COMPONENTS OF AN ACADEMIC ADVISING PROGRAM STANDARD FOR MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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Academic advising at Malaysian public universities has been in existence for more than three decades. However, different universities have different ways of running their programs. As a result, there is no standard academic advising program available for public universities of Malaysia. This study intends to fill the gap by exploring the expectations of students, advisors and administrators toward academic advising. Using qualitative research approach, the study explores the potential standardized components which can be used for developing a program standard. The findings of this study indicated that while each of the three groups favors the establishment of an academic advising standard, students suggest that the responsibility of advisors be clarified and the technological support be maintained and updated, advisors focus on assessment and rewards as well as staff development. At the same time, administrators focus on the components leadership, staff development, finance and assessment. Their opinions about the components of a future standard showed varying ideas and concepts, the dominant trend being the adaptation of international trends to the local values. The results of the study are expected to contribute to the development of academic advising standards for Malaysian public universities.

INTRODUCTION

Academic Advising (AA) program is a process for promoting intellectual, personal, social and career development of university students. This program is the only planned and structured program available on the campus, where all students have the opportunity for one-to-one interaction with academic advisors appointed by the institutions. Academic advising, at Malaysian public universities, has been in existence for more than three decades. However, different universities have different ways of running their academic advising programs. As a result, there is no academic advising program standard for the public universities of Malaysia. In fact, there is no agreement on the standardized components for developing the academic advising standard, leading to difficulties to evaluate the effectiveness of academic advising programs. Without standards that leads to some problems in academic advising and the result of less benefits for students. In some previous studies, first of all, students usually show their felling in difficult to see the value of AA; Learning and development outcomes from academic advising are unclear in terms of the planning of educational periods and career development (Hussin & Khadijah, 2011; Nor, 2013; Tan, 2011); AA services are less satisfactory to students as compared to other services in campus, due to insufficient support from advisors (Lai, 2011;

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Alavi, 2011). Secondly, advisors come from various paths of professional development. Furthermore, there are no standard criteria of rewarding their work. As a result, they perceive the advising system as weak, and their job as uninteresting and demotivating. Furthermore, although most of the universities in Malaysia express the strength and attractiveness of a diversity of students at both the local and global level, they do so without academic advising guidelines to enhance the quality of advisors (Salleh, 2006; Tan, 2011; Nor, 2013; Salia, 2012); Thirdly for administrators, no standard criteria means no assessment. And they cannot evaluate exactly their academic advising service in comparison with that of other universities. In the lack of standards, managers usually lack the efficient techniques to manage the advising practice, that renders it ineffective in our quickly changing era (Hussin & Khadijah, 2011; Salia, 2012; Ishak & Lezam, 2012).

This study intends to fill the gap by first exploring the expectations of students, advisors, and administrators toward academic advising program standard for public higher education of Malaysia. The potential standardized components will be a priority to explore for using in the development of an academic advising program standard for Malaysian higher education.

ACADEMIC ADVISING STANDARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)

Standards are accepted and established means of determining what something should be. They are concepts or principles established by agreement and used generally as examples/ templates or models to compare or measure the quality or performance of practice or procedure. According to Arminio (2009), standards are published documents setting out specifications and procedures designed to ensure that products, services and systems are safe, reliable and consistently perform the way they are intended to. This means that standards establish a common language which defines quality and safety criteria. While mentioning the quality, the quest for standards and the quest for **values** are somewhat parallel in areas (Geltn, 1989). Administrators and advisors have discovered a valuable way of advising attempt to persuade other advisor of that value (Geltn, 1989).

In many developed countries, standard for academic advising program has been established long time ago and has been playing an important role for academic advisors in understanding standard of good practice in academic advising. Thus, the learning and development outcomes can serve as a benchmark for improving, maintaining and evaluating the academic advising programs as well as enhancing the academic advisors' competencies.

Roles of academic advising standards in Higher Education

Higher education institutions are established and maintained to use academic advising standards and procedures for developing learning and students; quality assurance, and professional integrity (Greenwood, 1984; Campell, 2008, White,

2006). Standards provide a mechanism against which the members of the organizations or profession can judge the quality of their work. Standards also serve as guide that explain expectations to new members and inform faculty members when initiating new programs, enhancing new programs, and accepting new responsibilities. In higher education institutions, standards serve as self-regulatory means for ensuring quality and continuous improvement.

The goals and objectives of academic advising are accomplished and implemented through the organizational structure using the personnel to conduct advising, by using the physical structure in which advising takes place and deciding how the university resources will be used to materialize the stated goals and to establish moral, ethical and educational standards in different fields of study (Lewis, 1990). Many researchers acknowledged the uses of academic advising program standards with enormous benefits for the value of enhancing the quality of students learning and development outcome. Academic advising program standards provide the guideline with clear criteria to ensure the quality of advising process. By following standards, administrators can establish, improve and maintain the assessment of their advising system. At the same time, advisors can use standards in self-assessment and self-study for their professional development, while they do not have time to attend training courses due to being overloaded as lecturers. With standards, advisors can evaluate the academic advising system, especially assess the function of administration as well as other internal organizations in campus in advising process. This enables students and stakeholders to view clearly their learning and development outcomes in the future for planning effectively in each period.

Since academic advising standards were established in developed countries, they have been attractive for many researchers in many ways in both application and theories. For example, in the US, academic advising program standards were initially published by the Council for advancement Standards (CAS) in 1983 and updated in 2005 (White, 2006). Several researches indicated its influences on higher Education. Ratcliffe (2004) found that awareness of the CAS standards in the US has grown throughout the past decades. These efforts illustrated that the standards were being used creatively by different ways but that more institutions needed to know about and utilize them. Marron (2009) discussed how advisors utilized the standards, and reviewed strengths and weaknesses of each approach and how it benefits advisors and students. Zhao (2007) determined the use of standards in evaluation of student affairs divisions in two-year colleges. With the same objectives of the role of standards in program development, Stokes (1992) grew interested in the importance of standards while Nadler and Miller (1997) reviewed the attitudes of chief student-affairs officers toward the standards for ori-entation programs. These studies were continued to Mullendore and Biller' study in 1993 when they identified two methods of standard implementation in relation to orientation

programs, self-assessment guides, and program statements. Recently, other researchers have continued to emphasize the usefulness of standards in enhancing quality of academic advising, standards for orientation and suggestions for applying them to faculty governance-unit ori-entation programs (Miller, 1999); Notably, in 2009, Kelling (2008) implemented the research of *The Influence of the CAS Standards on Academic Advisors and Advising Programs,* his findings indicating that the strength effect on advising process from standards are two main areas, including self-study and program development. Some advisors indicated that it is not easy to apply standards in real work and needed to study standards. Studies of academic advising standards have clarified these previous researches and felt the need to enhance comprehension about the standards of academic advising in regard to administrators, advisors and students in multi ways of practicing. That will also contribute to clarify Bryan and Mullendore's study in 1991, when their finding had listed nine rea-sons for implementing CAS standards within the student affairs profession: program development, accreditation self-study, staff development, com-parisons across institutions, development and enhancement of program credibility, institutional acceptance of programs and departments, educa-tion of the campus community, improved politi-cal maneuverability and budgetary assistance.

Academic advising program standard components in Malaysia

Academic advising has attracted fewer studies than other areas of higher education (Sani, 2012; Rafida, 2010; Wahyuni, 2006). Most of such studies tried to address the problems in academic advising, clarify the causes and giving the solutions. The current academic advising practice needs to be improved in terms of motivation and satisfaction of students, allocated time and human resource as well as assessment and rewards. For example, Lai (2011) & Bakri (2012) mentioned the lowest rate of student satisfaction is toward academic advising, while advisors are overloaded with work as lecturers with teaching, research and publication tasks and without any reward for their advising activity (Nor, 2013, Tan, 2011). The main causes were identified as lack of concern, maintenance and improvement in the management of academic advising (Salleh, 2006). For instance, academic advising needs to include more details in some specific areas such as career guidance, time management and effective communication and study skills (Bakri et al, 2012) because the general concept of academic advising in current practice might be cause of academic advisor' giving poor rate students satisfy (Bakri et al, 2012); advisor staff needs to teach courses or guideline about academic advising; (Nor, 2013; Tan, 2011; Abdullah, 2012). Moreover, the prescriptive style of current practice need to change into developmental style (Abdullah, 2012). Solutions to improve academic advising were mentioned in mainly into two areas, namely, enhancing the quality of advisors and maintaining the advising system with more

support by technology. For example, Salleh (2006) introduced a framework for academic advising which was designed based on five main components comprising orientation and motivation programs, student support, engineering related enrichment activities, and outcome based education. Student Academic Monitoring System (SAMOS) is designed to monitor and tabulate student performance automatically for each student semester by semester (Salia, Faridah & Mohd, 2012). It was suggested that the university enhances the perspective of academic advising and applies an academic advising system to improve the quality the existing "mentoring system" that has drawn many complaints (Hussin & Tuah, 2007).

Additionally, the importance of technology support for the academic advising system was highlighted by a number of studies (Ishak & Lezam, 2012; Annamalai *et al.*, 2012). It was assumed that the IT mentoring system can effectively support academic advisors and administrators in the management of HEIs (Annamalai *et al.,* 2012). This finding indicates that technology plays an important role in improving the quality of academic advising. Furthermore, the role of advisors in academic advising was emphasized and the importance of training effectively was highlighted by Nor (2013) and Tan (2011). However, the above studies did not focus on student learning and development outcomes from the academic advising process, nor on the evaluation of academic advising. This research attempted to fill this gap through finding the components for developing an academic advising program standard.

In many developed countries standards of academic advising program are important to academic advisors for the understanding what the standards of good practice are. In order to practice their roles effectively, they must know about quality issues in academic advising (Jacoby & Dean, 2010). This is important not only for the advisees or students to know what to expect from their academic advisors but also for the academic advisors who can use benchmark to assess whether they are doing good work. In this regard, standards provide such benchmark, and their utility can be evaluated, in part, by the degree of their acceptance. In Malaysia, academic advising is considered as an extra- work for lecturers who are usually overloaded with teaching, research, publications and so on. To think of academic advising standards for Malaysian higher education may seem so difficult to achieve, however, this is necessary for study to explore ideas and effective solutions for the young generation development through advising process.

METHODS

Research Design

This study is based on a qualitative interview research that was conducted with different players of academic advising activity, such as administrators, advisors

and students in different public universities in Malaysia. The semi-structured interviews covered the participants' experiences and expectations about the academic advising standard components. The interview protocol was developed by the researchers due to the lack of any previous instrument applicable in the Malaysian context. Each interview session was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Participants and Procedure

The sample included fifteen students, six advisors and three administrators at three public universities. These are UTM in Johor, UM in Kuala Lumpur and USM in Penang. The students were selected based on purposive sampling, and advisors and administrators were selected by using expert sampling technique.

Research Questions

The in-depth interview was conducted to answer the following questions:

What are the components needed to develop academic advising program standards for public universities in Malaysian higher education?

Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analyzed in the form of thematic analysis using NVivo10. The components were derived from the data by analyzing the opinions and criteria mentioned by the participating students, advisors and administrators.

Since very little previous information is available about the Malaysian advising standards, it was necessary to identify the main trends and issues related to the local practice from the interview data. Therefore, the researchers chose to conduct data-driven thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

Students

Currently, students enroll to higher education with much hope for a future life of professional work and respect. They need to get maximum benefits from academic advising to achieve timely and successful graduation. Therefore, students' opinions of the component for developing academic advising program standard is related to what students need. Most of their views focus on a hope to have a standard with includes 1) a clear mission and program, 2) high quality advisor staff, as well as 3) modern & convenient technology and effective assessment. In detail, they need to know what outcomes they will achieve through the advising process, including academics, social issues, personality and career development. Secondly, the advisors' responsibilities need to be clarified to ensure enough time to meet the students and communicate with them in polite manners in a comfortable venue. The technological element attracted the students not only

for its interactivity but also for its potential to save time by enabling distance communication.

- AAP Standards must indicate clearly of what the goals of academic advising for students know.
- I think that the main purpose of academic advising is assistance of academic for students must be descriptive clear in standard.
- Advisors should help students in choose the good course in academic, share some students problems in study and life, introduce students in exchange program or take the fellowship for study outside.
- Students need the good job in the futures so advisors should help them.

a. Advisors responsibilities

- The guideline should be written clearly about the roles / responsibilities/ tasks of advisors. Students need advisors enough time to see and discuss; let students talk and share what problems.
- I hope advisors should help more and more when students need and not dominate of discussion and let final decision for students or only signed the forms.

b. Technology

- I think the element of technology should be concern in this modern life in campus.
- Advising system must be improve and maintain for convenient in support students.
- I usually contact to my advisors by phone, emails, face book…it is easier to share and get good advices

c. Assessment

- It is necessary for student allow evaluating their advisors. The feedback from students can be used for their advisors concern and improving their work.
- It is difficult to evaluate of advisors but in some cases it should be done for students show their opinions
- The rewards should be given for good advisors because they work hard for students success.

Advisors

With the high work load in higher education environment by teaching, researching, publication, Advisors perspective toward academic advising as extra work in

Malaysia. However, most of them assumed the benefits and value of their work in advising process for students satisfy, development and success. Related to the hope for a good standards/ guideline, they concern more about 1) clear mission and good program/ high motivation of students, 3) good technology system; 4) clear criteria in assessment and reward; 5) enough money. That will be explain clearly by detail following ideas:

- Standards need to show clear what outcome in academic advising program
- I think that academic procedure should be priority to advice students. They need to know how they can get degree and how they have enough cognitive, skills and attitude in their career in the future
- Advisors should help all what students need, even personality and social skills. They need to know all what happen around students and stakeholders requirements for students satisfy and need to be trust with students.

a. Students responsibilities

- Students must know what are responsibilities in their meeting in advising process.
- Students should know how they can get good advices form advisors though their respect and trust together.
- They need to improving and development by practicing replace of need the signed in the form for administration requirements.

b. Technology

- Manager should maintain and improving the advising system in universities for convenient and more benefits to both of students and advisors
- Apply good technology will bring effective assistance in busy condition in today.
- Clear evidence from technology makes advisors and students work more strict and effective.

c. Assessment

- Up to now, there is no assessment of advising in universities in Malaysia, that is inequality compare with another works.
- No rewards no encourage or motivate of advisors work well in advising process
- It seems less value of academic advising when no assessment
- Assessment should be concerned when manage need to improve the quality.

Administrators

With high pressure of ranking to take the high level in the universities map in Malaysia, administrators usually have far view for sustainable development in multi sides of higher education. Standard of advising for ensure quality of students learning and development and advisor development have perspective in most of interviews. In order to have good component to develop academic advising program standards, following criteria have been mentioned by them. They are include of 1) Mission/ program; advisors and students responsibilities; 3) Good leadership; 4) staff development; 5) Good technology system; 6) effective assessment; 7) Finance.

a) **Goals/ mission**

- We must put the mission of academic advising clearly for students, advisors, and stakeholder to look and work for reach goals
- What content of academic advising need be show detail and guide how to work
- All areas of academic, social, personality, and career must mention in advising program

b) **Responsibilities of advisors and student**

- The best is advisors and students should be share their responsibilities
- Roles and functions of advisors and students need be clear

c) **Leadership**

- Running of academic advising system in HE need to plan, action, checking and assessment.
- Leader perspective of the benefits of academic advising is very important in establish standards.

d) **Technology**

- We need to provide a good technology system for students and advisors to make them satisfy and convenient.
- Technological support us in assessment and get evidences from advising process.
- Technology cannot lack of for a good advising system.

e) **Assessment**

- It is necessary for get feedback and improve advising process.
- It maybe give trouble to advisors when they loadwork but it necessary for sustainable development of academic advising system.

- We can look different sides and different opinions from advisors, and students.

f) Finance

- If lack of money, all to be difficult in implement.
- Maintain technology need much money
- Rewards for advisors are necessary but it depend on money

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicated that each of three groups favors the establishment of an academic advising standard in the Malaysian higher education, with an emphasis on the components mission, program, advisors development, technology and assessment. However, the importance of the above criteria varies between the three groups. While students suggest that the responsibility of advisors be clarified and the technological support be maintained and updated, advisors focus on assessment and rewards as well as staff development. At the same time, administrators focus on the components leadership, staff development, finance and assessment. Their opinions about the components of a future standard showed varying ideas and concepts, the dominant trend being the adaptation of international trends to the local values.

CONCLUSION

Administrators, advisors and students agreed in the importance of establishing an academic advising standard in Malaysian higher education, though their level of satisfaction with the current practice is varying. At the same time, they expressed the desire of a unique model for Malaysian Higher education, which is compatible with both the local and global values and demands. The potential component of academic advising standards for public universities are mentioned of 1) Mission, 2) program, 3) Advisor staff development; 5) Technology; 6) Finance; 7) Assessment. The establishment of a Malaysian standard is viewed as beneficial by each group of respondents to simplify the planning, implementation and assessment of advising, while setting the outcome targets is deemed to be essential in motivating and inspiring and guiding all actors throughout the advisory process. It is also assumed by the respondents, that the establishment of a standardized practice would clarify the roles of both students and advisors. Moreover, it would help build respect for the advising activity among the students.

Further research may explore and critically assess the evolution of advisory activity in such countries that have recently implemented similar policies as the ones desired in Malaysia. This sort of research evidence would be useful for cross-country comparison and the exchange of ideas, strategies and good practices. The

finding can be used to develop academic advising program standards for public universities in Malaysia.

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