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# Academic Advising and Students' Academic Achievement in Higher Education: Experiences from Dar es Salaam University College of Education in Tanzania

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**Abstract**

Academic advising in higher education is a mounting field of study that requires special attention as it is significant for enrolled university students to persist and retain to the point of graduation. This study aims to explore the contribution of academic advisors in enhancing students' academic achievement in higher learning institutions. Data were collected from 58 respondents, including 48 students and 10 academic advisors both from the Faculty of Education of the Dar es Salaam University College of Education in Tanzania. The data collection methods were questionnaires, focused group discussions and unstructured interviews. A majority of student respondents (67%) revealed that their academic advisors had not contributed at all to their achievement. In contrast, 33% indicated that academic advisors had made contributions. The findings also indicated that among the challenges that students encountered when seeking for advisory services included the unavailability of academic advisors for advisory services, students' lack of knowledge on academic advising, ability and readiness of academic advisors to the advisory roles, and psychosocial related issues. Thus, a quality academic advising programme is indispensable to increase students' academic achievements in higher education. The study recommends a mutual relationship between the advisor and advisee that is based on trust and respect, shared responsibility and shared problem-solving.

**Keywords:** *academic advisor, higher learning institutions, students, achievement*

## 1. Introduction

Academic advising is an evolving and mounting field of study that requires special attention. It is undeniable that academic advising is significant for college and university students enrolled in any programme for them to survive pressures of study and social life in college well to the point of graduation (Kuhn, 2008; O'Banion, 1972). Given the significance attached to academic advisors on students' academic achievement, Drake (2011) pointed up that, academic adivisors link students to the university life. Thus, with or without advisors, university students are likely to encounter what may be termed 'succeed or fail experience'. In this case, succeed or fail experience is a scenario where some students achieve academically and others do not achieve, largely because of factors—social or psycho-social—that make an individual manage or fail to cope, such as differences in individual characteristics,

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ability or inability to interact with peers, and in this particular case an opportunity and ability (or otherwise) to benefit from mature and caring advice and opinion of academic advisors.

Comparatively, academic advising in higher education is done by many universities the world over. However, there are a number of questions that remain unanswered with regard to this. First, are academic advisors available and accessible for the delivery of such a service, and if available and accessible, are they ready for consultation? (Cuseo, n.d; Fosnacht et al., 2015). Second, if they are ready, are they trained or do they possess enough interpersonal and communication skills to effectively advise their clients? (DeBate, 2010). In that respect, the research on which this paper is based attempted to assess academic advisors' contribution to students' academic achievement and identify the challenges students encounter in accessing academic advisory services.

A learning process is effective when learners interact with and learn from experienced individuals. University students are therefore expected to learn from the veteran dons (Donaldson, 2008). Throughout their training programme students need to be advised, supported, guided, supervised and counselled where necessary. Daller (1997) and Pargett (2011) maintained that the role of academic advisors to students at universities is to assist advisees to achieve and develop both their academic and personal potentials. Therefore, academic advising services are important for helping students cope up with campus life, including planning of their degree programme; and interpreting and implementing the university's academic regulations, standards and policies.

Given this significance, higher learning institutions have been assigning academic advisors to students all over the world. For instance, in Europe (UK in particular), Drake (2011) asserted that academic advisors have to go beyond just opening the doors to advisees. Their role is to locate the places where students have to be connected and reconnected in their entire university life. Similarly, in Asia (e.g., in Malaysia), university students are assigned academic advisors whose responsibilities are to assist in determining their career goals and developing their intellectual, personal and social development (Office of Undergraduate Studies, Universiti Technologi Malaysia, 2010). Likewise, in Ghana (Africa), the GTUC (2006) insisted that all full time academic advisors are required to post and maintain at least five office hours per week to meet with their advisees. Academic advisors are also obliged to maintain a current file for each advisee, and keep a record of important academic information.

Equally in Tanzania, universities such as the University of Dar es Salaam specifically the School of Education and its constituent colleges do assign academic advisors to students. Since the topic under study is not widely researched and published in the country, many of the arguments come from my experiences as once a university student and currently an academic advisor. Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE), in particular the Faculty of Education, assigns each student with an academic advisor. Students get this

information on the presence of the advisors during the orientation week when they arrive at the campuses for the first time. They also receive this information via notice-boards where names of students and their immediate academic advisors are placed. Academic advisors are also given a list of students they are to mentor and advice from the time they join the university to the time of graduation.

Despite all these efforts, academic advising practice in Tanzania, specifically at DUCE, has not been successful. Students have been heard complaining to have been left on their own without any support from their academic advisors. Academic advising has been more of one way traffic—many academic advisors view it as the sole responsibility of students to look for an advisor. Academic advising practices have been more or less prescriptive, which is too formal and maintains distance; rather than the recommended developmental model that focuses on trust and warmth during the academic advising process (Daller, 1997).

Despite the contribution academic advisors have to students' academic achievement in higher education (Drake, 2011; Fosnacht et al., 2015), in Tanzania this contribution to students' academic achievement remains questionable. Academic advising in Tanzania's higher learning institutions needs to be examined for the purpose of improving and institutionalizing it. Moreover, there are limited empirical studies that focus on academic advising in higher education in Tanzania. It is for these reasons that the need to explore the contribution of academic advisors to students' academic achievement arose. More specifically, this study intended to answer the following questions: (i) To what extent do academic advisors contribute to students' academic achievement in higher learning institutions? (ii) What challenges do students encounter in accessing academic advisors when seeking for advisory services?

**2. Methodology**

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Education of the Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE) in Tanzania. DUCE has three different faculties, namely: the Faculty of Education, Faculty of Science, and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. DUCE is among the few Tanzanian higher learning institutions specifically established to prepare teachers who are expected to be advisors, mentors, role models and even counsellors to students when they graduate.

The target population for this study included academic advisors and students from the Faculty of Education. These were involved on the basis that they belonged to a faculty that had for a long time been regularly assigning students with academic advisors, as compared to the other two faculties. The total sample for the investigation was 58, constituting of 10 academic staff advisers and 48 students. The technique used in selection was based on respondents' readiness and willingness to participate in the study, which is an important matter in this kind of study (Yin, 2004). All forty eight (48) students were purposively selected, being third-year students who had been resident at the campus for a continuous period of three years. A longer residence on campus for

third-year students was assumed to be important as these would have had a longer exposure to, and experience of events, and witnessed the extent to which academic advisors contributed to their perspectives and achievement in comparison to their counterparts who had had a briefer period of stay. While the research had targeted 54 students, only 48 actually showed up in the classroom at the appointed time of the conduct of the study. The shortfall of 6 students could not compromise the findings, given the fact that in critical qualitative research what matters is the quality of information and not so much the quantity (number) of respondents. In addition to this observation, Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintained that in a careful study that uses qualitative sampling techniques, the saturation point can be reached with participants even no more than 20. In this particular study, the sample size had been determined by the level of saturation. Multiple methods were also used to obtain the information related to the study, namely a questionnaire survey and focused group discussion with students, and an unstructured interview conducted with academic advisors, over and above a review of relevant journals, books and online materials related to academic advising.

## 3. Findings

### *3.1 Academic Advisor's Contribution on Students' Academic Achievement*

The first research objective was to assess the respondents' views on the extent to which academic advisors contribute to students' academic achievement. Data were obtained through focussed group discussion and questionnaires administered to the 2012/2013 third-year students, as well as through an unstructured interview conducted with academic advisors. The findings, as presented in Table 1, were guided by a question: "Based on your experience, do you think your academic advisor contributes to your academic achievement?" For academic advisors the guiding question in the interview session was: "How does your presence as an academic advisor contribute to students' academic achievement?"

**Table 1: Students' Response on the Extent to Which Academic Advisors Contribute to Academic Achievement by Frequency and Percentage**

| Responses | Number of Student Respondents | |
|---|---|---|
| | *Number (Frequency)* | *Percentage (%)* |
| Yes | 16 | 33 |
| No | 32 | 67 |
| **Total** | 48 | 100 |

The study findings indicated that a majority of students (67%) revealed that their academic advisors had not contributed to their academic achievement. On the other hand, only a third (33%) indicated that academic advisors had made a contribution.

The student respondents had varied reasons for their responses. For instance, those whose response was *'No'* asserted that they hardly had met with their academic advisors. They stated that even when they tried to look for their assigned academic

advisors, they (the advisors) did not seem to be committed in assisting them. Students complained that the college management neither introduced to them the academic advisors nor gave any explications concerning academic advising and advisors during the orientation week. Stressing on this in a FGD, one respondent remarked:

> *To be honest, some academic advisors, including mine, are not helpful at all; they are very unfriendly and not sympathetic to one's plight. This made me fear to meet her to expose my problems. Finally, I decided to do things on my own.*

The above concerns are opposite to what other researchers believe. For instance, Guillen (2010) argued that students wish to be considered as partners in the advising process. When the advisor and the advisee consider themselves as partners it means there is commitment and mutual trust in their endeavour.

In contrast, the 33% of student respondents affirmed that their academic advisors were crucial. They emphasized that the advice given by academic advisors enabled them to change their immoral behaviours, improve their performance, and solve different academic and social problems. This is in line with the study by Smith et al. (1992) who argued that students who seek and receive academic support have been found to improve both their academic performance and their academic self-efficacy. However, the student respondents linked their academic success to personal efforts in creating and maintaining mutual relationship with their advisors. One respondent highlighted:

> *In my first year, I attended four consecutive lectures but I hardly understood what was going on. I heard of the presence of an academic advisor and I went to see him and created a continuous mutual relationship. The advisor has helped me and I appreciate his contribution.… My GPA is now better.*

The findings are in line with Pargett (2011), who reported that students who created mutual relationships with their assigned advisors had more satisfaction with their college experiences and improved academically. Very interestingly, respondents added that in cases where their advisors were often not available at the campus for known or unknown reasons, they decided to find their own advisors within the college. One respondent had this to highlight:

> *My academic advisor is abroad for PhD studies. I took some measures to get someone else to take over; unfortunately she is also currently away for studies. I plan to find another useful one.*

The statement above is in line with other studies which revealed that a majority of the participant students preferred to see any advisor they considered supportive, committed and available, rather than seeing only an assigned one (ibid.).

Unlike student respondents, all academic advisors affirmed that basically academic advisors contribute a lot to students' academic progress and achievement. However,

they put it clear that, in the context of DUCE, the contribution of academic advisors had not been fully realized to the expected level. This was because very few students were able to access academic advisory services from their advisors. The beneficiaries seemed to be only those who were conscious of the presence of academic advisors and made efforts to look for them. Wyckoff (1999) asserted that to establish a high degree of commitment to the academic advising process, university and college administrators must recognize not only the educational value of advising but also the role that advising plays in the retention of students. This observation becomes relevant when academic advisors associate failure of a majority of students to get advisory services with failure of the college management to familiarize students not only to their academic advisors but also to their pivotal roles.

One advisor respondent in an interview session had this to comment: "*In fact, I do not have any assistance for those who do not come for consultation ... I think it is not my obligation to contact them.*" This statement discloses some contradicting beliefs in the minds of advisors and advisees concerning the relationship between them. While one side believes that it is up to the advisor to reach out to the student, the other believes that it is up to the student to seek and maintain a relationship with the advisor. However, researchers (Drake, 2011; Pargett, 2011) have suggested that the responsibility falls on both parties. This implies that there is a need for a dual effort to form a relationship between an academic advisor and students.

Generally, respondents had varying responses with regard to the guiding questions. While some students reported that academic advisors contributed to their academic achievement, some uncovered that their academic advisors did not contribute to their academic achievement. Academic advisors, on the other hand, maintained that their advisory services had crucial contributions to students' academic achievements. However, academic advisors unravelled that academic advising has only been effective to students who recognized the existence of academic advisors, and realized that it was their responsibility to look for academic advisors for advisory services.

### *3.2 Challenges Students Encounter in Accessing Academic Advisors when Seeking for Advisory Services*

The second study objective was to identify challenges that students encounter in accessing academic advisors for advisory services. The responses were provided by students through questionnaires and FGDs; and through interviews with academic advisors. An understanding of the challenges that students inherently encounter was deemed to be significant for the college management, academic staff members and students to look for better ways of addressing the problems. The results are presented under the following major themes.

*3.2.1 Academic Advisors' Availability for Advisory Services*

The unavailability of academic advisors at the campus for advisory services was found to be the greatest setback that students encounter. A majority of the respondents (77%) indicated that their academic advisors were often not accessible when needed. They claimed that in most cases their advisors were absent at the campus, and once available, they claimed to be busy or pre-occupied with other 'more important' things. The findings disclosed that in some cases the absence of some advisors was due being away for further studies or some for official tour, although students were not informed of such official absence. The failure of the college management to replace advisors who were officially away left students without an academic advisor for a long time or indefinitely.

The student respondents went on further to underscore that there was no scheduled time for them to meet with their advisors, as one student in a focused group discussion emphasized: "*Meeting an academic advisor is an uphill task. Apart from going to the office thrice, I was not able to see her. I failed to meet her due to the absence of a specified schedule to meet with my advisor.*" This observation deviates from findings in other countries. Habley (2004) found that academic advisors in North America typically meet with their student advisees over two scheduled meetings per semester. Likewise, in Ghana it is reported that all full-time faculty members are assigned students to regularly meet and assist them in course selection and other relevant information about campus life (GTUC, 2006). On the contrary, in an interview at DUCE, almost all faculty staff members admitted that they rarely met with their advisees because of overload, but also because of the lack of time scheduled for advisory services.

*3.2.2 Students' Lack of Knowledge on Academic Advising*

The study findings revealed that most of the students had little knowledge on the actual meaning, scope, roles and responsibilities of academic advisors. Forty seven per cent (47%) of the student respondents claimed that they were assigned advisors without being told in advance about the roles and kind of assistance to expect from the advisors. This placed students in a dilemma as they were unaware of the kind of assistance they could receive from academic advisors. As a result, students have been perceived by their advisors as stubborn whenever they resisted going for consultation on issues that students thought were beyond the roles or capability of the advisors. Confirming the above-mentioned findings, in an interview a staff respondent emphasized:

> *Students come to me, apparently not aware of my official role as their academic advisor. They even go to the extent of borrowing money. This becomes not only a disturbance to me but also a bizarre kind of relationship.*

In further emphasising the need for clarifying the roles of academic advisors to students, Guillen (2010) pointed out that students often wish to be considered as partners in the process of advising; and that it is important that the role of advisors

are agreed upon right at the beginning of the relationship. The issues of students' unawareness of the presence of academic advisors, and/or their unwillingness to find out about assigned advisors ought to be of concerns to college administrators. This is because, at least for the 'freshmen', the actual assignment of staff advisors and the process of academic advising itself opens up the academic and scholarly horizons of the students as they begin to discover and adapt to so many new things within and around the campus, and as they slowly begin to get used to the uncharted many areas of social and life within and beyond the college.

*3.2.3 Psychosocial Related Problems*

The results revealed that 15% of the student respondents indicated the lack of confidence as a result of the harshness and unfriendliness of their academic advisors. While it is suggested that an academic advisor should maintain confidentiality concerning anything discussed with advisees (American University of Kuwait, 2013; Colorado State University, 2015), practices at DUCE are not universally consistent with this expectation. In the research on academic advising, confidentiality between advisors and advisees did not seem to be strictly adhered to, although it could be counter-argued elsewhere, not everything within the arena of academic advising is necessarily so confidential that it cannot form, serve as a tip or reference matter in either encouraging good practices or discouraging bad practices by others. Of course, in this connection, it is the divulging of the identity of the advisee (name) that would be unethical, and even criminal, on the part of an advisor. In the interviews, all academic advisors made reference to rendering advising services in circumstances of 'near public' domain, with a danger of losing confidentiality occasioned by restrictive office spaces largely because of sharing with other office occupants (mates). Office space was found to be an issue of critical concern not only to students but also to staff, especially when they turned to the role of advising their student assignees. As expected, in an academic advising session students are supposed to be free to express their experiences, problems and plights to their advisors as 'confidants'. Unfortunately, this freedom was frequently limited by the presence of other staff members in the same office. In addition to this constraint, as has been referred to elsewhere, student respondents revealed that the harshness and unfriendliness of some staff advisors discouraged them from seeking assistance or stating their inner feelings. They alleged that some advisors used combative and uncompromising language, which clearly signified not only the lack of communication skills but also the lack of training in social skills. One respondent said the following in a FGD:

> *I feared to see or meeting her because of her language, which was always harsh and undiplomatic. How could I dare go to express my problems ... Several times, when I gave myself courage to go, I ended up with my problems at the threshold of the office, fearing to knock and enter.*

This student confession goes to point to matters against the core values and principles of academic advising. Among others, Daller (1997) advised that academic advisors have to adhere to the core values of academic advising, which immediately

calls for, among others, a play of such values as mutual respect, honesty, friendliness, confidentiality and protection of the client.

*3.2.4 Ability and Readiness of Academic Advisors for the Advisory Roles*

The ability and readiness of academic advisors in rendering academic advisory services were reported to be another setback that students encounter in receiving advice from advisors. Ten per cent (10%) of the respondents contended that some academic advisors had no ability to solve their problems. Also a few other academic advisors were not willing to work as advisors, especially from the way they handled students seeking advice. The inability to render advisory services could be associated with the fact that academic advisors are not given any initial or even subsequent advisory training; and also the fact that this role is not stipulated anywhere as one of their academic responsibilities. It is just by virtue of being a university academic staff member that one becomes an academic advisor. DeBate (2010), in his campus study elsewhere, had findings similar to this study. He observed that many faculty members at a number of community colleges in North America had no advisory training, and therefore may not necessarily have known how to advise students. Lack of an advisory training programme could lead to what Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) found to be a source of disappointment and premature exit (dropping out) of students from high learning institutions. Such premature departures by students could be—and often has been—due to failure in a course, or else failure to adjust to the college social environment, which might not have happened in the presence of proper guidance from a formally appointed college staff advisor.

**4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Helping students succeed continues to be a setback for university and college managements, for students' success depends on many and varied factors, external as well as internal to the institutions of learning. As for internal factors, academic advising is one of the crucial ones because it increases students' academic achievement. Thus, to increase students' academic achievement and graduation rates, there ought to be a quality academic advising programme. A quality academic advising programme is a result of the relationship between the advisor and advisee; primarily being based on principles of trust and respect, an understanding and sympathetic 'listener', shared mutual responsibility, and shared problem-solving (Lee University, 2014-2015). For this, academic advisors need to be equipped with a knowledge and skills necessary for advising, including communication and interpersonal skills. This would help to obliterate the apparent 'expectation' gap that exists between student clients and staff advisors as reported in many instances in this research.

From the research findings, a few recommendations can be made. Firstly, office space needs to be given the first priority to ensure confidentiality. All respondents in the study mentioned this to be a problem that limited effective provision of advisory services as both advisors and advisees had no private space for intimate and confidential communication. Secondly, college and university authorities should have

a clear provision in their institutional mission statement that articulates the meaning, purpose and procedures of academic advising. The management should design a way in the Academic Registration Information System (ARIS) for posting all the important details to students, including their academic advisors; and a downloadable document that stipulates the roles of academic advisors and a specified schedule of meetings, even though students should have free access to their advisor in times of emergency and when in need of quick solutions to their problems. This would ensure that academic advisors are made available and accessible to meet students' needs without unreasonable delay.

A third recommendation concerns the training for advisors. The university could best design a comprehensive advisor-advisee training programme in each academic year, where it defines the terms, especially for new academic advisors, and makes explicit the expected roles of both sides. Where necessary and possible, such a programme should be made mandatory for advisors and advisees to attend. The overall purpose would be to inculcate a culture that promotes the advising process as a responsibility of both parties (the advisor and the advisee), as well as an atmosphere of 'friendship' and trust in an academic environment.

Fourthly, where numbers allow, the office responsible for assigning academic advisors to students should assign more than one academic advisor to a single student to ensure that this service is continuously available in the absence of one of the advisors for one reason or another.

Lastly, given that the particular study on which this report is based had not intended to generalize the findings, it is recommended that further surveys should be undertaken across university campuses of higher learning institutions in Tanzania on this area of academic advising so as to find out how academic advisors and students perceive the academic advising process, the advisor-advisee arrangements in place, the kind of relationships that have emerged, and, equally important, whether the experiences are transferable across institutions.

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