



Academic Advising

Focus Group Report 2024

Part 1

**STUDENTS'
UNION**
University of
Manchester

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Introduction

The Students' Union ran the Academic Advising focus groups on Friday 2nd February 2024. The focus groups sought to gather and understand the reality of Academic Advising processes and relationships at the University of Manchester to understand how to address any gaps between students' expectations of advising and the reality of their experience.

The focus groups sought to understand the following topics:

1. Student expectations and experiences of Academic Advising.
2. The desired nature of Advisors and Advisees' relationships. For example, the session aimed to find out how much students wanted their Academic Advisor to be aware of about them and how they feel their Academic Advisor can make them feel seen and heard as an individual.
3. The process of evaluation and feedback if unhappy with an Advisor or the advising process.

The group included 16 students, who were divided into three focus groups of 5-6 students each. They discussed a series of questions covering student expectations and experiences of Academic Advising, relationship building, and feedback and evaluation.

Methodology

Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to understand student opinions. Two transcribers were assigned to each focus group, taking notes for 2-3 students each. Personal information was removed and participants were given a number to ensure anonymity. Analysis was then merged and the comments were inserted into Excel, with separate sheets for each of the 3 focus groups. Two researchers divided the focus groups and analysed their sheets separately, coding for the dominant themes within focus group topics. The researchers then compared codes, agreed on the overall themes and analysed the combined sheets.

Expectations and Experiences

This topic seeks to understand student expectations of Academic Advising, and how their own experiences have compared to this. Flip chart paper was available for students or facilitators to write down their thoughts, as well as the verbal conversations that were recorded by transcribers.

The questions asked were:

1. 'What is an Academic Advisor?'
2. 'When would I reach out to my Academic Advisor?'
3. 'What qualities should an Academic Advisor have?'
4. 'What are your experiences of group advising (where an Advisor holds meetings with all their students)?'

Findings

Relationship Building

Building a strong relationship with the Academic Advisor in a safe environment was the most common theme, with 23 comments addressing this point. Comments ranged from wanting the Advisor to know their name, up to them being a soundboard for problems and decision making. Students largely agreed that Academic Advisors should have a sense of humour, be open, and most importantly show that they want to engage with and get to know students.

Experiences of relationship building varied. While some students felt comfortable with Advisors building relationships informally, other students stated that their Advisor was unhelpful, unengaged and uninterested. Some students had a strong relationship with their Advisor and felt that they genuinely did care and were approachable.

Communication and Engagement

Students expect Academic Advisors to reach out and initiate meetings early on in the semester and offer both online and in-person meetings to suit student needs. Students would like consistency in having the same Advisor throughout their degree, and the Advisor being open to regular contact.

Communication and engagement was a theme which showed the most variety in terms of student experience. For example, one student reported seeing their Advisor once a week while another does not know who their Advisor is.

The lack of consistency in communication and engagement arose as a potential problem for students. Some students meet their Advisor face-to-face, while another student has been told that they can only ask questions over email. This did not just vary between faculties, but students were having varied experiences across similar subjects.

Students in general felt that the expectation is to meet every few months, and while some were happy with this, others felt that they would benefit from more frequent support.

One weakness highlighted by students is the lack of Advisor flexibility. Advisors hold 1 hour office hour slots and if students have a class they were not able to meet the Advisor. Additionally, students mentioned more hybrid options as a potential improvement.

Findings

Academic Guidance

20 comments focused on seeing Advisors as helping with academic life. Several students mentioned that Advisors could help with choosing modules, such as which are the most important, difficult, and how to best cover a variety of content. As such, students would like Advisors to be knowledgeable about the field, the course, as well as tips such as how to improve academically and act on essay feedback.

Academically, a student whose Advisor was also their lecturer had a positive experience because they had a connection to the course, while another has felt reassured about how their course is going.

Students mentioned help with choosing modules was useful, as well as assistance with time management and schedules.

Pastoral and Wellbeing

Many students see the Advisor role beyond academics, with 16 comments focusing on personal and pastoral mentorship.

Several students mentioned Advisors providing wellbeing support or signposting to relevant services. Students would like support with the transition to university generally and how to make the most of the experience.

Other students saw the Advisor role as purely academic and did not expect pastoral support. There appeared to be a lack of clarity in what Academic Advisors do, and what problems students can go to them with.

Navigating University and Beyond

As the human face of the university, students said Advisors should be helpful with navigating the university system. Students felt that Advisors should be able to signpost on a range of issues such as hanging course, visa issues, mitigating circumstances and checking up on DASS support. It would be helpful for Advisors to be aware of events and schemes, such as peer mentoring programs, to aid signposting.

Students have had a largely positive experience navigating the university system, including Advisors emailing on behalf of the student to resolve issues and signposting for visa issues.

Findings

Students expect Advisors to provide career advice, including helping with work experience, writing references, and applying to jobs and internships.

Students with positive experiences of advising highlighted the strengths around career support and extracurricular activities.

Group Advising

While group advising sessions can be beneficial socially, particularly in the first year for meeting new people, students overall still prefer individual meetings for addressing personal issues or concerns.

One female-identifying student on a male-dominated course noted that she felt imposter syndrome during group advising sessions, and others noted not wanting to speak up in fear of embarrassing themselves in front of peers.

Students did however mention that group advising sessions can be valuable because peers who have completed certain modules can offer insights that the Advisor might not possess.

Some students highlighted the social aspect of group advising, suggesting that it can help individuals feel more comfortable speaking up in a group setting.

However, the consensus among the students was that one-on-one meetings with the Advisor are still preferred for personalized guidance and support.

Recommendations

Training

Training should be provided for Advisors to outline to them the kinds of issues that students face, as well as events and schemes available to students in the department. This will enhance the ability of advisors to signpost effectively as the first point of contact for students.

Additionally, all Advisors should be communicated clearly with to understand the boundaries of their role; including what they can help with, how often they should be seeing students; how they communicate with students. This being outlined clearly across the entire institution will promote more consistency in the advising process.

Student Communication

Advisors and departments should also communicate clearly to students at the beginning of their studies what Academic Advisors do, what they can help with, and where they might need to be signposted elsewhere. This is because students have wide ranging expectations of what Advisor are for, and there was some uncertainty around what kinds of questions students can take to Advisors. Clearer communication of the boundaries of Academic Advising early on will support students to feel confident going to advisors with questions, as well as managing expectations around what Advisors can't do.

Group Advising

Ensure that one-on-one meetings with Academic Advisors are easily accessible to all students. This might involve implementing online scheduling systems, offering extended office hours, or increasing the number of Advisors to reduce wait times for appointments.

Relationship Building with your Academic Advisor

This topic seeks to understand the format that students want their relationship with their Academic Advisor to take. The focus group aimed to find out how much students want their Academic Advisor to be aware of about them and how they feel their Academic Advisor can make them feel seen and heard as an individual.

The questions asked were:

1. 'Picture your first one-to-one meeting with your Academic Advisor, can you discuss the sort of things you would want your Advisor to know about you in order to build a successful working relationship?'
2. 'What could your Advisor do in both your first and subsequent meetings to help you feel understood as an individual?'

Findings

Advisor Knowledge

Students highlight the significance of Advisors understanding students' backgrounds, including their academic history/achievements, schooling systems, and any accessibility needs. Participants said that Advisors should know about students' aspirations and career goals. There were also discussions about students being able to control the information they share with Advisors, particularly regarding disabilities and their academic implications. Suggestions are made for Advisors to gather information about students before meetings, through profiles or questionnaires, to better understand their context and individual needs.

Students express the importance of Advisors being knowledgeable about the university system, including understanding the various pathways available within courses and the overall structure of the academic environment. This emphasises the need for Advisors to assist students in navigating the complexities of university life effectively.

Students advocate for the ability to choose Academic Advisors based on their aspirations and career development goals. They suggest that offering students the option to select their Advisors could enhance the effectiveness of the Advisor-student relationship by ensuring alignment between student needs and Advisor expertise.

Relationship Building

Students express a desire for Advisors to build strong relationships by understanding them as individuals. They want Advisors to take the time to get to know them, including their backgrounds, aspirations, and personal circumstances.

Some students suggest having more frequent meetings or allowing students to choose their Advisors based on their ambitions and career development goals.

There's a call for increased communication and engagement from Advisors, including surveys to collect feedback and the option to change Advisors if needed.

Personal Support and Mentorship

Students value the role of Advisors as mentors and support systems. They want Advisors to provide personal support, guidance, and mentorship tailored to their individual needs.

Some students suggest giving students the option to choose Advisors based on their teaching areas or experiences.

Recommendations

Pre-Meeting Questionnaires

Encourage Advisors to send out pre-meeting questionnaires to students to gather information about their background, goals, and concerns. This information can help Advisors prepare for meetings and ensure that discussions are focused and productive.

Flexibility in Advisor Assignments and Customised Support

Implement a system that allows students to choose their Academic Advisors based on their aspirations and career development goals. Some form of questionnaire about student interests and goals prior to assignment may refine this process and enhance the quality of advisor/ advisee relationships who share similar interests.

Provide students with the option to change Advisors if they feel that their assigned Advisor is not the best fit for them. This flexibility can empower students to seek support from Advisors who can better address their needs and aspirations. Additionally, if students identify a particular area of interest that a certain member of teaching staff is best placed to advise them on, this allows the opportunity to seek specialist advice on that topic, making the most out of the advising process.

Feedback and Evaluation

This section sought to understand how students would handle dissatisfaction with their Academic Advisor and where else you might seek academic support. It also invites anyone with relevant experiences to share their insights. Questions asked:

1. 'If unhappy with your Academic Advisor, what would you do (e.g., who would you speak with where else would you go for academic support; peer support, lecturers, library team)? Does anyone have experience of this they are willing to share?'

Findings

Anonymous Feedback Form

Students agreed that having an anonymous feedback form for Academic Advisors is important. They suggested that feedback should be submitted centrally, rather than directly to the Advisor.

Alternate form of Feedback

Some students suggested that feedback should not be directly given to the Advisor but should go through a central system instead. There were suggestions to use alternate points of contact, such as PASS leaders, Student Support Hubs, or course directors, for providing feedback and seeking academic support.

Recommendations

Anonymous Feedback Forms

Create anonymous feedback forms for students to share their thoughts on Academic Advisors. Make these forms easy to find and submit centrally, not directly to the Advisor. This helps students feel comfortable sharing their concerns and gives valuable feedback for improving Advisor performance.

Diversify Feedback Option

Offer multiple ways for students to give feedback and get academic support beyond just talking to their Advisor. Use resources like PASS leaders, student support hubs, course directors, or academic support staff. This ensures students can reach out for help from different sources and that feedback gets to the right people for action.

Conclusion

Key findings highlighted the significance of relationship building between students and advisors, emphasizing the need for strong, personalized connections. Students expressed varying expectations, ranging from academic guidance to pastoral support, indicating a potential lack of clarity in the role of academic advisors.

The two key aspects that prevailed in discussion most prominently were consistency and communication. Students expressed the desire for consistent and accessible support from advisors and discussion of experiences showed this is not the case at present. As such, the most pivotal actions moving forward is to increase clear communication both to advisors and students about what the relationship should entail, enabling everybody to refer easily to an established framework.

Additionally, students emphasized the importance of advisor knowledge regarding university systems and the ability to provide customized support tailored to individual aspirations and needs. If Advisors remain a source of both Academic and Pastoral support, discussion found that it is imperative that Advisors are briefed on the best way to offer help, safeguarding and signposting for more personal issues.

Recommendations for improvement encompassed various aspects, including advisor training, proactive communication with students, and the establishment of diverse feedback mechanisms. Encouraging flexibility in advisor assignments and enhancing the accessibility of one-on-one meetings were also proposed to address student concerns effectively.

Implementing these recommendations can improve academic advising at the University of Manchester, creating a supportive environment for student success and well-being.

Key Recommendations



1) Training (Professional)

Provide thorough training to Academic Advisors on understanding student backgrounds, aspirations, and the university system.

This recommendation is supported by the data, with 20 student comments showing that students emphasized the importance of Advisors being knowledgeable about the university system and providing academic guidance tailored to individual needs.



2) Training (Personal)

Ensure Academic Advisors are open and welcoming and demonstrate a desire to get to know and speak to students. A key aspect is getting to know students to a point of being able to offer personalised support depending on a students' specific needs.

This recommendation is based on the finding that students desire strong relationships with their advisors and value personalized support, including mentorship and guidance beyond academics. The data reveals that 23 student comments emphasize the significance of building strong, individual connections with Academic Advisors.



3) Pre-Advisor Information for Students

Communicate to students early on what Academic Advisors do, what they can help with, and where they might need to be signposted elsewhere.

This recommendation stems from the data indicating a potential lack of clarity among students regarding the role of academic advisors and the support they can provide. Among the student comments, 16 highlighted the importance of understanding the role of Academic Advisors and knowing where to seek appropriate support.



4) Pre-Meeting Questionnaires

Encourage the use of pre-meeting questionnaires to gather student information in order to tailor Academic Advisor meetings.

This recommendation arises from the data suggesting that students want advisors to understand their backgrounds, aspirations, and individual needs, indicating the importance of gathering relevant information before meetings. The data reflects 20 student comments emphasizing the need for Advisors to have a thorough understanding of students' backgrounds and aspirations.

Key Recommendations



5) Customised Support and Flexibility in Advisor Assignment

Implement a system for students to choose Advisors based on their career goals and aspirations.

This recommendation aligns with the data indicating that students value personalized support and mentorship tailored to their individual needs and aspirations. Among the student comments, 18 emphasized the importance of tailored support aligned with students' career goals and aspirations.



6) Anonymous Feedback Forms

Establish anonymous feedback forms for students to express concerns about academic advising, submitted centrally to ensure anonymity.

This recommendation is supported by students' suggestions for anonymous feedback mechanisms and alternative points of contact for providing feedback beyond direct advisor communication. The data reflects 16 student comments advocating for anonymous feedback forms to facilitate open communication.



7) Diversify Feedback Options

Offer multiple feedback channels beyond direct Advisor communication, including PASS leaders and student support hubs.

This recommendation is based on the data indicating that students desire diverse feedback options and alternative points of contact for providing feedback and seeking academic support. Among the student comments, 14 highlighted the importance of having multiple feedback channels and alternative support options.



8) Accessibility of One-on-One Meetings

Ensure easy accessibility to one-on-one meetings with Advisors through online scheduling systems and extended office hours.

This recommendation is supported by the data suggesting that students value consistent and accessible support from advisors and may benefit from increased accessibility to one-on-one meetings. The data reflects 15 student comments emphasizing the importance of easy access to one-on-one meetings with Advisors.

By implementing these recommendations, the University of Manchester can enhance the academic advising experience.

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