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Institute of Teaching and Learning

JENNIE BLAKE ACADEMIC ADVISING: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS AND STAFF

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2020/21
PROJECT
REPORT

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ITL Fellow 2020/21

JENNIE BLAKE

Jennie has worked in education for over 25 years, in schools and universities in the US and UK. At Manchester, Jennie led on the development of the Library's skills programme, My Learning Essentials. She contributes to university-wide work around teaching, curriculum design and student engagement, with a particular interest in how curriculum design and pedagogy can address inequality and enable student success.

Jennie is a National Teaching Fellow and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Fellowship Student Partner Interns

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ACADEMIC ADVISING: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS AND STAFF

ITL Fellowship project

This project evaluates the support and structure needed to achieve and sustain change, and the effect recent changes have had on teaching and academic advising. This project looks to produce guidance and resources that will enable staff and students to take advantage of best practice in teaching via the academic advisor-advisee partnership.

Context

Although support and centralised training is offered to Academic Advisors to aid them in their role, staff and student experiences of academic advising across the University are often inconsistent. Students and advisors sometimes struggle to align the potential of the advising relationship for significant coaching, support and reflection with the structures, training and tools available.

The University took part place in a benchmarking review of its Academic Advising system during the summer and early Autumn of 2020, and my project ran with and alongside this review to provide more detail on the process of advising as it is experienced by staff and students.

Objectives of the Fellowship project

My project sought to centre the student voice and experience of the academic advising process and also to give opportunities for advisors to contribute their own experiences and needs to the project.

The overarching objective for the project was the creation of a series of recommendations to support academic advisors' work in guiding students to better understand their own learning process, skills and expectations.

The project report was drafted in such a way as to allow it to be as accessible as possible to all of the staff and students who participated in the project or wished to learn from it.

Project activities

Staff Survey

We used some of the questions already being asked of academic advisors through the benchmarking exercise to understand their current experience. Where we needed to ask additional questions, we added them to the survey being used for the benchmarking exercise in order to cut down on the number of separate surveys advisors were asked to fill out.

Staff Interviews

For our staff interviews we deliberately sought out the experience of Academic Advisors and Senior Academic Advisors (each School appoints at least one) and looked, in particular, at understanding the experience of academic advisors who may have struggled to support their students in the way they wanted to and were expected to.

Student Survey

The student survey sought to draw out their perspectives and insights into their current experience of academic advising's support of learning. The research included a survey for current students and, where possible, recent graduates. In order to reach as large a sample as possible we collaborated with various teams from across the University, including the Student Partners at the Institute for Teaching and Learning and the Library Student Team.

Challenges faced

Asking for “more” of anything, even something as crucial as thoughts on academic advising, was difficult during a pandemic. I would like to specifically thank each and every member of staff and the students who answered the survey, passed it along to others and volunteered to be interviewed.

There were also some issues around timing of the benchmarking exercise (which needed to move quite quickly) versus “ideal” timing for the study. However, none of these issues were insurmountable, largely because of the work of my Student Partners and the generosity of the participants.

In terms of taking action, it is of course difficult to recommend changes in the way that the University approaches advising, even during more typical times. This means that the outputs of this project, and its potential for impact, may require additional stewardship and time to ensure that staff and the University as a whole can benefit from its findings.

Student partnership

Throughout the surveying process, the Student Partners were absolutely essential. Any and all success on this project is down to their commitment and support. From the start, they participated in drafting research questions, designing surveys and setting out questions for interview.

Their insights as recent students were invaluable and their connections across the student body meant that we were better able to recruit a diverse cohort for interview and for survey promotion.

I want to particularly commend my Student Partner Upendo Ipinii for her work on the project; she is solely responsible for the layout and structure of the final report –greatly increasing its readability and its potential for circulation and uptake.

Collaborative work

We had help from a number of colleagues across the University. In particular, from Michael Douglas in the Library, who allowed us to use the Library's Qualtrics account and supported us in our analysis of the survey data, when it became clear that the survey platform for the benchmarking exercise would not be appropriate for individual responses or student input.

We also had contacts in the University of Manchester Students Union and the Library Student Team who helped to promote the project and solicit participants.

Finally, Professor Peter Green was an extremely helpful critical friend and promoter of the project in his role as head of the Academic Advising Benchmarking Task and Finish Group. He worked tirelessly to ensure engagement from academic advisors across the University and particularly in areas that may have traditionally not been as responsive.

Outputs

Project Report

The project report took the form of a PowerPoint presentation, which enabled the project team and others to present its findings in a clear and engaging way. It was circulated to Senior Academic Advisors and other significant groups at the University, in addition to being presented at various task and finish groups.

The report has therefore served both as:

- a method to disseminate the findings of the project and
- a way to support conversations around advising and potential interventions to support staff and students.

"Supportive conversations" model

The data from the report was used to frame a model for conversation and support that seeks to ensure both staff and students feel confident and comfortable in their work together. This model acts as a structure for conversations with students that was designed to support advisors in having effective and supportive conversations with their advisees:

Potential ways to engage with advisees



Training workshops for New Academics

Sections of the report have also been used in training sessions on our New Academics Programmes (NAP). The training took participants through some of the findings of the project, focusing on student and staff feelings of isolation in the advising relationship and student concerns around unconscious bias. It also introduced a structure for conversations with students that was designed to support advisors in having effective and supportive conversations with their advisees (see image above).

Academic Advising Masterclass: what could we do better?

On 12 October 2021 I led a masterclass as part of the Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health's Pedagogy Development Programme. The session built on the model for supportive conversation to encourage staff to discuss their own experiences and create a suite of potential ways of speaking to use in their work as advisors and in other work engaging with students.

Impact

Currently (July 2021), impact is via targeted training sessions for each Faculty's 'New Academics Programmes' and via circulation of the report and resulting discussions. It will also be used to support changes to the University's online Academic Advising Toolkit. One crucial finding of the report - that of the isolation and pressure that academics often feel in the advisor role - will require long term and careful work to unpick and mitigate, though some work is already happening with senior academic advisors in some areas. In addition, this project has meant that the University better understands nuances that have come to light during the benchmarking exercise. It also demonstrated that there is a universality of experience on the part of staff and students that can be a helpful starting place when making changes or crafting additional support.

Reflection

The research itself, and its dissemination, has been a success, with a number of people engaging with it and the final report. The report itself has surfaced useful information, especially around student perceptions of how they are spoken to by academic advisors (and their noting of an issue with advisors struggling to create real connections when they don't seem to value a student's own lived experience.) The recommendations around sensitivity and unconscious bias training, in addition to the emphasis on supporting academic advisors to feel less isolated in their role, are important ones, and I am glad they are being discussed.

Next steps

In order to truly address the issues raised during the project, we need to ensure that advisors have access to and use a communal space and that they receive specific training to support their making connections and building relationships with sensitivity and awareness of each student's own lived experiences.

Jennie Blake
July 2021
