HOW PREPARED ARE OUR STUDENTS? DIRECTING OUR EFFORTS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' TERTIARY EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

New friends, new types of teaching and learning or perhaps even a change of location: for many students, transitioning to tertiary education involves adjusting to an environment which is out of their comfort zone (Sotardi & Friesen, 2017). These changes can impact on students' experiences which, in turn, impacts on their level of achievement (Bowden et al., 2019). Furthermore, for those unable to adjust, the fallout can be lifelong. It clearly behoves an education provider to not only provide services which support new learners, but to ensure these are accessible and available when needed, and that their uptake is encouraged and advocated. This article discusses findings from a 2022 study of tertiary teaching staff across the Bay of Plenty region conducted by Student Support Services at Toi Ohomai (a subsidary of Te Pūkenga – New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology). Lecturers and tutors from multiple disciplines at several Toi Ohomai campuses were interviewed about the assistance and resources provided to their students by this team. This data was collected and analysed elsewhere by team members (Brons & Granger, 2022). For this article, thematic analysis of the dataset was used to identify three key features of student support which participants singled out as critical to successful transitions for students. These three features were: digital literacy, literacy and numeracy, and academic writing. These skillsets are most frequently cited by teaching staff as essential for success, and yet are a source of imbalance and inequity. These three themes are therefore a focus of how we, as a support services team, need to direct our efforts to support students to succeed. In addition, they provide the basis of professional conversations as we build relationships with tutors in gaining access to students who need support. In discussing how we do this, regular communication and a whole institutional approach will also be explored.

BACKGROUND

In 2021, at Toi Ohomai, programmes of study were delivered from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority framework levels 1 to 9 in over 20 sites across the region. There were over 8,500 domestic and nearly 560 international learners enrolled across the Bay of Plenty region supported by approximately 600 permanent full-time and 300 part-time staff (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2022).

Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology, like all other providers in our sector, is under "increasing pressure to pass a high percentage of students and admit students into programmes without prerequisites or adequate prior experience/skills" (Malik, 2021, p. 3). This is supported by Sedgwick and Proctor-Thomson's (2019) study on the preparedness of students for tertiary level education. Furthermore, this study also indicated the working conditions of tutors with additional workload in terms of administration, preparation, marking, "class sizes and staff levels" (p. 1) and research, all of which further impacted the time available to support their students adequately. Considering the unpreparedness of some students, it is therefore of benefit to them to be supported not only by their tutor but by a highly qualified and knowledgeable support team.

At Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology, the Student Support Services team provide a wraparound support model for their students (Figure 1). This support includes: health and wellbeing, pastoral support, careers and employability, library access, student administration, accessibility services, kaitātaiako (Māori and Pacific academic learning facilitators), faculty librarians, student administration and the learning facilitators. Part of this larger team are learning facilitators (LFs) whose role is to support students with their academic studies. As LFs, we know what support students ask for, but what do teaching staff see as the most pressing need? From the findings, we may identify how to support our students better. This is a less studied area in the literature and the gap this paper intends to address.
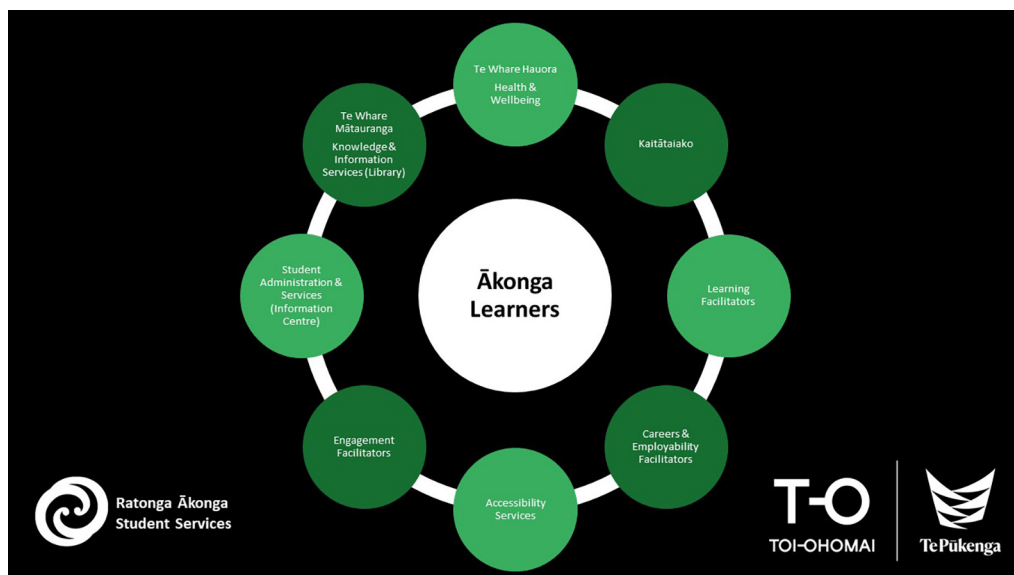

Figure 1. Student Services Support team model (Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology, 2023).

Learning facilitators (Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology, 2023), tertiary learning advisors (Malik, 2021; Tanner & Goa, 2021), and academic advisors (Barbuto et al., 2011; Higgins, 2017) are some of the terms for those supporting students learning within tertiary level education. For the purpose of this article, tertiary learning advisors (TLAs) will be used as a term to discuss their roles and responsibilities. Tertiary learning advisors are an important aspect in teaching and vital in supporting students at tertiary level (Sotardi & Friesen, 2017). According to Malik (2021), tertiary learning advising "is an established profession within the tertiary education system in New Zealand" (p. 1). Tertiary learning advisors are educated professionals, highly knowledgeable and skilled in their role of supporting students in their educational journey. Cameron's (2018) research indicated 90 per cent of those employed had a teaching qualification, with nearly 80 per cent holding postgraduate qualifications and over 60 per cent at master's level. In addition, many undertake professional development as part of their role.

THE STUDY

In 2022, after gaining ethics approval (TRC 2021.108, Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology, 24 November 2021), the Learning Support and Engagement team (part of Student Support Services) undertook a qualitative study with a selection of teaching staff (N=16) across all Toi Ohomai campuses in the Bay of Plenty region. The represented teaching staff taught on the following programmes:

- Master of Teaching Early Childhood Education
- Bachelor of Social Work
- Bachelor of Nursing
- New Zealand Diploma in Business
- Introduction to New Zealand Forestry Sector (Level 5)
- New Zealand Certificate in Tourism and Travel
- New Zealand Certificate in Real Estate
- New Zealand Certificate in Health and Wellbeing (Level 4)
- New Zealand Certificate in Health and Wellbeing (Level 3)
- Sport and Recreation (Levels 3–5)
- Te Kura Māori, Te Reo Māori (Level 2)
- New Zealand Certificate in Foundation Skills (Level 2)
- Student Transition Program – Automotive and Construction Trades (Levels 1–3).

The study consisted of semi-structured interviews, in person or online, to elicit teaching staff feedback on how the Learning Support and Engagement team work in partnership to support student learning and engagement (Brons & Granger, 2022). The raw data of the transcripts were further analysed to understand better the issues faced by teaching staff when students transition to a tertiary education environment. From this data, three specific themes that impacted on student success and retention were identified by the teaching staff: digital literacy, literacy and numeracy, and academic skills and writing. The rationale was to identify, through teaching staff feedback, the preparedness of students when they begin their studies and how we as learning facilitators might support both teaching staff and students.

FINDINGS: WHAT DO THE TUTORS SAY?

Digital literacy

Digital technologies continue to evolve and are part of everyday life transforming the way people work, learn and play. Digital devices such as computers, cell phones and laptops have proliferated in these environments. One of the factors relating to learning experiences indicated in the findings was an individual's level of knowledge, skills and experience in the use of digital technologies (Brons & Granger, 2022). Of those interviewed, 65 per cent of tutors stated lack of digital literacy skills as a barrier to learning for their students. Challenges students faced when using digital technologies, such as logging on to the organisation's network, were an issue for some who found it difficult to remember how to log in or had forgotten their password (Brons & Granger, 2022). Once the organisation's network was accessed, there were then challenges for students with accessing the different online platforms such as Moodle and Google Classroom. Further challenges were identified by the teaching staff for students in accessing and using the associated applications such as Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint or Google Slides, Docs and Sheets. According to Cowie and Khoo (2014), students who lack digital literacy skills face barriers with digital technologies which, in turn, impact negatively on their learning experiences. In considering the importance of time to develop digital literacy skills and to circumvent workload barriers, they suggest consideration should be given to preparing learners for using digital technologies in academic study.

As these digital technologies continue to change, the ability for individuals to adapt to these changes depends on their level of digital literacy knowledge and skills (Thomas, 2021). Morgan et al. (2022, p. 261) define digital literacy as "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate digital information, using relevant digital tools in a manner which is legally, ethically and socially aware". Considering this broad range of attributes, individuals with insufficient levels of digital literacy skills may face challenges adapting to rapidly changing digital technologies in their everyday lives. It is therefore important that students have digital literacy skills and knowledge to navigate digital platforms, particularly as course content and assessment are accessed within the online environment

(Jeffrey et al., 2014). Whilst there are many benefits to accessing course materials anytime and anywhere in the online digital environment, students need appropriate skills and knowledge. Many learners, when they embark on tertiary studies, encounter new technologies that require particular digital literacy skills (Thomas, 2021). Learners without these skills are more likely to face difficulties in their academic studies (Jeffrey et al., 2011). In addition, of the digital literacy skills identified for the use of new digital technologies, there was a "lack of familiarity with the breadth of digital tools, the terminology, and the common procedures used limited their ability to identify solutions and to navigate the digital environment" (p. 398). Therefore, lack of digital literacy skills negatively impacts on students' learning experience in higher education.

LITERACY AND NUMERACY

Basic levels of literacy and numeracy are an important part of education, work and society throughout life. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority Project Advisor Group (n.d., para. 9), provide the following definitions of literacy and numeracy:

- Literacy is the written and oral language people use in their everyday life and work. It includes reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Skills in this area are essential for good communication, active participation, critical thinking and problem solving.
- Numeracy is the bridge between mathematics and daily life. It includes the knowledge and skills needed to apply mathematics to everyday family and financial matters, work and community tasks.

Of the teaching staff in the study, 42 per cent indicated poor literacy and numeracy skills negatively impacted on their students' learning and motivation. To assess literacy and numeracy level proficiency, some students are assessed on the Literacy and Numeracy Adult Assessment Tool (LNAAT). This tool is an adaptive online assessment that measures levels of literacy and numeracy via the Learning Progression Steps, from Step 1 lowest, to the highest, Step 6 (Tertiary Education Commission, 2017). The LNAAT results give teaching staff an indication of students' proficiency which may impact on their deciphering of the course requirements. Participant teaching staff found the LNAAT results of their students important in ascertaining if additional support was needed (Brons & Granger, 2022).

Wagner (2014) highlights the importance of literacy and numeracy in the early years to improve opportunities in education. This is associated with increased employment opportunities and a better quality of life. There is an increase in the number of children leaving school who lack reading and maths abilities to function in the adult world (Berger & Fisher, 2013). In addition, poor literacy and numeracy skills of parents impact on the quality of their child's learning and development (Jones et al., 2015; Napoli & Purpura, 2017; Wagner, 2014). Furthermore, literacy and numeracy skills learning are dependent on childhood educational environments particularly in low socio-economic areas. With varying literacy and numeracy skills learnt within education, it is therefore likely that those transitioning to higher education later in life will face challenges. Erwin et al. (2020) report that 20 per cent of New Zealanders had low levels of literacy and numeracy. Of these figures, a high percentage identified as Māori or Pacific. Consequently, those with low levels of literacy and numeracy tend to have lower educational attainment and find their studies challenging (Erwin et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2012).

ACADEMIC SKILLS

Intricately linked with literacy skills is student academic writing ability. Academic writing is a specific genre that follows a set of conventions. According to Massey University (2018), academic writing encompasses a range of skills including: understanding and breaking down the question; understanding the structure of the assignment; finding and referencing academic sources; paraphrasing, grammar, and punctuation; and sentence and paragraph structure. Academic writing "deals with the theories and causes of a given topic, as well as exploring alternative

explanations for these theories or events" (para. 1). It is written in a "tone which uses concise, formal, and objective language" (para. 1) with no contracted words. In addition, the written work addresses an audience who may not necessarily know the topic; therefore, the writer needs to be clear and concise in their writing.

When students enter higher education, they are assessed mostly on their academic skills. Therefore, they need to have sufficient academic skill to interpret their findings and communicate within academic writing. Academic writing is an invisible element of learning, and it is assumed students' skills will develop as their course progresses (Strongman, 2013). However, this is not always the case. Students who have little experience of English, or for whom English is not their primary language, lack the necessary conventions of academic writing to succeed (Strongman, 2013; Wingate, 2012). Developing expertise in academic writing takes time and practice and, for some students, challenges them both mentally and emotionally (Wingate, 2012).

Of the participant teaching staff, 57 per cent indicated a lack of academic writing skills as a barrier to student learning and progression (Brons & Granger, 2022). Considering the demographics of students transitioning from secondary school and second chance learners, many lack ability in academic writing skills (Fowler, 2020). In addition, the transition for secondary students to higher education involves other adjustments in their lives, such as moving away from home, forming new friend networks and studying independently (Menz, 2020). Many participant tutors also discussed inadequate education as a cause of poor academic writing skills (Brons & Granger, 2022). However, it is not necessarily that students are unable to write, but that they have insufficient academic skills. For example, the initial task of deciphering an assignment question might seem overwhelming to some (Fowler, 2020). Menz (2020) indicates that the development of academic skills is not sufficiently integrated within the course content. However, tutors do support students in their academic skills, but there are constraints of time and resources, restricting tutors to teaching the required course content (Wingate, 2012). This aspect was mentioned by the participant tutors who realised they were unable to cover everything needed, particularly with the size of classes and diversity of student needs. To demonstrate, one participant mentioned the sheer size of some classes which made it impossible to cover all academic skill requirements (Brons & Granger, 2022). The collected data also indicates the unpreparedness of some students when they begin tertiary studies.

DISCUSSION: TUTORS AND TERTIARY LEARNING ADVISORS WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

Clearly, the three themes of digital literacy, literacy and numeracy, and academic skills, highlighted in the findings, identified barriers for some of our students within our organisation. Therefore, we need to discuss how students can be better supported by both tutors and tertiary learning advisors in their studies. Considering this focus, participant tutors found support provided by the TLAs to support their students in digital literacies, literacy and numeracy and academic skills vital. Tertiary learning advisor support for our students consists of individuals and group consultation, providing a range of workshops and digital literacy sessions which are essential in breaking down barriers to learning. Specifically, Higgins (2017) echoed the importance of TLAs for "student experience as well as student retention" (para. 1). More recently, Cameron (2018) discussed how working with TLAs increased student satisfaction; in particular, the versatility of advisors in responding to students' needs at the time of appointment who were sometimes unaware of the support they were providing. Further evidential research validates the successful retention and completion for those students who work with TLAs compared to those that do not (Ross, 2011).

According to Tinto (2012), supporting students is of utmost importance for success and retention especially for those requiring additional support. However, this support is reliant on the relationship between tutors and tertiary learning advisors (Holland et al., 2020). Whilst our participants consistently felt that the support provided by TLAs enhanced student engagement and retention, promoting cohesiveness between tutors, students and TLAs was needed. In particular, Leenknecht et al. (2020) advocate the quality of the relationship between

the tutor and other staff which either supports or inhibits the student's experience. Therefore, developing interaction and sustaining relationships over time between tutors and TLAs is essential. With this in mind, Strauss (2013) advocates a relationship where tutor and tertiary learning advisor connect regularly. Whilst our services connect regularly with students, building and maintaining supportive relationships with their tutors is also crucial. However, as Strauss (2013) emphasises, high workforce turnover is an issue for the sustainability of these relationships. For this reason, Strauss (2013) advocates promoting TLA services via formal and informal networks to connect with tutors. To improve these networks, a whole institutional approach is also suggested.

For an institution, initiatives to create opportunities for engagement and connecting tutors and tertiary learning advisors should be considered particularly important as strengthening these relationships would perhaps increase student engagement. Manning (2015) discussed how important the relationships between tutors and TLAs were for their students. Such relationships are beneficial to both the tutor and the TLA as each bring their own expertise—the tutor with their knowledge of subject content and the TLA facilitating academic study skills. Thus, they work in partnership to address the learning needs of the students to increase achievement and retention. A key aspect of the relationship between tutors and TLAs is communications that are regular, targeted and open, thus facilitating a mutual relationship of trust and respect

CONCLUSION

It is evident that some students arrive at tertiary education without the required skills for academic study, which impacts on their learning experience. The three specific trends highlighted in this study are the lack of digital literacy, low levels of literacy and numeracy, and limited or no academic skills. However, with the necessary support from their tutors and tertiary learning advisors, barriers to learning can be overcome. In particular, building and maintaining a reciprocal relationship where tutors and TLAs regularly communicate is an important aspect of supporting students in their academic journey. In addition, a whole institutional approach where both tutors and TLAs work in partnership allows each to bring their own strengths and knowledge for the benefit of their students which, in turn, may increase retention and attainment rates.

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