

Students' Experiences of Academic Advising Practices at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Fortunatha Mathias Matiba and Natujwa Mngulwi

Department of Educational Foundations, Management and Lifelong Learning, School of Education
University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Abstract

This qualitative study reports on academic advising services at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. It specifically discusses students' awareness of the advising services; areas where they need advising services and the extent to which university students make use of the available academic advising services. The study was conducted at the University of Dar es Salaam involving 68 participants. Semi-structured interviews and documentary review were the main data collection methods. Findings revealed that despite University efforts to allocate academic advisors to all students, majority of them were not aware of the services. On the other hand, some students were aware of and made use of the advising services. Findings revealed these students needed advice both one academic, social and psychological matters. While all participants had positive perceptions on the academic advisor services, only few of them had made of the service. The study recommends that students be educated on the importance of academic advising services. Higher Learning Institutions should find better mechanisms for effective academic advising services especially informing students about academic advising and monitoring the academic advising process.

Keywords: academic advisors, academic advising services, higher education, students

Introduction

In the beginning of the 21st century, things changed in many sectors including Higher Education (HE). One of the remarkable changes in higher education is high enrollment of students resulting in the needs knowledge-driven society. However, literature shows that majority of students join higher education with limited information about career prospects related to the courses they are enrolled (Muola, Maithy & Mwinzi, 2011). Lee (2017) adds that students enroll in Higher Education with inadequate academic preparation or financial challenges that severely weaken their chances of academic success, in these situation academic advisors are imperative.

The concept of “academic advisor” has been defined differently by different scholars. Khalil and Williamson (2014), for example, define it as a person who helps students obtain what they are seeking for regarding to their degree requirements. The academic advisors’ primary focus is to make students aware of various choices available and guiding them specifically in courses selection and the campus resources available (Khalil & Williamson, 2014).

Rationale for academic advising in higher education

The role of academic advisors include among others supporting students to value the learning process, to apply decision-making strategies, to put the college experience into perspective, to set priorities and evaluate events, to develop thinking and learning skills, to as well as the ability to make choices (Drake, 2011). Moreover, academic advisors are unavoidable, because of curricular complexity which sometimes results to students fail to understand which course would take them to their destiny after graduation (Khalil & Williamson, 2014). Furthermore, as the number of students increases, the need for more advisors also increases. Due to that the unique needs of student varied populations also require more specialized advising approaches (Gordon, 2004).

Academic advisory role is more emphasized in order to improve students’ retention in higher learning institutions (Drake, 2011). Furthermore, academic advisors are very essential people since they act as road map builders for students in achieving maximum standards in academics by supporting students to fulfill their desires on educational mission and vision so as to enter into their life destine (Ellis, 2014). Ghaemi and Yazdanpanah (2014) pointed out the importance of academic advising argue that academic advisors are very crucial, because of the complexity of this higher level of learning including many depressed students due to the financial problems and problems related with time management for studying and other academic activities. In addition, Smith & Allen (2006) argued that, academic advising is imperative because some financial constraints push students to involve part-time work which risk their academic performance and completion of their degree.

An overview of academic advising practices

The practices of academic advising are common both in developed and developing countries. For example in the USA academic advising is seen as vital because of massive international students’

enrolment in their institutions which is caused by the need of securing economic life and social status, academic advising is vital to assist these students to attain desired academic goal (Lee, 2017). Advisors eventually aid students in their navigation of institutional curriculum and culture.

Similarly, in Canada there is the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), which was formulated to crosscheck academic advising program in Canadian context, whereby in 2015 a conference was held so as to insist cooperation among groups which are involved in advising by insisting on exchanging information on how to advise students (Fricker, 2015). In Malaysia academic advising was practiced in higher learning institutions. Academic advising programmes are located at faculty levels are managed by students' respective faculties (Van & Said, 2018).

In South Africa academic advising was used as an inventive strategy for boosting the academic performance of extended diploma programme students. This strategy was very vital to students who are from disadvantaged school backgrounds, who are considered "at-risk" especially in their first year. It involved early identification of at risk students who are in need of financial and moral support (Nel, 2014). Similarly, Mulola, Maithya & Mwinzi (2011) report that in Kenya, academic advising service starts in secondary school level and it is not separated from counseling. According to Sy (2017), students' academic advising is also common practice in Liberia and in the year 2010 they established the Students' Academic Advisement and Career Counseling Centre which provide services to students as a strategic plan to meet national development goals by improving national work force so as to meet the national development agenda.

In Tanzania, like other developing countries, efforts to promote academic advising are evident. In 1997, for example, the then Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT) ordered all heads of secondary schools to make sure that all schools have academic advisors in place who will guide students to select subjects of their interests and intelligence matching with global knowledge and economy (Mabula & Edna, 2015). Normally, students choose subjects when they reach form three. During this period, teachers as academic advisors have to provide relevant information for better choice of subjects which is very important on students' academic carriers (Ndalichako & Komba, 2014). However, it should be noted that, selection of subjects when students are in form

three is the beginning of preparation of career choices in higher learning institutions; in this period, teachers as academic guides have to provide all education information for students' upcoming life (Ndalichako & Komba, 2014).

However, despite such importance, use of academic advisors is a problem to most of higher learning institutions (Mulola, Maithya & Mwinzi, 2011). According to Fussy (2018), few students make use of the advisors; they only seek advice when they find themselves in problems like coursework or discontinuity problems. This situation raises questions as to why students do not make use of academic advisors despite their obvious advantages. Hence this study aimed to investigate students' experiences towards academic advising service in higher learning institution (HLIs) in Tanzania. Specifically, the study intended to achieve the following objectives:

- i. Examine students' awareness of the availability of academic advising services in HLIs in Tanzania.
- ii. Explore the areas where students in Tanzania HLIs need academic advising services
- iii. Examine the extent university students make use of the available academic advising services.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach, which provided a room for the researcher to directly face the participants in a natural setting to get quality information. Research design, the study employed a multiple case study because the study deals with more than one case in the University of Dar es Salaam so as to produce in depth information with authentic information, as suggested by Ary et al. (2010). The study was conducted at the University of Dar es Salaam, which was selected purposively because being the oldest university in Tanzania; it has well-established structures and policies. These included well-arranged academic advising services which provided relevant data for the study. Detailed information about the problem under investigation was collected from principals, lecturers and undergraduate students.

Participants were selected using criterion, purposive sampling and convenient sampling techniques. Purposive sampling technique was used to select university of Dar es Salaam, and principals of colleges. Criterion sampling technique was used to sample twenty lecturers who deemed to possess useful experience in advising students. Convenient sampling technique was

employed to select 45 students who participated in the study. The use of this technique was based on the reason that all students at the campus have an academic advisor. So it was believed that every student had correct information about the topic under investigation. Three deans/principals were purposively sampled from units with high number of students. Again, semi-structured interview and documentary review were the main data collection techniques.

Findings and Discussion

Students' awareness of academic advising services

This research objective examined students' awareness on academic advising services is understood by students' in Higher Education. Findings revealed that despite University's efforts to allocate academic advisors to all university students, majority students especially first years were unaware of academic advising services. Analysis of data revealed that, lack of awareness among first year students was a result of first years not attending orientation week where information about academic advising services was shared. As one first year student argued that. *"I don't have any information about academic advisors; I don't even have an idea of that, may be because I was not present during the orientation week"* (Interview, first Year College A). Another student added:

I don't know who an academic advisor is. Can you tell me in brief who is that? What is their function and where can I get this service? I think I don't know this because I was not available during the orientation week (Interview, first year college B).

The quotation above implies that there are some students who may not know the availability of academic advisory service in the institution. The implication of this is for the university to find other effective mechanism to inform students about academic advising, relying solely on orientation week is inadequate because some students fail to attend orientation meeting.

On the other hand, some of second and third year students informed that they had some information about academic advisors. Data analysis revealed these were among students who got

informed about academic advisers during the orientation week and some admitted to have visited their academic advisers. Reporting on this one student had this remark:

I am often in touch with mostly my academic advisor. For sure, I consult her several times, an academic advisor is a helpful person in academic life, and I got to know about them when I was in first year, during the orientation week. Others fear to find their academic advisers. You know sometimes you find that you have been assigned an academic advisor who teaches you. This sometimes creates fear (Interview, third year student College A).

On the other hand, all lecturers involved in the study provided that they were aware of the academic advisory service and took responsibilities as academic advisers. They reported that they were informed about academic advisers' role upon recruitment at the university. One of the lecturers stated; *"I have the information of being an advisor, because it is one of the responsibilities of each teaching academician"* (Interview, Lecturer College, A). This means that the advisers were aware of their assigned tasks, roles and responsibilities. Moreover, study findings revealed that some advisers (lecturers) got information of that task from their principals of college.

The findings above suggest that most university students were unaware of academic advising services because they did not attend the orientation week. This finding is in line with what Davis (2013) study who reported that the orientation helps first year students to get academic and non-academic information and that those who were attending the orientation week got information about how to use the services available within the institution.. Generally, lack of awareness on the academic advising services among university students resulted to low usage of the service. These findings are in line with those of Walker (2017) that students do not make use of academic advisers because they don't know when to start and where they should go due to lack of knowledge on the services provided and when they regard themselves as not part of being served. The implication of this finding is for university management to ensure students are well informed about the importance of academic advising service to increase student participation and better academic performance in Higher Learning Institution in Tanzania.

Areas where students seek academic advising services

This objective intended to explore areas where students demanded academic advising service. The study findings revealed that areas where students needed academic advising varied across years of study. Further analysis indicated that advice was sought in academic matters, social, financial as well as psychological matters. Data collected indicated that most of the first year students were in need of academic advising for solving the academic dilemmas like course selection and proper study materials. Moreover, findings revealed second year students demanded advice to solve academic failure, because during this time some of them were frustrated so needed academic advice to help them psychologically. This was reported by one student who reported that:

When in my second year I conceived. From there I was totally frustrated. I asked myself how it was going to be; because university examinations were approaching. I consulted my academic advisor who told me to remove worries. She told me all procedures to follow so as to do my special examination (Interview, third year School A).

Findings indicated that third year students needed advice in relation to upcoming life, and those who wished to pursue further studies. For example one of lecturers reported that:

For the third year students, they just come and the story is just different from that of the first year and second year, the finalists will tell you, “Now I am completing my study, I want to prepare for my further studies. How am I going to do? As you know advising is not a quick process but a long term plan and calculated decision. So the students who come late is very difficult to advise them. Normally I tell student in second year if you’re considering to do master’s degree programme have ado the long term plan (Interview with Lecturer 2, School A).

The finding implies that finalist required advice on life after graduation including information on further studies. Finding further indicated need for advice on how to pursue further studies. However, findings revealed that some students seek advice while it was too late. For example, another lecturer added:

A first year student needed advice. He said that in diploma level, he learned early childhood education but in bachelor degree he was selected to study education. Now he was asking for the possibility of changing the programme of study and I told him that the grace period for changing courses was over. However, I advised him to proceed with the course in which he had been selected and when it would reach the time for opting courses he could look for

the course he wanted. At the end of the day he would compete equally with those who are studying early childhood education programme (Interview, Lecturer from College B).

Responses from students further revealed that in the academic aspects, they sought advice on course selection, time management, special examinations, as well as issues related to examinations results. In course of interview one third year student explained that: *“The advice which I normally seek is based on courses selection and carrier choices. Another thing is about what I should study in the postgraduate level. That is the advice that I sought for”* (Interview, third year school, A).

This quotation implies that course selection was one area where students commonly seek advice. In addition it was indicated that students seek academic advice on the issues of examinations results and psychological aspects. For instance, one second year student told that:

In the first semester, I did not seek advice from my academic advisor. But in the second semester, after the release of examination results, the results were not so good. So, I started contacting my academic advisor for some help. He helped me psychologically and told me that it was not good to give up. He provided me with a number of examples of people who faced cases like mine and others even worse than mine but they are just okay. He also instructed me on how to answer questions and how to study effectively (Interview, second year college A).

The quotation above implies that some students normally seek advice only when they have an academic problem. This trend is likely to affect negatively the effectiveness of advising services. Because academic advice is not only limited on solving problems, it also include other important issues like course selection and better study skills.

Findings further revealed that some students were consulting the advisors when they faced financial problems. This was shared during the interviews by one lecturer from school A, who asserted that:

Some of the students are coming with financial problems. For example my mentee was desperate seeking for financial assistance to pay tuition fees. He asked me to borrow some amount of money. Another one came saying he had lost a relative who was supporting him. He asked for some financial support to travel for burial activities. I had to pay for his trip to go home (Interview, Lecturer school A).

This quotation implies that also students (mentee) seek advice on financial assistance from their academic advisors. While on humanitarian basis academic advisors would decide to assist these

students financially, however if such practices are frequent is likely to affect negatively the academic advice because financial support is not a role of the academic advisor.

Moreover, the findings showed that academic advisory service in the University covered a variety of areas in social life, including complexities relationships. Findings indicated that some students sought advice when they had problems with their partners. This was sheared by one of the lecturer who argued that:

Some students come for the advice when they have problem with their partners. For example, one second year student said “Sir I, have got some misunderstanding with my partner so please advise me how I can do?” I got in dilemma because she said she was still in love with her boyfriend” (Interview, Lecturer college B).

This statement implies that some students seek related to social matters including love affairs. While academic advisors could assist their mentee, but psychological and social matters would better be solved by the counseling and guidance unit which is well established at the university. This finding implies that some students go for academic advisor when they get into social problems. It was further found out that some students visited their academic advisors mainly when they faced adverse problems and when in worse situation. This students’ habit is contrary to Banat (2015) pointed out that academic advising was important for the students’ academic development. Banat argued that students should stop finding advisors only when they are in difficult situations. Students are advised to consult the advisors all the time so that they can avoid worse conditions.

The extent students make use of academic advising services available

This objective of the study sought to investigate the manner students make use of academic advisory services available at the University of Dar es Salaam. The findings reported that all students were assigned academic advisors aiming that the advisors have to be consulted by students all the time, not only during serious problems. However, responses from the sampled lecturers and students revealed the contrary. Interview findings revealed very low use of academic advisors. Despite the efforts made by the University in making sure that students are given academic advising service, data analysis revealed that most of the students only turn to academic advisors when they face problems that need advice or solution from the advisor or only when students would anticipate that the advisor could be a starting point of the solution. Data in Table 1

present the number and percent of sampled students who had made use of the academic advising service at the sampled higher learning institution.

Table 1: *The Number and Percent of Students Who Made Use of the Academic Advising Service*

Categories of sampled students (N=45)	Number	Percent
Students who had made use of the academic advising service	08	16
Students who did not make use of the academic advising service	37	82
Total	45	100

Data in Table 1 shows that among the 45 interviewed students, only eight equivalents to 16% responded that they had been able to meet their academic advisors. This percent is indeed too low. Furthermore, responses from participants revealed further that students did not make use of academic advisors attached to them until they got into problems. The findings showed that common problems include the need to postpone studies, emergency resulting into a need for special examination, or when a student is being discontinued from studies. For example one lecturer asserted that:

I can say that the use of academic advisors among students is very low. Students do not have a guideline on using academic advisors. Some do not know the role of the academic advisors. Several times, those who come are doing so only due to problems or they have been told they should consult academic advisor first for things to move on. Thereafter most of them do not take it serious. Most of them don't know whom they should find for which case and for what kind of advice (Interview, Lecturer, institute B).

Thus, the findings revealed that there was low use of academic advisors for most students whose majority tends to get advice from their fellow students. Sometimes, they would go to the dean and principals for help on educational and social matters. The position of the academic advisor is thus frequently skipped by majority of the students who rush to the deans and principals when they are in problems. This finding concurs with Muola, Maithya and Mwinzi (2011) who found out that only few students make use of the academic advisors. In a similar tone, Ayon (2015) reported that academic advising service is still low in Lebanese private institutions. The implication for low usage of academic advisors is that the academic advisory service within the institution under study may result to college principals and the dean of students being loaded with academic advising role,

poor students' performance or making poor choices due to lack of proper guidance which could be obtained from academic advisors. Moore, Schragger and Jaeger (2018) argue that the use of different people instead of the academic advisor lead to difficulty for a student to obtain a cohesive advising experience. KhaliI and Williamson (2014) advise that use of an academic advisor help in making key decisions such as choosing majors that can affect not only the students' future career goals but in some cases the course of their life. This shows that the experience in mentoring students helps to drive students on the right track in academic and social life.

Reasons behind low use of academic advisors

The researcher was also interested to know the reasons behind the low use of the academic advisors by students in the sampled higher learning institution. Interview findings revealed lack of awareness played a big role to lower down the use of academic advisory services. Many students seemed to be not aware of the service, and its significance especially those who did not attend the orientation course. Further, findings revealed time constraint as another reason for low usage of the academic advisors. For example, one student responded that, *"I have not got time to consult my advisor but I will do so in the next semester."* This suggests that sometimes students failed to adjust their timetables in order to allow time for consultation.

Academic advisors' availability was another reason for low usage of academic advisory role. Some students shared that they were seeing it as the wastage of time to consult an academic advisor because some of them visited their academic advisors' offices several times and missed them. So they became discouraged. This finding was complimented by one of the lecturers from School A during an interview:

We are much occupied such that sometimes we don't have time to come in contact with our clients (students). So, sometimes balance the duties of advising the clients, delivering lectures, and personal activities is something difficult (Interview, Lecturer school A).

However, other students admitted that it was their own negligence. That is, they had time, they knew their advisors but they were not consulting them because they just felt that they were mature enough to handle everything by themselves. So they thought that asking for advice was lowering down was like their maturity.

The finding in this section revealed that many students at the University were not effectively deploying the academic advising service because of different reasons including unavailability of academic advisors in offices, fear and negligence. All these hindered students from consulting academic advisors assigned to them. It was further revealed that few students who could manage to consult their advisors, did so only when they were already facing serious problems. So, they sought for immediate help from the advisor. In that regard Banat (2015) argued that academic advisor provides a student with current and accurate information concerning curricular and academic policies and assists as a referral agent.

Conclusions

Despite the university effort to allocate academic advisor to every student, awareness about the availability of the academic advisory service revealed students lacked knowledge on the availability of academic advising service. However most of first year students in the sample were not aware of the availability of the service. The reasons for lack of awareness were absence during the orientation course and for those who attended the course did not understand how to go about. Secondly, few students make use of academic advisory services in the selected institution, and they only visited their advisors when were in serious problems like poor academic performance or when had issues on university examinations like discontinuity from studies. The concluded that students needed academic advice on various issues including academic issues like in course selection and better study skills. However, they also needed academic advising on social, economic and psychological aspects such as loss of loved ones or relationship break-ups thus could be well solved by the guidance and counseling unit.

Recommendations

Basing on that conclusion the following are recommended;

The university management should establish mechanisms to arise students' awareness on availability of academic advising services and its importance to students' wellbeing. Second, students should be clearly informed about the specific areas in which they can consult academic advisors. For example, Academic Registration Information System (ARIS) (where students'

academic issues are posted) can be used to put full information about the academic advisor in terms of roles, importance and areas to consult academic advisor. Further, students should be educated on the benefits they can acquire when utilizing academic advisor services. There should be a mechanism to influence students to find their academic advisors to increase students' utilization of available academic advising services, which in turn will improve their participation and completion of Higher Education.

References

- Ary, D., Jacobs, C. L. & Sorensen, C. (2010). *Introduction to research in education* (8th ed.). Wadsworth: Cengage Learning.
- Ayon, N. S. (2015). Academic advising: Perceptions of students in a Lebanese University. *IJAEDU- International E-Journal of Advances in Education*, 1(2), 118-126.
- Banat, I. Y. B. (2015). Academic advising problems at Al-quads University as perceived by students and its relationship with students' academic performance. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4(1), 97-108.
- Davis, A. D. (2015). *Students' perceptions of academic advising and influence on retention: A study of first semester, first generation and continuing generation college students at a liberal arts college*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana.
- Drake, K. J. (2011). The role of academic advising in student retention and persistence. Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com) *About Campus / July–August 2011*, 8-12.
- Ellis, C. K. (2014). Academic advising experiences of first-year undecided students: A qualitative study. *NACADA Journal*, 34(2), 42-50.
- Fricke, T. (2015). The relationship between academic advising and student success in Canadian colleges: A review of the literature. *College Quarterly*, 18(4), 1-15.
- Fussy, S. D. (2018). The status of academic advising in Tanzanian universities. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, 15(1), 51-65.

- Ghaemi, F. & Yazdanpanah, M. (2014). The relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement in the EFL classroom among Iranian university students. *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 2(1), 49-57.
- Gordon, V. (2004). The evolution of academic advising: one institution's historical path. *NACADA Journal*, 24(2), 17-24.
- Kavenuke P. S. (2015). Academic advising and students' academic achievement in higher education: Experiences from Dar es Salaam University College of Education in Tanzania. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Sciences*, 4(2), 76–86.
- Khalil, A. & Williamson, J. (2014). Role of academic advisors in the success of engineering students. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 2(1), 73-79.
- Latrellis, O., Kameas, A., & Fitsilis, P. (2017). Academic advising systems: A systematic literature review of empirical evidence. *Education Science*, 7(90), 2-17.
- Lee, I. Y. (2017). Academic advisors and their diverse advisees: Towards more ethical global university. *Journal of International Students*, 7(4), 944-962.
- Mabula, N. & Edna, K. (2015). Is it not now? School counselors' training in Tanzania secondary schools. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(19), 160-169.
- Moore, C., Schragar, C., & Jaeger, L. (2018). Destination integration: Strategies to improve academic advising. Sacramento, CA: Education Insight Center.
- Mulola, J. M., Maithya, R. & Mwinzi, A. M. (2011). The effect of academic advising on academic performance of university students in Kenyan universities. *International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 5(5), 332-345.
- Ndalichako, L. J. & Komba, A. A. (2014). Students' subject choice in secondary schools in Tanzania: A matter of students' ability and interests or forced circumstances? *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 2, 49-56. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/jss.2014.28008>
- Nel, P. B. (2014). Academic advising as intervention for enhancing the academic success of at risk students at a comprehensive university in South Africa. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Science*, 5(27), 732-739.
- Smith, L. C. & Allen, M. J. (2006). Essential functions of academic advisors: What students want and get. *NACADA Journal*, 26(1), 56-66.

- Sy, W. J. (2017). The advising palaver hut: Case study in West African higher education. *NACADA Journal*, 37(1), 51- 65.
- Van, T. N., & Said, H. (2018). Academic advisors' perceptions of academic advising in public universities of Malaysia. *International Journal of Educational Best Practices (IJEBP)*, 1(2), 34-45.