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Evaluation of Implementation of Models of Academic Advising in Postgraduate Taught Courses

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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates the implementation of four models of academic advising in taught postgraduate (PGT) courses. Model 1 was out of curriculum. Model 2 was an embedded approach with students taught by their academic adviser (AA) in a normal module, in addition to standard AA touchpoints. Model 3 was an extended advising offer of six group sessions. A fourth, by permission only, student-led Model X was also created.

The embedded approach (Model 2) elicited the most positive results, with more students reporting they had been given and taken up the opportunity to meet with their AA compared with any other model. Additionally, these students had more positive perceptions of their AA. Although a small sample, the student-led (Model X) received the least positive perceptions of support.

An institution-wide implementation of models improved student awareness and perceptions of academic advising. Further, end-of-year withdrawal rates decreased following implementation.

Following model implementation, there was a noticeable increase in comments relating to seeking help with managing workload and personal issues. This may have been because implementing models facilitated staff to build good relationships. It also likely reflects the increased pressures students face juggling their personal and academic lives. The findings showed that students desire academic advising, want more of it, and value a positive relationship with an AA. Where students were critical it was usually because their AA did not contact or seem to care about them.

Overall, consistent institution-wide implementation elicited positive results, and comparing models, academic advising should be curriculum-embedded where possible.

KEYWORDS

Postgraduate Taught students; Evaluation

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Introduction

Academic advising (or personal tutoring) is well recognised as a key aspect of the student experience in the UK (and wider) Higher Education (HE). Good advising has been linked to a positive transition into university (Quan et al., 2016), better attainment, student experience and holistic development (Holland et al., 2020), improved sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012), higher satisfaction (Harrell & Reglin, 2018), reduction of attainment gaps (Basi et al., 2019) and better retention (Webb et al., 2017). There is no definitive way of planning and conducting academic advising. Earwaker (1992) suggested three main approaches to academic advising: pastoral, professional and curriculum. Since then, various developments to these models and approaches have been developed and refined (Lochtie et al., 2018). Indeed, a growing body of literature and scholarly activity surrounding good practice and the benefits of good academic advising has emerged, allowing institutions to make increasingly more evidenced-informed decisions about implementation. Indeed, many HE institutions (HEI) have developed policies and frameworks to support academic advising in their own context.

Typically, academic advising literature focuses on undergraduate (UG) academic advising (e.g. Chan et al., 2019). However, postgraduate provision has recently grown in many UK universities (HESA, 2024). While the values of academic advising and many implementation principles apply to all students, there are different needs for different demographics. The nature and structure of postgraduate taught (PGT) courses are varied and often considerably different to traditional undergraduate courses. Furthermore, the student demographic is different between UG and PGT populations. Students on PGT courses are typically older, but there is also a notable difference in the proportion of mature students at PGT (even accounting for an older definition of "mature" for PGT compared with UG students). There is a greater proportion of overseas student enrolments (HESA, 2024). Additionally, PGT courses are generally shorter than standard UG courses, meaning students have less time to "get to grips" with processes (Quan et al., 2016). Academic Advisers (AAs) are well placed to support these students, and robust, evidence-informed models of advising are likely to have a positive effect on the student experience (Thomas & Hixenbaugh, 2006), retention and student satisfaction (Harrell & Reglin, 2018).

The study was conducted at a UK Post-92 HEI in northern England. Within this institution, there was a well-established Academic Advising Framework and Policy which set out the general principles and minimum requirements that apply to all students on a taught course while allowing appropriate variation between courses, staff and students based on differing needs, personalities and curricula. These requirements included that all students on a taught course should have a named AA, that staff should undertake mandatory academic advising training, AAs should make contact with their students at least three times per academic year, the first being within three weeks of the academic year to support transition and once each semester. While these principles were generally well established as practice in UG courses, they were

less established in PGT courses. Some PGT students had allocated named AAs, some courses utilised course leaders as AAs but had not formalised the role, and some courses did not have AAs. Further, the amount and timing of contact that students received was inconsistent between courses. This variation in practice, combined with the differing needs of PGT students and a lack of published literature concerning the specific needs of PGT academic advising, resulted in a project to develop evidence-informed models of PGT academic advising and implement the models institution-wide. The aim of this paper was to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of models of academic advising in PGT courses.

Methods

Model development

The principle of model development was that they should be evidence-informed, aligned with the institutional Academic Advising Framework, provide a consistently good experience, and yet be flexible enough to cater for diverse courses and student requirements. A working group of academic staff from across the university was established to develop the models. The working group collated pre-existing feedback about PGT academic advising (e.g. The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES; Advance HE, 2020) data, which included institutional questions on academic advising), existing literature and sector practice. In addition, information about the characteristics of the institution's PGT courses likely to affect students' needs with respect to academic advising was audited (e.g., age, proportion of international students within cohort, size of cohort, duration of course, type of course, delivery method). Based on this information, three main models of advising were created for courses to choose from, offering flexibility of approach to suit the curriculum and cohort needs while allowing a pragmatic implementation within the constraints of university systems and whilst also meeting the requirements of the Academic Advising Framework and Policy.

Model 1 was an extra-curriculum offer with at least three contact points per year. AAs were typically academic staff from students' discipline areas and may or may not have taught the students, but academic advising meetings were arranged separately from the taught curriculum. Model 2 was an embedded approach in which students were assigned so that they were both taught regularly by their AA and received at least three additional contact points of dedicated academic advice. Model 3 was an extended advising offer in which students attended a series of one-hour group academic advising sessions, each dedicated to developing the students academically, professionally and/or personally, similar to an extended induction, with the AA meetings being additional to the taught curriculum. This model was developed specifically with international students in mind, as they would likely benefit from greater support during their transition to university. A fourth model, Model X, was also created in response to the information gathered about specific cohorts and department needs (e.g. some health courses with large student numbers and complicated module diets studied as CPD by

health professionals). Model X was a student-led approach in which students attended a first group session to be fully briefed on the role of the AA and the reasons to engage with the process. Students could then request ad hoc meetings when they wanted to. Drop-in sessions could be included, and regular email communication instilling the benefits of engaging was essential. Model X was allowed only when a course team could demonstrate that none of the other models were appropriate.

Model implementation

The institution approved the models, and it was agreed that all PGT courses in scope should follow one of the four models. Models were promoted to PG course leaders via department Academic Advising Leads, College Heads of Learning and Teaching Enhancement, and academic communications. Course teams were supported through the model choice process with guidance documents, drop-in sessions and by the lead researcher (SB) attending department, subject group and course leader meetings. Since an academic advising framework, policy, and staff training already existed within the institution, the main awareness-raising centred around the fact that PGT students should receive the same level of support as UG students, which had not always been consistent. Courses in scope included all level 7 taught courses (60 credits or more), except for collaborative courses and Higher & Degree Apprenticeship (HDA) courses for whom other academic advising arrangements were in place.

Evaluation approach

Following ethical approval, a mixed-methods approach was taken, using existing data sources (student survey data, withdrawal data). The evaluation was underpinned by a Theory of Change and endeavoured to determine the effect of implementing an institutional approach to PGT academic advising and whether there were any differences between models.

The 'L0, L4, L7 Academic Advising Survey' is a short institutional survey sent to all students in Foundation Year, Level 4 and Level 7 (14,244 students in total) to gauge the awareness of academic advising. The survey ran from late November to early January. Level 7 was included in this survey for the first time in the post-model implementation year to aid the evaluation of the implementation of consistent models of academic advising for all PGT courses. Thus, pre-implementation comparisons were not available for these data.

The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) is a UK-wide online survey open to all Higher Education Institutions with PGT students and is made available by Advance HE (Advance HE, 2020). In the pre-model implementation year, PTES was open to 9,710 students from early March to mid-June. In the post-model implementation year, PTES was open to 11,099 students from early February to mid-June. The PTES provided a measure of overall

satisfaction. In both years, institution-specific questions on academic advising were included, thus allowing comparisons between models and pre- and post-model implementation.

Quantitative analysis

As defined below, several variables were calculated from nominal and ordinal survey data. Responses were included in calculations if the student was from an in-scope course, the model of advising being delivered was known (only three active courses did not provide this information), and the respondent had answered the relevant question (i.e. had not left the question blank or chosen N/A).

Student Awareness of the AA role (method 1) was measured as the percentage of eligible PTES respondents who correctly answered '*Yes'* to the question *'Does your course have Academic Advisers?'*

Student Awareness of the AA role (method 2) was measured as the percentage of eligible L0, L4, L7 Academic Advising Survey respondents who answered *'Yes'* to the question *'Do you know what an Academic Adviser is?'*

Student awareness of who their AA is (method 1) was measured as the percentage of eligible PTES respondents who answered *'Yes'* to the question *'Do you know who your Academic Adviser is?'*

Student awareness of who their AA is (method 2) was measured as the percentage of eligible L0, L4, L7 Academic Advising Survey respondents who answered *'Yes'* to the question *'Do you know who your Academic Adviser is?'*

Positive student perception of support for academic development and progression was measured as the percentage of eligible PTES responses who answered '*Agree'* or *'Definitely Agree'* to the statement *'My academic adviser provides useful advice and guidance to aid my academic progress and development'*.

Positive student perception of AA signposting to support was measured as the percentage of eligible PTES respondents who answered '*Agree'* or *'Definitely Agree'* to the statement *'My academic adviser refers me to further support services when necessary'*.

Positive student perception of relatedness to AA was measured as the percentage of eligible PTES respondents who answered '*Agree'* or *'Definitely Agree'* to the statement *'My academic adviser takes a personal interest in my academic progress and development'*.

Withdrawal was calculated at the course level as the number of students withdrawing from the course, compared with the number of enrolments, expressed as a percentage. Three withdrawal measures were calculated: in-year, end-of-year, and combined withdrawal (the sum of in-year and end-of-year withdrawals).

Statistical analyses were performed in SPSS (SPSS 26, IBM) with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$. Pearson chi-squared tests were performed to compare *awareness of the Academic Adviser role* and *who theirs was* pre- and post-model implementation. Differences between Models 1-3 in the post-implementation year were also measured using chi-squared tests. Where significant associations between models were revealed, Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc tests were carried out. Model X was excluded from these analyses due to the low number of responses and because Model X was not one of the models recommended or implemented. Descriptive statistics were, however, included for all models.

Mann-Whitney tests were used to compare whether there were significant differences in agreement between years in the student perceptions of academic advising. Kruskal-Wallis tests with step-down follow-up analyses (Field, 2018) were conducted to assess whether there were differences between models in the post-implementation year.

An independent t-test was performed to reveal whether there were any differences between pre- and post-implementation rates of withdrawal. Withdrawal rates of Models 1, 2 and 3 were compared for the post-model implementation year using a one-way ANOVA to reveal differences in withdrawal rates between the three main advising models. Model X was not included because only two courses used Model X, and it was not one of the main models recommended or implemented. Descriptive statistics were, however, included for all models.

Qualitative analysis

The PTES allowed respondents to provide qualitative answers to two questions: '*What kind of advice and guidance would you seek from an academic adviser?*' and '*How could academic advising further enhance your experience?*'. Responses were analysed thematically using Framework Analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Responses were themed by one researcher (SB) who read and interpreted the questionnaire results and created preliminary codes for each response. Where a response talked about multiple aspects, the response was double-coded to allow multiple aspects to be captured. A thematic framework was developed from the codes, which were applied to the data. Themes were interpreted and described by the same researcher (SB).

Results

Model implementation

Most (78%) courses chose to implement Model 1, with at least one course choosing this model in 15 of the 17 departments. Six departments had one or more courses which chose to implement Model 2, while five departments had courses which chose Model 3. Model X was implemented in only three courses (two departments), and one of these courses was being discontinued in the first implementation year.

Survey response

Of the 14,244 students surveyed in the post-model implementation year 'L0, L4, L7 Academic Advising Survey', 1,778 students completed the survey (12% response rate). 820 respondents were level 7 students. After excluding students on collaborative, HDA, and Research Masters courses from the data set, there were 771 eligible respondents.

For the pre-model implementation year PTES survey, 2148 respondents responded to one or more question in the academic advising section. Of those respondents, 229 were excluded as they were not studying a course in scope, leaving 1919 eligible respondents.

In the post-model implementation year PTES, approximately 600 more respondents answered one or more of the questions in the PTES academic advising section (2759 responses). Of those respondents, 242 were excluded as they were not studying on a course in scope, leaving 2517 eligible respondents.

In line with greater numbers of courses choosing Model 1, most respondents to the surveys were from courses where Model 1 was implemented in the post-model implementation academic year (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of responses eligible for inclusion within the scope of the project and the models of academic advising they experienced (post-implementation year only)

	Sample	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model X
Pre-model implementation year PTES survey	**1919**	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Post-model implementation year PTES survey	**2517**	2185 (87%)	245 (10%)	75 (3%)	12 (<0.5%)
Post-model implementation year Academic Advising Survey	**771**	662 (86%)	89 (12%)	19 (2%)	1 (<0.5%)

Student awareness of Academic Adviser

Following model implementation, 95% of PTES respondents knew that their course had AAs, up by 6 percentage points from 89% in the pre-implementation responses. 5% incorrectly answered that their course did not have AAs in the post-implementation PTES. This demonstrates a significant association between years and the proportion of students who were aware ($x^2(1) = 60.036$, $p < 0.001$). Student awareness of the identity of their AA was higher in the post-implementation year at 90% compared with 86% pre-implementation ($x^2(1) = 9.262$, $p = 0.002$).

For the different models of advising, based on the post-implementation PTES results, awareness of the AA role and knowledge of the identity of their AA was highest in respondents experiencing Model 2 (curriculum-embedded; Figure 1), although there was no statistically significant association between the model and awareness of *whether the course has Academic Advisers* (x^2 (2) = 3.716, p = 0.156). Pearson chi-squared results showed that when comparing awareness across Models 1, 2 and 3, there was a significant association between models and awareness for "*Do you know who your Academic Adviser is?*" (x^2 (2) = 6.049, p = 0.049), however, once pairwise comparisons were made with Bonferroni adjustments the difference between the three main models was not statistically significant.

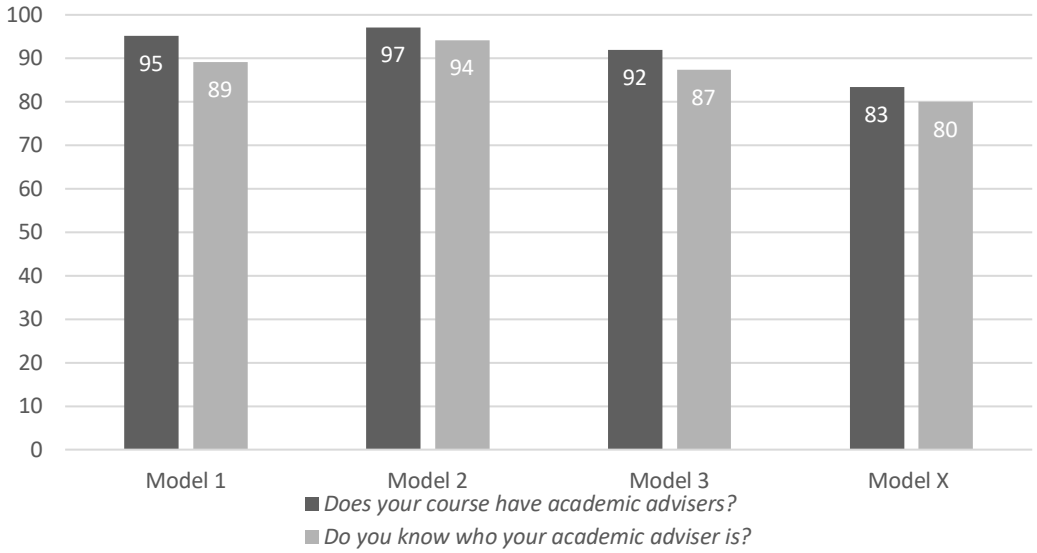

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents answering 'Yes' to questions about awareness of the Academic Adviser in post-model implementation year PTES.

A similar pattern of awareness was observed in the post-model implementation year Academic Advising Survey responses. Ignoring the data for Model X, where there was only one respondent, awareness of what an AA is was marginally higher for Model 2 (Figure 2), although there was no significant association between model and awareness (x^2 (2) = 0.482, p = 0.786). Knowledge of the identity of their AA was slightly higher for respondents experiencing Model 1 (Figure 2), but, again, there was no statistically significant association for this awareness by model (x^2 (2) = 5.247, p = 0.073). Knowledge of the identity of their AA and the opportunity for, and uptake of, meetings with their AA was lowest in Model 3 respondents. Model 2 respondents reported greater opportunity for and uptake of meetings with their AA, compared with Model 1 and Model 3 (Figure 2). Indeed, there was a significant association between the model implemented and the opportunity to meet with their AA (x^2 (2) = 16.811, p < 0.001) with post hoc tests revealing a statistically significant difference between all three main models (Figure 2). There was also a significant association between models with regards

to students actually meeting with their AA (x^2 (2) = 6.216, p = 0.045), with Model 2 being significantly greater than Model 3, although there was no significant difference between Model 1 and 2 or between Model 1 and 3 (Figure 2).

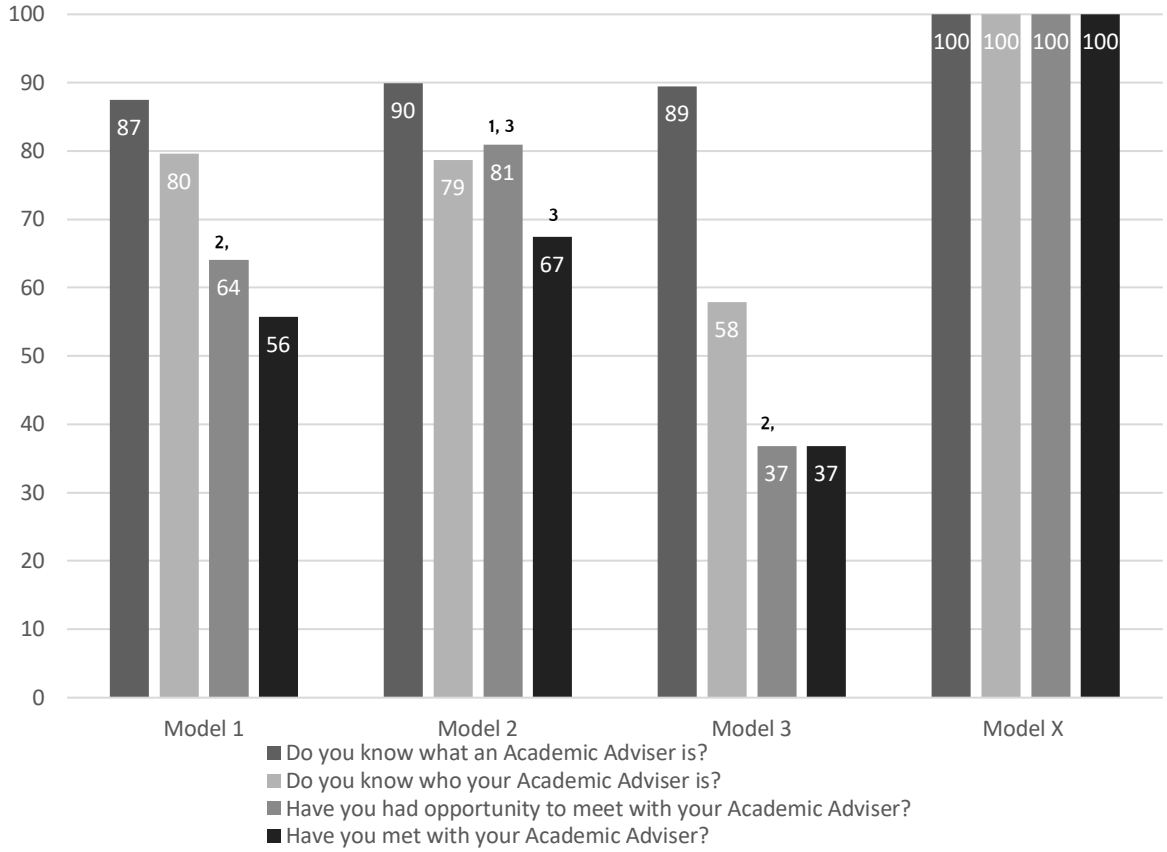

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents answering 'Yes' to questions about awareness of the Academic Adviser and meetings with their Academic Adviser in the post-model implementation year Academic Advising Survey. Note: Model X percentages represent just one response and were not included in statistical analyses. [1] Statistically different to Model 1; [2] Statistically different to Model 2; [3] Statistically different to Model 3.

Student perceptions

Overall, 83% of respondents of the post-implementation year PTES agreed that their *'academic adviser provides useful advice and guidance to aid my academic progress and development'*, an improvement compared with 74% in the previous year. This represented a statistically significant improvement in agreement in the post-implementation year (U = 1653208.000, p < 0.001). Statistical analyses revealed that agreement was significantly affected by the model employed (H = 22.493 (3), p < 0.001). Indeed, step-down follow-up analysis showed statistically that Model 2 had the greatest agreement with this statement (Figure 3). The lowest agreement was for Model X, although caution should be taken when

considering Model X results due to low response numbers and because it was not found to be statistically significantly different to Model 1 or 3.

In response to the statement *'My academic adviser refers me to further support services when necessary',* 82% of respondents agreed in the post-implementation year, compared with 72% previously (U =1564842.500, p < 0.001). Again, Model 2 respondents agreed the most with this statement, although this was not significantly different to Models 1 and 3. There was, however, a significant effect of the model on agreement with this statement (H = 30.943 (3), p < 0.001) with step-down follow-up analysis revealing a significantly lower agreement for Model X respondents (Figure 3).

Finally, the percentage of eligible PTES respondents agreeing with the statement *'My academic adviser takes a personal interest in my academic progress and development'* was 76% post-model implementation, up from 68% the previous year (U = 1612276.000, p < 0.001). The model implemented had a significant effect on agreement with this statement (H = 37.355 (3), p < 0.001), with step-down follow-up analysis, again showing Model 2 to have a significantly greater agreement than the other models and Model X to have a significantly lower agreement than Models 1-3 for this statement (Figure 3).

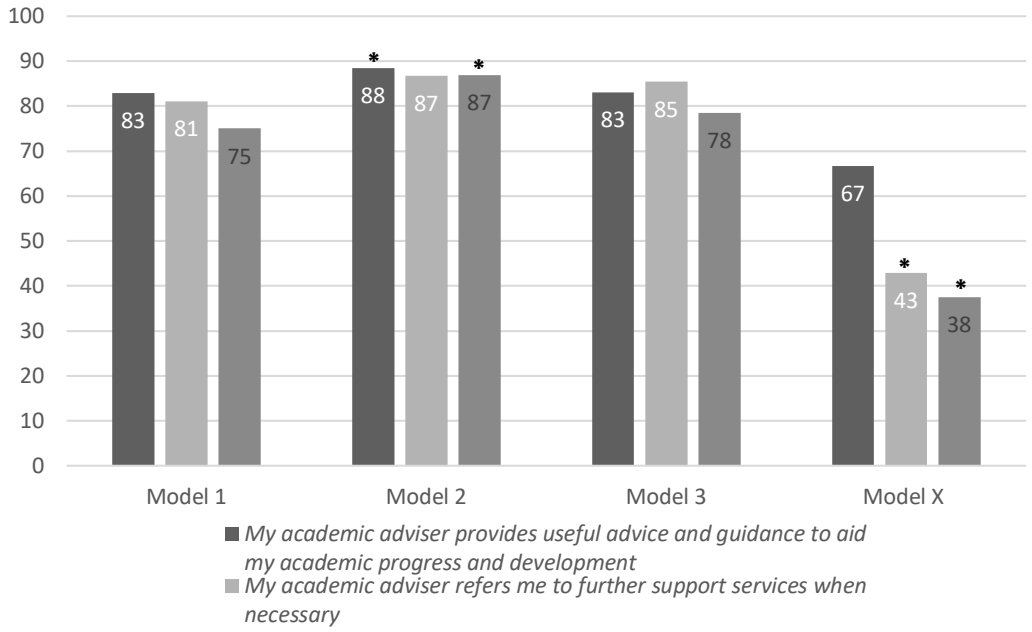

Figure 3. Percentage of respondents answering 'Agree' or 'Definitely Agree' to questions about their Academic Adviser in the post-model implementation year PTES. Note: Model X percentages represent just eight responses. * Statistically significantly different to other models.

Withdrawal

There was no significant difference in in-year withdrawal rates pre- and post-implementation (p = 0.295). There was, however, a significantly lower mean end-of-year withdrawal rate (p < 0.001) post-implementation, resulting in a significantly lower combined withdrawal rate (p = 0.006) (Figure 4).

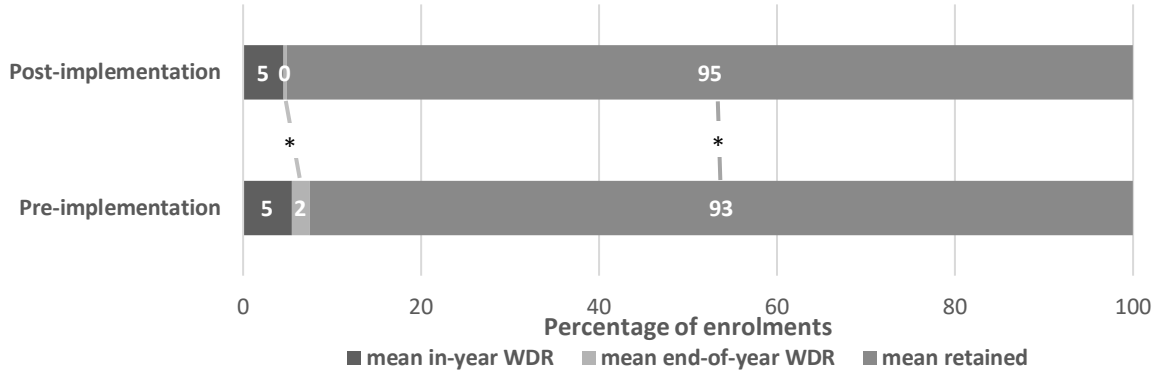

Figure 4. Percentage withdrawal (WDR) rates pre- and post-model implementation. * Significantly different between years (p < 0.05).

There were no significant differences between models in the rate of in-year withdrawal (p = 0.877), end-of-year withdrawal (p = 0.646) or combined withdrawal (p = 0.818) (Figure 5).

Qualitative data

Six main themes were identified from the thematic analysis of the PTES qualitative responses to the questions '*What kind of advice and guidance would you seek from an academic adviser?*' and '*How could academic advising further enhance your experience?*'. The themes were Academic, Professional, Personal, Relational, Contact, and AA Model.

Regarding the advice and guidance respondents would seek from an AA pre- and post-implementation, most comments related to the Academic theme. The types of responses provided varied within the theme, from general comments about "Academic Advice" to "support navigating university systems" and processes such as "applying for extensions". A large proportion of the comments related to help with assessments, or for the AA to provide guidance on specific academic skills such as referencing. The types of comment were similar between years, although in the post-implementation data, there was a noticeable increase in the number of comments relating to respondents expecting to be able to discuss how they can manage their workload with their AA :

> *"My learning experience and how I am coping with the extreme workload and the effect it has had on my mental well-being." (Post-implementation PTES respondent)*

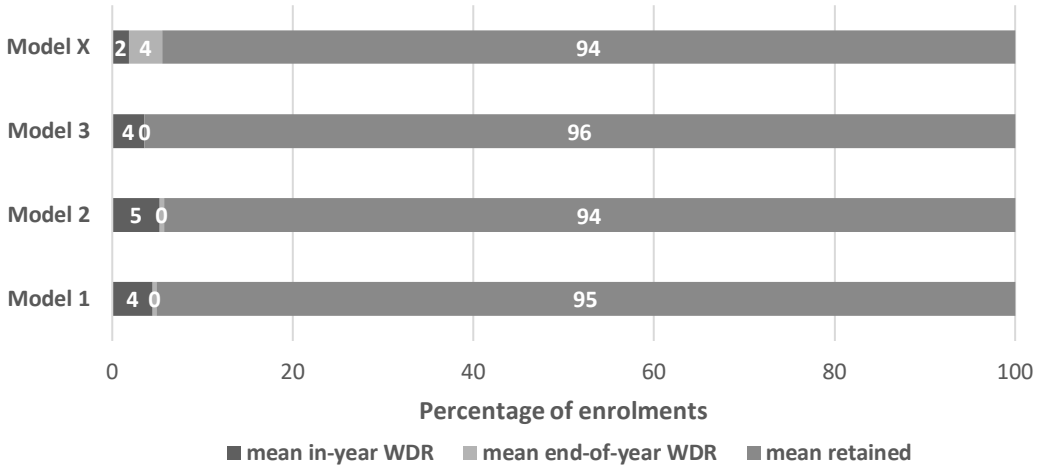

Figure 5. Percentage withdrawal (WDR) rates for each of the models of academic advising in the post-model implementation year.

A similar proportion of comments were made regarding talking to their AA about professional development pre- and post-implementation. These mostly related to future careers or further study, although some comments were also made about wanting AAs to check CVs/job applications, etc. In both years, the second largest proportion of comments within the Professional theme were around placement discussions and advice for dealing with situations whilst on placement.

"General guidance if I felt that I had a problem on placement or with workload." (Pre-implementation PTES respondent)

In the pre-implementation year, 12% of comments related to the Personal theme. This rose 10 percentage points to 22% of comments in the post-implementation year. Various topics were cited, including adapting to university, visa enquiries, and social issues inside and outside the university. However, most comments on this theme cited that they would seek advice or guidance on personal issues and/or mental health/wellbeing. In the pre-implementation year, some respondents specifically mentioned that they would seek advice on their personal development. Following implementation, there was a lower proportion of self-development comments and a larger proportion of personal and mental health/wellbeing issues cited compared with the pre-model implementation year.

"I have talked to them about how to improve my work but also with very personal and difficult issues with mental health and family problems." (Post-implementation PTES respondent)

Often, respondents commented on the relational aspects of the role of the AA. In both years, some students used the free text questions to berate a lack of support from their AA. However, this was outweighed by praise for the support students had received. Students cited that the role of the AA was to "provide reassurance" and "encouragement", that AAs should be "approachable", be "someone to listen", and should "be interested". Where contact was not initiated, queries were not responded to, or tutors did not make themselves approachable and available to students, comments were very negative. A 5 percentage points higher proportion of comments belonged to the relational theme post-implementation than in the previous year.

> *"My academic adviser is emphatic, understanding, firm, encourages and gives me tasks and guidance to better my learning skills" (Post-implementation PTES respondent)*

AA contact emerged as a theme in both years with students wishing for more contact, more one-to-one meetings and frequent check-ins, for AAs to respond to queries, and for AAs to initiate contact. A related theme, the academic advising model, made up a small proportion of the comments in both years but included students wanting a developmental model of advising (Grites, 2013) as opposed to a deficit model, a desire to maintain the same AA throughout their course, making meetings mandatory and have academic advising sessions timetabled. One comment expressed the desire for the AA to be independent of the teaching team. However, this was outweighed by the number of comments that expressed a desire for their AA to have subject/discipline/course knowledge. Most comments on this theme, however, were from respondents expressing confusion or lack of clarity over the purpose of the role.

Implications of findings

This paper aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing models of academic advising in PGT courses in a UK 'Post-92' HEI. The curriculum-embedded model (Model 2) elicited the most positive results, which is consistent with previous research in UG students (Owen, 2002). A higher proportion of students experiencing Model 2 reported they had *and* took up the opportunity to meet with their AA compared with any other model. The importance of relationship building as part of the academic advising process is well understood (Grey & Osborne, 2020). By embedding academic advising into the curriculum so staff also teach students regularly in addition to academic advising meetings, both parties have increased opportunities to get to know each other and build rapport, and it is likely that students find it easier to trust their AA. This model comes with no additional workload implications compared with Models 1 and 3, which benefits staff who often cite time pressure as a barrier to the academic advising process (Rogerson et al., 2024). Additionally, extra time with students will likely result in better, proactive academic advising conversations and in recognising and referring students with additional support needs based on changes in engagement and/or demeanour, which are harder to spot when not engaging with a student regularly. Indeed,

students had more positive perceptions of their AA when they experienced Model 2, with significantly higher agreement that their AA takes a personal interest in them and that they provide useful advice and guidance to aid academic progress and development. While the results of this study did not find a difference between models in withdrawal rates, it is known that a positive relationship with staff, for example, through academic advising, can improve retention (Thomas, 2012).

Although a small proportion of the sample in this evaluation, the student-led approach (Model X) received the lowest agreement with the statement *'my Academic Adviser refers me to support services when necessary'*. It is probable that students are less likely to approach their AA for support without AAs proactively initiating contact and building rapport with students. This is reflected in the volume of comments from students desiring staff to make contact or "check in" with them. From a practical perspective, this means that institutions and individual academic advisers should proactively reach out to students and create relationship-building opportunities. It is also possible that the AAs operating within model X were not as easily able to identify support needs in their students because they did not know them well enough. This is mirrored in the fact that Model X respondents had the lowest agreement with the statement *'My Academic Adviser takes a personal interest in my academic progress and development'*. While Model X is inexpensive in terms of workload, it goes against the sector-wide positioning that academic advising should facilitate proactive personal growth (Grey & Osborne, 2020). Indeed, previous research within the institution showed that students preferred a non-deficit approach (Rogerson et al., 2024), and a student-led approach is likely to result in poorer perceptions of academic advising if implemented widely.

The current study revealed that an institution-wide approach to academic advising could positively affect several key academic advising metrics. Following implementation, awareness of the role and the identity of their AA was significantly greater. This is likely due to institution-wide awareness-raising of the importance of academic advising for this cohort of students. In turn, staff were clear of the 'ask', understood that the pre-existing Academic Advising Framework and Policy and AA training also applied to PGT courses, were supported in planning their offer, and, in turn, more messaging and clarification of the role took place within courses. In addition to greater awareness, there were positive improvements in student perceptions of support post-implementation, with significant increases in the perceptions that AAs provided useful advice and guidance, referred to further support as appropriate, and took a personal interest in them. This suggests that AAs had taken the time to build rapport and likely formed better relationships with students post-implementation. While developing models and implementing them, it became apparent that many staff had incorrectly assumed that PGT students did not receive the normal institutional academic advising. Awareness raising with staff likely increased the promotion of the offer to students and subsequent improvement in relations. This has implications for other institutions; a substantial investment in time and communications was needed to ensure consistency (within the permissible flexibility) across 17 departments and hundreds of academic advisers. However, the improvements in

awareness and students' perceptions of support from this awareness-raising and inflation of importance demonstrate that it was worthwhile.

There was a decrease in end-of-year withdrawal rates post-implementation. By ensuring students on all PGT courses consistently had a named AA as a point of contact with a responsibility to contact students at least three times per year (as per the institution's policy), students who were struggling could be picked up earlier, provided with academic support and/or signposted to other support services. This seems to have resulted in fewer students struggling to the point at which they must withdraw at the end of the year. Retention of students leads to increased opportunities for students to reach their potential and is an important financial consideration for institutions.

Unsurprisingly, most of the qualitative comments around the support and guidance sought from AAs focussed on academic support, and this did not change pre- and post-implementation. This is consistent with the institution's academic advising offer, which, while the remit includes academic, personal and professional development, probably tends towards the academic development aspects. While the AA remit is concerned with a student's overall academic development, many comments (in both years) indicated that they slightly misunderstood what academic aspects their AA should help with. For example, there were several comments about getting help with specific assessment questions, reading drafts of work, or teaching specific academic skills such as referencing. This finding was echoed in the comments about professional development guidance, where many sensible comments about discussing career ambitions were made. However, many comments stated that respondents would ask AAs to check CVs or conduct practice interviews with them, which, within this institution would be the role of the Employability Adviser rather than AA. Indeed, previous research into academic advising within the institution (Rogerson et al., 2024) shows that clarity of the role amongst students is a pervasive issue, which is likely to be true across other institutions. Thus, clear expectation setting is imperative, and sessions designed to promote academic advising and explain the role are incredibly important (Rogerson et al., 2024), especially so if awareness of the academic advising offer is increased.

A worrying trend seen in the post-implementation year was a noticeable increase in comments relating to seeking help with managing workload and an increase in comments about going to an AA if experiencing personal issues. This may be because implementing the models resulted in increased awareness and promotion of the AA and was likely due to staff working hard to build good relationships with their students, making them a good point of contact. It was also likely symptomatic of the increased pressures students face, juggling personal and academic lives. The cost-of-living crisis, which was badly affecting students, probably contributed to this (Dabrowski et al., 2024). Given that postgraduate students may have complex personal situations alongside their studies, this may account for the rise in students seeking guidance from their AA about managing workload. Further, any increase in pressure on students is likely to result in a greater support workload for staff, which may squeeze what little flexibility exists

in workload allocation for academic advising. While AAs are well placed to support and signpost students, it does mean that staff need to be well-trained in positive signposting and maintaining boundaries (Lochtie et al., 2018) and properly supported within their role (Ridley, 2006).

Academic advising can have a transformational effect on students, as students have a trusted academic who cares personally about their development. This can improve belonging and mattering and enable students to reach their potential (Thomas, 2012). While students tend to value their AAs as being specialists in their discipline, more important to them is that they are known personally by someone who cares (Yale, 2019). This was evident in the PTES responses for both years regarding how academic advising could further enhance their experience. In these responses, the relational and AA contact themes were most prevalent. This demonstrates the importance students place on having a genuine connection with staff, which is also evident in the high number of respondents who used the PTES free text questions to praise the report received from their AA. To see the real benefits of the process, it is imperative that academic advising is not a transactional exchange (Yale, 2019). Indeed, when students were critical of their academic advising experiences, it was usually because their AA did not make contact or did not seem to care about them. It should be recognised that a poor academic advising experience is worse than none at all (Yale, 2019). Therefore, adequate time and importance should be given to the role. If academic advising is not implemented to a consistently high standard, this is likely to affect student satisfaction and their ability to achieve their full potential and achieve high student outcomes.

The context in which this evaluation sits should be noted. The pre-implementation year was the 2021-22 academic year, which followed the Covid-19 pandemic and was a year significantly affected by industrial action, which may have affected student responses. Student perceptions have been measured from PTES data. However, one limitation of PTES qualitative data is that the intention behind the comments is not always clear. For example, when a respondent answered "personal advice" in response to the question *'What kind of advice and guidance would you seek from an academic adviser?'* it is not clear whether the respondent expected their AA to be the person to support them with their personal issues directly (which would not be the role of the AA within the institution in question) or signpost them to other support services (which would be). Therefore, further research exploring student expectations would be valuable, especially for PGT students, who have rarely been specifically investigated.

Additionally, the extended advising model (Model 3) had a low uptake by courses despite being specifically designed to support international students, who made up a high proportion of students on most of the PGT courses in scope. This was likely due to systems issues making the timetabling of the extended advising offer very difficult and due to limited staff capacity to enact change at a time of immense pressure and change. However, the model was designed specifically to support this demographic based on a review of literature and sector best practices and warrants further exploration.

Another note of caution is that a very small number of courses were excluded from the evaluation because it was not possible to obtain accurate data about the model used and/or because the data sources about which courses were active did not always match. Therefore, while the authors are confident that no spurious data is included, data may have been missed.

In conclusion, the results of this evaluation provide empirical evidence of the benefits of implementing a whole-institution approach to the provision of academic advising for PGT students. The importance of academic advising in PGT courses should not be understated. This is an important cohort, and despite their academic maturity, the increased challenge of the course necessitates good support. Further, students value such support, and by raising the importance institutionally, improved awareness and perceptions of academic advising can be achieved. When considering the delivery model, our findings showed that students were more aware of the role of an AA, took up the opportunities to meet with them more, and had more positive perceptions of the support provided when the academic advising process was embedded in the curriculum. We therefore recommend using an embedded approach to academic advising, where possible.

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