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Citation:

METCALFE, Charlotte (2020). Academic Advising at a distance; exploring the provision of support on placement. *Rapport: The International Journal for Recording Achievement, Planning, and Portfolios* (5), 41-47. [Article]

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Academic Advising at a distance: exploring the provision of support on placement

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Academic advisors (or Personal Tutors) are the cornerstone of supporting students in Higher Education (HE), with individual meetings being important in developing and maintaining the Academic Advisor-student relationship (Yale, 2017). A key aspect of Academic Advisor (AA) support is to help identify and provide structure for improvements to the students' academic, personal and professional skills in all stages of the student lifecycle (Lochtie, McIntosh, Stork, & Walker, 2018). My own organisation, Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), defines an AAs role as including the proactive monitoring of students' academic performance and providing a consistent point of contact throughout all study transitions, including into and out of placements, and into employment once their studies are complete. The common model of academic advising assumes mainly face to face meetings between AAs and students, however with employability as a key priority in HE, students are increasingly likely to be engaged in work-based learning off-campus (Laycock, 2009).

With Higher Education (HE) curricula in the UK increasingly embedding placement provision (Gomez, Lush & Clements, 2004), the likelihood is that AAs will be providing support at a distance and/or within a workplace during a placement visit, which brings new challenges to the role. Although clinical courses typically utilise a nominated 'visiting tutor' on clinical placements (Dean & Levis, 2016), for many non-clinical courses the AA will carry out the placement visit, meeting with both the student as well as the student's workplace supervisor. Placement visit tasks vary even with different departments at SHU. The AA may be required to support the student in their new setting, mediate the student/supervisor relationship and/or support workplace/placement supervisors to work with the students. Given placement visit practice varies within one university, it is likely that there is much practice variation across the HE sector. There is a need therefore for greater understanding of what AA activity takes place to meet the needs of the student and the employer.

The current HE literature has little focus on this AA-student-supervisor tripartite relationship, forcing AA practitioners to apply their knowledge and understanding of on-campus advising to inform these off-campus interactions. Given the paucity of literature exploring AA for placement students, here we aim to identify the issues and concerns experienced during placement AA activity and to provide a foundation for researchers/practitioners to develop academic understanding of these relationships. Drawing upon nine case studies, three key areas will be explored: the issues

experienced by AAs when advising students on placement; being part of a tripartite relationship; and providing appropriate support for student development in the workplace.

Maintaining the AA-student relationship during placement

AA support often closely mirrors the students' curriculum allowing clear identification of student need at any given point in time. However, while on placement, where the student's activity may be varied and less well known to the AA, providing effective support may be more challenging and take more time to carry out particularly where the AA is additionally carrying out any supporting administrative tasks, such as:

contacting their host academic coordinator to check...the most suitable match for their language level

(Portfolio 15, CS2)

Further, re-orienting students to keep focus on academic assessments can be difficult when they are absorbed in the workplace experience:

This person at that time is the face-to-face contact with the university... The visiting tutor supports the student with upcoming assignments (not always placement related) offering academic support

(Portfolio 7, CS 3)

As placement students are not on campus there is a physical as well as a metaphorical distance between the student and university support mechanisms. This distance brought challenges in providing student support that may not be easily resolvable precisely because the student is at a distance:

There seems to be a disconnect between AAs and students at this time, as another member of staff is the first point of contact when issues arise in placement

(Portfolio 8, CS3)

Students were feeling isolated whilst on placement which can magnify their academic concerns and beliefs about their abilities:

She appreciated the support I gave her, as her main worry and concern was that she was feeling a bit lonely ...she was starting to hesitate whether she was capable of doing a good job... rather than believing that she could overcome this challenge as she had not set a learning goal

(Portfolio 15, CS3)

Students who feel isolated may struggle to identify workplace support especially where a poor relationship with their supervisor is either the cause of, or contributing to, their perceived isolation:

she had not developed a strong relationship with her supervisor and generally felt awkward around her

(Portfolio 1, CS1)

It is important that student-AA relationships are continued throughout this vulnerable period), not least because students are unlikely to confide in those with whom they don't have a good relationship:

the absence of the academic or person with a relationship with the student could result in students falling through the gaps in the system...The fact that the student felt able to tell me what had happened shows the importance of relationship building and trust

(Portfolio 22, CS 1)

AAs can also be instrumental in helping the student build or restore their workplace relationships:

We discussed her feelings/experience and considered her part in the relationship with the supervisor. We agreed that she would increase the contact she had with her, including requesting more meetings, emailing updates about her work etc

(Portfolio 1, CS1)

and build other supportive relationships:

also discussed the possibility of her identifying an informal supervisor by approaching a member of staff who she interacts with on a daily basis at work

(Portfolio 1, CS1)

There is a necessity therefore for AA pro-action in keeping abreast of evolving situations, offering advice in a preventative capacity:

[to] make a concerted attempt to keep these lines of communication open with regular emails and informal contact to remind students that I am available if they are experiencing difficulties and need to get in touch

(Portfolio 8, CS3)

Such pro-active engagement is heavily dependent upon the university acknowledging and meeting resource need, as well as providing appropriate structures and policy to support and shape AA activity. Making contact and carrying out placement visits to the workplace is a staff time cost to universities. An AA could easily spend four or more hours arranging and carrying out one visit. In our area, an AA is work-loaded for five hours, an allowance that also covers any additional student support contact, marking the student's presentation, and marking their final 3,000 word assessment. Where students are struggling on placement there are greater time resource demands placed on the AA at a time when fostering a good student-AA relationship is most important. There is therefore a need to adequately resource AAs to ensure continuation of the student-AA relationship:

This inconsistency in approach within our department could perhaps be due to some of the issues outlined... that widening access combined with increasing demands on academics can influence the time and quality of academic tutoring

(Portfolio 8, CS3)

I spent significant time with Student B, which is not reflected on my work plan

(Portfolio 12, CS2)

Universities also need to support AA delivery through the development of appropriate structures/policies to enable AAs to offer quality provision.

Developing tripartite relationships

Creating good tripartite relationships is by definition more than just the AA assisting the student to work well with their supervisor. The AA may well have to support the supervisor to work well with the student and with the AA themselves:

realised that the supervisors were looking for support from me in dealing with the student. Although both supervisors had experience in managing staff, the placement situation was one in which they felt they had little authority as she was not a real staff member

(Portfolio 1, CS4)

agreed to contact her [student's] supervisor after the meeting about increasing the support ... for the student as per our discussion

(Portfolio 1, CS1)

This is likely to be unfamiliar territory for AAs who are in someone else's workplace giving advice on how to work with or manage students. It is therefore a task that AAs may find difficult and/or may be unwilling to do:

I hadn't expected to be providing support for supervisors, rather I assumed that they would be equipped to deal with difficult staff and would therefore sort any issues out themselves

(Portfolio 1, CS4)

I had to tackle the problems raised and outline to the supervisor the problems she needed to act upon without making the supervisor look unprofessional in front of the students ... had initially planned to speak to the supervisor separately after the meeting ...and I had to make a decision as to whether I would wait until a future meeting to speak to her

(Portfolio 1, CS1)

We can see then that during placement visits AAs are performing multiple roles for students and supervisors:

The roles the staff member may perform during the visit are likely to be varied dependent upon the specifics of the situation, and they may find themselves being challenged by the situation

(Portfolio 1, CS1)

what I think this highlights is that with academics acting in multiple roles and support services being stretched that there is a wider institutional resource issue that needs to be addressed... includes training for academics on how to handle such situations

(Portfolio 22, CS 1)

Students are likely to be more oriented to career progression while on placement, yet are more removed from the usual university careers support mechanisms and therefore AAs have found themselves fielding career advice questions which is likely an area they have less experience of and how best to advise students:

I arranged for her to talk with Careers service and possibly undertake some assertiveness training if that is available...It indicated to me how difficult it can be to lower the barriers that are unconsciously erected against organisations that are perceived to only offer stereotypical job roles

(Portfolio 12, CS2)

This therefore requires AAs being suitably trained and supported in meeting the demands of these roles. Support may be offered in a variety of ways, through

training the AA and also through well developed and effective university procedures and policies. Universities also need greater engagement with employers to help them understand students' developmental position (Archer & Davison, 2008). A key focus should be to provide support for placement supervisors at all stages of the placement lifecycle, from planning the work offered to understanding how the placement work may fit with student's assessment.

Where the university is experienced in supporting placements and has relevant processes in place AAs are likely to find supporting placement easier. Even where policy and procedures are in place the university needs a commitment to ensuring these are well disseminated with appropriate training in place to use them. Otherwise as AAs' focus may get caught up in navigating ineffective procedure systems, students' academic needs may go unmet. As placements vary there is also a need for locally developed guidelines that can flex in accordance with requirements:

The course leader has a role in terms of course progression and bursaries; the placement coordinator sources the retrieval placement

(Portfolio 7, CS 3)

University policy outlines several points of contact during a student's placement year but due to the student experiencing some settling in problems, additional contact via SKYPE was introduced...we established that although policies in relation to such incidents were in place they were not visible, discussed or trained to members of staff who may need to use them

(Portfolio 22, CS 1)

Providing developmental support

It is likely that AAs will need to assist students in gaining the most out of their time on placement as not all students are eager to take part:

she comes across as lacking confidence, speaks very quietly and her body language is extremely unassertive...we spoke about the fact that recognising that confidence is a key area for her to develop

(Portfolio 12, CS2)

It is also possible that the student wasn't particularly motivated and/or may not have wanted to work on placement

(Portfolio 1, CS1)

Further, being on placement may not be the experience students expect and support may be needed for this transition. Being able to provide developmental support on placement appears to be an important part of the AA role, and again this activity needs to be supported by the university:

she was worried about the nature and scope of the work she was undertaking

(Portfolio 1, CS1)

I also identify a lack of information about student profiles which would be useful. I asked student B what her grades were so far and rely on this as a base for my academic advice

(Portfolio 12, CS2)

Disseminating best practice to develop AA support resources is an obvious win for any university. For example, within the case studies drawn upon here, AAs describe using 'actions plans' to improve the support they offer to students. This structured approach facilitates student progress as the student can draw upon this support outside of formal contact with their AA:

useful for us to devise an action plan outlining her learning needs and how she might achieve these...a plan of focussed reading and some shadowing

(Portfolio 8, CS2)

After our meeting, the student decided to continue with the semester at the host university and persist on achieving some goals we set in order to improve her situation

(Portfolio 15, CS3)

In all the case studies being explored here an underlying theme is that each discussed how placement support took much time and effort to be able to deliver a continued relationship and appropriate, timely support that has a positive impact upon student outcomes:

We agreed to meet regularly over the summer until she found her placement

(Portfolio 12, CS2)

I now make a concerted attempt to keep these lines of communication open with regular emails and informal contact

(Portfolio 8, CS3)

We both agreed to keep in contact about her ongoing experience...She was very grateful for the intervention and ongoing support...That she didn't leave

and that she saw improvements...demonstrates that my input impacted positively on her

(Portfolio 1, CS1)

With ever greater numbers of students on placement it is important to recognise and resource this maintain quality of provision:

widening access combined with increasing demands on academics can influence the time and quality of academic tutoring

(Portfolio 8, CS3)

Conclusion

This brief exploration of AA case studies has outlined some of the variety and complexity of issues that students, supervisors and AAs themselves are experiencing in the placement process. It is clear that for AAs, in addition to the issues that students face on campus, being in the workplace brings extra concerns and extra workload. Given the uncertainty about the challenges awaiting the AA during a visit, prior preparation is likely to be key to ensuring successful outcomes. It is therefore important that AA staff are made aware of the multifarious nature of this work, and are offered support and training, adequate time resourcing, and accessible effective policy and guidelines. Staff should have a clear view as to what constitutes a quality placement and be able to evidence to supervisors and/or students where expectations are not being met. Procedures outlining the expectations of each party (student, supervisor and AA) are needed that enable documentation of what action plans/outcomes may be set in motion if expectations are not fulfilled. Universities are already possessors of the best practice needed, however this is likely to reside solely within specific subject areas, and its focus as placement uptake increases, is to disseminate and support the uptake of this knowledge to ensure that there is a commensurate increase in AA ability to meet student needs.

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