

Academic Adjustment and Maladjustment: An Assessment of Ahmadu Bello University's Adviser-Advisee Scheme

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Abstract

In an attempt to revamp the Adviser-Advisee Scheme at Ahmadu Bello University, a pilot study was conducted to unearth the challenges experienced by Faculty (advisers) and Students (advisees) operating the scheme, as well as suggestions for its improvement. Online search on Academic Advising was undertaken to ascertain best practices across continents. Against this backdrop, the Adviser-Advisee Scheme (AAS) at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) was evaluated using primary and secondary data, obtained via quantitative and qualitative methods. The results identified challenges facing ABU's AAS and possible solutions, including as these relate to students and faculty transitioning to learning in today's digital age in an LDC. Despite diversities, conferees were invited to share their institutional and personal experiences of academic advising, and so enriched the strategy that was eventually proposed by the authors as the way forward for the AAS at ABU.

Keywords: academic advising, adviser, advisee, student-faculty collaboration, student preparedness

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Introduction

Nigeria has a fast-growing university system that is geared towards preparing students for the world of work. This growth has brought some challenges. Critical today is the failure of the system to respond adequately to the rapidly changing learning environment. One major challenge facing Nigerian universities is that students are increasingly ill-prepared because learning outcomes are poor at both the primary and secondary school levels. Universities are thus faced with the need to remedy the weak foundational learning of many students. Continued assistance from the first year of study through graduation is the best option for this remediation.

As universities innovate, they learn from the experience of what has worked over time, what has failed, and what has worked in different environments. They also learn from the growing body of knowledge from other institutions about what can work at the level of learners (students), classrooms (interaction between students and teachers and the learning environment) and the university (leadership and governance). Initiatives in new pedagogical methods, and technologies to enhance teaching and learning have in different situations improved education outcomes.

The learner-teacher relationship is critical to improving learning and also character. Most Nigerian universities have student support services manned by qualified counselors. Regardless of the scale of its operation, academic advising is at the heart of student support services the world over (TCNJ, 2019). An online search revealed best practices hinged on

distinct roles and responsibilities for advisers/advisors (who are faculty), and advisees (their students) (Leach and Wang, 2000; Higgins, 2017; and NACADA, 2019). A common goal is to achieve academic adjustment as students transit into and progress through university life (via guidance), and remedy maladjustment when it occurs (via counselling).

Academic advising also makes for smooth transition from the university to the world of work through career advising, which might include providing direction on coursework selection and identifying opportunities for advancement. Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) has an active student support service, provided by a central support unit and the various teaching departments. The academic adviser/advisee intervention is one of the long-standing initiatives to strengthen teacher-student relationship and assist students in having a smooth learning experience. The following study examines this initiative in greater detail to ascertain its usefulness in assisting students.

Ahmedu Bello University, one of 165 universities in Nigeria, is a two-campus, 56-year old, first generation Nigerian university. It has 521 degree programs (in addition to non-degree programs), offered by 98 academic departments in 16 faculties, 6 institutes, 12 specialised centers, and administratively grouped into 7 academic complexes. (For additional context, see Appendix.) Said to be the largest and most diverse university in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa, ABU's AAS is primarily concerned with its 2,967 teaching staff (faculty) and 48,329 undergraduate students, with a teacher-to-student ratio of 1 to 16.29.

ABU provides assistance to students as advisees by assigning them to faculty (academic staff) as advisers. These advisers provide guidance throughout the students' studies, the crux of which is to help students enter university life and progress through it with as little stress as possible. The broader context is the development and growth of the student's personality, given his or her particular psychological and health conditions. This translates into a triad of help areas in which a faculty adviser assists his student advisees, as follows:

- (1) Selecting relevant courses, or suggesting which courses the students should register for in each session.
- (2) Guiding the students regarding academic interests, problems and progress.
- (3) Helping the students derive maximum benefits from their educational, social, and vocational experiences.

The primary objectives of our study were to ascertain the challenges the scheme has faced through the decades and suggest possible ways to address those challenges.

Methods Employed in the Study

Primary and secondary methods were used to obtain quantitative data for this pilot study. Primary data were collected from male and female students at all levels (100L-500L), as well as from faculty with varied lengths of work experiences (from <10 to >30 years) at the Departments of Economics and the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences. Links to a 10-item questionnaire deployed on the SurveyMonkey platform were sent to the students through their representatives, who distributed them using Whatsapp app within their level group forums. A slightly different questionnaire was sent to faculty in a similar manner via the

group Whatsapp forum. Both students and faculty were given 48 hours in which to complete the surveys. Data analysis was mostly automatic on the SurveyMonkey app, but string inputs to the open-ended question answer requested from each respondent, three challenges of the Advisor-Advisee Scheme, and three suggestions to improve it, were reviewed manually by two trained research assistants.

To augment the above, two focus group discussions among economics and pharmacy students across all levels—guided by the questionnaire—were also held. In addition, information was obtained from the university's Management Information System with the help of the Institute of Computing & ICT, and from the Directorate of Academic Planning and Monitoring.

Apart from the FGDs, other qualitative methods employed, used structured guides for interviews of personnel relevant to the Advisor-Advisee Scheme at Ahmedu Bello University.

Results

This study shows the importance of Advisor-Advisee Scheme at the university. However, in many departments the scheme does not go beyond the traditional staff advisers either at the course level or for given year of study (not necessarily on personal basis), which means that it can be improved upon in order to make it more functional in every department.

The survey generated 135 challenges, which are grouped under ten categories (see Table 1). They were then further grouped according to the point of resolving them, namely: institutional or system-centred, adviser-centred or advisee-centred.

Table 1: Challenges to ABU's adviser-advisee scheme identified by students and staff

SN	Challenges	System-centred	Adviser-centred	Advisee-centred	Indeterminate	Total
1	Busy adviser and inadequate contact time between advisers and advisees	0	15	5	5	25
2	Unavailability of advisers	1	17	3	0	21
3	Limited and/or poor communication between advisers and advisees including advisee feeling constrained with adviser	1	11	7	3	22
4	Unfriendly and/or inapproachable advisers	0	7	3	0	10
5	Negative attitudes to the advisory scheme e.g. lack of adviser motivation and advisee understanding	0	8	2	0	10
6	Ineffective advisory scheme e.g. due to inadequate adviser guidance skills and inadequate advisee capacity	5	2	4	0	11
7	Poor adviser-advisee relationships including abuse of the relationship by some advisees	0	4	4	0	8
8	Absenteeism by advisees, lack of commitment / discipline, and late presentation in crisis	0	0	12	0	12
9	Advisees not willing to listen to advice	0	0	6	0	6
10	Invalid responses	0	0	0	10	10
Total No.		7	64	46	18	135
Total %		5.2	47.4	34.1	13.3	100

Students and staff were drawn from Department of Economics and
Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences

The key challenges identified by respondents indicated that the fewest were Institutional-centred. Only 5.2% of the challenges were so grouped. The main concerns registered in our study were that of an ineffective advisory scheme e.g. due to inadequate adviser guidance skills and inadequate advisee capacity. Unavailability of advisers and limited and/or poor communication between advisers and advisees (including advisee inhibitions in the presence of the adviser) were also classified as institutional.

More challenges were classified as adviser-centered. A total of 47.4% of the challenges could be resolved through the adviser. The major concern—26.6% of the adviser-centred challenges—was the unavailability of advisers. Challenges also revolved round the adviser being too busy and or having inadequate contact time with the advisees (23.4%), while 17.2% of the challenges were associated with limited and/or poor communication between advisers and advisees, including the advisee feeling uncomfortable about being frank and honest with the advisor. Furthermore, 12.5% of the challenges were motivated by negative attitudes toward the advisory scheme, e.g. lack of adviser motivation and advisee understanding, while 10.9% cited unfriendly and/or inapproachable advisers.

A total of 34.1% challenges are advisee-centred. Of these, 26.1% revolved around absenteeism by advisees, lack of commitment/discipline, and late presentation in crisis, while 15.2% were about limited and/or poor communication between advisers and advisees, including advisee reluctance to speak freely with the adviser. Advisees not willing to listen to advice constituted 13.0%, while 10.9% of the advisee-centred challenges were about busy advisers with inadequate contact time between advisers and advisees.

Of the total challenges, the largest (18.5%) concerned overly busy advisers and inadequate contact time between advisers and advisees. A further 16.3% cited limited

and/or poor communication between advisers and advisees, including advisee reluctance to speak freely with the adviser. Others issues raised included 15.6% of respondents faulting the unavailability of advisers; 8.9% for absenteeism by advisees, lack of commitment / discipline, and late presentation in crisis; 8.1% for ineffective advisory scheme, due to inadequate adviser guidance skills and inadequate advisee capacity; 7.4% for unfriendly and/or inapproachable advisers; 7.4% for negative attitudes to the advisory scheme, e.g. lack of adviser motivation and advisee understanding; 5.9% for poor adviser-advisee relationships, including abuse of the relationship by some advisees; and finally, 4.4% for advisees not willing to listen to advice.

The survey resulted in 326 recommendations on solutions to the challenges to AAS, and these suggestions were grouped into 21 broad categories and sorted into four bases for addressing them (Table 2). The suggestions were either to be applied at the institutional level (S=system-centred, 28.2%), or by addressing faculty (adviser-centred, 45.4%), or by addressing students (advisee-centred, 18.4%). Of the total 326 suggestions, 12.9% were grouped around the suggestion that advisers should be friendly to students, patient, readily approachable, and accessible; 12.6% were grouped around nurturing a cordial relationship already existing between advisers and advisees; 11.3% suggested that the scheme should be established university-wide e.g. with committees, logistics, compulsory implementation, early pairing, etc. Furthermore, 8.6% of the suggestions were for improved communication between advisers and their advisees; 6.7% for more frequent contact sessions between advisees and their advisers; 6.1% for the advisory scheme to be mandatory during student orientation (and re-orientation); while 4.6% suggested that more time to be allocated for the advisory process and contact sessions officially

timetabled. Other suggestions (3.7%) were for monitoring and evaluation of the scheme, plus rewarding deserving advisers; 2.8% were that guidance should extend beyond university academic life to post-graduation career, social life, etc; 2.8% were for training of advisers e.g. on rudiments of guidance and counselling; while 2.4% of the suggestions were that both advisers and advisees are to be committed to the advisory process.

Table 2: Suggestions to improve ABU's adviser-advisee scheme proffered by students and staff

SN	Suggestions	System - centered	Adviser-centered	Advisee-centered	Indeterminate	Total
1	Advisers should be friendly toward students, patient, readily approachable and accessible	0	39	3	0	42
2	Conducive and cordial relationship should exist between advisers and advisees	0	20	21	0	41
3	The scheme should be established university-wide e.g. committees, logistics, compulsory implementation, early pairing, etc	15	22	0	0	37
4	Good communication between advisers and their advisees	1	16	11	0	28
5	Frequent contact sessions between advisees and their advisers, who should be more available	3	12	7	0	22
6	The advisory scheme should be mandatory during student orientation (and re-orientation)	20	0	0	0	20
7	More time should be allocated for the advisory process and contact sessions officially timetabled	9	4	2	0	15
8	Monitoring and evaluation of the scheme, plus reward of deserving advisers	12	0	0	0	12
9	Guidance should extend beyond university academic life to post-	0	8	1	0	9

	graduation career, social life, etc					
10	Training of advisers e.g. on rudiments guidance and counselling	6	3	0	0	9
11	Both advisers and advisees are to be committed to the advisory process	0	4	4	0	8
12	Both advisers and advisees are to be proactive in their roles and responsibilities	0	5	2	0	7
13	Financing and welfare, including referral, when necessary, to professional counsellors	0	4	0	3	7
14	Online and social media academic advising should be incorporated as an addition to face-to-face contact	3	2	2	0	7
15	Students should be able to choose their advisers instead of having them assigned	6	0	0	0	6
16	Advisee allocation should be based on each student's academic interests and performance	4	2	0	0	6
17	Level and other group academic advising should be incorporated	4	0	1	1	6
18	Reduce number of advisees per adviser	4	0	0	0	4
19	Confidentiality and trust should be important hallmarks of the advisory experience	0	1	3	0	4
20	Others	5	6	3	4	18
21	Invalid responses	0	0	0	18	18
Total No.		92	148	60	26	326
Total %		28.2	45.4	18.4	7.9	100

Students and staff were drawn from Department of Economics and

Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences

To continue, 2.1% of the suggestions were for both advisers and advisees to be more proactive in their roles and responsibilities; another 2.1% asked for financing and welfare, including referral when necessary to professional counsellors; and another 2.1% suggested

that online and social media academic advising be incorporated as an addition to face-to-face contact. Finally, 1.8% of the suggestions were for permitting students to choose their advisers instead of having advisers assigned to them; 1.8% for advisee allocation being based on each student's academic interests and performance; 1.8% for level and other group academic advising being incorporated; 1.2% for minimising the number of advisees per adviser; and another 1.2% of the suggestions for confidentiality and trust to become more important hallmarks within the advisory experience.

The outcomes of the focus group discussions and interviews were largely in line with the survey data described in Tables 1 and 2.

Discussion

From the data it clearly emerges that staff do not consider academic advising/counseling to be a core function. With the workload of staff on the high side, it is understandable that adviser unavailability will be identified as a major challenge. This implies a lack of adequate institutional motivation for academic staff to see academic advising as an important means to strengthen teacher-student relationship and improve the teaching-learning process. The whole issue of remedying weak foundational learning, especially in the first year, through intensive staff interaction outside the classroom, including tutorials and directions on online sources, would seem to be unlikely. This gives weight to the major recommendation that “advisers should be friendly to students, patient, readily approachable and accessible.” Such a recommendation implies that this was not necessarily the case at the time of the study.

The second recommendation of weight was that “conducive and cordial relationship should exist between advisers and advisees.” This is important since the relationship between teacher and learner is critical for positive educational outcomes. For the adviser-advisee scheme to be successful, there must be mutual understanding of the roles, responsibilities and commitments of both the faculty adviser and student advisee.

Effective teaching depends on teachers’ skills and motivation, and yet many university systems do not take them seriously. The university should motivate advisers through pecuniary and non-pecuniary means to participate in the adviser-advisee scheme. The University could also increase the size of the central student support services with enough professional counselors to work with staff in AAS.

Concerning the role of technology, it is interesting that only 2% of recommendations suggested that online and social media academic advising be incorporated as an addition to face-to-face interactions. Most students have smart phones, but probably use them more for non-academic purposes. Thus, one may suggest that the University should encourage better use of technology in the classroom. Online platforms such as interactive whiteboards and text messages to support teachers would make the use of IT in teaching more common to the students. Technology increases learning outcomes significantly when it enhances the teacher-learner relationship. But teachers should be a step ahead of the students (or at least at par with them), for technological interventions to adequately influence this relationship.

Proposed Strategy for the Way Forward for Ahmedu Bello’s AAS

We recommend that the University should encourage innovative educators willing to take up the challenges identified with the AAS through the following measures:

1. The University should strengthen its focus on how people learn, with the intention of assisting students adopt the most effective learning process.
2. Some students, more than others, find it difficult to transit through university life. The university should introduce programs to aid those slow to integrate. Advisers are crucial to this process. They can identify problem students on individual basis, those that need help and refer them to competent authorities.
3. The university should articulate a sound philosophy of academic advising that would support a robust advising system and ensure that it is understood by both staff and students
4. The university should offer a compulsory course in academic advising (which doesn't have to be for credit) to all university students in order to encourage them appreciate the importance of AAS and of mentoring.
5. The university should offer regular refresher training to university staff (faculty) to update them on the latest advising techniques and best practices.
6. The university should concentrate on students as the core of the advising process, and encourage them to live up to their roles and responsibilities as recipients of academic advising.

Conclusion

The advisor-advisee scheme in Ahmedu Bello University outlined above has the potential of strengthening teacher-learner relationship. The authors' investigations have revealed that there is need for greater monitoring, evaluation, and revision of the AAS to ensure greater effectiveness. To this end, the university should improve on educational innovation. It

should also find ways of meeting the demands of a rapidly changing learning environment such as updating of the classrooms. IT offers potentially significant gains for education. Computers and computer-assisted learning software, as well as online platforms such as Google Classroom, Blackboard, enable learners to communicate easily with teachers.

AAS has assisted students in departments that have fully embraced it and this benefit could be extended throughout the university. This pilot study has identified various areas in which the university could improve, as it makes AAS mandatory across the two campuses. We believe that the university should continue the process with a university-wide review of the system and encourage it being a central aspect of student support services.

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APPENDIX

Some Facts about Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria

- Founded in 1962 as regional university	- A School of Postgraduate Studies
- Taken over by Fed. Govt. in 1975	- A Business School
- 2 Campuses in Land area of 7,000 hectares	- A College of Medical Sciences
- 16 Faculties	- A Teaching Hospital
- 98 Academic Departments	- A Veterinary Teaching Hospital
- 521 Degree and Non-degree Programmes	- A Distance Learning Centre
- 6 Institutes for Research, Teaching and Extension	- A School of Basic & Remedial Studies
- 12 Specialised Centres	- A Demonstration Secondary School
- 3 Specialised Colleges of Agriculture	- A Model Staff Primary School
- 2 Universities nurtured	- Students from all 36 states in Nigeria, Africa and rest of the world
- 30 Institutions affiliated (Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, Schools of Basic & Preliminary Studies)	- 68 universities in the north and FCT as mentee institutions
	- 500,000 Active Alumni
	- On the verge of migrating to a postgraduate university (70%).

Sources: ABU's Directorate of Academic Planning & Monitoring (DAPM) as well as Management Information System (MIS) under the Institute of Computing & ICT (ICICT), 2018.

Students and Staff at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria

Students			Staff		
Category	Number	%	Category	Number	%
		Female			Female
Sub-degree	5,384	38.37	Teaching	2,967	18.13
Undergraduate	48,329	34.79	Non-Teaching	8,565	19.63
Postgraduate	8,778	28.05	-	-	-
Total	62,491	34.15	Total	11,532	19.24

Sources: Management Information System (MIS) under the Institute of Computing & ICT (ICICT), 2018.