Academic advising in the massified university: Facilitating meaningful staff-student interactions

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Abstract

This chapter assesses the contemporary role and purpose of academic advisers as a resource for sharing academic capital and developing institutional belonging. Drawing on interviews with staff and students, Hensby and Naylor find that massification has inhibited the establishing of meaningful staff-student interactions. With students able to access specialist support from a range of professional services comparatively little attention has been paid to redrawing and promoting the adviser's role and value. Meanwhile, systemic issues reinforce a perception among students from BAME and 'non-traditional' backgrounds that academic staff are remote and unapproachable. Moreover, recalling findings from chapter three, reluctance to approach staff further fuels student misconceptions about the 'self-reliant' independent learner. The chapter argues for the importance of academic advising as a resource for engaging with minority students' experience of university. The authors identify strategies and resources that can facilitate meaningful interactions and foster effective independent learning for students.

Keywords: Higher education; race and ethnicity; widening participation; tuition; academic advising; independent learning; mentoring

Introduction

The massification of higher education has been a key underlying theme in this book, and its transformative effects are especially apparent in the case of academic tuition (Giannikis and Bullivant, 2016; Tight, 2019). Once at the heart of universities' contact provision, personal tutors – or academic advisers, as they are increasingly known – now sit alongside a range of professional services and systems including wellbeing counsellors, academic skills advisers, and employability officers. To some extent, this reflects changes in student needs. In 2019, a WonkHE survey revealed that 45.5 per cent of students identified mental health as one of their top three concerns while studying at university, with a further 41.6 per cent citing 'gaining the right experience and skills for my career'. The survey also indicated that these issues were especially pertinent for BAME students, with a disproportionate amount admitting to feeling lonely on a regular basis (see also chapter four of this volume). The impact of this shift is arguably evidenced by that fact that between the 2005-6 and 2017-8 academic years the number of student experience professionals more than doubled across the sector (Wolf and Jenkins, 2020: 6). Today, new benchmarks for student support hold

strategic significance for universities' growth and sustainability, as the government-mandated National Student Survey (NSS) provides key metrics for university league tables, which in turn shape future recruitment cycles.

Though this may have resulted in the decentring of tuition in students' lives, academic advisers remain unique in offering all undergraduates one-to-one interactions with a designated staff member for the duration of their degree. Given the themes discussed in this book so far, these conversations should create a space for students – especially 'non-traditional' ones – to 'feel acknowledged and integrated within university' (Holland et al, 2020: 6). Although their precise impact on academic attainment remains notoriously difficult to prove (Holland et al, 2020: 5), adviser systems retain strategic value as a standard model response to fulfil governmental expectations that students 'will receive effective support to achieve educational and professional goals' (BIS, 2015).

However, it is less clear how effectively advisers can facilitate *meaningful* staff-student interactions in a massified environment. Staff-student ratios have remained mostly stable despite the considerable increase in undergraduate numbers across the sector, but this obfuscates significant changes to the structure of academic staffing. Between 2005-6 and 2017-8, 'traditional' academic staff – i.e. teachers who are research-active – rose only by 16 per cent, whereas the number of teaching-only staff rose by 50 per cent (Wolf and Jenkins, 2020: 6). This, perhaps, reflects the growing importance of other staff commitments, such as submitting to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which carry greater institutional value and personal prestige – particularly in academic promotions criteria.

Permanent academic staff members are also responsible for acting as academic advisers, yet this generates a structural tension as for senior staff their experience is countered by a more limited involvement in core undergraduate teaching, as well as their restricted responsibilities regarding students' pastoral care. Of course, professional services staff (particularly those working in mental health and wellbeing) are better equipped to provide students with specialist support, but this arguably contributes to a perception that advisers are defined more by what they *do not* do than what they actually *do* (Grey and Lochtie, 2016). This definition problem is further exacerbated by the fact that tutor and adviser systems are often inconsistently implemented and poorly monitored within universities (McFarlane, 2016; Gidman, 2001). The role is subject to minimal institutional guidance or training (Race, 2010), and seldom recognised through work allocation models or promotion criteria (Myers, 2008; Kenny and Fluck, 2022). In sum, this contributes to a perception that the role lacks value and recognition compared to other aspects of the job.

Nevertheless, the literature does indicate a strong desire from students to have meaningful and timely interactions with academic staff, particularly in their first year of study (Calabrese et al, 2022; Braine and Parnell, 2011; Yale, 2017). This chapter considers how academic advisers can facilitate such interactions within the constraints posed by massification. In doing, we demonstrate how original research can help identify areas for improvement in the structure and delivery of adviser systems. The chapter begins with a critical analysis of the academic adviser system at the University of Kent. Drawing on interviews with students and staff, this captures student and staff definitions and expectations of the role, systemic and operational issues, and the extent to which advisers are able to satisfy students' needs. Second, we summarise examples of changes in the policy and

practice of the adviser system that have been enacted in response to our research findings. These address a number of issues, including improving staff knowledge and understanding of student demographical change and individual performance, approaches to embedding adviser systems within programme curricula, and improving adviser training and recognition.

Personalised academic tuition: theory and practice

What is the purpose of an academic tutor or adviser? There is a lack of consensus across the literature as to a precise definition, not least due to its role (and title) varying across different institutions and subject areas, but we can at least begin by identifying some core characteristics. Fundamentally, advisers provide students with a single academic point of contact who 'oversees individual progress and takes action if necessary' (Thomas, 2012: 31). The role provides an overview of support that spans a student's entire degree programme, and continuity across what is usually a modular structure of study. Of course, not all tutor/adviser models necessarily uphold these core characteristics: some, for example, assign different advisers on a yearly basis to aid specialisation of support and enable greater flexibility for staff taking sabbaticals or research leave. Despite these variables, we can establish that an adviser in the contemporary HE system is expected to offer personalised guidance on aspects of the undergraduate experience that fall outside the remit of conveners or seminar leaders, including helping with module selection, monitoring attendance, reviewing progress and feedback, and writing references (McFarlane, 2016).

Whether academic advisers should act as 'mentors' to students is perhaps less clear. Certainly, mentorship is embedded in the more traditional 'pastoral' model of academic tuition commonly associated with the collegiate system of Oxford and Cambridge universities. According to Wheeler and Birtle (1993: 15), the role is akin to 'a moral tutor' who 'gives guidance on personal and moral issues as well as academic support'. Notwithstanding the somewhat anachronistic emphasis on morality, the pastoral model has long served as the inspiration and template for tutor systems across the sector, including those that bear little structural or historical resemblance to the Oxbridge collegiate system (Earwaker, 1992; Tapper and Salter, 1992).

Arguably underpinning the pastoral/mentor definition is the belief that the tutor represents an agent for integration into the university's community and culture. Tinto's (1997) work famously posits that the greater the students' involvement in college life the greater chances of their retention and academic success. His work ascribes a high value to engagement with academic staff, with tutors serving as conduits for learning university's culture and conventions (Wootton, 2006). In addition to the acquisition of institutional knowledge and academic skills these interactions should help facilitate a sense of belonging, with tutors able to act as representatives and confidants for safeguarding a student's wellbeing (Tinto, 1997; see also Endo and Harpel, 1982; Astin, 1993; Malik, 2000; Braine and Parnell, 2011; Small, 2013).

Though the pastoral model foregrounds the value of facilitating meaningful interactions, its success arguably rests on certain assumptions which limit its relevance to many contemporary HEIs, especially in a massified context. Tinto's work presupposes that universities foster high levels of 'institutional commitment' from incoming students, which may apply more easily to Oxbridge, the Ivy League, and liberal arts colleges. Yet as Thomas (2002: 426) argues, this commitment derives from (and is reinforced by) longstanding status hierarchies that facilitate pathways into similarly

prestigious careers. it is neither required nor desirable for students to 'break ties' with their former communities in order to experience a sense of belonging. This reflects the loss of a common transition to university following decades of widening participation drives, as well as a more standardised and professionalised learning and support provision (Christie, 2009).

This is not to say that universities do not retain an institutional habitus. As seen in chapters three and four, BAME students and students from lower-income backgrounds may feel alienated by some of the assumptions and priorities that implicitly inform institutional practice. Successful adaptation requires students to accumulate and deploy 'legitimated forms of academic skills and knowledge' recognised as such by the university (Watson, 2013: 416-7). While advisers may serve as facilitators for the accumulation of this 'academic capital', the onus is placed on the students themselves to navigate this field effectively and proactively. With this in mind, it has also been argued in chapter one of this volume that the adaptation of Bourdieu's sociology to literatures on educational retention and attainment runs the risk of endorsing a deficit reading where traditional hierarchies of knowledge and status continue to be upheld. Moreover, lessons from critical race theory imply that staff-student relationships should be a two-way process, especially given the continued underrepresentation of academic staff of colour (Rollock, 2019; Bhopal, 2018). In other words, academic advisers should not simply serve as conduits for imparting institutional knowledge onto students, they should also use these interactions to broaden their own knowledge and understanding of contemporary student needs and experiences.

Academic staff are not solely responsible for delivering efficacious tuition, however. This requires a system that is clear in its purpose and well-supported in organisation and content, but massification has arguably rendered the pastoral model unfeasible in most HEIs due to the increase in adviser-advisee ratios restricting the spaces and opportunities for traditional, collegiate relationship-building. This is evidenced by the widespread switch to a 'professional' model where tutors have been widely rebranded as 'academic advisers'. Under this model, advisers are expected to stick within an academic advice remit and required to refer advisees immediately to specialist services should their support needs become more pastoral in nature (Owen, 2002: 10). Such models help fulfil a university's contact provision more efficiently while ensuring that support will always be delivered by a relevant specialist, though this arguably repositions the adviser role more as a 'signposter' than confidant.

This returns us to the essential question: how can academic advisers develop meaningful relationships with undergraduates – particularly those who may initially feel greater feelings of unbelonging – within a massified system? Though such relationships remain possible within a professionalised adviser model, research indicates students may feel the role has diminished in significance. Yale's (2019) study, for example, found that students often worried that their tutors were 'too busy' to meet them, whereas Small's (2013) research indicated students were more likely to approach their tutor if they had also marked their assessments. For those that *did* meet their tutor, students from Holland et al's (2020: 5) study voiced frustrations at the 'generic' nature of the advice they sometimes received.

Ironically, to make the most of this system students are implicitly required to employ 'independent learner' attributes that staff members typically uphold as essential for achieving highly at university. Yet as we have seen in chapter three, not all students are equally equipped to quickly acquaint

themselves in an environment that may seem impersonal and alienating compared with school or college. For BAME students especially, the combination of high expectations and a fear of 'sticking out' leads to independent learning being repurposed as self-reliance. This includes a reluctance to seek help from academic staff, raising questions of whether an adviser system should embed a stricter model of regularised meetings to improve the quality of these interactions, or allow it to remain largely voluntaristic in nature. Through our study, we seek to address this issue directly, as we recognise the limited applicability of the traditional pastoral model in an increasingly massified HE environment while acknowledging the limits of an overly clinical, mechanical system that risks reducing tutor meetings to a 'tick-box exercise' (Mynott, 2016).

The study

As with previous chapters in this book, our research draws on findings from interviews with 62 undergraduates from the University of Kent, conducted in the 2014-15 academic year. In addition to this, we make use of 24 interviews with academic staff members across 10 academic schools, conducted in 2015-6. All staff are teaching-and-research academics who act as academic advisers, though some also have managerial responsibilities for monitoring the system within their school.

Similar to many UK universities, the adviser system at Kent was introduced in 2012 in response to the 2010 NUS Student Charter which recommended 'institution-wide procedures for personal tutoring' entitling each student to a named tutor. This replaced a patchwork of tutor models that varied by academic school, many of which were largely voluntaristic in nature. The adviser model, which was defined and developed by the University's central education committee, asserted its role and purpose through a handbook stressing its provision of academic advice and an 'agreed referral route' for pastoral support. Further, it states:

> It is important to stress that no matter how helpful you think you can be, you should not stray into counselling or therapy. It may be difficult not to get embroiled in students' personal problems, but you should not attempt to try and solve students' personal problems yourself. Students should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own decisions and actions and make contact with professional support services themselves. In cases where students are unable or unwilling to contact professional support services, the academic adviser should encourage the students to agree to referral for specialist advice and support.

Emphasis is placed on students' own responsibility for their self-care, though through forms of 'encouragement' advisers remain part of this conversation. The handbook states that advisers 'will play a proactive role in supporting the student's general academic development', but that individual academic schools retain responsibility to 'determine their preferred mode of delivery to suit their own academic and support structures'. In sum, this system strictly asserts an academic remit for advisers, which falls in line with the 'professional' model as defined by Owen (2002).

From tutor to adviser

There was a general recognition among staff interviewees that the original tutor model required overhauling to better respond to changes to the size and composition of the undergraduate population. The functionality of previous models was felt to be over-reliant on either staff and

students arranging meetings as they saw fit, or ritualised administrative activities enabling tutors to informally 'check in' on the general wellbeing of their tutees. The latter process was described by two tutor-turned-advisers:

> Students had to come and sign in to say they were here, and then they had to sign out at the end of the term. That's how we maintained contact to make sure they were around, so that had gone a bit woolly and drifty. (Karen[1], Sciences academic adviser)

> They [had] to sign a bit of paper. It's clearly pointless. But it brings them in and then you talk about other things, although it turned out that not all colleagues were doing this and that some people just basically ignored it. In those days we were free to do what we liked. (Rhianne, Sciences academic adviser).

The expansion in undergraduate numbers exposed the limitations of this largely voluntaristic model, resulting in a decline in student attendance while making it harder for tutors to maintain a personal familiarity with their tutees. The latter also reflected the lack of integrated informational support to monitor a student's general performance:

> We didn't have anything like the infrastructure or the resources we have in place now. We used to rely on members of staff, tutors telling us if students were missing their classes and we would follow up on that. But not everybody does that, so it was hit-and-miss. (Clive, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

The formalisation of the adviser system arguably helped generate a shared consensus among staff interviewees on the role's academic remit. This involved providing an overview of students' progress, creating a space for self-reflection, and picking up early warning signals if students were struggling with their assessment or attendance. But whereas some stuck rigidly to providing 'academic advice', others placed added emphasis on their role as conduits for students' learning of the university's 'habits and ways'. This implied a more proactive role for the adviser, one where students were socialised into the schools' 'academic culture':

> Some of the things I think they have genuinely found quite useful is to talk to them about how the University works – about the faculty structure, the peculiarities of the marking systems; stuff about reading materials. It's just to try and get them to relax a bit about the fact that we know that this is a culture shock for most of them, because the difference between school, college and here in every way is a huge gulf. (Elise, Social sciences academic adviser)

This explanation displays a sensitivity to the academic capital advisers are capable of imparting to their advisees. Knowledge of institutional systems – particularly those relating to learning and assessment procedures – should clearly not remain 'invisible pedagogies' (Bernstein, 1996) with students required to absorb as if by osmosis. The opportunity to transmit this knowledge, however, rests on a shared commitment to the adviser relationship from staff *and* students. Simply put, the former need to promote and encourage adviser meetings and the latter need to recognise the value of attending them, yet undergraduate interviewees (particularly those studying in their first year) were often uncertain what an academic adviser was, with some not even sure if they had one:

> *[Have you ever met your academic adviser?].* No never. *[Have they invited you to meet them?]* No, not to my knowledge at least. I don't think so, I've never met him or her, I've no idea. I haven't heard anyone, any of my friends talk about their academic adviser. (Shappi, BA Classical & Archaeological Studies – BAME Arab)

The lack of engagement from first year undergraduates stemmed partly from a perception that the principal role of advisers was to provide advice *in response* to specific queries or problems. But this left little room for meaningful interactions which might occur organically or at the behest of their adviser:

> Maybe the only time I will contact him is if I'm not sure about something like if I want to change my module and I'm not too sure, then probably I would go to him. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

> I'm not sure if she cared about us. I don't feel like I can go to see her about anything that concerns me about my studying. (Vicki, LLB Law – White)

Rebecca's comment recalls concerns over students' perceived lack of entitlement to support from academic staff, with advisers only worth contacting for specific procedural matters that students are unable to do themselves. Though a preference for self-reliance was associated with BAME and lower-income students, feelings of unbelonging may also be extended to mature students such as Vicki. Like Rebecca, her disinclination to approach advisers outside of specific troubleshooting requirements reflected a more general perception of the unapproachability of academic staff. One BAME interviewee revealingly kept referring to his recent adviser meeting as an 'interview', analogous to interrogation from an authority figure rather than a relaxed and productive conversation. This reticence was recognised by advisers, who despite trying to keep conversations during meetings 'chatty and informal' found it difficult to break from students' preconceptions of staff-student dynamics:

> Many students feel very shy when it comes to meeting up with academic advisers, outside the scheduled meetings. They feel that we may be unapproachable, or maybe annoyed by them visiting. (Nicholas, Social sciences academic adviser)

> I think there is obviously a sense that you're going to your teacher's office. Some of them are very shy and even if they come here, they're not quite sure what to say. It's possible they might feel like they're being called in, which is a bad thing if you're at school. (Lydia, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

Students' apparent reading of adviser meetings in terms of 'being called in to the teacher's office' arguably captures some of the limits of Tinto's engagement model in a massified context. Though new students may recognise the need to acclimatise to the university environment and begin absorbing its habits and ways, this is tempered by an apparent disconnect in staff-student relations. Advisers disagreed on whether this disconnect was an inevitable part of the student lifecycle or whether it pointed to broader sector-wide shifts. Some felt that the initial lack of engagement reflected students' prioritisation of their *social* adaptation to university life, with the adviser role taking root in the second year once they require more personalised support on issues such as module choice, placements, or dissertations. Others felt that engagement diminished even further

as students' growing independence left them feeling less obligated to arrange or attend meetings when their time and engagement could be more effectively invested elsewhere.

Systemic issues

Questions of whether students should feel obligated to arrange or attend meetings reflects how the adviser system is organised and executed. As with many universities, staff on short-term contracts at Kent are typically not expected to act as advisers, even though they often fulfil a large fraction of core undergraduate teaching. According to advisers and advisees, this impacted on whom first year undergraduates were most likely to approach for advice and support:

> Our part-time teachers are very good teachers. I mean, a lot of the time, they're better at relating to the students than I am. (Elise, Social sciences academic adviser)

> I don't see my academic adviser because I feel my seminar leaders all know more about the questions, if that makes sense. I can't go and ask my academic adviser what I'm going to write in an essay, I would rather ask my seminar leader who teaches that particular module. And I don't really have any classes with my academic adviser. (Chloe, LLB Law – Black African)

This divide was made worse by the fact that advisers could be assigned as many as 30 advisees across all years. Under these constraints, the University recommended that schools make introductory meetings compulsory followed by at least one interaction per year thereafter. The purpose of this was to establish a foundational relationship that students could then build on, though in practice this still resulted in a system that was largely voluntaristic:

> There always a couple of students who come with particular questions, but the vast majority – I have 30 – don't come either to the first meeting or to any subsequent meeting. You might get a reference request in three years' time. I always invite my advisees in to see me. You're not policed on that, so I expect some people just never see their students. I always invite mine but if they don't turn up, I can't force them to come. (Lydia, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

Constraints imposed by the adviser-advisee ratio also limited the extent to which initial meetings – usually 15 minutes per student – could be made to feel like the beginning of a more meaningful relationship. For some students, adviser meetings arguably exacerbated feelings of unbelonging as staff struggled to make interactions seem personalised:

> I do have a tutor, [but] I don't have a very personal relationship with him. Like, he doesn't know my name and we just meet up when he sends an email. That's just my personal experience. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

> We had an academic adviser. I'm not sure if she just cared about us. I don't feel like I can go to see her about anything that concerns me about my studying. (Vicki, LLB Law – White)

> I haven't had a relationship [with my academic adviser] I have met them twice. The first time was the first week, just to introduce. And the second time was just telling me "I'm here in case of anything." (Emily, BSc Business Studies – Black African)

As Emily's comment suggests, the impersonal nature of adviser-advisee relationships provided little incentive for students to arrange follow-up meetings. Despite the low uptake, however, there was little enthusiasm among staff for these to be made compulsory. On the one hand, this reflected a capacity issue as staff did not have the availability in their workload to accommodate eight hours of adviser meetings per term. On the other hand, some staff interviewees felt that compulsory meetings would only fuel the 'teacher's office' impression, believing interactions under this model fared poorly in comparison to the 'naturally occurring' mentorship that develops through teaching or dissertation supervision. There was little doubt that academic workloads caused by massification were largely to blame for problems with the adviser system and student engagement more generally. With staff negotiating multiple competing demands on their time, the adviser role's relative lack of reward and recognition saw its status suffer in comparison to other responsibilities as academics:

> No one gets a chair for being a tutor, do they? And it's a difficult one for [the work allocation model] because things go swimmingly for a couple of week and suddenly all hell breaks loose and some really knotty problem comes up. (Warren, Sciences academic adviser)

For Ingrid, the lack of adviser recognition was laid bare by the fact that she was not initially aware that her responsibilities as a lecturer included acting as academic adviser for twenty students when she started her tenure:

> I've been here for three years now. In the first year – I shouldn't say this – I didn't even know I had tutees. And then I got this message saying, 'Oh, we have to give you an additional tutee because this lecturer has gone on maternity leave.' And I thought, "One *more*?" I had no idea, because nobody told me about it. (Ingrid, Social sciences academic adviser)

This pointed to fundamental issues with how the adviser system was being promoted to staff and students. Although frustrated with the lack of student engagement, advisers recognised that running the system in a largely voluntaristic manner carried the risk of it falling into abeyance:

> If academic advisers are not promoting the scheme, we can't complain if the students don't know anything about it. (Danny, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

> I understand how students don't feel engaged. Because there's so many of them, and they're getting almost a remote service, but there's a lack of engagement or buy-in to the academic adviser system as a whole. (Martin, Sciences academic adviser)

These systemic constraints did not necessarily reflect a reluctance from staff or students to meaningfully engage with each other, however. For those who fell outside of the model of the 'ideal' student (Read et al, 2003), feeling personally recognised and understood by academic staff was considered particularly important for gaining a sense of competence as a student. As mature and lower-income students respectively, Stew and Lauren's frustrations were clearly expressed:

> There's been nothing there which has said, "Right, academically, what do you want to achieve? Academically, what do we need to do to help you achieve it? Are you on the right course? What are your needs?" That's been absent. (Stew, BSc Psychology - White)

I never had the support of anybody. I had nobody come and check up on me, ask if I was okay, have the monthly meetings or whatever. Maybe if I'd had that, I would have been able to have a bit more strategy laid out for me. I could have worked to my own goals. (Lauren, BA Business Studies – White)

Similarly, staff members believed that meaningful interactions with students could still be among the most rewarding aspects of their job, but that the clinical, remote nature of the adviser system had struggled to facilitate such engagements:

It reminds me of the film *Almost Famous*. Philip Seymour Hoffman plays a rock journalist mentor, who says, "I'm too busy, I'm too busy. I can't talk to you," to this 15-year-old. Cut to him to talking to him in a café, right? I think most academics are like that. Actually, when you talk to them, they'll give you a lot of quality. I mean, it's not that people aren't as busy as they say they are. I think people like to have that face time. (Les, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

Adviser or mentor? Establishing meaningful relationships

Part of the problem staff faced was judging how 'personal' such relationships should be. This stemmed from the adviser system's emphasis on providing academic rather than pastoral support, and how easily these could be separated in practice (Race, 2010). Despite these complexities, staff responsible for monitoring the system maintained that advisers were ultimately responsible for drawing a clear line between the two:

What we tell our advisers is, "You are supposed to be giving academic advice rather than pastoral advice." If it is health problems or personal problems, we send them off to the [wellbeing] advisers. Of course, the two are very intertwined but that is what we tell our advisors now, "You are strictly speaking giving advice on academic matters rather than on personal problems." (Elaine, Social sciences academic adviser)

A minority of advisers outright rejected this separation. Though initially unaware of her adviser allocation (see above), Ingrid came to take her role very seriously, believing that she was responsible for helping incoming students settle into university life socially as well as academically. This definition was arguably more akin to the pastoral/Oxbridge model as summarised by Owen (2002):

For me personally, I see myself as an academic adviser who is like mother hen, and I have all my chickens and I just want to check whether they are all right, have settled in, are homesick or not, have made friends. If not, can you help them along a bit. (Ingrid, Social sciences academic adviser)

The majority took a middle ground with varying degrees of confidence. While keen to stress the importance of avoiding crossing boundaries of expertise, advisers still felt the removal of a pastoral remit was unrealistic in practice as discussions over 'academic matters' could easily reveal problems related to students' overall wellbeing and vice-versa. For Samantha, the separation of the academic and the pastoral also overlooked how arts subjects in particular are studied and experienced:

We are not trained to do pastoral care and there should be lines around that. [But] we have a much more meaningful transaction with students in terms of their academic

development which I am afraid always overlaps with some form of pastoral stuff because people are working with the stuff of their lives. (Samantha, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

Samantha's comments reflected grievances among some staff that the standardisation of support systems had imposed a 'one size fits all' model across the University. Though the new system at Kent gave schools freedom to tailor their adviser model to their own curricular needs, this was still felt to presuppose a lecture-seminar model more common to social sciences and humanities degrees. Even within these subject areas, however, staff still struggled with the arbitrary separation of academic and pastoral support. Peter, for example, highlighted how the *process* of referring advisees to specialist support usually required advisers to be pragmatic about providing personalised engagement:

> I've had to cross over into that pastoral thing and advise them about getting counselling and that sort of thing. I'm fine with that. I'm not sure that everybody is, and we're advised to try to separate them, but I think it's a bit unrealistic. I think there are a number of colleagues who would feel uncomfortable going into the more pastoral side of things or dealing with personal matters. (Peter, Social sciences academic adviser)

The need for a pragmatic approach does not necessarily contradict advisers' deference to specialist support staff when it comes to pastoral matters, but Peter's comment perhaps indicates that some academics might have been more comfortable with taking the University's the handbook's guidance at face value. Warren voiced strong concerns in this area, believing that advisers who stuck rigidly to the academic advice remit were ultimately contributing to a fragmentation of meaningful staff-student engagement:

> [Students] need to know that they've got somebody there who is worried about their pastoral side rather than just the academic side. The fact that I'm supposed to be giving academic advice and not much else, if they're in trouble and they come and see me I can't just say, "Oh it's not my problem, it's somebody else's". […] Brand new lecturers coming in would say, "I didn't come here to be a bloody social worker". You could tell they were not going to be very sympathetic on a Friday afternoon if someone turns up because their world has collapsed. (Warren, Sciences academic adviser)

Danny, on the other hand, believed that the professionalisation of student support had given increasingly little cause for advisees to approach their adviser on pastoral *or* academic matters. With a specialist referral route for many academic issues – including appeals, concessions, and academic skills – as well as counselling services, wellbeing officers, and peer mentors for pastoral matters, he felt that many advisees were increasingly opting to contact the relevant service directly. This, he felt, effectively cut the adviser out of the support network altogether:

> You just don't tend to hear from academic advisees. When it comes to balancing academic stuff with other aspects of their lives, I think they're most likely to contact [other] members of staff about that. If it's a concession request, they go to the student support people, which is where I'd direct them anyway if it was that sort of concern. (Danny, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

Academic staff tended to endorse this sort of behaviour for showing 'independent learner' traits, even when this involved bypassing their academic adviser altogether. Nevertheless, concerns over students' lack of independence remained a strong theme among staff. While there was some sympathy for the ever-intensifying target-culture of secondary education in British schools, which was seen to privilege 'teaching to the test' above critical thinking, many voiced concerns that incoming undergraduates lacked independent learner attributes compared to previous cohorts:

> We were much more independent at what we did in school. You had to be and because if you failed in the same year twice you got kicked out and that was the end of it. Not all great, but independent learning was just normal to us. Clearly that is very, very different now. (Walter, Social sciences academic adviser)

> I'm not sure schools are really preparing them for independent thinking and independent actions. I think the school system is very much about targets and jumping through various hoops, and I don't think they get a huge amount of time to have a lot of independent thought. I don't see much of that when they get here. (Martin, Sciences academic adviser)

> I think they're not coming from school with that independent study mindset that perhaps they did have a few cohorts ago. I think if you were to leave them to their own devices, I would be a bit worried. (Sally, Social sciences academic adviser)

Though 'independent thought' is of course widely recognised as a key attribute in university-level learning, we should be mindful of unreflexively upholding an 'independent learner' discourse as it risks reproducing longstanding hierarchies of race and class in higher education (Leathwood, 2006; Yee, 2016). As we have seen in chapter three, students already in possession of academic capital are more likely to possess the self-confidence to quickly establish themselves at university and proactively access support services as and when they need it. Non-traditional students, on the other hand, may lack the entitlements brought by academic capital to engage with the university field in the same way, especially in an institutional environment that implicitly privileges white, middle-class values and culture. For BAME and working-class students in particular, self-reliance is an interpretation of independent learning that makes it easier to obfuscate personal academic struggles (real or imagined) and thereby manage underlying feelings of unbelonging (Stuart et al, 2011). In this context, academic advisers are one such example of an underutilised service due to students' desire to avoid appearing needy or generally ill-prepared for higher education.

Yet, recalling the earlier comments of academic adviser Les one can argue that most academic staff *do* want to help when a student reaches out. Likewise, we may also recall from chapter three BAME student Joseph's reflections on receiving valuable support from his academic adviser that 'when you're not looking for something, you don't really see it'. This arguably highlights the ways that the promotion of an independent learning discourse within a massified HE environment has created barriers for establishing meaningful staff-student interactions. To illustrate, Amy, a BTEC entrant, found the experience of proactively asking for, and receiving, support from her academic adviser as confounding her preconception of what it meant to be an independent learner:

> It's just weird that I wasn't used to doing that – actually emailing someone to find out how I'm doing. It just didn't feel independent. It felt really strange. It's not that you're nagging, [or] asking inane silly questions, you know. But if you do realise that there are areas of

your work that you need support on, to actually sort of be proactive about going to someone and saying, "Look, I'm struggling with this," or, "I've got this feedback. How can I make this essay better?" it's you taking ownership, rather than, you know, surrendering your independence. (Amy, BA Anthropology – White)

Although it may be the case that some staff members were happy for students to conflate independent learning with self-reliance, interviewees such as Nicholas and Lydia were cognisant of the ways staff allowed this myth to proliferate. Though students were expected to develop their organisational and time-management skills to become effective learners, these skills and attributes students are necessarily capable of deploying as soon as they arrive at university. This suggests that advisers have an important role to play in laying the groundwork for students to develop as effective and autonomous independent learners:

> Students are being taught that entering higher education means you're an independent learner. But what do we mean by independence? We mean independent to do the work at home, on your own but you can certainly collaborate with your colleagues, your module conveners, and seminar leaders. You have to develop those relationships that will help you do this work independently. (Nicholas, Social sciences academic adviser)

> There is that tension between us going, "No, do it for yourself" and getting them to recognise when you have to come and ask for help when you need it. But with that first meeting, actually, it's fine if they come here and go, "Hi. What is this?" because that's the point of it. (Lydia, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

What can be done? Strategies and systems for enhancing adviser-advisee relationships

The research presented in this chapter has underlined the importance of facilitating meaningful interactions between academic adviser and advisee. Against a backdrop of massification and growing professionalisation, the role and value of the adviser has arguably become lost within universities' student support provision. That said, students continue to express a desire for personalised support from academic staff, and the continuity and overview of support advisers offer remains unique. If deployed effectively, advisers can help address students' desire for recognition and validation while at university – especially for those who arrive on campus with feelings of unbelonging. Though it remains the case that advisers should not provide advice on matters that are the provision of specialist support professionals, staff uncertainty over the role's pastoral remit is symptomatic of the fragmentation of staff-student interactions more generally. The challenge, therefore, is to identify ways that will help refurnish the adviser role with a status and distinctiveness to both students and staff.

This was the initial purpose of our interviews with advisers and advisees, as well as follow-up survey research conducted as part of the University's involvement in HEA's Collaborative Retention Project (2018). The presentation of findings to senior managers and subject leaders within the University of Kent prompted a flurry of new strategies and practices. These can be grouped into four broad categories: knowledge and communication of student needs and experiences; integration of the adviser role within broader support systems; the use of technologies; and adviser reward and

recognition. With exemplars of good practice across the sector continuing to indicate that 'no one size fits all', these strategies and practices sought to uphold the principle that institutional systems are most effective when locally delivered by schools with central guidance and training (Lochtie et al, 2018). That said, the localised implementation of the adviser system was found to be highly variable, requiring greater coherence and co-ordination to enable effective collaborative working between academic and professional support staff.

The first of the themes for action sought to improve advisers' understanding of wider shifts and trends in the student lifecycle. To close this knowledge gap, academic schools began conducting annual 'new student' surveys, with results shared in subsequent staff meetings and away days. Surveys sought to capture students' expectations of success, concerns relating to their adaptation to university life, as well as a self-assessment of academic skills. Resultant data has succeeded in not only prompting intra-school conversations about pedagogy and assessment patterns, but also ensuring that individual advisers are more informed about the contemporary student experience and thereby better equipped to anticipate their support needs.

Our second theme for action relates to the relationship between the academic adviser system and the university's wider learning and support systems. Follow-up student survey research revealed that attendance in adviser meetings was highest in schools where the system was more strongly integrated into course curricula. In these cases, meetings were not only scheduled more frequently but also had a specific theme and purpose which pre-emptively addressed specific milestones in the student journey, such as discussing students' feedback from their first assignment; module selection and choosing a dissertation topic. Admittedly applying this model to all schools was not possible, especially those offering undergraduate degree programmes that varied in structure. However, these schools were at least able to reorganise their allocation of advisees to allow certain advisers to be given specialist portfolios of students studying specific degrees and combinations.

Most schools sought to publicise the adviser system to new students by integrating them into 'welcome week' activities. Advisers participated in ice-breaker activities with their advisees, and introductory group meetings were timetabled as part of the programme timetable. As well as helping put the adviser role at the centre of the school's contact provision, the ice-breaker activities in particular helped humanise advisers as a friendly and supportive point of reference. Advisers, too, regained a sensitivity to incoming students' needs and expectations, particularly those who had little involvement with first year undergraduate teaching. Echoing findings from Calabrese et al. (2022), some schools opted to formally timetable subsequent adviser meetings to improve student attendance and de-emphasise their optional status.

The third theme for action focused on adviser meetings themselves, specifically how information technologies could help give conversations greater meaning and purpose. Many advisers felt that the University's online student record system was designed to benefit administrators rather than facilitate discussion with advisees. Indeed, some advisers interviewed lamented the loss of paper-form documentation that could be handed to students as part of a more meaningful interaction. To address these issues the University developed ['progress profiles'](#) to provide a more user-friendly presentation of learner analytics than the student records system. The profiles, which feature 'traffic light' classifications and graphs showing student performance across all years, were designed to help

advisers review student performance and progress in advance of meetings, as well as act at the (printable) focal point of discussions.

The fourth and final theme concerned reward and recognition for advisers. These activities were arguably easier to implement as they were the responsibility of central University governance and could thus be applied across all schools. To begin, the University used its learning and teaching networks to organise academic adviser workshops. The purpose of this was to identify exemplars of good practice both at an organisational level (including the exchange of different ways of integrating the system into school curricula) and for specific adviser-advisee scenarios. The latter featured pragmatic ways of managing the intersection between academic and pastoral support, as well as developing more personalised ways of communicating with advisees.

The workshops precipitated a second intervention, an adviser training e-module. The purpose of this was to outline to new and existing staff the role's purpose and responsibilities, offer guidance on referral processes, and provide supporting resources such as template forms and good practice case studies (the latter as identified through the aforementioned workshops). The e-module represents a core template which academic schools have been able to adapt to include subject-specific content and support needs, as well as differences in the way the adviser model was integrated into programme curricula.

Staff dedication to their adviser role was further supported by changes to its promotions policy, as good adviser practice was identified as an example for fulfilling academics' 'citizenship' responsibilities. Good practice was made easier to identify and evidence through the development of annual 'above and beyond' staff awards, voted by students and managed by the student union.

Concluding thoughts

Academic tuition and advising has an important role to play in enhancing student success and belongingness in higher education, but its role and purpose has arguably become lost amid sector-wide massification and professionalisation. With rising student numbers and undergraduate teaching increasingly delivered by teaching staff on fixed-term contracts, the traditional Oxbridge-style pastoral model of tuition has ceased to represent a realistic template for most universities. At the same time, the rise of professional student support has stripped tutors of much of their traditional remit, with universities providing specialist wellbeing, employability, and academic skills services across its entire undergraduate population.

There is no denying that the latter trend has strengthened the quality of student support while necessarily reducing the burden of responsibility on individual academics to act as 'catch-all' problem-solvers. In theory, professionalisation should free advisers up to help their advisees learn the 'habits and ways' of the university, and reward engagement and attainment with the micro-affirmations that will spur students on further. In turn, through these interactions students can help impart on staff a greater sensitivity to the changes to the contemporary undergraduate experience, and how this may generate different support needs to when they themselves were at university.

Yet technocratic solutions on their own only take us so far. Drawing on evidence from our own institution, we found that the implementation of a new, professionalised adviser system had achieved a greater consistency in organisational terms but was insufficiently integrated with other

academic and pastoral support systems. For staff, amid a myriad of competing responsibilities the adviser role lacked resourcing and prestige, making it easier for the system to remain largely voluntaristic in practice. For students, the role's definition and value was ambiguous, thereby reinforcing the 'self-reliant independent learner' ideal among non-traditional students in particular. Despite this, however, students still expressed a wish to receive personalised, meaningful engagement from academic staff throughout their time at university, even if they did not necessarily possess the tools to proactively seek this out for themselves.

The interventions and strategies presented in this chapter have gone some way to addressing these needs by affording the adviser role and system greater attention and resourcing than it has received in the past. Nevertheless, we should be mindful that these interventions and strategies only offer scope for improvement within the systemic constraints of massification. Adviser-advisee ratios of the kind detailed in this chapter are symptomatic of these constraints and will always limit the scope for building meaningful staff-student relationships. To challenge the status quo, more work is needed across the sector to rebalance academic workloads – making possible more sustained, scheduled, contact between advisers and advisees – and to support new students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds as they arrive in the unfamiliar environment of the university.

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[1] All staff and student names in this chapter have been anonymised, with pseudonyms applied consistently across all chapters in this book.