

## Academic Advising as Intervention for Enhancing the Academic Success of “At-Risk Students” at a Comprehensive University in South Africa

Mrs Benita P Nel

University of Johannesburg  
bnel@uj.ac.za

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### Abstract

*This article explores the role of an Academic Advising programme based on personal exchanges between academic staff member and students in enhancing the latter's academic success. The contribution focuses specifically on the relevance of “Academic Advising” as an innovative strategy for boosting the academic performance of extended diploma programme students. This strategy responds to the imperative to design appropriate interventions to effectively assist with increasing the academic success of students from disadvantaged school backgrounds, who are considered “at-risk” especially in their first year. Put differently, Academic Advising is an intervention aimed at identifying these “at-risk” students early in their first year of study, and supporting them holistically with the view to increasing “access for success” in Higher Education. Interviews with staff members and students are used to elicit both parties' experience of the particular intervention. It is shown that the success of this intervention is strongly linked to academic staff's ability to identify the personal struggles of individual students, namely, accommodation issues, reading and language challenges, and lack of career guidance. Besides improving students' academic performance, this intervention will create a sense of accomplishment, increased enthusiasm and confidence among these students, who did not initially meet the minimum entry requirements for Higher Education.*

**Keywords:** At-risk students; first year students; intervention for “access for success”; Academic advising.

### 1. Introduction

The South African Higher Education sector is still faced with the daunting imperative of transformation. This means amongst others, ensuring meaningful access to all previously-excluded sectors of our society. However, this cannot happen at the expense of academic excellence. It is important also to note that this sector is still grappling in general, with low levels of student success (Macgregor 2007). Whilst there are many reasons for this, for some it is directly related to the challenges faced by students in their transition from school to Higher Education, for others, it relates to the reality that public schools are characterised by varying levels of resources (Fricke et al 2008). This under-preparedness is compounded by the fact that some students from both rural and insular areas seemingly cannot function effectively in the city-style university environment, the exclusive use of English as medium of instruction, finding suitable accommodation, and financial challenges (Schreiber 2007). In other words, students' inability to efficiently address their obstacles is generally attributed to such factors such as poor language proficiency (Howie 2007), lack of resilience (Wilks & Spivey 2010), and limited social capital (Heymann & Carolissen 2011). These factors, though significant, partly account for the current under-preparedness of numerous first year students (Coughlan 2009). Whilst first year students are informed about the rules and regulations of, as well as support services offered by their Higher Education institution, in my experience as a lecturer, it seems that they generally fail to take advantage of both this knowledge and support facilities. The question is how do we encourage these students to access the available support services, but also, how do we motivate them to become independent?

To address these and other challenges faced by university students, particularly those from the aforementioned previously-excluded backgrounds, new and innovative interventions and strategies need to be designed and implemented. The implementation of these interventions and strategies in different institutions of Higher Education yielded varied levels of success (Smith et al 2014). In addressing this challenge, and of interest for this contribution, the Academic Development Centre (ADC), at the comprehensive university under investigation, also implemented an intervention loosely called “Academic Advising” since 2009. Academic Advising (which will also be the term I use in this article) has been designed broadly as a tertiary-level intervention programme, based on mentoring by the academic staff. This programme aims to eradicate first year students' sense of isolation and increase their access for success by, amongst other things, assist them to be familiar with, access and use available resources and services supplied by the

university. Academic staff members play an instrumental role in the early identification of at-risk students who are then provided with the necessary information and support that would help them address their challenges. It is important to note that these interventions include a special orientation dimension. This orientation supplements the generic orientation offered by the institution at the beginning of the year, which is part of the induction of new extended-programme students into the ethos of the university. Furthermore, a student conference is organised once a year to motivate students; and, a mark review session is convened each term to give academic staff the opportunity to holistically examine the academic progress of each student on the programme.

This article aims to analyze the role of this staff-student personal exchange-based academic advising programme in assisting students to cope with and take charge of their challenges in a manner that aim to enhance their academic success. Interview excerpts will be used to emphasize staff's and students' narratives of their involvement in, and enrichment through this programme. Firstly, I will present a literature review on the current scholarly work on the challenges of the first year experience and the role of institutional interventions in this regards.

## 2. Literature Review

As indicated in the introduction, literature on the first year experience of students in Higher Education, identified students' slow or difficult academic and social adjustment, but also, their lack of finance and time management skills as some of the significant factors hindering their academic success (Higgins 2010). Consequently, universities' approach to this maladjustment has changed. Rigid rules and regulations requiring staff to act in *loco parentis* have been replaced by an approach aimed at equipping students with the tools they need to personally manage their adjustment (Higgins 2010). This new approach consists of using faculty staff members as mentors to first year students, on a one-on-one basis. This focus on mentoring it is argued has the potential to increase both the retention and enrichment of undergraduate students (Jacobi 1991).

Mentoring in Higher Education has been variously defined. For the purpose of this paper, mentoring will be understood in terms of its definition by Shandley (1989):

First, it is an intentional process of interaction between at least two individuals.... Second, mentoring is a nurturing process that fosters the growth and development of the protégé.... Third, mentoring is an insightful process in which the wisdom of the mentor is acquired and applied by the protégé.... Fourth, mentoring is a supportive, often protective process. The mentor can serve as an important guide or reality checker in introducing the protégé to the environment he or she is preparing for. Finally ... an essential component of serving as a mentor is role modeling.

For Shandley, in Higher Education the interaction between a mentor and a mentee must be based on *intentionality* and *nurturing*. That is, the mentor is expected to share her insights and experience with the mentee. The mentor also needs to support and guide the mentee, and help mold him.

Students, who commence their Higher Education career with less academic resources than the average student, have less chances of graduating (Engstrom & Tinto 2008). Thus, to ensure meaningful access for these ill-equipped students, well-aligned and coordinated suitable support services should not only be available, but should be used by these students. The significance of this kind of support in the promotion of student retention is highlighted by Tinto (2002) who sees both academic and social support as central to the enhancement of the holistic development of students. Academic support include the language proficiency assistance offered by writing centres, academic development programmes for under-prepared students, and support with time management and subject workload balancing. All these support services enable students to have a "more effective, enhanced and satisfactory experience if they are placed in an environment designed to help them navigate" their complexities and problems (Higgins 2010). Interaction between academic staff and students can assist the latter with both academic and social adjustment (McKay & Eserella 2008). Social adjustment includes extra support when the student is a single parent, assistance with accommodation, stress and time management, but also, with emotional challenges. Lastly, students also encounter financial challenges such as the withdrawal of their funders, unexpected unemployment of the breadwinner, and increase in their living expenses when they move to the city. Finance-related stress can affect students to such an extent that they will consider deregistering from the Higher Education institution (Bitzer 2009).

It is important to stress that student success requires more than just increased basic-skills courses. It is necessary to invest in structured and aligned activities geared towards their success (Engstrom & Tinto 2008). Put differently, to ensure a holistic development of students (Bitzer 2009), structures must be instituted to identify factors that can negatively affect students' academic progress. It is in this context that academic advising programme is run by a South African university. This initiative is aligned with other support activities that can possibly identify issues that hinder students' success in extended programmes and it provides opportunities for a timeous identification and remedying of the

academic or social situation. The academic advisor's role in the programme under discussion is to equip students with tools to manage their own adjustment to Higher Education. This is achieved by motivating them, guiding them to the appropriate support services, and monitoring their academic progress. These support mechanisms have the potential to foster students' academic success even when they have completed the programme. It is therefore against this backdrop that I critically analysed this programme. The next section will outline the research methodology followed in this study.

### 3. Research Methodology

A qualitative approach (Van Manen 1990) was selected for this study. This is because it can delve deeper into the motivations and individual goals of research participants, it is suitable for an analysis of academic advisors' and students' views on the Academic Advising programme. Because this study investigates participants' lived experiences and behaviours, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted. These interviews were audio-recorded to collect participants' accounts of their personal experiences. The choice for audio-recorded interviews is warranted by the fact that it is sometimes easier to talk about experiences than to write about them (Van Manen 1990). The recorded interviews were then transcribed and analysed.

#### 3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Since this was a preliminary investigation, only four academic advisors and six students were purposively selected and interviewed. The academic advisors interviewed included one line manager, two fixed-term contract lecturers, and one part-time lecturer. This group consisted of three females and one male. This gender representation was in line with the gender composition of the staff in the given department. With the exception of one fixed-term contract lecturer, all academic advisors were involved in the Academic Advising programme for more than two years. Students in their second or third year of study were interviewed to elicit their reflections on their experience of the programme. It is important to note that finding students who had completed the programme was difficult, since they had already left the campus. Thus, only six students were interviewed. All the above-mentioned interviewees were selected based on their active involvement in the university under investigation's Academic Advising programme. This ensured the collection of well-informed responses.

Aspects explored in the interviews included the interviewees' understanding of the function of the programme and their roles in it, as well as its benefits and possible shortfalls. The interview schedule for students included questions contained in Figure 1 below:

- 1 How would you describe the academic advising programme?
- 2 What are the benefits of this programme?
- 3 How would you describe your role as the role of an academic advisor? Give examples of your own experience of this programme.
- 4 What, in your view, are the outcomes of the academic advising programme?
- 5 What are the challenges faced by students in the extended programme? What do you regard as the four most prominent challenges?
- 6 What are the shortcomings of the academic advising programme?
- 7 How can this programme be improved?
- 8 Did you consult an academic advisor? If so, explain the situation(s).
- 9 What can be done by the academic advisor to ensure that students' needs are met?
- 10 Are there any negative effects associated with students having academic advisors?

**Figure 1:** Interview schedule for probing students' views of the academic advising programme

The same interview schedule presented in Figure 1, was used when interviewing academic advisors; however, the last three questions were omitted.

In order to adhere to sound ethical practice, all interviewees were informed of the research study's goal and procedures, and their consent for inclusion in this study was secured (Vos 2005) and the different interviewees were numbered to protect their identities.

Data were then analysed by means of content analysis. Participants' responses were categorised according to each question in the interview guide. This categorisation was done for both academic advisors and students.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The results of the interviews are presented under the following headings: 4.1) essence of the programme; 4.2) role of academic advisors; 4.3) benefits and 4.4) outcomes of the programme; 4.5) students' key issues, and 4.6) shortcomings of the programme and 4.7) suggestions for improvement. A1, A2 or S1, S2 and so forth will be used to refer to Academic Advisor 1 or Student 1 respectively, as sources of the direct quotes.

### 4.1 The essence of the Academic Advising Programme

An academic advisor (AA) defined the programme as an intervention aimed at facilitating students' holistic adaptation to tertiary education through the provision of additional support. S/he stressed that, because the majority of student lack this type of assistance,

...a group will have a dedicated staff member who is there to monitor their progress and to suggest or provide, depending on the situation, interventions that are required to enable that student to perform as efficiently or effectively as possible at university (A2)

Another academic advisor indicated that though all students needed support at varying levels, she focused mainly on at-risk students. She saw the contribution of the programme in terms of its channeling of students to the appropriate services. Her colleague emphasised the need to support at-risk students on completion of the analysis of their marks.

Most of the interviewed advisors articulated that "... I know that we are supposed to concentrate on the academic stuff but it goes a lot beyond that ... (A4)". This indicates that the improvement of students' academic performance requires a strategy that takes into account other facets of their lives besides academic issues. This is added dimension is confirmed by Ruus et al (2007). Indeed Ruus et al (2007) view an educational institution as responsible for the creation of an environment in which students' academic success is related to their psychological and physiological wellbeing. An academic advisor summarises this interconnection thus as follows:

we give them academic advice but we refer them to PsyCaD [Student counseling centres] to make sure that their personal problems are dealt with as well because you can't separate the two (A3)

### 4.2 The role of academic advisors

Some interviewed academic advisors view themselves as motivators and support structures for first year students in extended programmes, in that, they "...monitor their progress and suggests or provide, depending on the situation, interventions that are required" (A2). Others indicated that their role is to "channel them in the right place" (A4), if they are unable to personally assist these students. Yet others indicated that their role was solely academic - they would refer students for other issues. Evidence of the academic focus is provided by an advisor who states that her "role basically is to sit there with all their marks and take them through the process ... (A3)". It is important to note that Lacefield et al (2012) emphasises the possibility and feasibility of using academic results as a means of identifying students who are at-risk of failing. Nevertheless, there are those who view their role as assisting in providing students also with a more holistic support.

Advisors were also very aware of their personal abilities and limitations when fulfilling these roles:

*I am not able to get them all the information but I have the life experience and the university access to allow them to then go to the right place to help them get the help that they need (A4).*

*Identifying factors that threaten students' academic success is central to effectively assisting them and/or referring them to relevant intervention opportunities (Lacefield et al., 2012).*

One student perceived the academic advisor's role as someone who assists students in all academic and non-academic aspects. S/he states that the function of an advisor is

*...basically to assist any student with their academic needs and if they needed anything educational wise or if they had any problems, they would always come to the AA and tell them and they would advise them and assist them where necessary (S1)*

This sentiment was echoed by another student who saw the AA as fulfilling a

...supportive function ... directed to the programme itself and the (support) which are directed to the modules ... I used to go to him [the AA] for personal issues also (S3).  
When asked whether or not they consulted an AA, students responded very positively: "Yes, all the time (A1)" and "Yes ... quite a few times" (S4).

#### 4.3 The benefits of the Academic Advising programme

It would seem that this intervention gives at-risk students the financial, academic, and emotional support that they need to succeed in their first year of study. This is evidenced by one academic advisor who states that:

...we're able to give students who are at risk for financial or personal reasons support that may allow them to make full use of the academic chance that they are given .... (A4)

This is echoed by another advisor who, commenting on the purpose of the programme, indicates that:

...it gives them an anchor in their first year and in fact on an ongoing basis and a lot of students will come back. Students are often quite lost at the beginning of the year. They don't know where to go for advice, for resources, sometimes they literally just need a shoulder to cry on, they need someone to recognize them and to see them ... (A2)

This intervention also gives students the confidence to accept bigger challenges as they progress to the next academic level. The intervention makes students aware of their at-risk status relatively early in the year. This enables them to take remedial action. Indeed, from as early as February each year, students meet with academic advisors to discuss their progress thus far. In such meetings, academic advisors show students areas where they are at-risk. These sessions afford students the opportunity to tell academic advisors about their challenges and receive the necessary support. This support enables students to overcome obstacles they face in their academic journey. This often leads to an improvement in students' marks and, ultimately, the pass rate. One academic advisor views this as a win-win situation:

If they are not having too many problems that will affect their efficiency academically, they will do well and if they do well, you as an individual will be happy that your students are also progressing. (A1)

A student stressed how consulting an academic advisor assisted her in continuing with her studies, despite her personal obstacles:

I was pregnant last year. Then I didn't know what to do at first. I was scared to come at first ... asked for advice as to what to do and so forth. She did help me a lot (S2)

This student went home for a month, returned and successfully completed her first year, as she passed all her modules. Sometimes the academic challenges experienced by students result from personal issues that need to be addressed. This is confirmed by the following excerpt: "...sometimes they will say: Because my life is on fire that [is why] my marks look like this" (A1).

This interconnection between their academic progress and their personal lives was reiterated by another student who received support from an academic advisor:

I actually had a problem with my traveling and at some point I managed to go to her and she was able to tell me how I should (manage) my study program ... you lose a bit of focus when it comes to education and ....I was able to get that sense of believe that it is possible ... yah from her (S4).

Indeed, it seems to be confirmed as Heymann & Carolisson (2011) believe that students need role models and mentors who will assist them holistically on their journey through Higher Education.

#### 4.4 The outcome of the programme

When asked about what advisors regarded as the outcome of the programme, one advisor responded as follows:

Well there was a time when it [Academic Advising intervention-BPN] didn't exist and usually during those times I found that students sort of just survived from a day to day basis. It is almost that they lost their goal ... they forgot why they were here. So with the Academic Advisor intervention what helps me a lot is that they are more goal-oriented. So at least they know what the goal is and we keep on reminding them. So we sort of keep them on track. (A3)

Another interviewee considered the improvement of the pass rate as the main outcome of this intervention. Conversely, one respondent perceived better career-guided students as the outcome of the intervention. Indeed, academic advisors refer students for career counseling when they suspect that the latter's inability to perform is due to a mismatch between the qualification enrolled for and students' abilities.

#### 4.5 Key issues that students grapple with

An overlapping of comments was observed on the question relating to issues that students grapple with. These issues can be divided into academic and non-academic. Academic issues included students' under-preparedness for Higher Education, lack of self-discipline, lack of time management, incorrect career choice, difficulty with English as language of instruction, and inability to balance the different subjects. An advisor summarises the language problem as follows:

*You know English is a second language, that's a given for 99,9% of our students, but there are some students who are arriving with English that are incapable of supporting them in a tertiary environment where English is the language of tuition I think that is a huge problem and I think it seems to be getting worse. (A4)*

*Under-preparedness was characterised as a "lack of fundamental basics (A2)" and "... it is almost that they haven't internalised discipline (A3)". Another academic advisor added that in "most cases it's ... balancing the subjects (A1)".*

Non-academic challenges, on the other hand, included financial constraints, food, accommodation, transport issues, pregnancies, and uneasy adjustment to the new environment, as well as personal problems, stress, peer pressure, and crime. It is important to note that financial challenges were more cited in the interviews than their academic counterparts. These financial challenges are confirmed by a study conducted by Schreiber (2007). According to this study, students grappling with undergraduate adjustment, those who have an African language as mother tongue, as well as those who receive financial aid need counseling services more to enhance their academic success (Schreiber 2007). Some of the key challenges experienced by academic advisors are contained in the following responses: "... a lot of times it is personal problems (A3)", "some students they do stay far and when they come to school, they get mugged and it affects them (A1)", and "guy stuff (S3)", in the case of male students.

All students enrolled for extended engineering diplomas have a year module called Fundamental Research Practice. It endeavors to improve students' written and spoken English competencies as so many enrolled students have language barriers. However, it is not a sufficient means to alleviate the situation, since certain students are "not always ready for varsity" (A3). This implies that although there are attempts to address language barriers, there are other skills that are missing which are crucial for a student to succeed academically.

On the issue of financial constraints, as in past years, the National Financial Student Aid in South Africa (NFSAS) did not cover the living expenses of students in 2012. Consequently, students experienced various finance-related problems - even starvation. This, in turn, led to low concentration among students who could not function optimally. This was confirmed by A2 who wondered:

*I have no idea why but this year, especially this year I have a lot of students who have no food! They are literally starving! It's amazing!"*

As a result, academic advisors established a food cupboard for hungry students, until a permanent solution was found. Some academic advisors felt very strongly about this challenge:

*Financially I think we have a massive issue because NFSAS doesn't cover their living expenses and it breaks my heart – these kids are given the opportunity to come to university and have to drop out or feel that they are unable to carry on because they are not being fed – it freaks my mind. (A4)*

#### 4.6 Shortcomings of the Academic Advising programme

Different academic advisors have varied levels of commitment to the Academic Advising intervention. The following statement by one academic advisor highlighted this issue:

*I think the academic advisors' level of commitment to it varies. I think it is slightly problematic that people don't volunteer to do it. It is added on as an additional duty because there is not necessarily a willingness to do it. It's what you want to put into this programme as an academic advisor is what you are gonna get out and what the students is gonna get out and I think that is a significant problem. (A2)*

In line with the difference in staff's commitment, the impact of the AA intervention also varies from group to group. This hinders the consistency of the intervention. Nevertheless, one should also bear in mind that these roles are add-ons to staff's existing responsibilities. What is more, these academic advisors are not remunerated for these roles.

Confidentiality is also regarded as a possible obstacle to this programme:

*Confidentiality – students sometimes they find it difficult to come and talk to the lecturer and when they look at you in class they feel like: This one, he knows my problems and they feel ... you are gonna judge them... They are scared to talk. (A1)*

As it transpires, insecurity relating to confidentiality can hinder students' confidence in the intervention. Indeed, students feel comfortable to talk when they are assured that whatever they choose to share will remain confidential. Nevertheless, convincing students of the confidentiality of their exchanges with the academic advisors is difficult.

Another issue raised in the interviews was the significant amount of paperwork expected from academic advisors. Indeed, the division expects staff to write term reports on their work as academic advisors. This takes time away from or adds to the hours academic advisors spend on their primary responsibilities:

*To me as an individual, I would say sometimes I forget to document the events as they occur and as times goes by it's difficult to recall what has actually happened. Ja that's a challenge. (A1)*

Another advisor added that "having to fill in paper work and attend meetings (A4)" compounded her frustration, especially since the AA intervention is without remuneration. In other words, more administrative work without remuneration, for a part-time lecturer, amounts to an extra burden. This issue should be examined by management.

Unlike academic advisors, students hardly identified shortcomings relating to the AA programme. They were very satisfied with the service rendered by academic advisors. However, one student mentioned that because AAs have busy schedules, "there is not sufficient time (S3)" for discussion.

#### 4.7 Suggested improvements

The interviewees had differing opinions on how this intervention could be improved. Nevertheless, the issue of time is a reality that cannot be ignored. Indeed, one academic advisor maintained that "if we want to improve anything it's going to take up time that we do not have (A3)". Another advisor emphasised the impact of better trainings and the elaboration of clearer guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of academic advisors on the improvement of the intervention:

*I think if we could find a way of getting greater consistency in how it is put into practice – I think we are sort of getting there – we've got some basic guidelines. So I think they are clearer than where we were last year. But I think we need to panel beat those a bit ... (A2)*

A student suggested that the programme could be improved by ensuring that academic advisors continuously enquire about students' problems and follow up on them. In other words, students should be encouraged to open up about their challenges and needs. Another student highlighted the need for advisors to adopt an open and friendly approach which will make them more approachable or inviting to students. This view is confirmed by an advisor who stresses that advisors should be "regularly inviting to get a better understanding of their situation and being able to find the solution to situation" (A4). One student also recommended that such programmes as the AA be made available to students beyond their first year of study, as it "will help you with the progress throughout the years" (S3).

These results highlight a number of challenges faced by some first year students in Higher Education institutions. Some of these obstacles relate to academic adjustments, notably, students' lack of English proficiency, their under-preparedness for Higher Education, as well as those pertaining to social adjustments, namely, time management, personal problems, and accommodation and financial difficulties. These challenges are almost similar to those reported internationally (Higgins: 2010). Thus, a mentoring programme that aims to improve students' academic success has to address both their academic and social challenges. Through such programmes as the Academic Advising, students are encouraged to access support services that are at their disposal. Nevertheless, these programmes need dedicated staff members who will invest their time and efforts (in the absence of financial remuneration) to assist at-risk students to adjust to their new learning environment. The fact that students wished that such programmes would continue beyond their first year of study indicates that they are beneficial.

## 5. Final Reflections and Conclusion

A mentoring programme, like the Academic Advising programme, where a staff member is the mentor, evidently can yield significant benefits in terms of the induction of first year students into Higher Education. This new environment as indicated in the literature and the findings of this study, is very demanding on students. Nevertheless, students and staff alike provided evidence that shows that programmes like this, can go a long way to assist students to cope with the challenges that they experience. Students received help with both their academic, social and personal lives. This enables them to turn their challenges into manageable possibilities. As a result of the early monitoring of students' progress and the mentoring they receive, their levels of motivation and success have increased.

The university under investigation has established, through this programme, a constant safe-net that will "catch" at-risk students. This is achieved by means of the mark review sessions, supportive staff, but also, emotional support, career guidance referrals, and other support structures. The key issues that students grapple with – under-preparedness, lack of discipline, lack of time management, financial challenges, and language issues – are addressed by also referring students to the appropriate services.

The value of the intervention to develop first year students holistically, through programmes such as Academic Advising is indeed confirmed and their confidence as students, as shown in their accounts, has improved. They seemingly are also able to manage their time more effectively – this boosts their overall performance. However, more research should be conducted to compare the performance of students who receive this intervention to those who do not. Because, after all is said and done, the real test is whether these first year students, now in their second or even third year of study, are able to meaningfully continue and succeed in their path on completing the enrolled qualification. This is the true test of academic success!

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