

Original Paper

Qualitative Assessment of the Perceptions of Undergraduate Students and Advisors on Academic Guidance in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This paper describes the perceptions of undergraduate students and their advisors on the role and challenges of academic guidance in Saudi Arabia. For this, five focus groups comprising six to eight students and one advisor were interviewed, and their responses to four questions were qualitatively analyzed. The responses from all groups emerged in four major themes, two related to the student's perspectives and two related to those of the advisors. Overall, the students identified the unfamiliarity with the purpose of academic guidance and a failure of their advisors to follow their progress as the primary challenges. The advisors highlighted the lack of student feedback and academic guidance training as the obstacles to successful student progress. The findings presented here suggest that universities should incorporate student and advisor feedback into the academic guidance systems to ensure student success.

Keywords

Bachelor's degree students, academic guidance, academic program, study progression, counseling practices

1. Introduction

A solid understanding of academic teaching and guidance is important for research design and direction in all areas of social sciences. Nevertheless, effective Academic Guidance (AG) is challenging, because students are unaware of its importance in their academic progress (Brewer & Smith, 2011). Both teachers and students face challenges, such as those related to the failure to identify what the students are learning and the lack of appropriate assistance for those that face some difficulties and are not willing to continue their study program (Batanero et al., 2011). However, a little consideration has been given to academic engagements with the pedagogical issues related to teaching roles and duties

(Alshehry, 2018). These issues include the challenges and the advantages for guiding bachelor's degree students and how teachers could provide AG to students as their education progresses (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). The challenges faced by Undergraduate Students (UGS) are attributed to their underappreciation of the value of AG or its ability to resolve the obstacles they face and their resistance to changes in how AG is applied at other institutions to address their future study needs (Zamel & Spack, 2004).

Until recently, most investigations concerning AG were focused on the systems provided and their role in education (Brew et al., 2016). The concept of counseling theory and practices were first introduced in Europe and the United States in the early 1910s (Li & Lin, 2018). AG was highlighted as a tool at schools and universities to help resolve challenges associated with education. The emphasis at most academic institutions was to improve the teaching standards, including those for the courses taught, quality assurance, and guidance (Zamel, 1995). The institutional systems that are needed by a given department depend on the needs of the teachers as well as the students in that department (Alshehry, 2009). To provide benefit above that from the teachers' experiences and knowledge, these systems need to be incorporated into the teaching strategies applied to the students (Almazroa et al., 2014). Moreover, cooperation among departments with consideration of the opinions of their academic staff on how to report on AG would support the success of these institutional systems (Kaur & Wong, 2017). Another important factor for the success of AG is the integration of the students themselves, where they can follow and maintain responsibility for their own academic progression (Brew et al., 2016).

At various academic institutions, there are challenges in developing, changing, and implementing the practices for providing AG to ensure successful academic progression of the students (Edmondson, 2011). Although previous studies in China showed that the application of AG is challenging, it is essential as it enables the teachers to make referrals for higher stages of education (Wang et al., 2015). The benefit of AG continues to strongly impact the achievements of students at university-level institutions (Alshehry, 2018). Moreover, Sun and Yuen (2012) stated that a counseling and guidance system should be applied at most universities, as it benefits not only the students but also society.

These systems were introduced only recently in Saudi Arabia and remain at a rudimentary level (Abbasi & AlGhamdi, 2015). The aim of the present study was to explore how teachers and their students interact to maximize the benefits from AG. For this, we used focus groups comprising students of a bachelor's degree program and their academic advisors and asked them to identify the academic challenges as well the strategies and solutions that could be employed to overcome those challenges.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This was a qualitative study of participants' perspectives that were obtained from the answers to specific questions asked during focus group interviews (Smith et al., 1996). The participants were asked the following research questions.

- (i) How is the academic advisement provided?

- (ii) What do you think is lacking from students during the academic counseling with their teachers?
- (iii) On the other hand, the students were asked the following research questions.
- (iv) How do students interact with your counselors to ensure their education progresses successfully?
- (v) How do you think the academic advisors are important and how do they benefit the student's education progress?

2.2 Participants

Five academic teacher advisors (AG1 to AG5) from the bachelor's degree program in the college of education participated in the study. Each of these has ten students to advise, among which 40 UGS were selected to participate. These participants were selected from purposive samples to ensure that all were able to provide reliable and accurate data regarding their academic and study challenges and the practices applied to overcome these challenges. According to a study by Kruger (1994), six to eight UGS participants and one academic teacher advisor were selected for each of the focus groups, which were coded as UGS1, -2, -3, -4, and -5 to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

The responses for a given focus group were coded according to which advisor it included (i.e., UG3 involves the responses of the students for AG3).

2.3 Focus Group Interviews

A pilot study was initially conducted with eight academic teachers in the same departments with random samples of participants to determine the suitability and trustworthiness of the interview questions. The answers provided by the participants during the focus group interviews reveal qualitative data on the participants' knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and practices that reflect their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This research design method provides the participants the opportunity to discover their concerns, challenges, and issues of academic ethics in the opening and ending questions during the interview. Each interview session took approximately 30 to 60 min. The interviews were written through interviews with the majority of reliability and validity of interviews responses were transcribed later to ensure accuracy (Creswell, 2007). The interview transcriptions were written in Arabic and later translated.

2.4 Data Analysis

A qualitative analytic method was used for identifying, analyzing, and stating themes for coding the responses to the interview questions. The coded data were then manually analyzed on the basis of the similarities and differences that emerged. This method enables the data to be described in more detail and organized according to the various aspects of interpretations of the research topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lastly, various databases which include the categories used to organize the responses were grouped into broader themes. The data analysis involved five main phases, including formalizing the data, generating the codes, searching for similarities and differences of themes, revising, organizing, and narrowing these themes, and lastly, reporting the results (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

3. Results

The analysis of the findings revealed four main themes that influence AG that are detailed below. These main themes involved students' concerns regarding their own inadequate understanding of AG and a failure of teachers to follow their study progression. For the academic staff, the main themes involved a lack of student feedback and a lack of AG training programs. The following results shows the parenthetical phrases which reflect a summary or rephrasing of translated responses. Thus, they were edited as such rather than as direct quotes.

3.1 Students' Concerns for Unfamiliarity with AG

Most of the student participants reported that their limited knowledge about academic advisement was the main obstacle to expressing their ideas most clearly. One focus group (UGS4) indicated that this unfamiliarity influences the context of the program of study, the understanding of the importance of AG, and what they need to provide the teachers with regarding their study information and progress. A representative response (from UGS1) was that a difficulty that the students face is a misunderstanding of the content of the academic advisors and guidance with regard to their course matter, lectures, study levels, and programs. Furthermore, a participant in UGS3 reported a need for a preparation program at the beginning of each semester to outline the students' main role and identify the tasks required during their study. As reported by UGS5, most students had difficulties contacting their advisors due to their office hours, a feeling of intimidation when meeting in the classroom, and ignorance of what was being discussed. However, other groups of interviewees (including those in UGS2) reported that their difficulties in contacting and communicating with their teachers were due to their failure to know what to do or talk about when meeting with them and that they needed a better understanding of what the advisors need from them.

3.2 Students' Concern for Failure of Their Advisors to Follow Their Progress

Participants in UGS2 remarked that they were unable to meet routinely with their advisors to discuss their progress because they were overloaded with courses and assessments. Participants in UGS1, -2, and -4 reported that at the end of each semester, they felt that the role of an academic advisor is very important, as if they were in contact with their academic advisors, they could avoid the low grades due to certain circumstances or issues they had faced. However, participants in UGS3 felt that they did not need an academic advisor, as they tried their best and performed well enough on their own. Participants in UGS5 were in agreement with this viewpoint, reporting that in the higher university academic environment, they prefer greater freedom in their fields of study than they experienced previously and did not want to rely on advisors for their progress.

3.3 Academic Advisors' Concerns for the Lack of Student Feedback

With regard to a lack of interaction between students and their teachers, one academic advisor one stated that it is very important to encourage students to contact their advisors and to provide them with feedback regarding their study progress to ensure optimal guidance. AG4 commented on the importance of following the academic situation of each student so that any academic problems that

arise can be promptly addressed to ensure higher grades. AG2, -3, and -4 acknowledged the benefit of properly advising their students and their role in making the students aware of this to empower them and enhance their progress. However, AG5 noted the lack of understanding of the role of AG, which could lead to the students being deprived of the chance to get their studies going smoothly, and so they need to get in contact with their advisors at the start of the semester and provide them with any academic transcripts or reports related to their field of study.

3.4 Academic Advisors' Concerns for the Lack of Training Programs

With regard to improving the quality of AG, the advisors' considerations were reflected in the comment by AG1, who remarked that to assist students and enhance learning, academic teachers should redesign the initial course programs to incorporate an orientation to academic learning skills and management. The challenge noted was that the advisors lacked feedback from student evaluations, which the teachers and advisors could then use to modify the way they apply AG and enhance the students' understanding and knowledge of AG. Similarly, AG2 noted that feedback provides knowledge and experience to help advise students about AG, with clear suggestions and recommendations from the students, enabling them to participate in the formation of their own curriculum. AG5 reported that training programs for AG can be organized involving students that are experiencing difficulties, thereby improving the interaction between students and their teachers regarding teaching and learning practices. To this end, AG3 recommended providing a seminar or training program focused on improving incoming students' knowledge of AG and the importance maintaining contact with their advisors each semester. Another academic adviser identified they need to create a congenial academic environment with good support and guidance systems, where the teaching and learning practices reflect an enlightening climate rather than an oppressive or stressful experience for teachers and students.

4. Discussion

The findings presented here provide a clearer picture of the perspectives of students and advisors regarding the challenges they face for AG. These findings are consistent with other studies that revealed that such challenges and obstacles faced by both academic advisors and students should be considered by leaders within various institutional fields (Batanero et al., 2011; Alshehry, 2018; Brew et al., 2016). According to Kaur and Wong (2017), such findings justify integrating student and advisor feedback into successful academic programs. Almazrao and Al-Shamrani (2015) also insisted that this is the best way for successful staff professional development. A successful and demanding academic program entails an enforcement of AG requirements (Lin, 2014; Alshehry, 2009; Wang et al., 2015). Therefore, responsible institutions should adopt and adhere to the AG systems used internationally and beginning when the students enter their programs, and these systems should incorporate student feedback.

Considering the academic staff suggestions to improve the academic setting, the professional standards for the study programs should depend on the guidance experience with students as they progress from

one level to another, which they consider a consistent reliable indicator. Almazroa (2014) reported that academic staff need this feedback and experience to develop teaching strategies and for policy making. This report also recommends that the university should consider designing and implementing a policy that students understand to enable them to pass the study programs in a reasonable time. The incorporation of feedback from students would be a good indicator of whether they are sufficiently prepared to complete their program of choice during their university education.

In accordance with those at universities worldwide, the staff also requested that counseling services be provided from various fields throughout the students' education to provide a comprehensive guidance resource. These services should encompass caring, diverse, empathetic, and ethical professional counseling (Lin, 2018). This concept of counseling can be used by public or private institutions to help resolve these challenges related to the academic environment. Sun and Yuen (2012) had earlier reported that AG systems would benefit both educational institutions and society as a whole, by improving the students' confidence towards self-reliance in the future.

The main perspectives identified here, including the lack of student familiarity with AG and the lack of follow-up, are consistent with findings from previous reports (Abbasi & AlGhamdi, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). Moreover, they are in agreement with the results reported by Lin 2018, where students felt that the lack of benefit from AG was a result of their lack of familiarity with the system and what was expected. For these UGS, identifying the issues with AG will facilitate their academic progress and enable them to participate in their study program until their graduation. To ensure their participation, the interactions with their advisors should be positive and incorporate the evaluation of their counseling from time to time during the semester.

A limitation of this study is that the findings referenced careful interpretations and perceptions of several groups of UGS and their advisors only at a specific department of a college of education. Therefore, broader generalizations to other students, teaching methods, and curricula are limited. Further studies involving UGS at other universities and comparisons among universities in other countries are needed. For future research, additional surveys of both students and teachers regarding AG before students enroll in each course are needed to determine the factors that affect their interactions and their responses to AG, as well as to provide feedback.

In conclusion, the themes identified here provide avenues to improve AG and minimize the challenges faced by students at their advisors that hinder their academic potential at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Hawkes, 2014).

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