who meet weekly with international students to talk (in English) about anything other than their studies.

⁴ As part of the **Excell** (*Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership*) programme (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1998), local students engage with international students in discussion and role play, offering a safe environment in which to explore the cultural values underlying different expectations and behaviours, in order to help them communicate effectively with their New Zealand peers and lecturers, as well as the wider community within and beyond the university (Commons & Gao, 2011).

⁵ **International buddies** provide informal social support to help incoming students adapt to New Zealand life and culture (Victoria International, n.d.).

⁶ **Campus Coaches:** First-Year Orientation guides, helping new students within their faculty acclimatise to university life by showing them where the first lectures will take place, how to log-on to Blackboard, and so forth.

⁷ **PASS (Peer Assisted Study Support) leaders:** fellow students (“peers”), who facilitate voluntary study sessions in core courses, in which they excelled the previous year. PASS leaders do not teach; rather they foster “active learning”, encouraging participants to identify and meet their own learning needs. VUW offers more than 80 study groups each year, catering for over 1,500 participants. (For more information, see Laurs, 2009.)

⁸ Appointed by their respective academic programmes, subject **tutors** undertake a compulsory 3-hour session run jointly by SLSS and CAD, followed by on-going subject-specific training delivered by their respective Schools.

In 2011, an opportunity arose to rectify this situation, when the restructuring of Student Academic Services brought SLSS, TPA, DS and Careers together under the umbrella of RAE (Retention, Achievement and Equity). Although each Centre continues to operate autonomously, this new grouping has fostered closer dialogue between members, resulting in a proposal to design a core leadership-training module that students could undertake before going on to their respective role-specific sessions.

Core leader training

Discussions about core leader training took place over the course of a year, with input from representatives from TPA, DS and SLSS, eventually resulting in an agreed set of common components:

- Self-awareness
- Treaty of Waitangi and Māori values
- Diversity
- Support services.

These elements were then woven into a one-hour, introductory team-taught session, combining the strengths of the presenters from SLSS and TPA,⁹ to provide a holistic foundation upon which training in other programmes could then be built. Not only did this new module offer greater scope for subsequent training to devote more time to role-specific content, it also provided an enhanced programme, bringing together elements, such as DS's emphasis on "resilience" and "self-care", TPA's Māori values, and SLSS's active learning approach, which had previously each been offered separately. This core leadership training module has now been in place for two years, with more than 400 student leaders having taken part.

Self-awareness

The self-awareness part of the session (first 10-15 minutes) begins with an opportunity for new leaders to identify the strengths they bring to the role, as well as possible threats and challenges they may encounter. Participants complete an individual SWOT grid, then share with others how their responses might impact on their future leadership positions. The bulk of the session draws on role-plays and active learning techniques (Vinson et al., 2010) which focus on asking questions rather than providing answers, challenging participants to reach their own understanding. This section also covers differing styles of leadership (Disability Services, n.d.), enabling participants to establish a firm sense of self before proceeding to the next stages of training.

⁹ In this event, DS has opted out, on the grounds that their leader-training is too highly-specialised to accommodate core elements.

Treaty of Waitangi and Māori values

The next segment (20 minutes) is the heart of the training, in every sense, focusing on the university's commitment to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi — and what this means in practical terms. Colleagues from the Centre for Māori and Pasifika success, TPA, take a pragmatic approach, which steers away from New Zealand history and politics by inviting student leaders (many of whom are international students) simply to consider what constitutes a “healthy” or “unhealthy relationship”. Moving on from this, individuals' responses are realigned within the broader context of how the Treaty partnership plays out in daily life. As potential representatives of the university as a whole, student leaders begin to realise that acts of good citizenship embody the principles of the Treaty every time they treat others with courtesy and respect.

Endorsing the validity of everyone's responses, TPA staff then introduce the values that underpin their Māori and Pasifika mentoring programme:

- *Rangatiratanga* (ability to bring groups together/self-direction),
- *Kotahitanga* (unity),
- *Ako* (reciprocal teaching and learning),
- *Whakawhanaungatanga* (building strong networks),
- *Manaakitanga* (empathy/hospitality),
- *Whakamana* (showing respect),
- *Whakanui* (acknowledging success).

The discussion encourages student leaders to explore the words' meanings before offering explanations, once again, inviting participants to consider how—despite the possibly unfamiliar terminology—such concepts relate to themselves as individuals, and as future leaders.

Participants quickly recognise the universality of these values, frequently sharing examples from their own cultures. In each case, the discussion rapidly moves beyond the surface. For instance, nearly all of the PASS leaders (many of whom study Law) can translate *rangatiratanga* as “sovereignty.” However, an appreciation of the word's parts (*ranga* - “to weave,” *tira* - “group,” and *tanga* - plural signifier, i.e., “lots of groups”), helps them also realise its deeper significance in terms of the collective responsibilities involved in their role as peer leaders.

Similarly, participants come to understand that *manaakitanga* means more than simply “hospitality” (although home-baking often features prominently in PASS study sessions). Student leaders, particularly tutors (who often feel pressured to focus solely on content), acquire a sound rationale for beginning each session with an ice-breaker. Moreover, they also begin to appreciate how the simple act of knowing people's names—and pronouncing them correctly—serves as an effective means of building a learning community (inevitably drawing upon *ako*, *whakawhanaungatanga*,

kotahitanga, *whakanui* and *whakamana* in the process). This section provides the heart of the core leader training, empowering students to consider not only Māori values, but also their own, in relation to the particular cohorts with whom they will come in contact.

Diversity

The third part of the core training session (10 minutes) builds on the humanism of these Māori values in acknowledging and celebrating diversity. This contrasts with previous iterations (tutor-training in particular), where participants often regarded non-native speakers of English as potential problems, rather than sources of cultural enrichment. Inviting participants to brainstorm what “diversity” means to them not only provides further opportunity to reflect on their own values and life-experience, it also seeks to raise awareness of the university as a vibrant heterogeneous community. Many of our leaders are Kiwis; many more are international students, all of them encompassing the myriad qualities implied by each label. Similarly, students in their groups may well speak more than one language, be exploring their sexuality, have physical or mental impairments, and/or be the first-in-family attending university. Issues relating to diversity have often already surfaced during the Māori values section of training, meaning less time is usually spent on this separate section. Either way, the training aims for all participants to arrive at the same message: treat others as you wish to be treated. Even if student leaders on occasion find themselves personally challenged by a group member’s sexuality, religious garb, or outspoken comments, this aspect of the training seeks to reinforce their role as ambassadors of a wider university community accepting of difference.

Support services

Intended to outline the university’s agencies available to support student leaders to support “their” students (Health & Counselling, SLSS, Student Finance, Rec Centre, etc.), given the wealth of preceding discussions, the final part of the programme is invariably rushed. Nevertheless, the information is fully detailed in the core training handbook (Laurs, Eggeling, Harris, & Roberts, 2012) and revisited in more depth during subsequent role-specific training.

Whakawhanaungtanga: The big picture

While the impetus behind designing a core training module was simply to streamline the process, obviating the need for students involved in multiple leadership schemes to repeat core elements, the programme’s holistic nature has led to a growth in

leaders' confidence and empathy, with resultant impacts on the learning communities themselves.¹⁰

For example, PASS leaders now demonstrate growing confidence in encouraging students to find their own solutions by drawing on the collective might, as shown by representative comments gathered at this year's end-of-trimester PASS debrief:

- *Kotahitanga:*
 - “the students create their own groups outside of PASS”
 - “shared lunches”
 - “deciding on discussion topics together”
 - “students making friends with each other, fostering a positive study environment”
 - “students making friends with Leaders”
- *Rangatiratanga:*
 - “arm someone with the whiteboard pen”
 - “getting the people who know the most to be the ‘quizmaster’”
 - “asking for a person to be the scribe and for each group to feed mini-group ideas back to the big group”
- *Whanaungatanga:*
 - “speed-dating”
 - “seeing students around uni in a non-PASS setting”
 - “icebreakers”
 - “problems — someone else solves”
 - “Having a FB page where students post Qs and interesting facts.”

While these examples reveal a pleasing sense of community building, the PASS philosophy strongly emphasises cooperative learning in the first place. University tutorials, on the other hand, have traditionally not been sites of cooperative learning. Despite having the potential to foster *ako* and debate, tutors are often constrained by the need to cover set content within a set time. Moreover, when faced with reticent students, they frequently resort to filling the silence themselves, delivering mini-lectures, rather than allowing participants time to find their voices. This creates a vicious cycle, whereby students may come to regard tutorials as places where they are talked at, rather than with.

¹⁰ Further exemplifying the principles of the Treaty in action, the Māori and Pākehā leadership trainers co-presented at the International First Year in Higher Education Conference (Wellington, 7-10 July, 2013). The presentation, “Empowering Student Leaders to Nurture the First Year Experience Through Cross-Cultural Diversity”, was well-received, particularly by delegates from Australia. An additional highlight was the paper's selection, as one of 10 out of 150 presentations, for publication in the *FYHE International Journal* (Laur, Eggeling, & Harris, 2013).

However, a marked attitudinal change has begun to show, thanks to the inclusion of the Māori values within tutor training sessions over the past year. As an example, one of the exercises involves asking tutors to select the three most important principles of “good practice in undergraduate education” from the following list:

1. Encourages contact between students and faculty
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
3. Encourages active learning
4. Gives prompt feedback
5. Emphasizes time on task
6. Communicates high expectations
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.
(Chickering & Gamson, 1991, pp. 66-69)

Although responses feature these qualities to a greater or lesser extent, previous cohorts tended to privilege “prompt feedback” and “time on task”. Now, however, “developing reciprocity and cooperation among students” and “respects diverse talents and ways of learning” are gaining in prominence, a shift in awareness that can be directly attributed to increased awareness about the importance of Māori values.

Conclusion

By raising awareness of innate humanistic values (irrespective of whether participants use the *te reo* terms or not), the core leadership training sessions have not only fulfilled the original aim of providing a one-stop foundation, they have the added bonus of enriching leaders’ self-awareness and role-specific performance in relation to the students in their care.

Time will tell whether this core training has a lasting impact, whether tutors dealing largely with discipline-specific matters and peer leaders operating in everyday interactions, succeed in translating these principles into practice. Nevertheless, the seeds have been sown. Victoria, University of Wellington has a strong extra-curricular leadership programme, which seeks to foster its students’ graduate attributes and employability skills. As the number of students participating in the core leadership training programme continues to grow, hopefully so too will the message that inherent values, such as respect, relationship-building and reciprocity, are key to success, both at university and within society as a whole: *he tangata, he tangata, he tangata!*

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