

Engaging Students for Success during a Pandemic: The Impact of Academic Advisement upon Course of Study Completion Rates amongst Business & Computer Studies and Industrial Technology Students at the University of Technology, Jamaica

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Abstract

*The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted education provision and access across the globe. One key aspect affected is **academic advisement**, vital to a student's university experience for enhancing **success and engagement**. While recognizing disparities between academic advisement and student progression at the University of Technology, Jamaica, the study explored the robustness and effectiveness of institutional academic advisement processes since the onset of the **Covid-19 pandemic** toward successful student engagement and subsequent **course completion**. A mixed method approach, utilizing surveys, enabled the description of the advisor / advisee experience so that understanding of the role, function, and benefit of academic advisement and its practices could be reviewed. The research was informed through data collected from 108 students and 15 lecturers attached to a Bachelors of Education qualification. The findings revealed that 80% of students sought their advisors on matters related to their course of study. Whilst students valued the advisor's experience and approach, they also recognized weaknesses in administrative functions attached to the process, specifically in student support system capabilities and follow-up. Recommendations include the strategic institutionalization of a mandatory advisement function, enhanced through a dedicated unit with the purpose of successfully enriching the advisee / advisor experience for both student and institutional success in **higher education**.*

Keywords: Academic advisement, Covid-19 pandemic, student success and engagement, higher education, course completion

Introduction

In 2017 Carolyn Thomas, Vice Provost and Dean for Undergraduate Education at the University of California, penned timely words.

It is a unique moment for academic advising. The elements are aligned for its stature to rise, even as greater judgment of its work takes place. There is no better time for us to work, in earnest, to ensure that campus leadership knows the unique contributions that academic advisors can make [to] their institutional goals for student success. (Thomas, 2017, p. 1)

The success of students in higher education is not only for the students and institutions, but for all stakeholders. Whilst the concept of success is not always easy to articulate, factors that contribute are frequently acknowledged, which include advisement. If institutions cultivate enthusiastic student engagement, the likelihood of achievement in a particular study programme is expected (Zegarra, 2019). Increasingly, higher education institutions recognize the potential for utilizing academic advisement activities further toward positive student engagement (Pargett, 2011), hence, fuelling its growth (Johnson, 2018).

The University of Maine (2020), defines academic advisement as a process between the student and academic advisor that focuses upon maximizing the benefits of education while discussing goals in keeping with appropriate course selections and university services/policies. Banat (2015) emphasized that effective advisors assist advisees discover their potential for decision making, thereby contributing to the development of mature and self-directed students. However, research conflicts as to whether this advice is delivered more effectively when conveyed by assigned advisors, as opposed to any available advisor (Massey, 2018; Pargett, 2011).

In 2020 the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech, Ja), like many global institutions, further recognized the criticality of advisement in any successful educational experience. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic led the University to adjust its advisement policy to further assist students, particularly its vulnerable online learners (The University of Technology, Jamaica, 2020). All full-time faculty are assigned as academic advisors. The policy limits advisee numbers to a maximum of 30, thereby avoiding excess advisement demands that diminish efficient advisement services. Notably, in a report to faculty board, dated 29th October, 2018, the Academic Advisement Coordinator within the Faculty of Education and Liberal Studies (FELS) reported that notwithstanding some overload anomalies, these aforementioned ratios were 1:10 in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and 1:17 in the School of Technical and Vocational Education (SOTAVE).

Acknowledging the importance of advisement in student and university performance, former President of UTech, Ja., Stephen Vasciannie, reported average student retention (in 4 year programmes) of 84% for 1st and 2nd year students in academic year 2017/18. An improvement upon just 51% graduating from 2014/15 and 2015/16 cohorts, the University's 2018 Institutional Self Study, (2017/18) reported that this figure had increased to 56% of programme enrollees graduating (Jamaica Observer, 2017). Researchers from the University of Texas, analyzed similar 4 year programme data, concluding that proactive advising bore tremendous influence upon university retention and increasing degree completion rates (Massey, 2018).

Past President Vasciannie's indications of the disparities between advisement and student progression at UTech, Ja are significant. This study seeks to explore the robustness of the advisement process since the onset of the pandemic, with its subsequent impact, and the success of institutional advisement for student engagement and success.

Academic Advisement

The literature relating to academic advisement and success, particularly in a Jamaican and Caribbean context is limited, though growing in significance worldwide. Exploration of such research, journals, studies and publications is intended to support and frame the relevance of the research advanced here. Literature is organized in line with themes advanced through the research questions.

The Role of Academic Advisors and Academic Advisement in Higher Education

Academic advisors deliver an important function, providing students with academic/career guidance (Pargett, 2011). As an educational process, academic advisement is critical in interconnecting students with learning opportunities that foster and support engagement, and attainment of key learning outcomes, thereby shifting student focus toward an appreciation for learning (Campbell & Nutt, 2008). Baker & Griffin (2010) advance that advisement facilitates academic success by integrating a component for achievement in faculty education targets. Stevens et al. (2018), indicate that, higher education students unaware of, and deprived of advisement have experienced lesser progress. Zegarra (2019) affirms, without academic guidance, students may remain in college longer than necessary due to failure in meeting course requirements, or according to Chisholm & Kennedy (2014), be ill-informed to make decisions for fulfilling degree requirements.

Institutions must ensure the visibility and availability of advisement to students, hence institutional organization and physical structure may require re-orientation to encourage engagement (Cuseo, 2015). Whilst not unique,

UTech, Ja, mandates that an initial advisement meeting is convened with incoming students to discuss University expectations, opportunities, and potential challenges (University of Technology, Jamaica, 2019). Similarly, the Mico University (Mico), in Kingston, advances that it is through its academic advisement policy that students be provided with appropriate counsel to enable them to make informed decisions concerning academic and career goals and thereby successfully complete studies in the prescribed time. Further adding that student satisfaction with the quality of educational programmes is an imperative (The Mico University, Academic Advisement Policy, 2019, p.4). Academic advisement thereby occupies a cornerstone position, facilitating both student and institutional success, extending beyond academic objectives to ensure student satisfaction. Within this context, academic advisors are positioned for a primary role in facilitating universal success (Thomas, 2017).

Key Components of Academic Advisement in Higher Education

Institutions seek to advance their prominence by promoting academic advisement as a learning activity that espouses institutional objectives and student success (Campbell & Nutt, 2008). Incorporating advisement into faculty induction activities promotes its profile, emphasising higher expectations of student/faculty interactions that promote success (Tinto, 2010).

Providers and users of advisement must be congruent in recognizing its key components so that advancement strategies may be pursued, policy at UTech, Ja., exemplifies this.

Academic advisement serves to develop and enrich students' educational plans in ways that are consistent with their personal values, goals, and career development, preparing them to function as lifelong learners in a global society. The University recognizes that there are vulnerable populations in tertiary education including online learners for whom academic advisement must be provided (University of Technology, Jamaica, Academic Advisement Policy, 2020, p.1).

The Mico Academic Advisement Policy, (2019) stresses similar objectives, collaboratively. Tinto (2010) further identifies advisement's importance in developing attributes, such as initiative and responsibility. Whilst Cuseo (2015) suggests advisement targets specific actions, including clear definition, incentives, advisement strategies, training and quality standards, elevating advisement from an administrative demand to a strategic learning tool.

Pointedly, academic advisement, whilst beneficial in advancing strategic institutional objectives, should not be overlooked as an insignificant factor in student success, the other arguably being student-centred learning (Thomas, 2017; Wallder & Brown, 2019). Significantly, as Miller (2016,), in concurring with previous studies advanced, it is advisement that "provides the opportunity for students to develop a personal, consistent relationship with someone in the institution who cares about them" (50-51).

Characteristics of the Academic Advisor

Without identifying specific roles and responsibilities of an academic advisor, poor academic advice may ensue. In this regard, Cuseo (2003) summarized undergraduate student perspectives that valued advisors as mentors/counsellors; favourable attributes included availability, accessibility, approachability, personable, and knowledgeable.

Campbell and Nutt (2008) recognize academic advisement as a *tool* in higher education, through which a student-teacher mentoring relationship may be promoted. Within this relationship students develop social and intellectual skills, whilst learning to balance and prioritize activities. Critically, advisors facilitate this development through innumerable pedagogical strategies and techniques. It is from this description of the academic advisement activity that scholars may seek to advance advisory characteristics for academics, one that develops value added components for advisees while they engage in learning. Notably, such attributes likely advance student satisfaction, learning, and persistence toward graduation (Hossler, 2000). Cheung et al. (2017) sought student views and expectations of advising, from which an overall positive evaluation of academic advising was delivered. Students preferred a

developmental, non-prescriptive structure, one that addressed their life, academic and career objectives via an appreciation of their educational potential

Student Participation in Academic Advisement

Data points to the usefulness of academic advisement in enhancing course completion rates (Hefling, 2019) as it evolves and grows, so does current practice (Johnson, 2018; Pargett, 2011). Green, (2016) observed that infrequent advisor/advisee interactions were detrimental to a students' educational experience. However, whilst provision of academic advisement may increase to enhance student's academic experience (Zegarra, 2019; Bryant, 2016) usage is contingent upon student participation. Johnson's (2018) research indicated that significant numbers of students in a returning cohort adopted advisement support voluntarily (78% of sample). However, Lowenstein (2013) found results to the contrary, when advisement was mandatory, students viewed advisement as an obstacle to overcome. Amongst students placed upon academic probation, McCoy (2018), found that significant numbers declined support.

Academic advising can directly affect a student's persistence and probability of graduating, indirectly impacting grades and university satisfaction. Historically, satisfaction with academic advising was among the college experiences rated lowest (Allen & Smith, 2008) though recent research suggests increased receptivity (Cheung et al., 2017). Drake et al. (2013) suggest successful advisement systems result from better understanding student expectations. Smith & Allen (2006) sought student views of 12 academic advising functions. They found students primarily valued accurate information about graduation, followed by information concerning subject selection, careers, and university regulations/policies. Research from Hong Kong (Cheung et al., 2017) reaffirmed these priorities. Students sought information concerning study programmes, career development, personal goals, and advice regarding academic problems (Grites, 2013). Priorities were reinforced, with the addition of relationship building by Chan, (2016).

Purpose of the Study

The Covid-19 virus has redefined how humans interact on a daily basis, impacting economic and social sectors across the globe. Academic advisement in tertiary education, as outlined, is certainly not unscathed. Evaluating disparities between academic advisement and students' progression at UTech, Ja., requires understanding. This study, thus, seeks to assess faculty's engagement of students for success during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specific focus is given to the impact and experience of advisement upon course of study completion rates amongst students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education in TVET within FELS.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How significant is the process of academic advisement in enhancing student success and retention for course of study completion?
2. In what ways has academic advisement assisted students pursuing a degree in education to address challenges and concerns that they may experience during their course of study?
3. In what ways did student challenges and concerns, as addressed by Academic Advisors change as a result of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic?
4. Are there significant characteristics of academic advisement and academic advisors that assist in ensuring the robustness of advisement in the current Covid-19 pandemic?

Methodology

The study utilized survey instruments that relied on a mixed method research design. Mixed methods research design is a procedure for collecting, analysing, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative research methods into a single study to understand a research problem (Creswell, 2012). The participants were student-teachers and lecturers from SOTAVE enrolled in the Business and Computer Studies (BCS) and Industrial Technology (IT) options. A student-teacher sample of 196 participants was targeted; 108 responded. Participants were exposed to the academic advisement experience preceding and subsequent to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Sixteen lecturers attached to the courses of study reviewed were also surveyed. Notably, the methodology pursued in reaching the targeted audience was in-keeping with Covid-19 protocols and accumulated information kept confidential within this study.

Data Analysis

Chart 1

Research Questions Alignment with Survey Instrument

Research Question	Data collection method	Data analysis
1. How significant is the process of academic advisement in enhancing student success and retention for course of study completion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student Questionnaire (questions 26 – 30) 	Descriptive Analysis
2. In what ways has academic advisement assisted students pursuing a degree in education to address challenges and concerns that may be experienced during their course of study?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lecturer Questionnaire (question 9) Student Questionnaire (questions 5 – 21) 	Descriptive Analysis
3. In what ways did student challenges and concerns, as addressed by Academic Advisors change as a result of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lecturer Questionnaire (questions 6 – 8) 	Descriptive Analysis
4. Are there significant features of academic advisement and academic advisors that assist in ensuring the robustness of advisement in the current Covid-19 pandemic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lecturer Questionnaire (questions 2-5, 10) Student Questionnaire (questions 22 –25) 	Descriptive Analysis

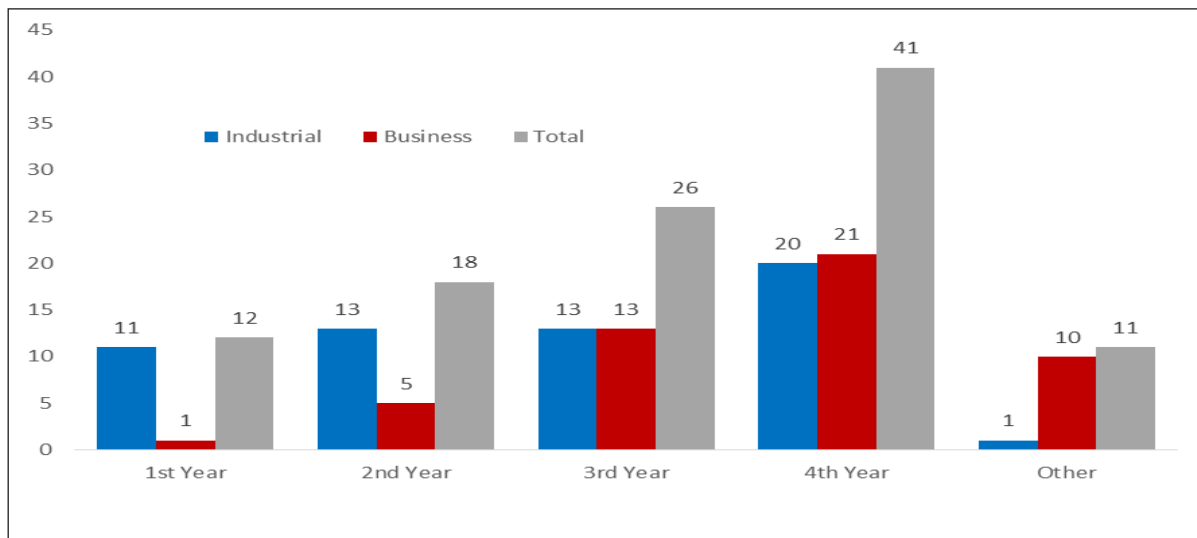
Data was collected using Google forms and further analysed utilizing Microsoft Excel, to organize data and create charts depicting results. Descriptive statistics assisted in describing and summarizing the data accumulated (Fallon, 2016). Both quantitative and qualitative data was processed to identify themes and grouped in alignment with the research questions (see Chart 1.). This process of analysis is supported by Taylor-Powell & Renner (2003) research centred on qualitative data.

Results

The 56% response rate garnered comprised 56% male and 44% female respondents, 63% being under the age of 25. Respondents comprised of 50 BCS and 58 IT.

Figure 1

Year of Study Distribution among Students by Year



As reflected in Figure 1, 41% were enrolled in their 4th year of studies, 10% in the 5th or beyond, 91% being BCS students. Amongst academic advisors approached, 15 of 16 responded. Fifty-three percent were female, 47% male, 67% having over 5 years’ experience as an academic advisor. 80% of advisors had 20 or less advisees, in keeping with the university’s policy of a 1:30 advisor:advisee ratio (University of Technology, Jamaica, 2019).

Academic Advisement and the Role of the Advisor

Figure 2

Students Preferred Mode of Interaction with Academic Advisors

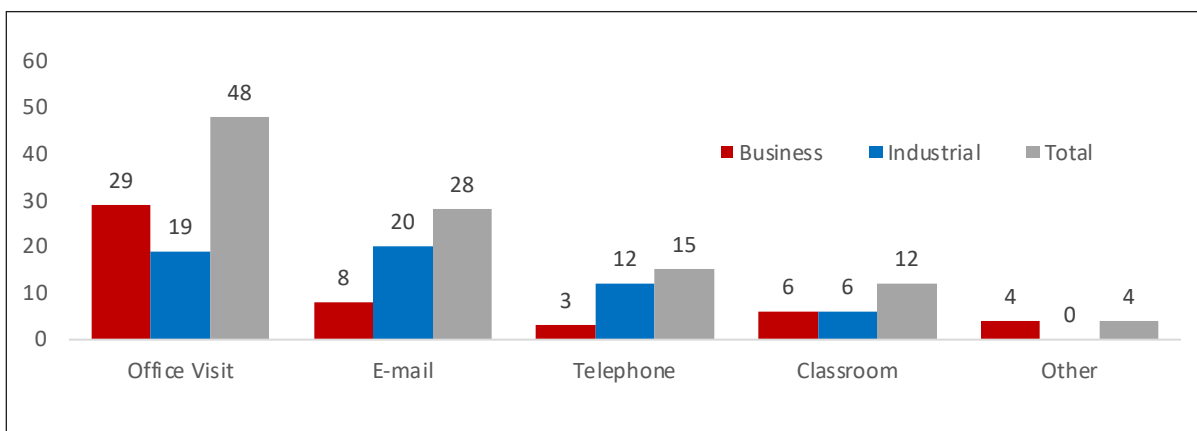
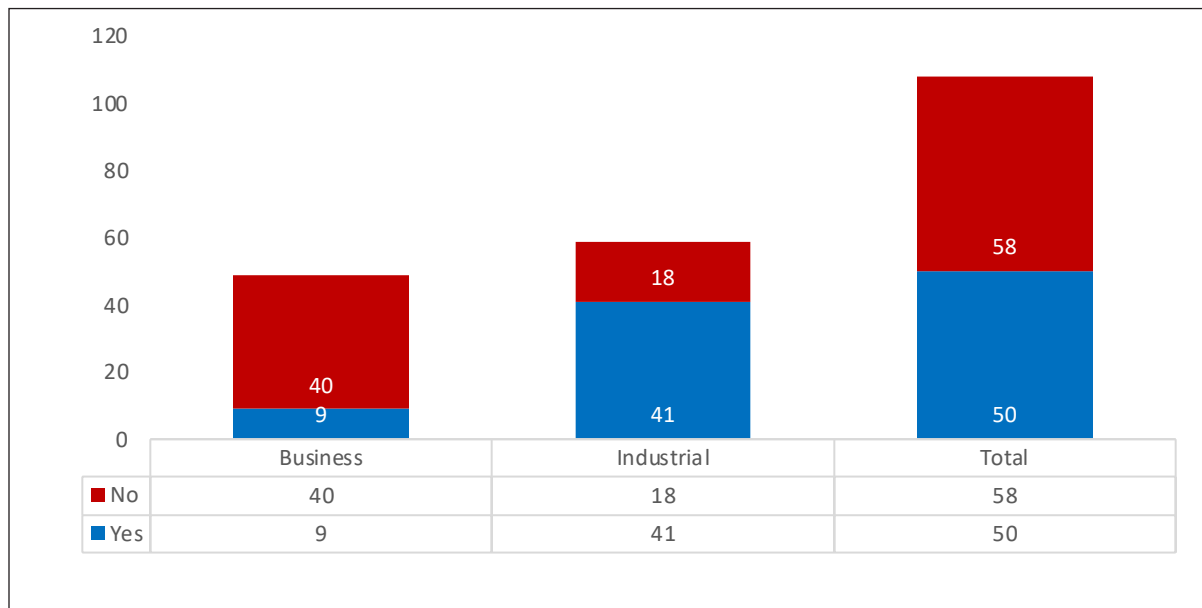


Figure 2 illustrates 48% of students surveyed expressed preference for face-to-face meetings with advisors. Fifty-nine percent of students made appointments to meet with advisors; 55% kept these appointments. Only 46% of students were asked to complete the Meeting

Figure 3

Students Requested to Complete AA05 Forms



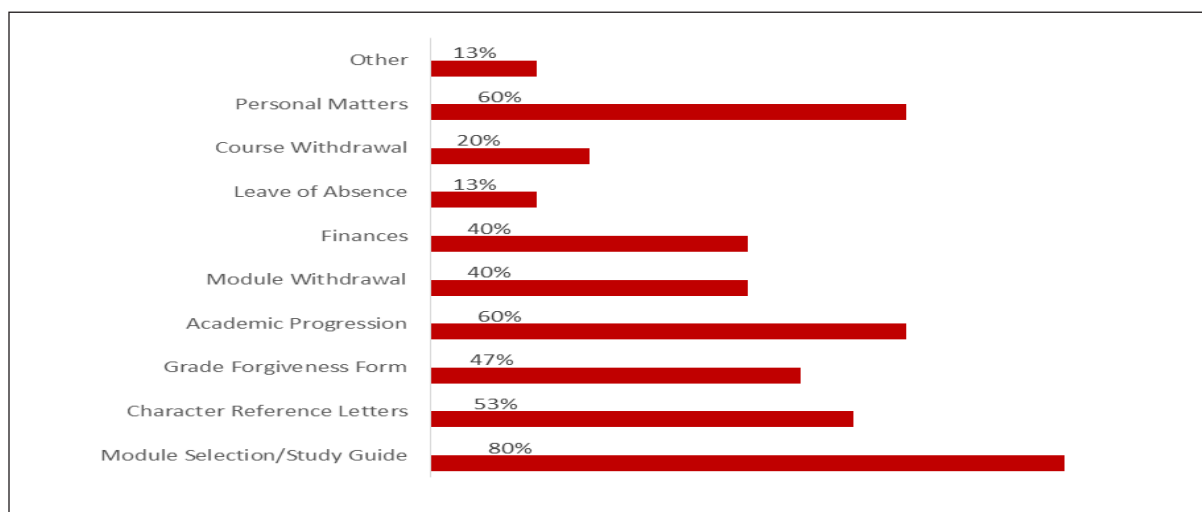
Record Form, AA05 by advisors, Figure 3., illustrates, BCS students were notably delinquent. Interestingly, 87% of advisors were familiar with the Integrated Student Administration System (ISAS), however, usage was limited. Markedly, 53% of students agreed that their academic advisement experience contributes to successful course of study completion (Thomas, 2017; Zegarra, 2019).

Student Participation in Academic Advisement

Industrial Technology advisees and advisors discussed the greatest variety of issues, primarily concerning Module/ Study/Academic matters and administration.

Figure 4

Student Issues Brought to the Attention of Academic Advisors



This is consistent with advisor reporting depicted in Figure 4. Advisees sought counsel in course, academic, personal and financial matters. Such demands are consistent with UTech, Ja academic advisement objectives and reinforce research advancing that student engagement improves course completion rates (Pargett, 2011; Banat, 2015).

Significant Characteristics for Successful Advisement and Advisors

Study respondents appreciated specific advisement and advisor attributes, including advisors *knowing* the advisee, acknowledging their adulthood (75% plus), whilst valuing concerns, opinions, and feelings relating to key matters discussed.

Chart 2

Strengths and Weaknesses of Academic Advisors

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good listener ▪ Understanding ▪ Informed ▪ Approachable/Available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Needs more time ▪ Unprepared for meetings ▪ Poorly structured meetings ▪ No Follow up/ low interest in students

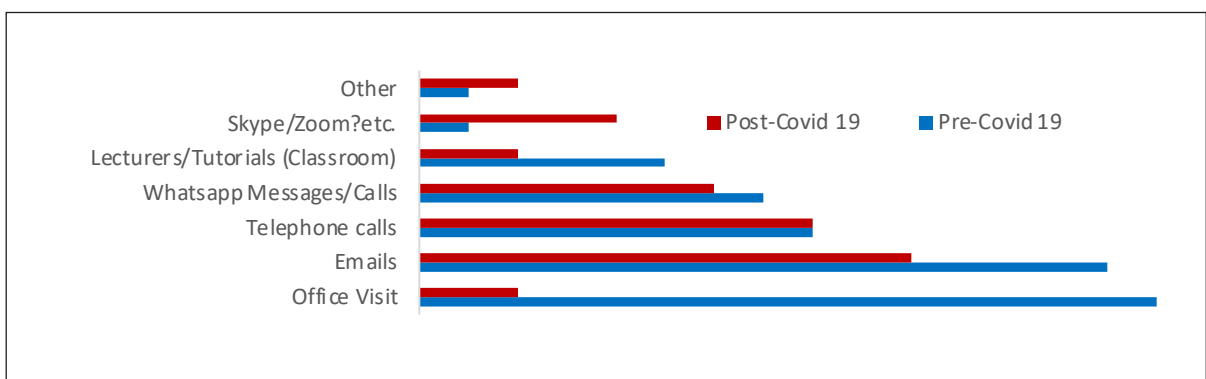
Such observations in Chart 2 are consistent with matters that predominate in other research - academic, career, and life goals (Cheung et al., 2017; Grites, 2013). Interestingly, as reflected in Chart 2, students appreciated the effective *soft skills* practised by advisors; however, this pointed to weaknesses in administrative activities. Intriguingly, 65% of respondents indicated reservations about recommending their academic advisor to fellow students.

Academic Advisement and the Covid-19 Pandemic

Whilst advisors mainly saw little change in relation to the matters which advisees sought assistance (academic, administrative, career, finance), significantly, 80% saw an increase in advisees consulted and the volume of issues raised (45%). One notable issue arose due to the Covid-19 pandemic, internet connectivity, without which accessing course modules and university services was impossible.

Figure 5

Engagement Modality for Academic Advisement (Pre- and Post- Covid-19)



Interaction however continued. Figure 5 indicates the shift toward increased use of email, messaging and video platforms.

Discussion

Prevailing research aligns with this study and highlights advisement's critical influence upon student success and institutional retention. This study elucidates that strategically institutionalizing advisement encourages advisee participation, certainly in the groups explored. Such practice likely boosts opportunities for student success. This is demonstrated by higher levels of advisor/advisee engagement amongst IT students, making it more likely that these students graduate within 4 years, when compared with BCS counterparts, (Figure 1) (Zegarra, 2019; Massey, 2018; Thomas, 2017). Overall, high levels of participation in academic advisement were found; all respondents reporting experience of advisement, including 80% utilization in academic and 60% in personal matters.

Advisees sought advice predominantly on academic/career issues followed by financial and personal matters (Figure 4); however, inconsistency in the quality of advising experienced is significant (Cuseo, 2015). Our data reflected the significance of these matters in advisor/advisee interactions, approximately 60% of advisees indicating that advisors assisted them effectively in aforementioned areas. Aligned with our findings, Young-Jones et al. (2013) pointed to the significance of quality advising practice accruing more benefit as advisees mature, thereby driving success.

Personal issues cannot be ignored as they may impact a student's ability to function and meet daily requirements of their course of study. In our investigations, though University policy points students toward counselling services in addressing personal matters (whom, in turn advisors will refer), respondents indicated a preference toward resolving issues with advisors. Advisors were recognized for ensuring availability, whilst also assisting in surmounting obstacles (60%).

As evidenced in some of the aforementioned studies, the successful performance of students in tertiary education is entrenched in strategies and approaches that target both personal and academic weaknesses with enriched communication. Notably, it is the individual circumstances that predetermine needs in advisement. In this study, advisees indicated the preponderance of both personal and financial issues. Anecdotally, these are precisely the matters that advisors state predominate; global research supports these findings (Cheung et al., 2017; Grites, 2013). Consequently, with the onset of the pandemic, the modes of communication certainly changed though issues prevailed. Whereas all advisees sought and preferred office visits prior to the pandemic; subsequently, messaging (WhatsApp) and telephone communications predominate, accounting for 60% of preferred communications.

Both academic advisement systems and advisor competencies/characteristics are important in achieving success. Study data demonstrated that over half (53%) of respondents advanced that their advisor's assisted in successful course completion. Additionally, advisees appreciated advisors *soft skills* practise. Interpersonal skills viewed positively include good listening, empathizing, and encouragement. These *soft skills* may be the key factor in enhancing student retention within the programmes studied. Inconsistencies were however apparent in administrative practice, with 70% of IT students requested to complete the record meeting documentation (form AA05) as opposed to less than 25% of BCS advisees. This is significant for *follow up* (only 45% of advisors interactions performed well here) and to resolving issues that had been initiated within advisement processes. Likewise, a little over 50% of advisors were seen as having adequate knowledge of university policies and the ISAS.

Conclusion

By no means did this study reveal a perfect advisee/advisor. Findings were consistent with wider research and many of the challenges and commonalities identified globally. Further, this research does lead to some key assertions that will likely enhance student success and course completion.

In ensuring that a meaningful advisor/advisee relationship is developed, it is suggested that academic advisement be prioritized as a significant university experience, one identified with the university's shared vision, throughout the student's tenure.

Effective communication is crucial and the seemingly smooth transition between advisors and advisees in continuing communication with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic is testament to the robustness of systems prevailing in the university. Whilst issues arose with regard to administrative functioning, the study data indicated that activities were maintained. Whilst communication modalities shifted from face-to-face to virtual and traditional forms of telecommunication, weaknesses in both institutional infrastructure and the wider national levels of internet connectivity led to reduced accessibility to learning platform(s) for students. Though a consequence, partially external, it is significant due to its capacity to halt learning interactions!

Administrative functions linked to the academic advisement process (including for advisor competencies) may be strengthened through the creation of a dedicated unit within the faculty. Whilst this centrality underlines its importance, as a function it would serve to enhance student access, consistency, and the quality of information provided to students. Consequently, reducing students' tenure to within the prescribed 4 years, which study data suggests may have been previously exceeded due to weaknesses in advisory follow-up and also unfamiliarity with ISAS features. Mitigating these compounding issues would wholly enhance advisor:advisee interactions. Tying academic advising fully into a student administrative system where mandatory meetings and *checkpoints* are programmed will assist in delivering a seamless and successful institutional journey.

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