Academic Advising: Improving Current Practices

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Abstract

Academic advising is an essential element of a student's experience and an integral part of a professor's work. However, it does not always receive enough attention in higher education institutions even though it can be crucial in enhancing institutional success and promoting student engagement and retention (Antoney, 2020). This paper aims to discuss academic advising, describe current practice in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLAC) at Durham University, present students' views of this practice as expressed in a survey in 2022, as well as explain the efforts undertaken to improve such practice. The analysis of survey data shows that there is a lot of room for improvement in the way academic advice was provided. The paper also lists the recommendations made by a working group on academic advising that convened in 2021-22 to scrutinise it and suggest improvements in MLAC; some of these recommendations could be useful to other departments as well.

Keywords:

Academic advising, School of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLAC), current practices, improvement, Durham University

Introduction

With the growing complexity and flexibility in systems of higher education and increases in fees and student expectations, issues of support for students have become more prominent (Antoney, 2020). Academic advising is a crucial aspect of the student experience that can make a difference to engagement, success, and retention (Nutt,

2003). However, it has been largely overlooked in many institutions. There is a lack of appropriate or sufficient training available to advisors in many institutions, and some professors regard academic advising as a secondary role that they often do not prioritise when compared to teaching, assessment, and research. In most institutions, students are assigned advisors from among current academic staff members, and it is assumed that they would interact positively with each other to achieve goals which often remain unclear both to the advisor and the advisee (McGill, Ali and Barton, 2020).

History of academic advising

The history of academic advising can be traced back to the beginnings of higher education and the founding of Harvard College in the USA in 1636. The college president and faculty members, who were mainly clergymen concerned with students' moral and intellectual development, started advising their students by acting '*in loco parentis*' (Gillispie, 2003, Lee, 2011). Similarly, in the UK, academic advising started at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, where personal tutors offered parental support to students during transition from home to university (McGill et al, 2020). However, currently the role encompasses both academic and pastoral support. There are two main models of advising or tutoring in the UK. In one model, the advisor/tutor provides academic and pastoral support, and in the other model, the advisor provides academic support, and a dedicated member of staff provides the pastoral (McGill et al, 2020). It is worth noting that the models shift, and there is a move towards the second. For example, traditionally, academic advising at Durham University followed the first model, but starting 2022/2023, a new student support system allowed for the introduction of dedicated student support officers who take charge of pastoral support, which allows the academic advisors to focus on the academic and personal development of their advisees. This is in addition to the welfare support offered by colleges. The new system aims to bring all strands of students support together under one system.

Research in academic advising started in the seventies with papers by O'Banion (1972) on the academic advising model and Crookston (1972) on developmental advising, and it advanced with the first national academic advising conference held in 1977 in Canada. As a result of this conference, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA)

was established in 1979. Starting 2003, academic advising gained prominence as a profession with professional certification from NACADA, and the United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring Association (UKAT).

Definition of academic advising

Academic advising is understood to involve a series of meetings between a student and an academic staff member in which they discuss issues that can affect the student's academic progress. There are several definitions of academic advising; all of which highlight the interactive nature of academic advising, the personal relationship between the advisors and the advisees, and the developmental nature of the process. For example, it is defined as "a decision-making process during which students clear up certain confusion and realise their full educational potential and benefits through communication and information exchange, with an advisor" (Grites, 1979, p.1). The purpose of the process has been described in some definitions, e.g., "academic advising synthesises and contextualises students' educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities, and lives" (NACADA, 2006; cited in Antoney, 2020.), and as "academic advising enables students to become autonomous, confident learners and engaged members of society" (UKAT, 2020).

Theoretical foundations of academic advising

Although Creamer (2000, p. 31) argued that there are no theories of academic advising currently available, there are many theories and approaches in psychology, education, and social sciences that can be used as the foundation of the theoretical underpinnings of academic advising (Williams, 2007). Hagen and Jordan (2008) hold that academic advising can be viewed through many theoretical lenses, such as Crookston's (1972) concept of developmental advising in which the relationship between student and advisor is a crucial element in student growth "facilitating the student's rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioural awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluating skills" (Hagen & Jordan, p. 20). Hagen and Jordan also refer to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) positive psychology

movement, which invites advisors to focus on student strengths rather than their deficits. Clifton and Anderson (2004) developed an approach called 'strengths-based advising', which focuses on potentials and talents and motivates students to succeed.

Theories of cognitive development have also been used in academic advising. Berk (2007) regarded cognitive development as a socially mediated process that required support from adults and more mature peers. In this way, advisors scaffold advisees' cognitive development as they grow into more independent learners (Hagen & Jordan, p. 23). These are some examples of theories that can inform academic advisors and how they engage with their advisees. NACADA (2023) explains many approaches to academic advising with related resources on their website. Examples of these approaches are the learning-centred approach, the engagement approach, the developmental approach, the prescriptive approach, the intrusive or proactive approach, the appreciative approach, and the flipped approach (Antoney, 2020).

Importance of academic advising

Although some academics regard academic advising as a peripheral part of their role or even a burden, it is valuable for the student and the institution (Habley, 2009). For students, academic advising connects their academic and personal worlds through discussions between student and advisor, as non-academic interactions between students and educators beyond the confines of a classroom have a positive impact on the students' development, social integration, and performance. Moreover, since learning is a social activity, it is important to match students with academic advisors who are interested in them holistically and not just in their academic performance. Therefore, academic advising helps to increase students' likelihood of succeeding in tertiary education, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, since good advising promotes student retention and satisfaction and is helpful in career planning and goal setting (Daller, 1997; de Klerk, 2021; Karp, 2011; Oertel, 2007; Surr, 2019). From an institutional perspective, Nutt (2003) views academic advising as "the core of successful institutional efforts to educate and retain students." Tsui (2012) presents a powerful case study where student-centred academic advising played a key role in reforming the undergraduate curriculum and transforming student learning at the University of Hong Kong.

Academic Advising in MLAC

At the School of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLAC), a typical degree lasts 4 years, with the third year spent abroad. Students are assigned academic advisors in years 1 and 2 and, during the year abroad, they complete a research project and their supervisor acts as the academic advisor. Finally, in the fourth year, the dissertation supervisors act as the finalists' academic advisors. This system has been in place for many years, and has seemed to work well, and it is in line with academic advising practices in other academic departments of Durham University.

In 2021, a working committee was established to scrutinise academic advising in MLAC, including consultation with students from all year groups, academic staff, and professional services staff. The aim was to discuss students' experiences and expectations of academic advising, and how to improve advising in MLAC. Discussions within the group showed that students had various experiences of academic advising, and they felt that there were aspects that could be improved. The working group created and administered a questionnaire to find out how first- and second-year students felt about academic advising.

Discussion of outcomes

The questionnaire received 102 responses, representing 27.4% out of 372 invited students. The responses are summarised in table below. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Table 1: Student responses to a questionnaire about academic advising:

Question:	Yes	No
Have you met your academic advisor this year	37%	63%
If yes, did you find the experience useful?	40%	60%
Is your academic advisor easy to contact and communicate with?	43%	56%
Do you know clearly what the role of the academic advisor is?	14%	86%
Would you prefer your academic advisor to be from one of your language areas?	95%	5%
Are you aware of academic support offered by the university, e.g., DCAD Academic Development for Students HUB?	5%	95%

As the table shows, there is a lot which could be improved in terms of academic advising practices in MLAC. Unfortunately, student engagement with and benefit from academic advising was small, as 37% of students had met their academic advisors, and 40% of those found the meetings useful. Contacting advisors has been an issue, as 56% of respondents did not find it easy to contact their advisor, and 86% did not understand their role. Although traditionally, the school made an effort to not allocate students to advisors from their language areas, 95% of respondents would prefer their advisor to be specialised in one of the languages they were studying.

Other topics cited in the questionnaire included the frequency and format of meetings. Forty three percent of respondents would like to meet their academic advisor once per term, and 57% would prefer more frequent meetings. Regarding meeting format, 58% of respondents would like to meet their academic advisors individually, whereas 4% would prefer small group meetings and 38% a mixture of both formats. Finally, students were asked how they would define the role of the academic advisor. Their answers revolved around 3 main themes and examples of their answers are given after each theme. These included:

***academic support*:**

"Someone who is always there for the student to help them with academic matters",

"To give advice to students about their studies and different options",

"Someone who is there to support your academic progress".

pastoral support:

"Someone who genuinely cares for the well-being and success of the student",

"A support network".

communication and contact:

"A point of contact within the school who is available to give general advice in regard to how to manage your studies",

"A person that students can talk to about any academic issues",

"The first port of call if there's an issue".

Many students responded to this question by saying that they did not know what the role of the academic advising was. However, the responses given above show that students expect a lot from their academic advisors and value their role in their university life. Key words that were repeated in the responses are help, support, advise, check in with, answer, contact, talk to, give advice, and care, among others.

In response to the questionnaire findings, the working group on academic advising made recommendations to the school about how to improve future practice. The recommendations are as follows:

- Appoint academic advisors from one of the language areas of the advisees.
- Clarify the remit of academic advisors to advisors and advisees.
- Make sure that the administrative processes and advising allocation ensure students are allocated academic advisors from the induction week of year 1.
- Use a Banner-based system to facilitate academic advising in MLAC.
- Academic advising should be recognised appropriately in terms of staff workload.
- Inform students about academic advising in induction sessions and encourage them to engage with it.

- Improve the academic advising SharePoint site and add more information and links – for example: information about processes such as extensions, concessions, and course changes; advice on complaints and appeals – and encourage advisors and advisees to refer to it.
- Prepare a short training video for advisors.
- Set up the first meetings between advisors and advisees during the induction week if possible.

Most of these recommendations were implemented, and it is hoped that they will improve the situation of academic advising.

Conclusion

Academic advising is a very important aspect of students' experience. It is not clear to many advisors and advisees how to define academic advising. Clarity is needed about the purpose of academic advising, and information about it should be shared widely so that expectations can be managed, and students should be provided with the support that they deserve. We also need to understand how academic advising fits in with other forms of student support offered by the university. Finally, the academic advising workload needs to be properly recognised, as currently most staff feel that they are not fairly rewarded for academic advising, and this affects how they perceive it and engage with it.

In response to the recommendations above, certain changes were introduced in 2022, for example, training materials were provided to advisors and advisees, academic advising induction sessions were arranged in Induction Week, the SharePoint site for academic advising had links to the resources required by students, and a banner-based system was established for advisors to learn more about their advisees. In 2023, MLAC Academic Advising Handbook will be released on SharePoint. The handbook will introduce advisors and advisees to the process of academic advising and how it fits within the university student support system, as well as provide advisors and advisees with links and information about the administrative processes and important points of contact for students on their common queries. Finally, it is strongly recommended that the university reviews the workload for academic advising to improve staff engagement with the

process. It is hoped that this paper would generate more discussions of academic advising at Durham University and across the sector in the UK.

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