Brookes Briefing

Academic Advising

Academic Advising is a key activity in the Education and Enterprise Pillar of **Oxford Brookes University Strategy 2035**, in particular "to offer each student … support in the form of personal/professional development coaching" (p.17) and "We will ensure the personalisation of the student learning experience" (p.26). The vision for advising at Oxford Brookes is to achieve a high quality and inclusive Academic Advising system which engages students to (pro)actively participate in their own self-development to enable them to become successful learners and graduates.

The Academic Adviser complements academic guidance at cohort level by focusing on the holistic development of the individual student. The main responsibilities of Advisers in UK HE include: Academic feedback and development; Personal welfare support; Information and support referral; Goal/target setting and monitoring of achievements; Solution-focused coaching (Small, 2013; Gubby and McNab, 2013; Ghenghesh, 2017; Gurbutt and Gurbutt, 2015; Calcagno et al, 2017; Ralston and Hoffshire, 2017; Yale, 2017). In practice, this is provided through one to one and group tutorials, and monitoring progress through connecting and communicating with your advisees.

The importance Academic Advising is reinforced by expansion of the HE sector, coupled with widening access = more students and more diversity; increased competition in the sector = concern about league tables (influenced by retention); differential outcomes for under-represented groups and the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) (Thomas, 2017).

Academic guidance can enhance the student experience; improve the academic success of students; encourage students to prepare for employment and careers beyond university; promote a sense of belonging to a disciplinary community (Thomas 2012; 2017). Advisers who are proactive and meet regularly with their advisees (Kuh, 2008; Hattie, 2009) are likely to be successful in supporting students to: reflect on how their studies are progressing; extend their conceptions of learning, study skills, metacognition and self-critical awareness; formulate and review their plans for employment and career aspirations; communicate effectively with academics within their discipline.

Moreover, it is the human side of education which comes first – finding friends, feeling confident and above all, feeling a part of your course of study and the institution – that is the necessary starting point for student success; at the heart of student retention and success is a strong sense of belonging; the academic sphere is the most important site for nurturing engagement which creates a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012; 2017). Advisers can improve student retention and success by: enabling a student to develop a relationship with an academic member of staff in their discipline or programme area'; providing students with reassurance, guidance and feedback about their academic studies in particular, and working in partnership with professional services; curriculum; being proactive (ie not optional); having an holistic approach; being collaborative and developing relationships; monitoring participation and following up non-participation (Thomas, 2012; 2017).

Principles and Practices for Academic Advising

Principle 1: Connect, communicate and monitor progress

Regular, ongoing and systematic tracking and monitoring of student progress and performance is widely considered as a necessity to provide successful student support (Shaw, 2014; McFarlane, 2016; Thomas et al, 2017). Students welcome this close attention, and regular, proactive follow-up contact (Small, 2013; Ghenghesh, 2017; Yale, 2017). This is particularly the case for students who may be categorised as 'at risk' or 'vulnerable' (Calcagno et al, 2017; Hannam and Dalrymple, 2022). There are many factors which influence student performance. These factors can be: Institutional (for example, level of satisfaction on their course and with the university); External (for example, level of family support; background and upbringing; socio-economic factors); Individual (for example, emotional well-being; strengths and areas for development at the point of starting the course, such as their level of practical and theoretical skills). Whilst students' individual characteristics are already formed, it is important for the Academic Adviser to acknowledge them and ask the student how their thinking, approaches and behaviours will impact on, or contribute to their progress. This dialogue will help you to provide effective support for your Academic Advisees.

Ensure that each of your Advisees:

- knows that you are their Academic Adviser at the earliest stage possible;

- knows how to contact you, including when and where your office hours will take place (we strongly encourage using Google Calendar to promote your office hours as well as putting them on your email signature and on relevant module Moodle sites);

- has their progress and engagement proactively monitored, with a focus on 'at risk' and 'vulnerable' students, taking into account the views of all of the staff who work closely with them;

  - regular 'checking-in' with your Advisees through email is also essential to check progress, direct them to some of the resources and services available to them and generally make them feel welcome, cared for and able to approach you as their Adviser. Please see the provided **email templates** for your use.

- is provided with accurate and regular feedback about how they are progressing and agree SMART targets stating what they need to do to improve;

- experiences a variety of different interactions with you whether they are full-time or part-time, postgraduate or undergraduate living, at university or away.

The key to keeping your Advisees on track are regular structured interactions in individual Advising tutorials (see Principle 2 which follows).

Principle 2: Run effective tutorials (one to one / group) using themed content (an Advising 'curriculum')

"[one to ones are] a forum where both teachers and students can discuss progress and set targets - and there is a great deal of evidence to indicate that it has played a key role in raising standards and student retention". (Crace, 2002, online)

In one to ones, the Adviser should:

- use a structure for the conversation, for example, a **coaching model**;

- employ active listening,open questioning, constructive challenging, reflecting back, paraphrasing and summarising.

- Be informed by iInstitutional data on student attendance and performance (most areas use Moodle for this information;

- record details of the conversation using the dashboard system for future reference. Many areas use 'virtual office' on Moodle (a site listing all advisees) to record notes from meetings in one location (and also to book meetings);

- develop agreed SMART targets

Adapted from Lochtie et al, 2018, pp. 112-3

Agreeing a style with the Advisee) can be useful. For example, it could be:Teaching (where specific teaching goals are the focus), Mentoring (where skills, knowledge and experience are shared/passed on) or Coaching (a non-directive conversation between thinking equals).

It is important to try to keep the focus very much on the advisee, and the development of their understanding and insights into their own behaviours and attitudes. By adopting a coaching style, you are able to support your advisees to become more independent learners. This means aiming to be 'non-directive' and using the associated skills. Of course, where you are on this spectrum may depend on the individual student and how 'coach-ready' they may be. The approach could even be agreed with them.

Principle 3: Set boundaries and know how to refer students to other services

The aforementioned institutional research, in addition to feedback from many conversations with colleagues, highlights the growing number of issues which students present with. In turn, this underlines the significance of boundary setting.

Boundaries can be best understood by grouping them into different type and by examining examples alongside their rationale.

Boundary type	Rationale	Examples
Expertise	You don't have the expertise or training. Other people in the institution are employed for these purposes.	A student who…. Has made suicide threats (mental health) Has suffered a bereavement (counselling) Has shown potential signs of sexual exploitation (safeguarding) Has had to leave home and asks you for advice about what to do (accommodation)
Temporal (time)	You, as a resource for your students, are a finite resource. Equality and fairness to students needs maintaining.	A student with complex individual needs who takes up excessive amounts of your time.
Behavioural / engagement / expectation	You can influence behaviour but not control it. As long as students are informed sufficiently, they have a responsibility to meet expectations.	Repeated low level 'disruptive' behaviour / 'non-engagement' / not meeting expectations over a period of time with no sign of improvement.

It may become clear that you need to refer a student to another service. For example, consider referring if you: can identify a service that has specific expertise to support your advisee; believe that you have gone as far as you can with the student; sense there is a conflict between your role as an Academic Adviser and your teaching role; feel out of your depth with the issues the student is bringing to you.

You should try to clarify, as much as possible, what the student wants or needs. However, you may not always be able to pinpoint the issue. You, or your students can use the regularly monitored email address **inclusivesupport@brookes.ac.uk** and they will ensure it reaches the right place.

In many Faculties, the Student Support Co-ordinators (SSCs) are used for referral (and they have training in some of these areas). Please liaise with your manager/team about use of SSCs in your Faculty.

References, resources and further reading

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