Sheffield Hallam University | Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research

EVALUATION OF IMPLEMENTATION OF MODELS OF ACADEMIC ADVISING IN POSTGRADUATE TAUGHT COURSES

REPORT

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Evaluation of Implementation of Models of Academic Advising in Post Graduate Taught courses

Executive Summary

The first aim of this project was to develop evidence-informed models of academic advising for Postgraduate Taught (PGT) courses that was aligned to the institutional Academic Advising Framework, provided a consistently good experience, and yet was flexible enough to cater for diverse courses and student requirements. The second aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of these models.

Three main models of advising were created. Model 1 was an out of curriculum offer with at least three contact points per year. Model 2 was an embedded approach in which students are both taught by their academic adviser (AA) in a normal module, as well as receiving at least three contact points of dedicated academic advice. Model 3 was an extended advising offer in which student attend a series of one hour group academic advising sessions, each dedicated to developing the students academically, professionally and/or personally. A fourth, by permission only, student-led Model X, was also created in response to the needs of particular cohorts and departments.

Following model implementation student awareness of the AA role and of who theirs is was significantly greater. Additionally, there were positive improvements in student perceptions of support post-model implementation, with significant increases in the perceptions that academic advisers provided useful advice and guidance, referred to further support as appropriate, and took a personal interest in them. Further, there was a decrease in end of year withdrawal rates post-model implementation.

Comparing models, Model 2 (embedded in curriculum) elicited the most positive results. A higher proportion of students experiencing Model 2 reported they had the opportunity *and* took up the opportunity to meet with their Academic Adviser compared with any other model. Additionally, these students had more positive perceptions of their AA, with significantly higher agreement that their AA takes a personal interest in them and that they provide useful advice and guidance to aid academic progress and development. Although a small proportion of the sample, where the approach was student led (Model X) there was lowest agreement that the AA referred students to support services when necessary, or that their AA took a personal interest their academic progress and development.

Most of the qualitative comments around the support and guidance sought from Academic Advisers focussed on academic support, and this didn't seem to change between pre- and post-model implementation. Many comments (in both years) indicated that they slightly misunderstood what academic aspects their AA should help with. Thus, clear expectation setting is still imperative, and possibly more so now that more students are aware of the academic advising offer post-model implementation.

A worrying trend seen in the post-model implementation year was a noticeable increase in the number of comments relating to seeking help with managing workload and an increase in comments related to going to an academic adviser if experiencing personal issues. This may be because the implementation of the models has resulted in increased awareness and promotion of the academic adviser and is likely due to staff working hard to build good relationships with their students, making them a good point of contact. It is also likely symptomatic of the increased pressures students face, juggling their personal and academic lives.

While students tend to value their Academic Advisers being specialists in their discipline, more important to them is that they are known personally by someone who cares. This was very evident in the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) responses for both years regarding how Academic Advising could further enhance their experience. In these responses the relational and AA contact themes were most prevalent. To see real benefits of the process it is imperative that Academic Advising is not a transactional exchange. Indeed, where students were critical of their Academic Advising experiences it was usually because their Academic Adviser did not make contact or did not seem to care about them.

Based on the evaluation and research conducted by the working group we have the following recommendations

1. **The importance of Academic Advising in PGT courses should not be understated.** This is an important cohort, and despite their academic maturity, the increased challenge of the course necessitates good support.

2. **Academic Advising should be embedded in curriculum (Model 2), where possible.** This likely results in the best outcomes and satisfaction for students. However, curriculum redesign poses a risk to course teams ability to do this effectively. Alternatively, investment in systems and processes which enable timetabling of Academic Advising sessions may provide an alternative.

3. **Model 3 is strongly recommended for courses with high proportions of international students.** Unfortunately, uptake of this model in the post-model implementation year was low. It is likely that this is due to systems issues making the timetabling of the extended advising offer very difficult, and staff capacity to enact change at a time of immense pressure and change. However, the model was designed specifically to support this demographic based on extensive review of literature and sector best practice, and warrants further exploration.

Finally, the value of Academic Advising is brilliantly summed up by one of our PTES respondents:

"Academic advising can help to ensure that students are taking courses that are appropriate for their intended major or career path. Advising can guide the best ways to approach difficult courses or majors and can help students to develop a plan for their future academic and professional pursuits. Additionally, advising can provide support for students who are struggling academically, whether it is in the form of providing additional resources and support or connecting them with additional support services. In sum, academic advising can help students to maximize their educational experience and to maximize their success."
(PTES 2023 Respondent, College of BTE)

Context

At Sheffield Hallam University Academic Advising is central to student experience, impacts every student on taught courses at Hallam, is a strategic priority as part of the Transforming Lives strategy and Future Strategy and is underpinned by the Thrive element of the Hallam Model. All Hallam students on a taught course should have a named academic adviser who works with the student on their academic progression and development, personal development, and professional development during their student journey.

There is no definitive way of planning and conducting academic advising. Earwaker (1992) suggested there are three main approaches to academic advising: pastoral, professional and Curriculum, but since then a variety of developments to these models and approaches have been developed and refined (Lochtie et al., 2018). Indeed, many HE institutions have developed policies and frameworks to support academic advising. Sheffield Hallam University's Academic Advising Framework (2018), and Academic Advising Policy (2019) set out the general principles and minimum requirements that should apply to all students on a taught course but allows for an appropriate level of variation between course, staff and students based on differing needs and personalities and curricula. While these principles have been generally well established as practice in undergraduate (UG) courses, they were less well established in postgraduate taught (PGT) courses at Hallam.

Postgraduate provision at Hallam has grown in recent years. The nature and structure of PGT courses is varied and often considerably different to traditional UG courses. Furthermore, the student demographic is different between UG and PGT populations. Notable differences include a marked contrast in the proportion of mature students (UG: 18%, PGT: 42% in the 2017/18 academic year; The Source, 2021) and the proportion of overseas (including European Union) student enrolments (UG:4.2%, PGT: 22.7% in the 2019/20 academic year; The Source, 2021). Additionally, PGT courses are generally shorter in duration than standard UG courses, meaning students have less time to "get to grips" with Hallam processes, especially if they are new to the university (Quan et al., 2016). Academic Advisers are well placed to support these students and robust, evidence-informed models of advising are likely to have a positive effect on the student experience (Thomas & Hixenbaugh, 2006), retention and student satisfaction (Harrell & Reglin, 2018). Thus, in 2021 a project was initiated to develop evidence-informed models of PGT academic advising, implement the model institution-wide and evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation.

Aim

The first aim of this project was to develop evidence-informed models of academic advising for PGT courses that was aligned with the institutional Academic Advising Framework, provided a consistently good experience, and yet was flexible enough to cater for diverse courses and student requirements. The second aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of these models.

Methods

Model development

Under the direction of Hallam's Head of Academic Advising, Melissa Jacobi, and led by Dr Sarah Bosch, Senior Lecturer within the directorate of Student Experience, Teaching and Learning (SETL), a working group of academic staff from across the university was established. To develop the models the working group collated pre-existing feedback about PGT academic advising (e.g. Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) data), existing literature and sector practice are being collated. In addition, information about the characteristics of Hallam's PGT courses which was thought likely to affect students' needs with respect to academic advising was being collected (e.g., age, proportion of international students within cohort, size of cohort, duration of course, type of course (academy or professional), delivery method). Based on this information three main models of advising were created for course teams to choose from which offered flexibility of approach to suit the curriculum and cohort needs while allowing a pragmatic implementation within the constraints of university systems and while are meeting the requirements the Academic Advising Framework (2018), and Policy (2019). Model 1 was an out of curriculum offer with at least three contact points per year. Model 2 was an embedded approach in which students are both taught by their academic adviser in a normal module, as well as receiving at least three contact points of dedicated academic advice. Model 3 was an extended advising offer in which students attend a series of one hour group academic advising sessions, each dedicated to developing the students academically, professionally and/or personally. A fourth model, Model X, was also created in response the information gathered about particular cohorts and department need (e.g. some health courses with large student numbers and complicated module diets studied as CPD by health professionals). The Model X offer is a student led approach in which students attend a first group session in which they are fully briefed on the role of the Academic Adviser and the reasons to engage with the process. Students can then request ad hoc meetings as and when they want to. Drop-in sessions can be included and regular email communication instilling the benefits of engaging essential. Model X was designed as a 'by permission only' model, with permission granted by the Head of Academic Advising only when a course team could sufficiently demonstrate that none of the other main models were appropriate.

Model implementation

Developed models were approved by TaLL in January 2022. Models were promoted to PG course leaders via department Academic Advising Leads (normally the department Student Experience Lead), College Heads of Learning and Teaching Enhancement, and via academic communications. Teams were supported through the module choice process with guidance documents, drop in sessions and by the lead researcher (SB) attended department, subject group and course leader meetings. Courses in scope included all level 7 taught courses (60 credits or more), with the exception of collaborative courses and Higher & Degree Apprenticeship (HDA) courses for whom other academic advising arrangements are in place.

Evaluation approach

The evaluation was underpinned by a Theory of Change and several research questions were developed to determine the effect of the implementation of an institutional approach to PGT academic advising, and whether there were any differences between models:

1.a. Following the implementation of PGT models of academic advising, to what extent are students aware of the academic adviser (AA) role and who their AA is?

1.b. To what extent are there any differences between PGT models of academic advising in levels of students' awareness of the AA role and who their AA is?

2.a. Following the implementation of PGT models of academic advising, do students report feeling supported in their academic progression and development, personal and professional development?

2.b. To what extent are there any differences between PGT models of academic advising in whether students report feeling supported in their academic progression, personal and professional development?

Following ethical approval (Converis number: ER39063680) a mixed methods approach was taken. Existing data sources were utilised (student survey data, withdrawal data).

The 'L0,L4,L7 Academic Advising Survey' is a short survey sent to all student in Level 3, Level 4, and Level 7 students across all three colleges - Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences (HWLS), Business, Technology & Engineering (BTE) and Social Sciences & Arts (SSA) (14,244 students in total) to gauge the awareness of academic advisers at Sheffield Hallam University. The survey ran from 23rd November 2022 to 6th January 2023. Level 7 was included in this survey for the first time in the 22-23 academic year to aid evaluation of the implementation of consistent models of academic advising for all PGT courses.

The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) is a UK-wide online survey open to all Higher Education Institutions with postgraduate taught students and is made available by Advance HE. PTES 2022 was open from 1st March – 10th June to 9,710 Hallam students. PTES 2023 was open from 6th February – 9th June to 11,099 Hallam students. There was a two-wave launch of PTES for the first time in 2023 – in February for students who were already established on their course and then in mid-April for all students who started their course in January/February 2023. The PTES questionnaire provides a measure of overall satisfaction, and several further sections, each of which are made up of several questions. In 2022 and 2023, Hallam specific questions on Academic Advising were included.

Quantitative data

Several variables were calculated from nominal and ordinal survey data as defined below. Responses were included in calculations if the student was from a course which was in

scope, the model of advising being delivered was known (only three active courses did not provide this information) and the respondent had answered the relevant question (i.e. had not left the question blank or chosen N/A).

Student awareness of Academic Adviser role (method 1) was measured as the percentage of eligible PTES survey respondents who correctly answered '*Yes*' to the question '*Does your course have Academic Advisers?*'.

Student awareness of Academic Adviser role (method 2) was measured as the percentage of eligible L0,L4,L7 Academic Advising survey respondents who answered '*Yes*' to the question '*Do you know what an Academic Adviser is?*'.

Student awareness of who their Academic Adviser is (method 1) was measured as the percentage of eligible PTES survey respondents who answered '*Yes*' to the question '*Do you know who your Academic Adviser is?*'.

Student awareness of who their Academic Adviser is (method 2) was measured as the percentage of eligible L0,L4,L7 Academic Advising survey respondents who answered '*Yes*' to the question '*Do you know who your Academic Adviser is?*'

Student perception of support for academic development and progression was measured using percentage of eligible PTES survey responses in each of the who answered '*Agree*' or '*Definitely Agree*' to the statement '*My academic adviser provides useful advice and guidance to aid my academic progress and development*'.

Positive student perception of Academic Adviser signposting to support was measured as the percentage of eligible PTES survey respondents who answered '*Agree*' or '*Definitely Agree*' to the statement '*My academic adviser refers me to further support services when necessary*'.

Positive student perception of relatedness to Academic Adviser was measured as the percentage of eligible PTES survey respondents who answered '*Agree*' or '*Definitely Agree*' to the statement '*My academic adviser takes a personal interest in my academic progress and development*'.

Withdrawal was calculated at course level as the number of students withdrawing from the course, compared with the number of enrolments, expressed as a percentage. Three measures of withdrawal were calculated: in-year withdrawal, end-of-year withdrawal, and combined withdrawal (which was the sum of in-year and end-of-year withdrawals). Data were provided by the Strategic planning and Insights (SPI) Team and were taken from The Source for all PGT courses. Data provided by SPI were cleaned include only courses in scope and courses for which there were both pre-implementation and post-implementation year enrolments.

Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed in SPSS (SPSS 26, IBM). Pearson chi-squared tests were performed to compare *awareness of the Academic Adviser role*, and *who theirs* was pre-and post-model implementation. Differences between Models 1-3 in the post implementation year were also measured using chi-squared tests. Where significant associations between models were revealed, Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc tests were carried out. Model X was excluded from these analyses due to low numbers of responses for Model X and because Model X was not one of the main models recommended or implemented. Descriptive statistics were, however, included for all models.

Mann-Whitney tests were used to compare whether there were significant differences in agreement between years in the student perceptions of academic advising. To assess whether there were differences between models in the post implementation year stepwise follow up analyses were conducted.

An independent t-test was performed to reveal whether there were any differences pre-and post-model implementation in the rates of withdrawal. Withdrawal rates of Models 1, 2 and 3 were compared for the post-model implementation year using a one-way ANOVA to see if there were any differences in the rates of withdrawal between the three main models of advising. Model X was not included due to there being only two courses using Model X and because Model X was not one of the main models recommended or implemented. Descriptive statistics were, however, included for all models.

Qualitative analysis

The PTES survey gave respondents the opportunity to provide qualitative answers to two questions related to Academic Advising: '*What kind of advice and guidance would you seek from an academic adviser?*' and '*How could academic advising further enhance your experience?*'. Qualitative responses were analysed thematically using Framework Analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Responses were themed by a single person (SB) and who read and interpreted the questionnaire results and created preliminary codes for each response. Where a response talked about multiple aspects, the response was double coded to allow both aspects to be captured. A thematic framework was developed from the codes, and these were applied to the data. Themes were interpreted and described by the same researcher (SB).

Results

Model implementation

Most (78%) courses chose to implement Model 1, with at least one course choosing this model in 15 of the 17 departments. Six departments had one or more courses choose to implement Model 2, while five departments had courses choose Model 3. Model X was implemented in only three courses (two departments), and one of these courses was being run-out in the first implementation year.

Survey response

Of the 14,244 students surveyed in the 22-23 academic year 'L0,L4,L7 Academic Advising Survey', 1,778 students completed the survey (12% response rate). 820 respondents were level 7 students. Following exclusion of students on collaborative, HDA and Research Masters from the data set there were 771 eligible respondents.

For the 2022 (21-22 academic year) PTES survey 2148 respondents of the PTES survey responded to one or more question in the Academic Advising section. Of those respondents 229 were excluded as they were not studying on a course within the scope of this project, leaving 1919 eligible respondents.

In 2023 (22-23 academic year) there were approximately 600 more respondents who answered one or more of the questions in the PTES Academic Advising section (2759 responses). Of those respondents 242 were excluded as they were not studying on a course within the scope of this project, leaving 2517 eligible respondents.

In line with greater numbers of courses choosing Model 1, most respondents to the surveys were from courses where Model 1 was implemented in the 22-23 academic year (Table 1).

	Sample	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model X
PTES 2022	1919	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
PTES 2023	2517	2185 (87%)	245 (10%)	75 (3%)	12 (<0.5%)
2023 Academic Advising Survey	771	662 (86%)	89 (12%)	19 (2%)	1 (<0.5%)

Table 1. Number of responses eligible for inclusion within the scope of the project and the models of Academic Advising they experienced (post implementation year only)

Student awareness of Academic Adviser

Following model-implementation, 95% of PTES respondents knew that their course had Academic Advisers, up by 6pp from 89% in the 2022 (pre-implementation) PTES responses, while 5% incorrectly answered that their course did not have Academic Advisers in the post implementation PTES. This demonstrates a significant association between years and the proportion of students who were aware ($x^2(1) = 60.036$, $p < 0.001$).

Of the respondents who answered the relevant question, student awareness of who their Academic Adviser is was higher in the post-implementation year at 90% compared with 86% pre-implementation ($x^2(1) = 9.262$, $p = 0.002$).

For the different models of advising, based on the 2023 PTES results, awareness of the academic adviser role and knowledge of who their Academic Adviser is was highest in respondents experiencing Model 2 (embedded in curriculum; Figure 1), although there was no statistically significant association between model and awareness of *whether the course has Academic Advisers* (x^2(2) = 3.716, *p* = 0.156). Pearson chi-squared results showed that when comparing awareness across Models 1, 2 and 3 there was a significant association between models and awareness for "*Do you know who your Academic Adviser is?*" (x^2(2) = 6.049, *p* = 0.049), however, once pairwise comparisons were made with Bonferroni adjustments the difference between the three main models was not statistically significant.
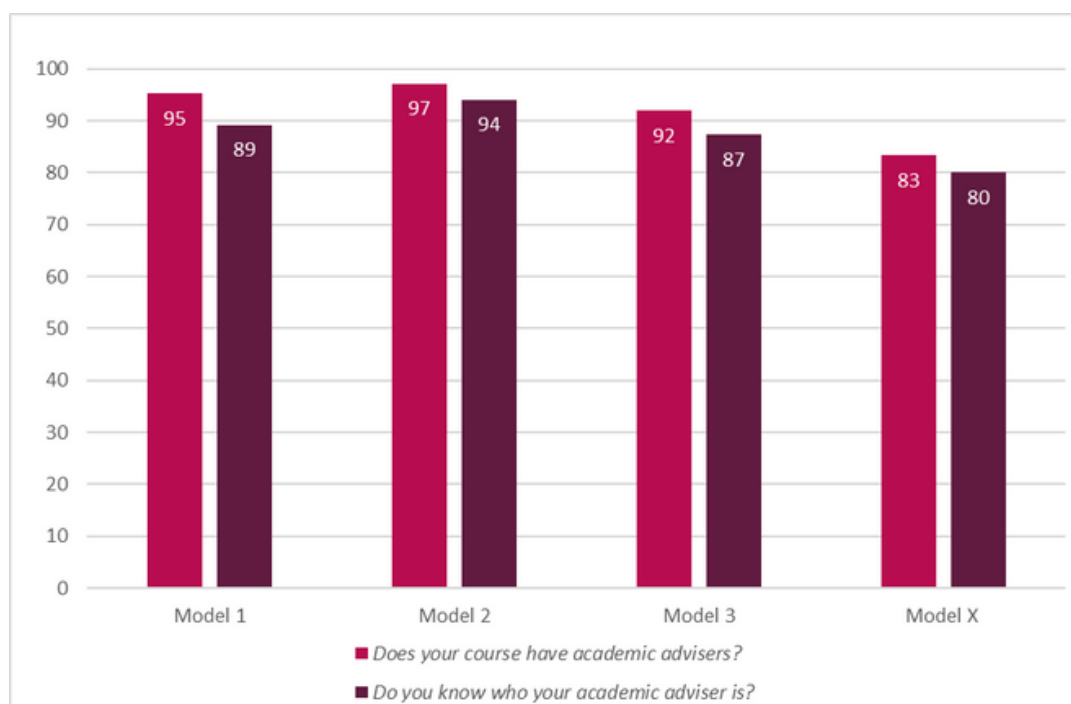

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents answering 'Yes' to questions about awareness of the academic adviser in PTES 2023 (post model-implementation year).

A similar pattern of awareness was observed in the 2023 Academic Advising Survey responses. If data for Model X, where there was only one respondent, is ignored, awareness of what an academic adviser is was marginally higher for Model 2 (Figure 2), although there was no significant association between model and awareness (x^2(2) = 0.482, *p* = 0.786). Knowledge of who their academic adviser is was slightly higher for respondents experiencing Model 1 (Figure 2), but again there was no statistically significant association for this awareness by model (x^2(2) = 5.247, *p* = 0.073). Knowledge of who their academic adviser is, and opportunity for and uptake of meetings with their academic adviser was lowest in Model 3 respondents. Model 2 respondents reported greater opportunity to meet with and uptake of meetings with their academic adviser, compared with Model 1 and Model 3. (Figure 2). Indeed, there was a significant association between the model implemented and the opportunity to meet with their

Academic Adviser ($x^2(2) = 16.811$, $p < 0.001$) with post hoc tests revealing a statistically significant difference between all three main models (Figure 2). There was also a significant association between models with regards to students actually meeting with their Academic Adviser ($x^2(2) = 6.216$, $p = 0.045$), with Model 2 being significantly greater than Model 3, although there was no significant difference between Model 1 and 2 or between Model 1 and 3 (Figure 2).
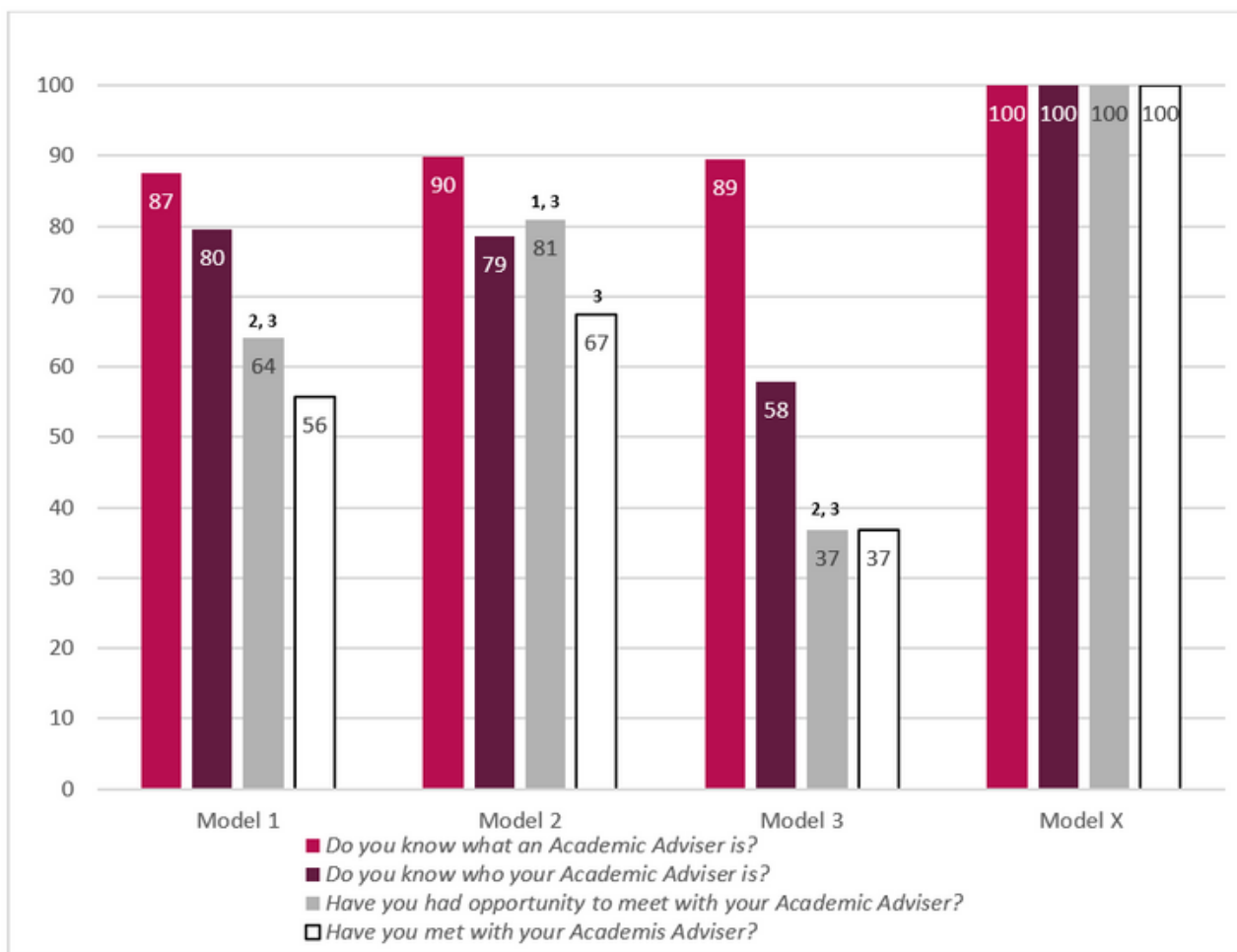

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents answering 'Yes' to questions about awareness of the academic adviser and meetings with their Academic Adviser in the 2023 Academic Advising Survey (post model-implementation year). Note: Model X percentages represent just one response and was not included in statistical analyses. 1 Statistically different to Model 1; 2 Statistically different to Model 2; 3 Statistically different to Model 3.

Student perceptions

Overall, 83% of respondents to PTES 2023 agreed that their '*academic adviser provides useful advice and guidance to aid my academic progress and development*', an improvement compared with compared with 74% in 2022. This represented a statistically significant improvement in agreement in the post implementation year (U = 1653208.000, p < 0.001). Statistical analyses revealed that agreement was significantly affected by the model employed (H = 22.493 (3), p < 0.001). Indeed, step-down follow up analysis showed statistically that Model 2 had the greatest agreement with this statement (Figure 3). The lowest agreement was for Model X, although caution should be taken when considering Model X results due to low response numbers and was not found to be statistically significantly different to Model 1 or 3.

In response to the statement '*My academic adviser refers me to further support services when necessary*', 82% of respondents agreed in 2023, compared with 72% (U =1564842.500, p < 0.001). Again, Model 2 respondents agreed the most with this statement, although this was not significantly different to Models 1 and 3. There was, however, a significant effect of model on agreement with this statement (H = 30.943 (3), p < 0.001) with step-wise follow up analysis revealing a significantly lower agreement for Model X respondents, (Figure 3).

Finally, the percentage of eligible PTES survey respondents who agreed with the statement '*My academic adviser takes a personal interest in my academic progress and development'* was 76% in 2023, up from 68% in 2022 (U = 1612276.000, p < 0.001). The model implemented had a significant effect on agreement with this statement (H = 37.355 (3), p < 0.001), with step-wise follow up analysis, again showing Model 2 to have significantly greater agreement than the other models and, Model X significantly lower agreement than Models 1-3 for this statement (Figure 3).
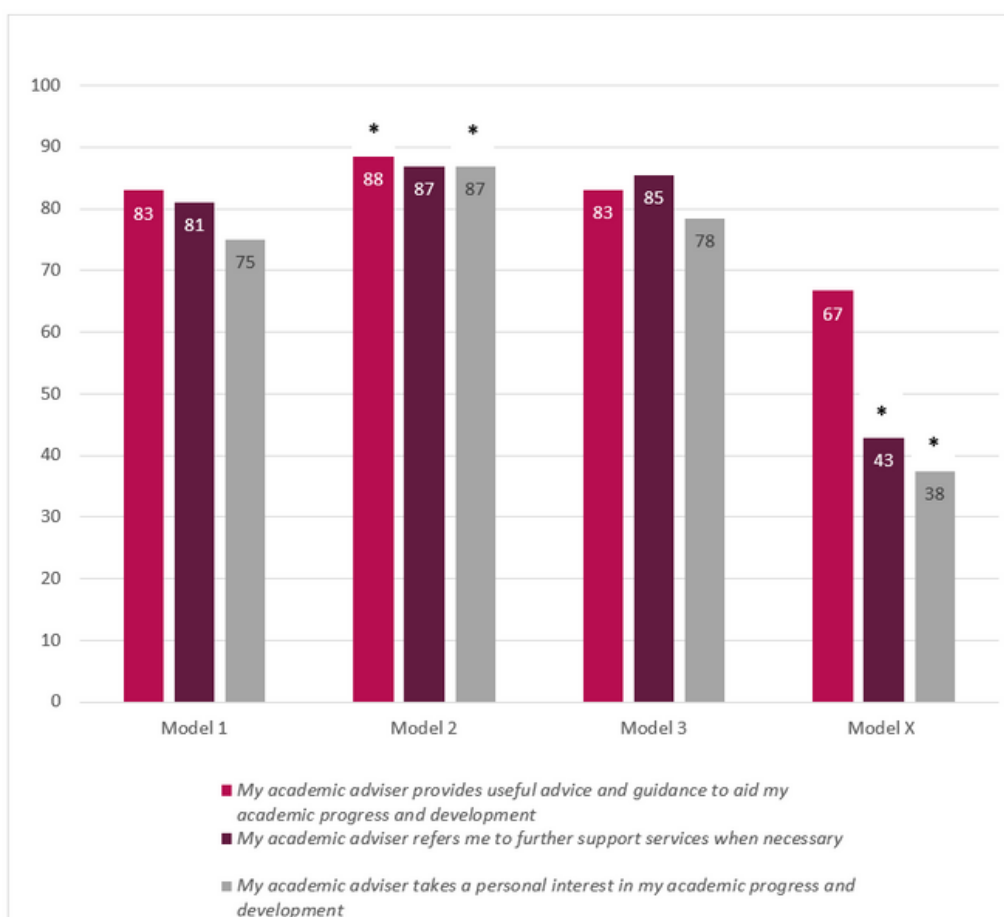
*Figure 3. Percentage of respondents answering 'Agree' or 'Definitely Agree' to questions about their academic adviser in the 2023 PTES (post model-implementation year). Note: Model X percentages represent just eight responses. * Statistically significantly different to other models.*

Withdrawal

There was no significant difference in in-year withdrawal rates pre- and post-implementation ($p = 0.295$). There was, however, a significantly lower mean end-of-year withdrawal rate ($p < 0.001$) post-implementation which resulted in a significantly lower combined withdrawal rate ($p = 0.006$) (Figure 4).
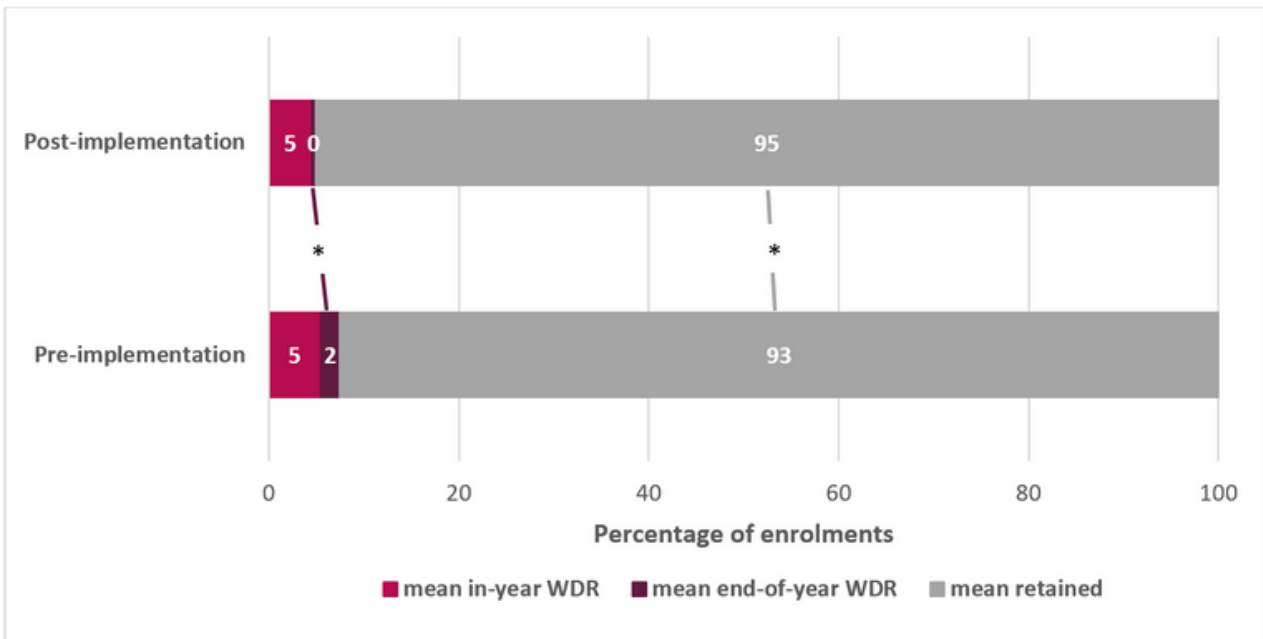
Figure 4. Percentage withdrawal (WDR) rates pre- and post-model implementation. * Significantly different between years (p < 0.05).

When the three main models of advising were compared in the post-implementation year, there were no significant differences between models in the rate of in-year withdrawal ($p = 0.877$), end-of year withdrawal ($p = 0.646$) or combined withdrawal ($p = 0.818$) (Figure 5).
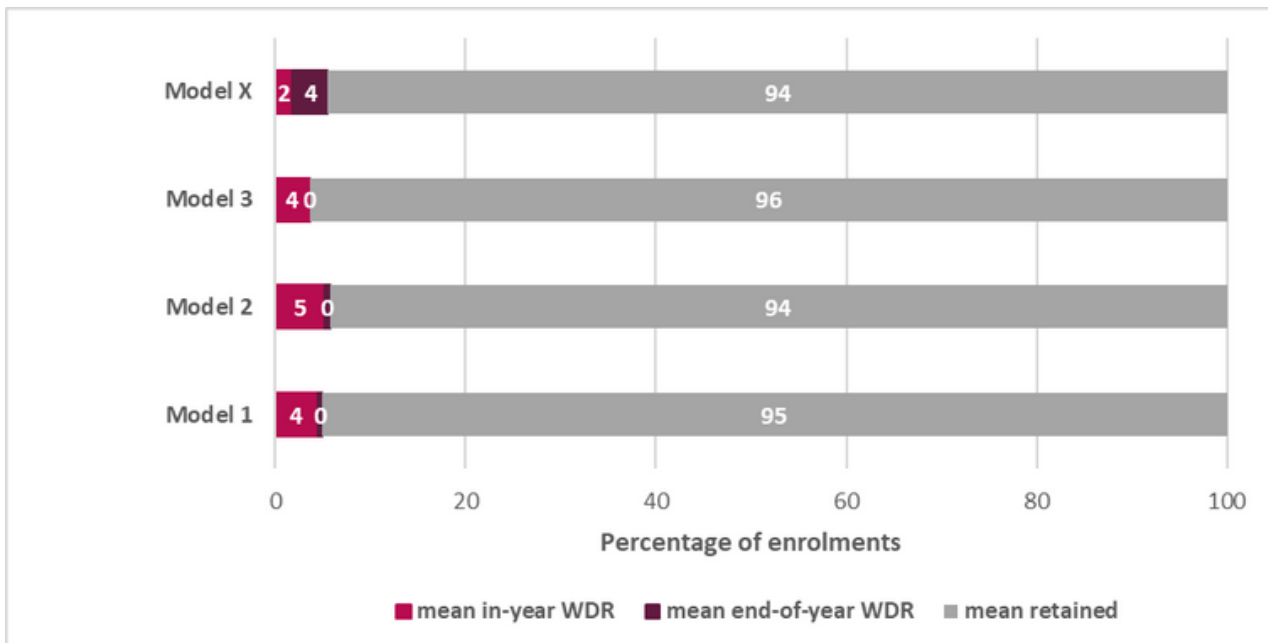

Figure 5. Percentage withdrawal (WDR) rates for each of the models of academic advising in the post-model implementation year.

Qualitative data

Six main themes were identified from the thematic analysis of the PTES qualitative responses to the questions *'What kind of advice and guidance would you seek from an academic adviser?'* and *'How could academic advising further enhance your experience?'*. The themes were: Academic, Professional, Personal, Relational, Contact, and AA Model.

With regards to the kind of advice and guidance respondents would seek from an academic adviser, both pre-and post-model implementation, the majority of comments related to the Academic theme. The types of responses they provided varied within the theme to general comments about "Academic Advice" to support navigating university systems and processes such as applying for extensions. A large proportion of the comments related to help with assessments, or for the academic adviser to provide guidance on specific academic skills such as referencing. The types of comment were similar between years except for a noticeable increase in the number of comments relating to respondents expecting to be able to discuss with their Academic Adviser how they can manage their workload in the post-implementation data (PTES 2023):

"My learning experience and how I am coping with the extreme workload and the effect it has had on my mental well-being." (PTES 2023 respondent)

A similar proportion of comments were made regarding talking to their Academic Adviser about professional development pre- and post-model implementation. These mostly related to discussion of future careers or further study, although some comments were also made about wanting Academic Advisers to check CVs/Job applications etc. In both years, the second largest proportion of comments within the professional theme were around placement discussions and advice for dealing with situations whilst on placement.

"General guidance if I felt that I had a problem on placement or with workload." (PTES 2022 respondent)

In the pre-model implementation year 12% of comments related to the personal theme. In the post implementation year this rose 10pp to 22% of comments. A variety of topics were cited including adapting to university, visa enquiries, social issues inside and outside of university, but most comments in this theme cited that they would seek advice or guidance on personal issues and/or mental health/wellbeing. In the pre-implementation year some respondents specifically mentioned that they would seek advice on their own personal development. Post model-implementation there was a lower proportion of self-development comments and a larger proportion of personal issues and mental health and wellbeing issues cited, compared with the pre-model implementation year.

"I have talked to them about how to improve my work but also with very personal and difficult issues with mental health and family problems." (PTES 2023 respondent)

Often respondents commented on the relational aspects of the role of the Academic Adviser. In both years many students used the free text questions as an opportunity to berate a lack of support from their academic adviser. However, this was, in both years, outweighed by the praise for the support students had received. Students cited that the role of the academic adviser was to "provide reassurance" and "encouragement", that academic advisers should be "approachable", be "someone to listen" and should "check in" with students. A larger (5pp high) proportion of comments belonged to the relational theme in the post-model implementation than in the previous year.

"My academic adviser is emphatic, understanding, firm, encourages and gives me tasks and guidance to better my learning skills" (PTES 2023 respondent)

Academic Adviser contact emerged as a theme in both years with students wishing for more contact, more one-to one meetings and for academic advisers to respond to queries and to initiate contact with students. A related theme, the academic advising model, made up a small proportion of the comments made in both years but included comments from students wanting a developmental model of advising as opposed to a deficit model, a desire to maintain the same academic adviser throughout their course, making meetings mandatory and have academic advising sessions timetabled. One comment expressed the desire for the academic adviser to be independent from the teaching team, although this was vastly outweighed by the number of comments that expressed a desire for their AA to have subject/discipline/course knowledge. Most comments in this theme however were from respondents expressing confusion or lack of clarity over the purpose of the role. Interestingly, when separating out the two free text questions asked in the PTES, respondents tended to refer more to the relational, AA model and AA contact themes when describing ways in which academic advising could further enhance their experience, suggesting that students desire academic advising, want more of it, and desire and value a positive relationship with an academic adviser. Where contact is not initiated, queries are not responded to, or tutors did not make themselves approachable and available to students, comments were very negative. There were some responses to the 2023 survey that cited academic advisers had a role to play in building belonging.

"It will help me feel like I am really a part of the school." (PTES 2023 respondent)

When considering how academic advising could enhance their experience, the vast majority of students commented with in the relational and AA contact theme. There were some specific comments relating to academic, personal and professional advice, but most responses were requesting "more contact", "more one-to-one meetings", "frequent check-ins", better/quicker responses to questions/emails, "be interested" and Academic Advisers getting to know students.

Implications of findings

An institutional implementation of models of academic advising for PGT courses has had a positive effect on several key Academic Advising metrics. Following model implementation awareness of the role and of who their Academic adviser is was significantly greater. This is likely due to an institution wide raising of importance of Academic Advising for this cohort of students. In turn staff were clear of the 'ask', were supported in the planning of the offer and a greater volume of messaging, and clarification of the role took place.

In addition to greater awareness, there were positive improvements in student perceptions of support post-model implementation, with significant increases in the perceptions that academic advisers provided useful advice and guidance, referred to further support as appropriate, and took a personal interest in them. This suggests that academic advisers have taken the time to build rapport and likely due to formed better relationships with students post implementation. During the process of developing models and implementing them, it became apparent that large proportions of staff had incorrectly assumed that PGT students did not receive the normal institutional academic advising. Raising awareness of staff that this offer also applied to their students, likely increased the promotion of the offer and subsequent improvement in relations.

There was a decrease in end of year withdrawal rates post-model implementation. One of the key remits of the Academic Adviser is to support academic development and progression. By having a named academic adviser as a point of contact with a responsibility to contact students at least three times per year, students who are struggling can be picked up earlier, provided with academic support and/or signposted to other support services. This in turn seems to have resulted in fewer students struggling to the point at which they have to withdraw at the end of the year. Retention of students leads to increased opportunities for students to reach their potential and is an important financial consideration for the institution.

With respect to the different models of delivery Model 2 (embedded in curriculum) was found to elicit the most positive results. A higher proportion of students experiencing Model 2 reported they had the opportunity *and* took up the opportunity to meet with their Academic Adviser compared with any other model. It is widely accepted that embedding Academic Advising is the best way of implementing the support. When staff also teach students regularly, they have increased opportunity to get to know each other and students find it easier to trust their Academic Adviser. This comes at no additional work planning time compared with Models 1 and 3 and is likely to result not only in better proactive Academic Advising conversations, but also in recognising and referring students who need additional support based on observed changes in engagement and/or demeanour, which are much harder to spot when not teaching a student regularly. Indeed, students had more positive perceptions of their Academic Adviser when they experienced Model 2, with significantly higher agreement that their Academic Adviser

takes a personal interest in them and that they provide useful advice and guidance to aid academic progress and development. In addition to being a work loading—efficient approach, these benefits are likely to improve retention and student outcomes. Although a small proportion of the sample in this evaluation, where the approach was student led (Model X) the lowest agreement with the statement '*my Academic Adviser refers me to support services when necessary*'. This suggests that without Academic Advisers proactively initiating contact and taking time to rapport build with students, either students are less likely to approach their Academic Adviser for support or the Academic Adviser themselves are not as easily able to identify support needs in their students. This is mirrored in the fact that Model X respondents had the lowest agreement with the statement '*My Academic Adviser takes a personal interest in my academic progress and development*'. While Model X is inexpensive in terms of AWP allocation, it does go against the sector-wide positioning that Academic Advising should be non-deficit in nature and is likely to result in poorer perceptions of Academic Advising if implemented widely.

Probably unsurprisingly, most of the qualitative comments around the support and guidance sought from Academic Advisers focussed on academic support, and this didn't seem to change between pre- and post-model implementation. This is consistent with the Academic Advising offer, which, while the remit includes academic, personal and professional development, probably tends towards the academic development aspects. While the Academic Adviser remit is concerned with a students overall academic development, many comments (in both years) indicated that slightly misunderstood what academic aspects their Academic Adviser should help with. For example, there were several comments about getting help with specific assessment questions, reading drafts of work, or teaching specific academic skills such as referencing. This finding was echoed in the comments about professional development guidance, where many sensible comments about discussing career ambitions were made. However, many comments stated respondents would ask Academic Advisers to check CVs or conduct practice interviews with them, which would be the role of the Employability Adviser rather than Academic Adviser. Thus, clear expectation setting is still imperative, and possibly more so now that more students are aware of the academic advising offer post-model implementation.

A worrying trend seen in the post-model implementation year was a noticeable increase in the number of comments relating to seeking help with managing workload and an increase in comments related to going to an academic adviser if experiencing personal issues. This may be because the implementation of the models has results in increased awareness and promotion of the academic adviser and is likely due to staff working hard to build good relationships with their students, making them a good point of contact. It is also likely symptomatic of the increased pressures students face, juggling their personal and academic lives. This is probably contributed to by the cost-of-living crisis which is badly affecting students. Given that postgraduate students tend to have more complex personal situations alongside their study, this may account for the rise in students seeking guidance from their Academic Adviser about managing workload. While Academic

Advisers are well placed to support and signpost students, it does mean that staff need to be well-trained in positive signposting, maintaining boundaries and supported in their own self-care. Further, any increase in pressure on students is likely to result in greater support workload for staff, which may squeeze the little flexibility in AWP given for Academic Advising.

It is widely regarded that Academic Advising can have a transformational effect on students, as students have a trusted academic who cares personally about their development. This can improve belonging and mattering and enable students to reach their potential. While students tend to value their Academic Advisers being specialists in their discipline, more important to them is that they are known personally by someone who cares. This was very evident in the PTES responses for both years regarding how Academic Advising could further enhance their experience. In these responses the relational and AA contact themes were most prevalent. This demonstrates the importance students place on having a genuine connection with staff, also evident in the high number of respondents who used the PTES free text questions to praise the report received from their Academic Adviser. To see real benefits of the process it is imperative that Academic Advising is not a transactional exchange. Indeed, where students were critical of their Academic Advising experiences it was usually because their Academic Adviser did not make contact or did not seem to care about them. It should be recognised that a poor Academic Advising experience is worse than none at all (Yale, 2019). Therefore, adequate time, and importance should be given to the role. If Academic Advising is not implemented to a consistently high standard, this is likely to affect student satisfaction as well as their ability to achieve their full potential and achieve high student outcomes.

The context in which this evaluation sits should be noted. The pre-model implementation year was the 21-22 academic year and followed the Covid-19 Pandemic, and was a year significantly affected by industrial action. Student perceptions have been measured from PTES data. However, one limitation of PTES qualitative data is that it is not always clear what the intention is behind the comments is. For example, when a respondent answered "personal advice" in response to the question *'What kind of advice and guidance would you seek from an academic adviser?'* it is not clear whether the respondent expected their Academic Adviser to be the person to support them with their personal issues directly (which would not be the role of the Academic Adviser) or signpost them to other support services (which would be). Therefore, the addition of student focus group data to this evaluation in which expectations can be more deeply explored will be valuable.

Another note of caution is that a very small number of courses were excluded from the evaluation because it was not possible to obtain accurate data about the model used, and/or because the data sources about which courses were active did not always match.Therefore, while we are confident that no spurious data is included, it is possible that data were missed.

Recommendations

Based on the evaluation and research conducted by the working group we have the following recommendations

1. **The importance of Academic Advising in PGT courses should not be understated.** This is an important cohort, and despite their academic maturity, the increased challenge of the course necessitates good support.

2. **Academic Advising should be embedded in curriculum (Model 2), where possible**. This likely results in the best outcomes and satisfaction for students. However, curriculum redesign poses a risk to course teams ability to do this effectively. Alternatively, investment in systems and processes which enable timetabling of Academic Advising sessions may provide an alternative.

3. **Model 3 is strongly recommended for courses with high proportions of international students.** Unfortunately, uptake of this model in the post-model implementation year was low. It is likely that this is due to systems issues making the timetabling of the extended advising offer very difficult, and staff capacity to enact change at a time of immense pressure and change. However, the model was designed specifically to support this demographic based on extensive review of literature and sector best practice, and warrants further exploration.

A final word from one of our students…

"Academic advising can help to ensure that students are taking courses that are appropriate for their intended major or career path. Advising can guide the best ways to approach difficult courses or majors and can help students to develop a plan for their future academic and professional pursuits. Additionally, advising can provide support for students who are struggling academically, whether it is in the form of providing additional resources and support or connecting them with additional support services. In sum, academic advising can help students to maximize their educational experience and to maximize their success."
(PTES 2023 Respondent)

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