Evaluating, Enhancing and Expanding Academic Advising in the Sutherland School of Law

Report of the Academic Advisory Strategy Group
June 2022

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6 Undergraduate Students

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1 Research Supervisor

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4 Focus Groups

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3 Workshops

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1 Interim Review Presentation

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2 Surveys

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123 Students Surveyed

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16 faculty Surveyed

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24 Weekly Meetings

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3 Key Themes

_____

9 Months

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1 Agenda for Better Academic Advising

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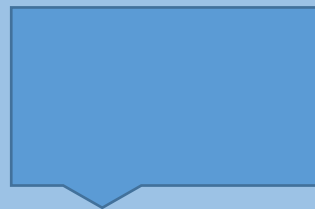
Contents

1.   Background to the Project

This project forms part of a wider UCD initiative to inform and improve academic advising University-wide. As part of this initiative, HEA / National Forum funding was made available to support the development of pilot schemes on academic advising across the University. An initiative team, based in UCD Teaching and Learning, is responsible for the management and coordination of these funds and projects, with oversight provided by the University Working Group on Academic Advising, chaired by Professor Marie Clarke.

The need to review the Academic Advising programme in the School of Law had already been recognised, and recent initiatives included the integration of the programme as part of the new core first year module, *Legal and Professional Skills*. However, to further develop the quality and effectiveness of academic advising in the Law School, further research was needed. Following a competitive process, funding was awarded for this project, *Evaluating, Enhancing and Expanding Academic Advising in the School of Law.*
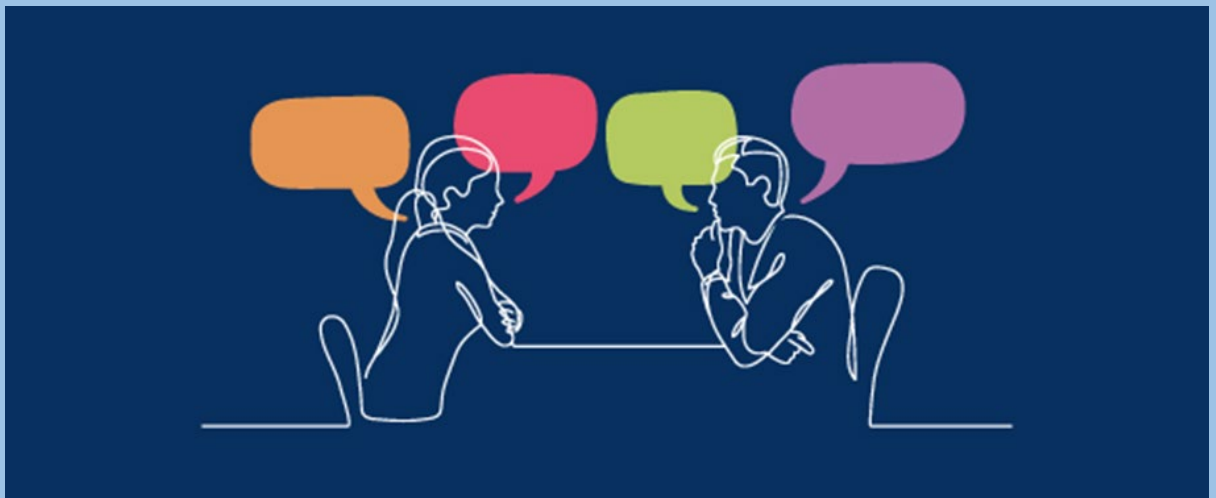
2. Overview of Academic Advising in the School of Law

Every undergraduate student on Law programmes is assigned an Academic Advisor who is a full time member of the faculty. Stage 1 students take a core module in the first trimester, *Legal and Professional Skills (LAW10420)*.

As part of this module, students receive credit for attending a small group introductory meeting with their academic advisor and for attending a second individual meeting with their academic advisor where they obtain feedback on a short piece of written work.

Students retain their academic advisor for the duration of their programme, but there are no formal structures in place for meetings or the continuation of the relationship.

3.   Project Aims

The aims of this project were:

- to identify gaps and weaknesses in the current academic advisor programme in the School of Law
- to recommend suggestions to improve the programme, and
- to implement initiatives to enhance the programme.

Importantly, this is a collaborative staff-student project, which takes a 'Students as Partners' approach to achieve these aims. We therefore formed an Academic Advisory Student Strategy Group, consisting of 6 students across a range of undergraduate Law programmes and stages, and from a diverse range of backgrounds. Students were given the lead in driving the project and, with guidance from the Research Assistant and Project leads, in establishing the most appropriate means to achieve the project aims. However, there was ongoing communication between the students and project leads, meaning that some of the student recommendations could be acted on during the course of the project itself, such as immediate changes to the first year academic advising programme which is run as part of the Legal and Professional Skills programme.

Image: Members of the Academic Advisory Strategy Group, from left to right: Daniel Power, Michelle Kadiri, Marlene Douglas, Martha Ní Riada. (Missing: Katie Morrissey, Altamash Shaikh)

4.   Methodology

(i) '*Students as Partners' Approach*

This is a collaborative staff-student project to improve the academic advisors programme in the School of Law, taking a 'Students as Partners' approach. A Student Strategy Group was formed, consisting of 6 students across a range of undergraduate Law programmes and stages and from a diverse range of backgrounds. To ensure that all students had an equal opportunity to participate in the research, members of the group were compensated for their time.

This Strategy Group worked with a Research Assistant who helped guide the students through the process of organising regular meetings, managing workloads and deadlines, facilitating student focus groups and surveys, obtaining ethical approval where needed and facilitating faculty and student workshops. The project leads had oversight of the work of the group and had regular discussions with the Research Assistant, but the project was predominantly student-led.

A further result of the 'student as partners' approach and regular communication was that some of the initial suggestions of the Student Strategy Group could be implemented and assessed during the research period itself. In particular this included a change to the first year academic advising programme which is run as part of the Legal and Professional Skills programme in 2021/2022.

(ii) *Student Focus Groups*

Four student focus groups were held, as follows:

Date	Stage / Year	Number of participants
4th November 2021	1 and 2	4
11th November 2021	3 and 4	5
7th February 2022	1 and 2	9
14th February 2022	3 and 4	6

Table: dates and details of student focus groups

The Student Strategy Group prepared open-ended questions for the focus groups. The focus groups were facilitated by the Student Strategy Group, assisted by the

research assistant. The absence of faculty at the groups allowed students to answer questions more freely.

As this was low risk research, we completed the *Human subjects Low Risk Study Review Form* and received exemption from full ethical committee review. The Focus Groups were recorded to enable transcription and data collection.

To ensure that all students had an equal opportunity to participate in focus groups, members of the focus group were paid / compensated for their work.

(iii) *Student Surveys*

Short Surveys were sent to various cohorts of students including those who had completed the revised first year programme. As this was low risk research, we completed the *Human Subjects Low Risk Study Review Form* and received exemption from full ethical committee review. The surveys were designed so that data could be collected without any identifiable personal information.

Survey responses were obtained from 178 students. The following charts show the distribution of students taking the survey, by year and then by programme.

As can be seen below, 42% of those who complete the survey were first year students; 28% were second years; 17% were third years and 12% were final year students.
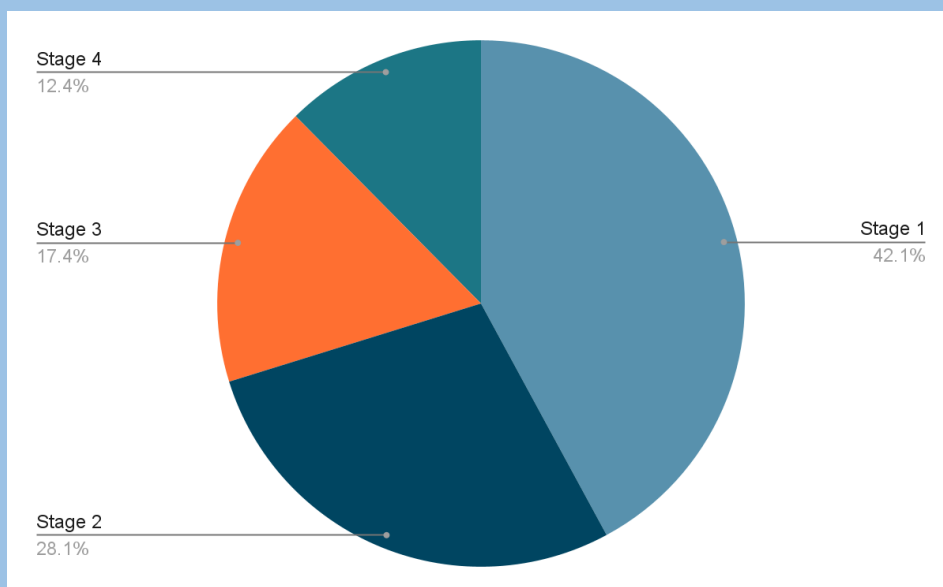
Image: Student survey breakdown by Stage

The survey was completed by a sample of students broadly representative of the ten Law programmes, as seen in the image below. This represents a good spread of

respondants across Law programmes. The largest cohort of students who completed the survey were Business and Law students (39%). This is the largest undergraduate Law programme. The second-largest group of respondents (23%) were from the BCL programme, and 13% of respondents were from Law with Politics.
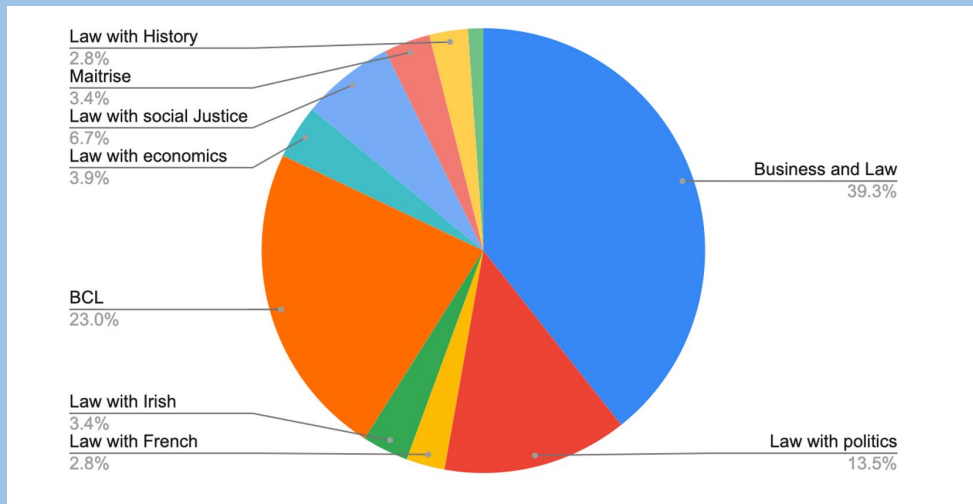
Image: Student Survey Breakdown by Programme

(iv) *Faculty Survey and Workshop*

To obtain faculty perspectives on the academic advisory programme in the School of Law, faculty were invited to complete a short survey in trimester 2. This survey was completed by 16 members of staff.

In addition, the Student Strategy Group held a faculty Workshop, hosted in hybrid format, in which the results of the student focus groups and student and faculty surveys were presented to faculty. This provided a further opportunity to obtain feedback from faculty on the academic advising programme, and to inform them of the student perspective of the programme and suggest improvements for their own practice as regards the academic advisor / student relationship.

Image: Participants at the Faculty Workshop.

5.   Faculty Survey: General Findings

The faculty survey provides a helpful overview of how faculty interact with their academic advisory students, and what issues arise in those meetings.

Interaction with students

It is difficult from the survey to ascertain how frequently advisors meet with their students. However, it seems that in many cases the only interaction advisors have with their students is when students are in first year, as part of the *Legal and Professional Skills* module. After this, the rate of interaction with students drops significantly.

Zoom (63%) and Email (69%) are the two most popular ways of communication that have been used by the Academic Advisors that were surveyed, with 50% saying that they held face to face meetings this year. Brightspace is also used as a means of communication (6%). However, it should be noted that some of the Academic Advisors stated that the Zoom meetings were due to Covid-19 restrictions and one Advisor stated that in regard to meetings they would 'prefer to do this in person'.

Beyond first year, interaction via email increases (75%) with a reduction in the use of Zoom (10%) and face to face meetings (38%). Some Academic Advisors noted that students rarely contact them.

Issues raised in first year

advisors reported that meetings with first year students tend to focus on:
- Legal writing
- Academic questions
- Careers
- Settling into university
- Pastoral care questions like counselling or loneliness

Image: issues raised by students in first year advisory meetings

Issues raised after first year

The main issues that came up after first year related to careers / employment advice, personal issues and references for postgraduate courses.

Image: issues raised by students after first year

General comments from Academic Advisors on how they interact with Students after first year:

'I tell my first years that I'm always happy to meet with them in subsequent years at their instigation. A minority take up this invitation. Most do not.'

'It depends. I have frequent contact with some of these students; no interaction with others.'

'Emails sent to the group once per teaching trimester, with supports I can offer as academic advisor.'

'Students appear in final year expecting / demanding that you write references for them. Often, you are in a worse position as you may not even have taught them but have no special insights into them as persons.'

'Rarely'

Image: some comments from advisors.

6. Main Issues Identified

The main issues identified from the student focus groups, student surveys and faculty surveys are as follows:

1. **Lack of understanding of the role or purpose of the Academic Advising programme**

   Faculty and students alike are confused and unsure as to the purpose of the Academic Advising programme. Students are unsure what an academic advisor is and what they can expect from them, and faculty have differing understandings of the role.

   There is also a lack of awareness that the academic advisor is available beyond first year and that the programme is not limited to the *Legal and Professional Skills* module. Many students were unaware that there was any form of academic advising programme in the School. Some feedback from faculty recognised that they had similar assumptions.

   Confusion is also caused by the overlap between the Academic Advising programme and other services such as the Student advisors.

2. **Communication issues**

   Communication was one of the overarching themes we identified in our findings as it was mentioned in all of our focus groups and surveys collected. A clear *communication gap* was identified from our research. This included a lack of communication and information regarding the academic advisory programme, for both faculty and students, and also differences in the types of communication and styles of interaction used between academic advisors and their advisees.

3. **Inconsistencies**

   A primary issue we found as part of our focus groups was the vastly differing experiences each student had when meeting with their academic advisors. Some students had minutes lasting merely a minute or two, whereas others had meetings lasting up to 20 minutes. Some academic advisors took on a more pastoral role whereas others focused solely on academic matters. Students recognised that advisors weren't always sure of their role themselves. Some advisors were welcoming and friendly whereas others were stern, offered little support, or viewed it as a "tick box" exercise.

There is also a lack of consistency in the programme throughout the stages of the degree, with a formal structure only being in place for the first year of the programme.

4. The power imbalance between faculty and students

Students identified that there is a significant power imbalance between faculty and students, and that they are often scared or intimidated attending meetings or contacting their advisors. Students reported significant levels of stress attending their first year meeting, particularly as they were receiving feedback on what is often their first piece of academic work, and some students were distressed or upset after their meeting if they received criticism of their work. This made students less likely to reach out to their advisors after this meeting.

A lot of onus is on students to seek or arrange academic advising, and the power imbalance makes this process daunting. Students do not know how to reach out to the advisors and do not always receive a positive response when they do so.

5. A student desire for more emphasis on pastoral care

All students surveyed wanted the Academic Advisory Programme to be more holistic in nature. Students had expectations that advisors would play more of a supportive or pastoral role. Students emphasised the importance of building a relationship with faculty to have continuous support throughout their degree and to help with things such as choosing modules or careers advice. However, faculty were wary of their lack of training in areas outside academic affairs, and suggested that the role would be to signpost / guide students to the existence of other support roles such as Student Advisors, Study Skills Tutors and the Careers Network.

6. The need to recognise diversity and to be more inclusive

Students stated that academic advisors tended to assume that students all come from a 'traditional' background, and that there was not much understanding of the significant numbers of students coming from diverse backgrounds. Academic advising for some students might be the only type of individual academic advice they have access to throughout their education so

it is important to recognise and facilitate diverse backgrounds. Students were of the view that they were being compared to their peers, or that high expectations were placed on them from the very first meeting. This issue recognises that students felt overwhelmed, and their learning abilities/difficulties or background were not being recognised.

7. The need for an improved Academic Advisory programme

Students believe the Academic Advisory Programme is important and valuable but not well executed. Students have expressed enthusiasm at the possibility of reforms to resolve current issues and inconsistencies. There is a palatable desire from students to engage with the programme when they feel listened to by their advisors and when their advisors can explain candidly what their relationship can be over the course of their degrees. A desire from students for the role to change as they progress through their degree from basic writing tips in first year to module and career choice in third and fourth year. All students in all focus groups expressed a keen interest in the student-led workshop held by students and facilitated by the academic advisors.

We now examine in more detail the responses from faculty and students. We discuss these under three key themes:

1. The role of the Academic Advisor
2. Communication between Advisors and Students
3. Diversity and Inclusion

We have made recommendations in relation to each of these themes.

7. Key Themes and Recommendations

Theme 1: The Role of the Academic Advisor

Introduction

There is no universal definition of an academic advisor, and the understanding of what constitutes an academic advisor can vary from institution to institution, or even within institutions. In general, however, it can be said that an academic advisor is a faculty member that provides one to one interaction about a student's academic progression. For example, if a student has problems with a module or programme they are taking and want to drop it, they can go to their academic advisor for advice. Overall, academic advisors act as a guide to students on academic issues and encourage them to achieve their learning goals.

One of the key questions for this research was to investigate what faculty and students believe to be the role of an academic advisor, and to see if there is any common understanding of the role.

Our findings show that a key issue with the role of the academic advisor is that the UCD School of Law does not actually define who an academic advisor is, and it does not state what an academic advisor should do. This has caused the current confusion amongst faculty and students on what they should expect and what they are expected to do.

Faculty survey perspective on the role of an Academic Advisor

When we asked faculty what the role of an academic advisor was, we received mixed responses. Many gave basic definitions of what it should be like 'an academic mentor' and 'pastoral support', while other responses showed they believe the role of an academic advisor is either 'too limited in scope' or should be abolished. The mixed reviews showed us that there was not a common idea of who an academic advisor was and what they do. Much like students, academic advisors were not certain of the nature of their role. Some felt that the one or two introductory meetings for new students was the extent of the role and were not aware of the longer-term emphasis placed upon the role.

faculty feedback recognised that the role of the academic advisor was not clearly defined within the Law School. The objectives of an advisor were not clearly communicated to them. The evidence in the data shows that the unclear communication from the offset of the academic advising programme affected the

communication in other aspects of the programme. faculty were not sure of their role and this then impacted the quality of the programme.

Student perspective on the role of an Academic Advisor

In the survey, students were asked about their perspective of the academic advising programme. When we asked the students if they understood the academic advising program, 50% of the students said yes, and when we asked them if they knew their academic advisor, 83% of them said yes. However, in the focus groups it was clear that students were very unclear as to the actual role of an academic advisor.

Uncertainty as to the role of an academic advisor

Students noted that they were not sure what their academic advisor was for and there were inconsistent views and expectations of the role. Many students saw it as something akin to the UCD Writing Centre where they could go and get advice on their writing, whilst others saw their advisor as someone who could give career advice. This links with the previously discussed issue of unclear communication. This misunderstanding comes from the ill-defined role of the academic advisor and needs to be addressed so that students know what they should be contacting their academic advisor for.

Overlap with other services

Students were not sure what their academic advisor was for and were confused with other advisor supports in the school such as Student Advisor, Programme Manager, Module Coordinators etc. It was clear from feedback that roles were not defined or clearly communicated to students causing confusion and overlap.

Lack of awareness of the significance of the role beyond first year

From doing focus groups grouping first and second years and then third and fourth years, we have learned that there is a better awareness of the programme from early-stage students than degree-level students. Many first and second years spoke cogently about the role of the academic advisor, while degree-level students often were unclear about what the role of an academic advisor was. This shows a generally positive trend for the programme as greater awareness is being brought to new undergraduates and should continue. As the academic advisor programme is perhaps

even more valuable - for third and fourth year students as they plan the beginning of their career, there needs to be a targeted campaign to encourage these students to contact their advisors and engage with the programme.

Recommendations

- The School of Law should implement clear guidelines and policies of what an academic advisor is and what they should do.

- The School of Law should take steps to enable faculty and students to be aware of these guidelines and follow them.

- There should be open and ongoing communication between faculty and students about what they should expect from the academic advisor program.

- It should be made clear that the academic advisory programme is not limited to the *Legal and Professional Skills* module.

- There should be a reminder email every trimester to students reminding them of who their academic advisor is and encouraging them to make contact.

Theme 2: Communication between students and academic advisors

Introduction

This section focuses on communication between students and academic advisors, particularly in the context of the student meetings with their advisors. For most students, the main meeting with their academic advisor is the individual meeting in the first trimester of first year, as part of the *Legal and Professional Skills* module. At this meeting, they receive feedback on a short piece of work. After this students can communicate with their advisors via email, or arrange meetings when necessary (e.g. during the advisor's office hours). However, it was noted that only a small number of students make contact with their academic advisors after first year.

Communication between students and academic advisors

Where communication was working well the benefits and success of the academic advising programme could be seen from student feedback. Students who participated in our focus groups expressed that where they had regular meetings and ongoing communication with their academic advisor, valuable relationships were built and the programme was a beneficial academic advisory tool. The following are examples of positive statements from students during our focus groups:

'My feedback from the LPS assignment was overly positive, I didn't get any criticism.'

'My advisor was really approachable, and we email regularly.'

'My advisor emailed directly about internships and other opportunities.'

In situations where communication was not working well, student feedback demonstrated a negative experience of the academic advisory programme. Students who participated in the focus groups shared that when meetings were short, impersonal, or too clinical that they failed to create any relationship with their academic advisor and felt the academic advisor programme was not useful to them. Students described being "terrified" as though it were a "job interview". The following are negative statements from students during focus groups:

'All I got was a 2 minute chat'

'I felt I was a bother contacting my advisor'

'The meeting had no personal relationship'

'My advisor said their goal was to make sure I was okay academically. Our talk wasn't reflective of that, I did not reach out again'

'We met in the lobby of the Quinn building; I expected the meeting to be in private'

'My academic advisor met me on zoom, their camera was turned off'

Some students spoke very positively about their meetings with many lasting for more than 20 minutes while others were finished in less than five minutes. While conversations will naturally have differing levels of depth/engagement, we suggest implementing recommended meeting lengths to ensure students get a base-level exposure to their advisor that will encourage them to reach out again and build an ongoing and meaningful relationship.

The following table identifies the main strengths and weaknesses identified by students in focus groups and surveys:

Strengths	Weaknesses	
Face to face meetings	Meetings too short and impersonal	
Potential to build an academic relationship	Unsure of the meaning of the programme	
Valuable feedback from advisors	Feedback not supportive	
Securing a meaningful reference	No connection to obtain a reference	
Advice on career progression	Box ticking exercise	
		Lack of clarity that support continues after stage 1

Student challenges in communication:

Students identified there was a heavy onus on them to reach out and make a relationship with their advisor. Students expressed that there was a power imbalance that made them uncomfortable in making contact with advisors. It was expressed that if faculty could reach out to students on occasion in order to make friendly reminders the academic advisor programme exists, this would give the opportunity to build a valuable relationship.

'I feel like it's a burden if I email my advisor'.

Students expressed that the focus on getting the *Legal and Professional Skills* module feedback made the initial academic advisor meeting too formal, and would prefer some general chat in order to build a lasting relationship. The emphasis on feedback in the meeting gave students the idea that the sole purpose of the meeting was to mark or comment on that piece of work rather than be an academic support for the entirety of their degree. In some cases the feedback provided was negative, meaning students had a negative interaction with their advisors. Crucially, where students had a bad experience in the first meeting, it affected their overall attitude to the programme:

'The relationship is very formal; I would not be comfortable organising future meetings with the advisor for further supports'

Students emphasised the importance of building a relationship with faculty members to have continuous support throughout their degree.

Student Comments on the academic advisor programme/ meetings:

'Maybe advisors could send friendly reminders about the programme each semester.'

'There should be annual meetings in 2nd, 3rd and 4th year.'

'I think it would be a good idea to meet with your advisor each year or each semester.'

'I only found out in final year that the programme extended beyond first year.'

'Can be helpful however feedback should be clarified more.'

'It is quite unclear if we can actually reach out and for what issues we can reach out to them for.'

Faculty challenges in communication

Faculty feedback recognised that the role of the academic advisor was not clearly defined within the Law School. The objectives of an advisor were not clearly communicated to them. The data shows that the unclear communication from the offset of the academic advisor programme affected the communication in other aspects of the programme. faculty were not sure of their role and this then impacted the quality of the programme.

From the faculty survey it was clear that faculty often only engaged with students in order to fulfill their obligations with the *Legal and Professional Skills* module, which required the students to submit a piece of work and then to receive feedback from their academic advisor. Although students recognised this was a useful tool, the whole procedure often led both students and faculty to believe this meeting was all that was expected from both, and that the focus should merely be on the feedback on the assignment.

'There is a big communication gap, both advisor and student don't know what to do.'

'After the feedback on the assignment we had a general chat, this was nice.'

Faculty also expressed discomfort with asking personal questions of students, as they do not receive training in providing this type of support. Although faculty recognised that their role is to focus on academic issues, it is difficult to draw the line between "academic" and "personal" difficulties. It is also difficult to know where to guide students to to receive more supports.

'Asking questions is uncomfortable to do and online it is even more uncomfortable'

Some faculty did however send out regular emails to engage with students beyond the LPS module and recognised that engagement was very low beyond first year. Faculty commented that students would meet them in first year and not again until final year when it was time to seek an academic reference.

It was also noted that the first group meeting with academic advisees comes quite early in the term, and should perhaps be a few weeks later when students have had more of an opportunity to settle in. One of the students suggested that a tutorial or seminar type group class with an academic advisor or student advisor would be helpful; they thought that they'd feel more comfortable in a group setting asking questions in a smaller group.

Further comments from academic advisors regarding the meetings:

'I would recommend getting them to meet us in Week 3.'

'Meeting was timetabled too early in the term'

'I had open, and, I hope, helpful conversation with some students who asked questions and were comfortable.'

'Some students subsequently followed up for additional advice'

'One student really struggling so had a good chat with them about that (rather than about the assignment)'

'I'm not sure they always get the full value from the meetings'

Recommendations:

- Guidance should be given regarding faculty - student meetings so faculty and students have a coherent guideline of their role and what is expected.

- Meetings should have time requirements and delivery standards. This should include a minimum of 10 minute meetings to be held at least twice an academic year.

- Meetings should be friendly and conversational to build a relationship with each individual student. This can help identify what academic support the student specifically needs and ensure the academic advisory tool is more beneficial overall.

- Consideration should be given to reducing the emphasis on feedback on the assignment in the individual meetings.

- Faculty should be given guidance on the relevant supports available to students, so they can provide this information to students if necessary and guide them to appropriate services.

- Students should receive emails each trimester to remind them who their academic advisor is, and how best to contact them – for example, by providing details of the advisor's weekly office hours and how to attend these office hours.

- The first group meeting with the academic advisor should take place slightly later in the first trimester.

- Consideration should be given to having more organised group meetings with academic advisors, rather than the emphasis being on individual meetings.

- Records should be kept of student engagement and progress in order to build a valuable reference for the final year.

Theme 3: Diversity and Inclusion

Introduction

Through our research we identified that diversity and inclusion are major areas of concern within the academic advisor programme, the Law School, and the ethos of the University as a whole. In the focus groups, students felt that their diverse backgrounds were not being recognised and that there were certain expectations placed on them which did not take into account their backgrounds or experience. In the faculty workshop we facilitated, some of the faculty were unclear as to how a student's unique situation can alter their needs with regard to academic advice. To make meaningful change in regard to diversity and inclusion within the University we must acknowledge that a 'one size fits all' approach to academic advising doesn't realise the full potential of students.

In the Sutherland School of Law in 2021, 27% of students came from a non-traditional access route, i.e. HEAR, DARE, as a mature student, or through QQI-FET. This is a significant number of students, and while it is reflective of the School's commitment to widening participation, it is important that supports are provided for these students once they begin the Law programmes and that academic advisors are aware that students may need additional supports.

Power Imbalance between faculty and Students

Student focus groups emphasised the imbalance of power between academics and students. The faculty who we spoke to felt that this was not a major issue. However, the students felt that the gap was difficult to surmount, and it became an issue when the onus was on students to reach out to their academic advisor as some of the students found that element very daunting. We recognise that by the very nature of the relationship between an educator and student a power imbalance is created, but we feel that by acknowledging this imbalance and creating a greater onus on faculty to reach out to students we can attempt to counteract this imbalance. In addition, this power imbalance is exacerbated when a student has come from a non-traditional background or where a student is already feeling overwhelmed or anxious.

Recognition of diversity and different support needs

Students identified they were being compared to their peers, or high expectations were placed on them from the very first meeting. This issue recognises that students felt overwhelmed, and their learning abilities/difficulties or background was not being recognised.

Feedback from faculty on this issue was that students cannot expect the academic advisor programme to be similar to the role of a teacher might in secondary school. In other words, it is not a 'hand-holding' programme as a result of the time constraints on academics. Faculty also voiced the concern that students needed to learn the skills of independent learning and the ability to problem solve.

The needs of students must be balanced against the demands placed on faculty; however, we feel that the emphasis on independent learning is misplaced as it does not recognise the differing needs of students and the extra support which is only available to some students through their personal and familial connections.

For example, some students come from families who already work in law, and may have knowledge of legal terminology, access to law books or experience working in law firms or shadowing practising lawyers. Others may be the first people in their family to attend university, and may not have had the same education supports and opportunities up to this point. Academic advising for some students might be the only type of academic advice they have access to throughout their education so it is important to recognise diverse backgrounds and how the advisors can facilitate and support students from all backgrounds.

Recommendations

- Faculty should receive continuous training on widening participation and EDI initiatives, in particular to increase awareness of the numbers of students coming from non-traditional backgrounds and the support needs of those students.

- Faculty should avoid making assumptions when talking to students, for example in assuming that students have recently completed the Leaving Certificate, that students have financial funds to purchase books or equipment, that students live close to UCD or that students have family supports.

- Faculty should be aware of the supports that are available to students who have ongoing support needs, and encourage students to access those supports.

- Faculty should be encouraged to reach out to students and to contact them regularly to remind them that they are there for support. This may help reduce the 'intimidation factor' that students may feel when contacting their academic advisor.

8. Project Outputs

1. Student Workshops

Student focus groups in Trimester 1 indicated that students felt that Academic Advisory Workshops would be of benefit to them. As a result, the Academic Advisory Strategy Group held two student workshops:

- 20 October 2021: *All you need to know: Guide to Law Workshop*

  This workshop was entirely student-led and run, with over 100 students attending. The workshop covered issues such as essay writing, time management, exam tips and note taking.

- 7 April 2022: *Academic Advisory Workshop: A Step by Step Guide to Essay Writing*

  This workshop was led by the project lead Dr Cliona Kelly, with support from the student team. Students were invited to send in questions in advance of the workshop. The workshop was recorded on Zoom with the recording sent on to students who were unable to attend.

Feedback from students indicated that student-led workshops bridge the gap between lecturers and inexperienced students, and it is less intimidating for students. It is possible for student-led or staff/student-led workshops to be held in future as part of a new Applied Legal Skills module or in conjunction with student societies such as the Law Society or Student Legal Service, as these already organise similar workshops.

2. Faculty Workshops

A hybrid faculty workshop was held on 7 April 2022 in the Sutherland School of Law. As well as acquiring feedback from faculty on their perception of the academic advisor programme, this was an opportunity to inform faculty of the research completed by the Student Strategy Group, particularly as regards issues such as diversity and inclusion.

Image: The Members of the Student Academic Advisory Strategy Group who presented the faculty Workshop, from left to right: Katie Morrisey, Martha Ní Riada, Michelle Kadiri, Marlene Douglas.

3. Changes implemented in 2021/2022

As a result of early recommendations of the Student Strategy Group, some changes were implemented in the *Legal and Professional Skills* module in 2021/2022. In particular, the old system where the first piece of work submitted by a student was in fact graded by their academic advisor was abandoned, and instead replaced the current system where feedback was provided and the student given the chance to work on that feedback and resubmit. This was based on feedback from the Strategy Group that the provision of a grade at the meeting was contributing to increased levels of stress for students, and also that students should not be graded on their first attempt at work in university. Feedback was sought on this change in the focus groups and it was positively received - students like getting the feedback and having a chance to work on the assignment again before final grade. Faculty were also positive about the change in focus from a grade to substantive feedback.

In addition, a member of the Student Strategy Group addressed the first year cohort during a Legal and Professional Skills lecture to inform them of the academic advisory programme, and to encourage them to meet with their academic advisors.

Recommendations

- Students would benefit from the continued provision of workshops on issues such as essay writing and study skills. These could be delivered by faculty or students, or a combination of both. There are advantages to having students deliver these workshops, and this could be a part of the new Applied Legal Skills module.

- Faculty should have continued training and workshops on aspects of their academic advisor role, to improve their understanding of the role and to discuss challenges that arise.

- Students should continue to be involved in the assessment and promotion of the Academic Advisory programme, with continued review of the programme and any changes made. This could be done for example through the new Applied Legal Skills module.

9. Conclusion and Summary of Recommendations

- The main lessons to be learnt from this research is that a lot of students and faculty are unsure of what the academic advisor programme is. There are also inconsistencies in terms of how the advisors interact with students, how long meetings last and what is discussed between Advisors and students. Some students fully immerse themselves in the programme and ask for help, while other students think that the Academic Advisory programme does not go beyond the LPS module.

- We recommend that the role of the Academic Advisor is clearly defined and communicated to both faculty and students. This should ensure that both students and Advisors understand the role of the Advisor and what the Advisor can provide in terms of assistance for their Academic Advisory students.

Summary of Recommendations

1. The School of Law should implement clear guidelines and policies as to what an academic advisor is and what they should do.

2. The School of Law should take steps to enable faculty and students to be aware of these guidelines and follow them.

3. There should be open and ongoing communication between faculty and students about what they should expect from the academic advisor program.

4. It should be made clear that the academic advisory programme is not limited to the Legal and Professional Skills module.

5. There should be a reminder email every trimester to students reminding them of who their academic advisor is and encouraging them to make contact.

6. Guidance should be given regarding faculty - student meetings so faculty and students have a coherent guideline of their role and what is expected.

7. Meetings should have time requirements and delivery standards. This should include a minimum of 10 minute meetings to be held at least twice an academic year.

8. Meetings should be friendly and conversational to build a relationship with each individual student. This can help identify what academic support the student specifically needs and ensure the academic advisory tool is more beneficial overall.

9. Consideration should be given to reducing the emphasis on feedback on the assignment in the individual meetings.

10. Faculty should be given guidance on the relevant supports available to students, so they can provide this information to students if necessary and guide them to appropriate services.

11. Students should receive emails each trimester to remind them who their academic advisor is, and how best to contact them – for example, by providing details of the advisor's weekly office hours and how to attend these office hours.

12. The first group meeting with the Academic advisor should take place slightly later in the first trimester.

13. Consideration should be given to having more organised group meetings with academic advisors, rather than the emphasis being on individual meetings.

14. Records should be kept of student engagement and progress in order to build a valuable reference for the final year.

15. Faculty should receive continuous training on widening participation and EDI initiatives, in particular to increase awareness of the numbers of students coming from non-traditional backgrounds and the support needs of those students.

16. Faculty should avoid making assumptions when talking to students, for example in assuming that students have recently completed the Leaving Certificate, that students have financial funds to purchase books or equipment, that students live close to UCD or that students have family supports.

17. Faculty should be aware of the supports that are available to students who have ongoing support needs, and encourage students to access those supports.

18. faculty should be encouraged to reach out to students and to contact them regularly to remind them that they are there for supports. This may help reduce the 'intimidation factor' that students may feel when contacting their Academic Advisor.

19. Students would benefit from the continued provision of workshops on issues such as essay writing and study skills. These could be delivered by faculty or students, or a combination of both. There are advantages to having students deliver these workshops, and this could be a part of the new Applied Legal Skills module.

20. Faculty should have continued training and workshops on aspects of their academic advising role, to improve their understanding of the role and to discuss challenges that arise.

21. Students should continue to be involved in the assessment and promotion of the Academic Advisory programme, with continued review of the programme and any changes made. This could be done for example through the new Applied Legal Skills module.