

Learning Centre Practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand:

Report on workshop presented at 2008 ATLAANZ conference

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Abstract

In 2003 and 2004 ATLAANZ members developed a draft professional practice document that describes some of the principles, knowledge and roles that underpin our work as learning advisors. At the 2007 conference we proposed building on that work by gathering information on the diverse range of practice in the work of learning advisors and on the changes and challenges centres had faced in recent years. This data would, we hoped, assist learning advisors to reflect on the provision of learning development in New Zealand institutions and provide baseline data that would assist future research into effective practice and comparison with practice in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Questionnaires were sent to learning centres at 31 universities, polytechnics and private training establishments in Aotearoa/New Zealand. We sought information about job titles, institutional settings, funding, staffing, the users, and the ways in which users' needs are catered for.

In the conference workshop we presented some initial findings, facilitated discussion on those findings, and sought feedback from participants on future research directions. This report describes the project and summarises the key discussion points from the workshop.

1. Background

This research began in 2007, but has its origins in the work during 2003 and 2004 to develop a professional practice document for ATLAANZ members. The draft document presented at the 2004 ATLAANZ conference (Cameron, Fraser, Looser & Thorns, 2005) described some of the principles, knowledge and roles that underpin our work as learning advisors, but did not include our 'practice' at that stage, largely because of time constraints.

Three years on, several factors reinforced to us the value of documenting both the commonalities and wide variation in our practice. In the face of major restructuring at several learning centres, many colleagues were seeking information about others' practice in order to benchmark themselves against other institutions and draw on the collective experience of the contribution learning advisors make to institutions. Projects to describe learning advisor practice were initiated in Australia and the United Kingdom, providing an opportunity for international comparisons and research. Finally, consideration of 'professionalism' and 'practice' continued to form a significant part of ATLAANZ conferences, both in presentations and informal discussion, indicating to us that there was strong interest amongst our colleagues in researching our practice.

At the 2007 ATLAANZ conference, we proposed a project to gather information on the diverse range of practice in the work of learning advisors and on the changes and challenges centres had faced in recent years. This data would, we hoped, assist learning advisors (LAs) to reflect on the provision of learning development in New Zealand institutions and provide baseline data that would assist future research into effective practice and comparison with practice in Australia and

the United Kingdom.

This report outlines the project, the initial findings presented at a workshop during the 2008 ATLAANZ conference, and the key discussion points from the workshop.

2. Method

2.1. Survey design

Two draft questionnaires were developed in 2007; one focused on centres as a whole (to be completed by one person per centre), and the other focused on practice in more detail (to be completed by individual LAs). Where appropriate, we included questions similar to those asked in the Learning Development Benchmarking project funded by the Australian organisation the Association of Academic Language and Learning (AALL) (Learning Development, University of Wollongong, 2007), to enable international comparisons. There were, however, substantial areas of difference between our questionnaires and those of the AALL project, necessitated by the different Australian and New Zealand institutional contexts and the different aims of each project.

At the workshops hosted by the University of Auckland prior to the 2007 ATLAANZ conference, we facilitated a session during which we sought feedback on the two draft questionnaires. That feedback was used to refine the questionnaires, which were then reviewed by ATLAANZ colleagues at several institutions for the comprehensiveness of item options, clarity of wording, and ease of completion.

Ultimately, only one of the two questionnaires was used, because of the difficulty in clarifying the requirements for formal ethics approval for the study. Initially, each of our two institutions took a different stance on the questionnaire to be completed by individual LAs and the decision process proved protracted. When it became clear that, if we waited for agreement between the two institutions on the second questionnaire, there might be insufficient time to complete the survey in 2008, we decided to defer the second, individual questionnaire and concentrate on the centre questionnaire.

The final centre questionnaire contained 30 questions, covering five key areas:

- Learning centre & institution (titles; location; hours; funding; connections)
- Staffing (numbers, tenure, contracts, qualifications)
- Users (demographics of students in institution and of users of learning centre)
- Programmes & services (areas & roles, modes of delivery)
- Changes (in practice, structure, delivery)

(NB. The full questionnaire is appended to this report.)

Questions were a mix of closed-ended multiple choice and open ended numeric and text. At the end of each section a further open-ended "comments" section was included to encourage respondents to provide additional explanatory information.

The final version of the questionnaires was formatted and distributed using the online survey programme *Survey Monkey* (www.surveymonkey.com).

2.2 Respondents

Public tertiary institutions (universities, wananga, and institutes of technology and polytechnics) were identified through the New Zealand Qualifications Authority website (www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers/index.do). Potential learning centre contacts at those institutions were identified through the ATLAANZ website or, for institutions with no prior association with ATLAANZ, by telephoning the institution. We then contacted each centre by email or telephone to confirm the head of the centre.

The final pool of respondents included 37 centres at 29 institutions (28 public; 1 private). This represented almost all public tertiary institutions (the exceptions being Telford Rural Polytechnic, Te Wananga o Raukawa, and Te Wananga o Awanuiarangi). Because of the proliferation of private providers, and their different funding structures, no attempt was made to include private providers in this project unless they were associated with ATLAANZ. The sole private provider in the project, Bethlehem Institute of Education, was included on this basis.

2.3.3. Data collection

An invitation was emailed to the head of each centre identified, explaining the project and inviting him/her to complete an online or paper form of the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire within two weeks. We followed up with an email reminder three days before the end of the two week period. By the deadline, approximately 75% of institutions had responded. During the week after the advertised closing date, we telephoned those centres that had not responded to ask if a representative of the centre would be able to complete the survey if more time were available; in most cases this led to the questionnaire being completed.

2.4 Data analysis

The final usable response rate represented 89% of institutions (26 out of 29) and 89% of centres (33 out of 37) approached. This was a high response rate, possibly a result of the high proportion (approximately 90%) of centres associated with ATLAANZ (although not all of those who completed the questionnaire – i.e. the heads of centres – were ATLAANZ members), and the extent of support for the project received at the 2007 conference workshop.

The data, however, did have a number of limitations. Although we had trialled the questionnaire beforehand, it was apparent that some questions were open to misinterpretation, with the result that some data had to be omitted from the analysis. There were also a number of questions that some respondents were unable to complete. Most of these involved quantitative data – not all centres collected the type of data we were seeking. Also, recent staffing changes meant that some heads of centres had been recently appointed and could not comment on changes that had occurred, and others were not LAs (but, for example, heads of student services) and appeared not to have the depth of knowledge of some issues that we had assumed.

In this first stage of the analysis, we focused on two themes that emerged from the data: status (including individual LA status and the position of centres within their institutions), and delivery of services. Because of the data limitations outlined above, and the fact that there was limited time available between the survey completion date and the conference, we presented only simple descriptive analyses at the conference workshop. We hope to gather follow up data and complete a more in-depth analysis in 2009.

3. Results & Discussion

In this section, we present briefly the interim findings and note the discussion that arose during the conference workshop.

3.1 Status:

Titles

It seems that the name we adopted for ourselves in the late 1990s has taken firm root. Approximately 40% of centres formally used the title *learning advisor*, and several others reported that their staff members use the term *learning advisor* informally to describe their work to colleagues and students instead of the official titles that reflect their institution's employment categories (e.g. *lecturer*, *tutor*). Several respondents commented on the importance of their title in conveying the nature of their work. Some had chosen *learning advisor* to convey the academic nature of work to colleagues, or had changed from a title such as *learning support* to *learning advisor* to convey to students the developmental nature of the role. Others noted that they used different titles in different contexts, for instance using *lecturer* when working with staff but *learning advisor* or *tutor* when working with students.

Types of contracts

We asked about two aspects of employment status: tenure and classification.

The majority (approximately 80%) of LAs and administration staff were on permanent contracts, the remainder being on fixed term.

Approximately 60% of LAs were on academic contracts, about 30% on general contracts, and the remainder on individual agreements. We expected that this would be a contentious issue and it was clear from both the respondents' comments and the discussion in the conference workshop that it indeed was. Several respondents commented in the survey that they were unhappy with their classification as general staff and were seeking academic contracts and this was reiterated by several workshop participants. However, this was by no means a universal view among LAs.

Three issues related to academic/general classification were apparent: recognition of teaching expertise; salary and working conditions; and hierarchical position within the institution. Those arguing that LAs should be classified as academic staff maintained that being classified as academic meant they were recognised as 'teaching' staff and were thus more accepted by their fellow 'teachers' in the faculties, and that the academic contracts conferred salaries and conditions more commensurate with LAs' qualifications than general contracts did. There was also a view that there was a clear hierarchy within tertiary institutions, with academic staff having a higher status, and that academic classification was therefore to be preferred.

Others, however, disagreed with this view. They felt that recognition of their expertise by faculty colleagues was not dependent on contract classification, and that the general contract scale offered more opportunity than the academic scale for salary progression for LAs. They argued that it would be better to focus on salary bands and working conditions than contract classification. There was some discussion about our response to the issue of hierarchy in tertiary institutions and, in this regard, colleagues from one of the wananga noted that their institution had tried to avoid elitism by calling all teaching staff *kaiako*.

Contract type was clearly signalled in the workshop as an issue that needed further exploration. In particular, workshop participants wanted further research into the links between qualifications, salary bands and working conditions. Those attending felt there was much to be gained from sharing this information within ATLAANZ. There was also a suggestion that we explore further the links between salary and job titles. (It is worth noting that, in this discussion, some participants

equated being on a university academic contract with being a 'lecturer'; however, in some universities LAs are employed on academic contracts as 'tutors'.)

Qualifications

In the survey we gathered data about the highest qualification of LAs. At the 2007 conference, participants indicated they were concerned that this information could be used to LAs' disadvantage and this view was reiterated at the 2008 conference, so we have decided not to include this data in the workshop report.

Instead, it was suggested that we explore LAs' qualifications in more depth, by examining not just level but 'breadth' – that is, years of experience and type of qualification (e.g. specialist teaching or TESOL qualifications).

Institutional setting

The majority of learning centres were either located in library buildings or complexes such as information commons or learning hubs. For several respondents, there had been a recent change in location. Few respondents were dissatisfied with the location of their centres.

Just over 40% of centres were part of student support services. Others were autonomous units or were part of other units such as teaching and learning centres or libraries (See Figure 1). Several reported that, even though they were part of a larger team, they essentially acted as an autonomous unit, both in terms of management and budget.

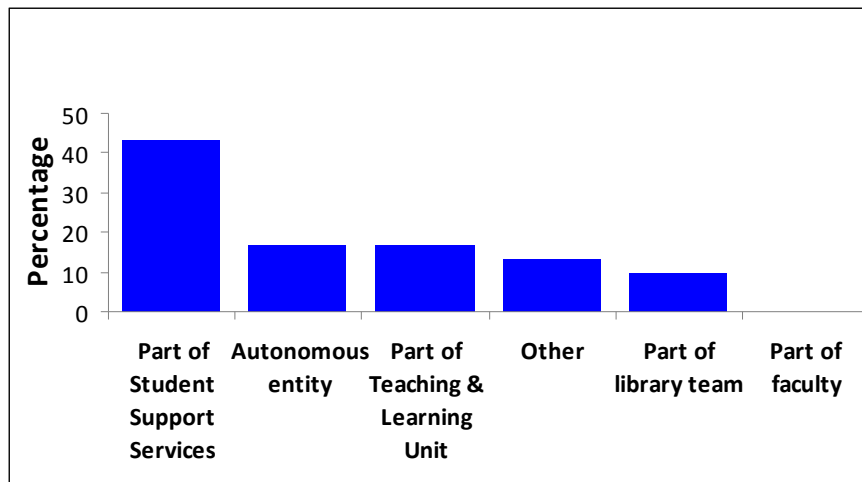


Figure 1. Autonomy of learning centres

Levels of staffing

We were interested both in the relative numbers of full time and part time staff, and the ratio of LAs to students.

The responses did not allow us to identify accurately the number of full time/part time staff, but it was clear that majority of LAs are part time and very few centres (6 out of 32 respondents) are staffed by full timers only. Several centres also noted that they used significant numbers of casual/short term staff (including students) to cope with peak demand.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, staffing was a source of dissatisfaction. Many centres noted that they

were understaffed or had no “slack” in the system, and restructuring / staff losses was one of the two main changes reported by respondents. However, because of incomplete data in the survey responses, we were able to calculate LA : student ratios for only half of the respondent centres.

Since the data is not robust, and because this information was considered by those at the conference workshop to be potentially sensitive, we have not included the data in this report. An Australian colleague commented that making such information public had never worked against AALL members; instead institutions realised they were lagging behind their counterparts and moved to rectify the situation. The feeling of those in the workshop, though, was that this data should not be published yet.

3.2 Delivery

Programmes, modes and opening hours

Details on the services provided by learning centres, the modes through which they were delivered, and opening times are summarised in Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5.

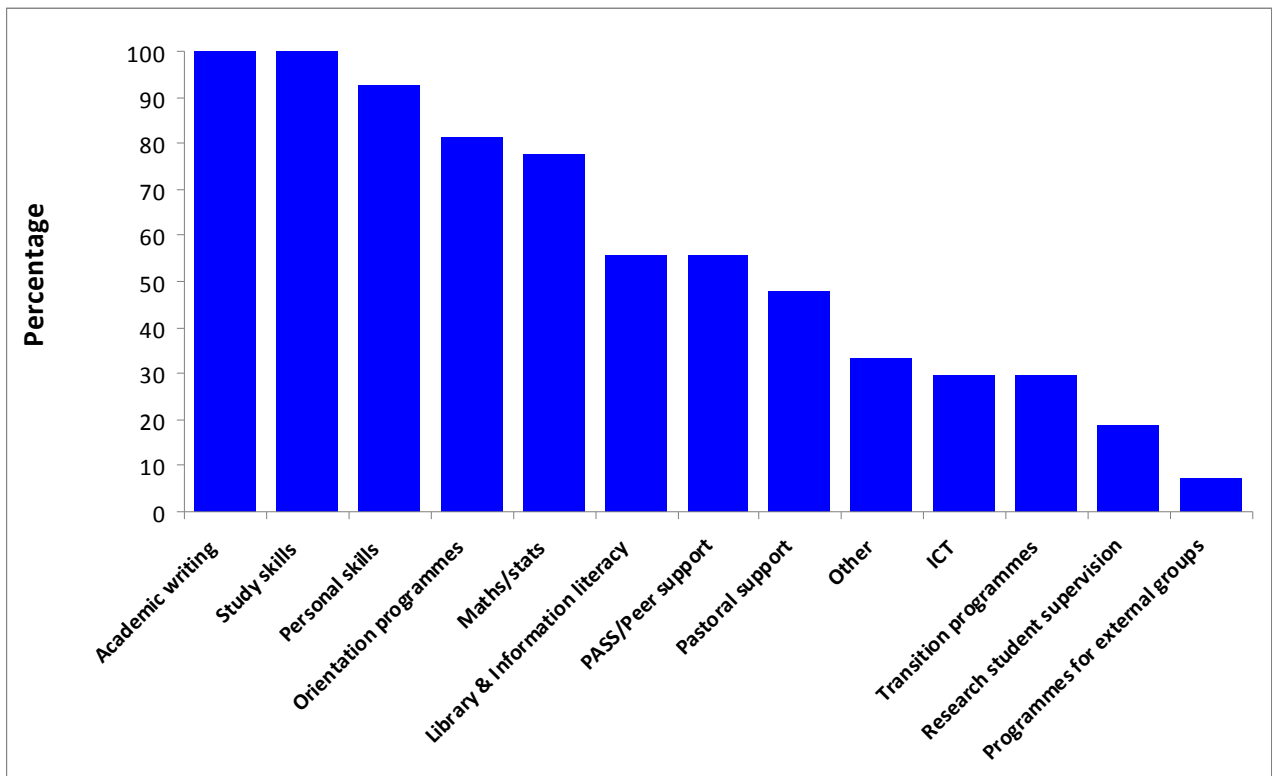


Figure 2. Programmes provided by learning centres

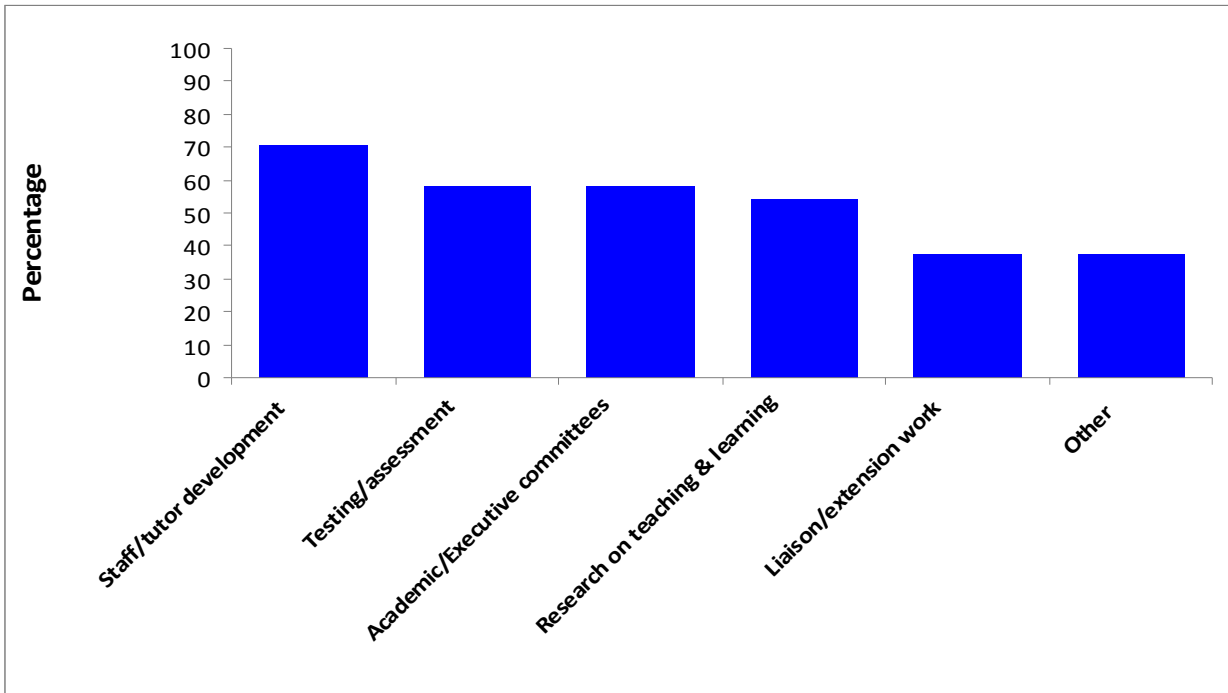


Figure 3. Other roles/services provided by learning cCentres

[NB. "Other" included such tasks as helping staff write for publication, preparing marking guides]

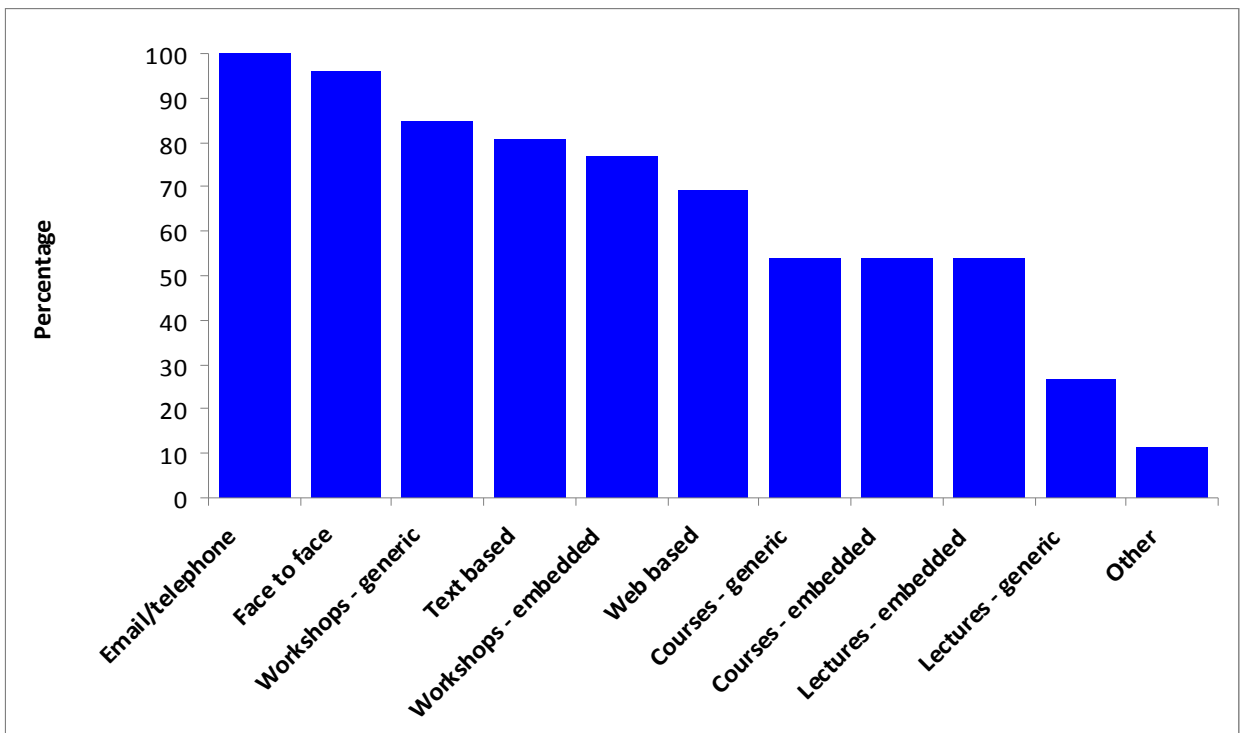


Figure 4. Modes in which programmes provided

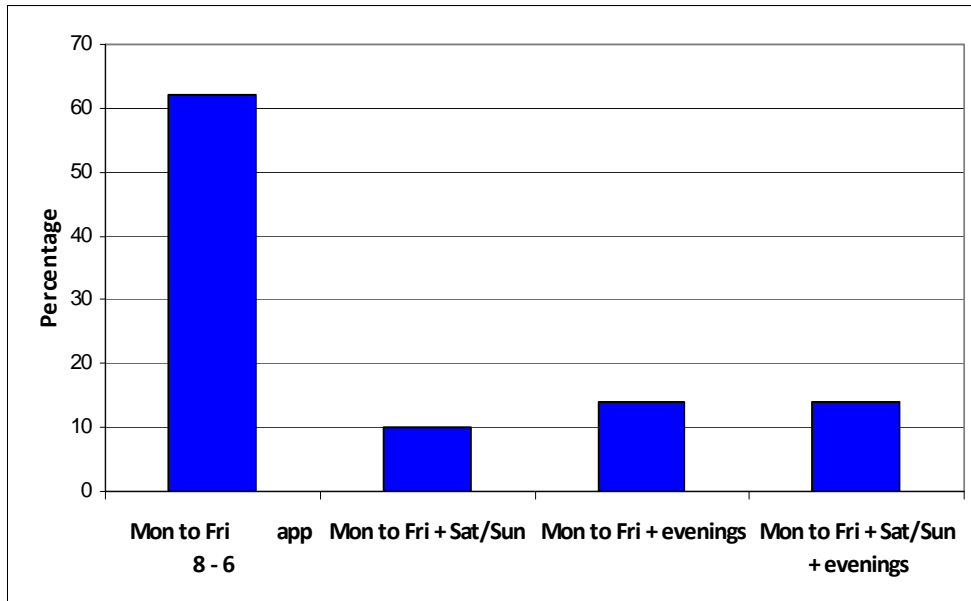


Figure 5. Opening days / hours

Delivery was one of the two main areas of change signalled by respondents (the other being restructuring and staff losses). Several respondents reported that they were offering fewer 1-to-1 appointments, but more workshops (particularly embedded/integrated sessions) and on-line delivery. This was reiterated by several workshop participants, some of whom noted that the increase in embedded workshop time had been explicitly at the expense of 1-to-1.

Workshop participants suggested that we research changes in delivery in more depth.

Usage

We asked questions about the numbers and demographic profiles of students in the institution as a whole, and of those using the learning centre, to identify global measures of who uses learning centres and explore possible sector differences.

Unfortunately, only a small number of respondents could provide that data. Sixty percent of respondents provided at least some data about the total numbers and demographic profile of students in the institution as a whole; however, only 30% (20%) could provide some (all) demographic data about the students using the learning centre. Several respondents commented that they expected to have this data available in future; others noted that they collected different categories of data to those for which we were asking.

The value of collecting detailed usage data was endorsed by those attending the workshop and there was support for the notion that ATLAANZ identify core data that all centres could collect and share.

4. Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the data gathered, the project resulted in a rich pool of data about the work of learning advisors in Aotearoa/New Zealand, covering over 80% of learning centres in public tertiary institutions and 90% of centres associated with ATLAANZ.

In this first stage of the analysis, we concentrated on identifying key themes and providing the workshop participants with basic descriptive analyses of the data associated with those themes. Three issues emerging from the data were highlighted by workshop participants as warranting further, more in-depth, research: (a) LAs' qualifications, and the links between qualifications, salary and working conditions; (b) changes in delivery; and (c) the identification of core usage data that all centres would collect and share.

We hope to gather follow-up data and complete a more in-depth analysis in 2009.

Acknowledgements

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References

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