Moving academic advising online: enabling student aspiration and reflection

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Abstract

The purpose of academic advising is to help students to achieve their potential. It is a system viewed positively by both staff and students (Chan et al, 2019) with academic and personal gains reported by students (Mu and Fosnacht 2019). Academic advising is a central and vital activity in engendering a more student-centred and personalised approach to learning and achieves this by attending to students' individual needs and aspirations (Gordon et al 2011). Yet, despite its importance, VLEs are ill-equipped to support the cross-module and multi-year needs of either the student or advisor. At our institution, we are piloting a technology-based and systematic approach to academic advising in one department of 520 students and 21 academic advisors. Interactions between advisors and students occur twice per semester with a majority of group sessions for first and second year students transitioning to a majority of one-to-one sessions for final year students. Agenda are issued for all group sessions to ensure a common approach across advisors with the focus reflecting the level of study and timing in the academic calendar. Over the last three years, we have evolved from no discussion or recording of personal goals and aspirations to the current pilot which records advisor and student interactions in an online survey tool wherein students set academic targets and reflect on their engagement and effort. This data is captured in Jisc Online Surveys and augmented with detailed data on attendance and module outcomes before being uploaded into the VLE. For advisors, this foundation of data provides a comprehensive picture of students enabling advisors to play a more effective role in supporting the student to academic and personal success. For students, it provides a consistent, single location from where multi-source data can be accessed throughout their studies enabling students to review and refine their goals within the necessary context of their past performance achievements and engagement. In this paper, we report on the pilot and explain the limitations of the VLE and how they have been overcome to create an effective, accessible and secure system for advisors and students. We evaluate student engagement in the academic advisor process and in the pilot and analyse the range and scope of the targets set by students. This information is augmented by qualitative data from staff and students that is being used to develop and improve the pilot. Our paper will be of interest and benefit to other institutions seeking (1) practical solutions to the use of technology to support academic advisors within/outside the VLE and (2) to optimise the academic advising process through the improved use of information to better understand students' needs and aspirations and thereby enhance student outcomes and the achievement of their potential.