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# Underestimating the relationship between academic advising and attainment: a case study in practice

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8 **Academic advising: advising<sub>1</sub>, attainment<sub>2</sub>, tutoring<sub>3</sub>, success, achievement, higher education.**

## 9 **Executive Summary**

10 The Higher Education Academy (2015) highlighted attainment alongside access, retention and  
11 progression as key areas of foci in order to fulfill the aspiration to provide all students with the  
12 opportunities and support required to succeed in Higher Education (HE). Although previous research  
13 into academic advising has focused on the impact upon student satisfaction and retention, the impact  
14 upon attainment is underexplored. This research aims to explore the extent of the relationship  
15 between advising and attainment and answers the call by bodies such as Advance HE (formerly the  
16 Higher Education Academy) to recognise that academic advising is vital to student success.

17 This research provides a contribution to the body of knowledge around academic advising, in the  
18 form of a case study undertaken to identify the impact of academic advising on student attainment at  
19 Sheffield Hallam University. A focus group and questionnaire were employed to gather data from  
20 final year undergraduate students at Sheffield Hallam University. Findings indicate that the impact of  
21 academic advising on attainment is both explicit and implicit, with support in areas beyond academic  
22 studies having a significant impact on student experiences. In addition this research also questions  
23 the perceived meanings of attainment in HE and proposes that attainment should be viewed as  
24 holistic attainment whereby students are developed as a whole, better enabling them to deal with the  
25 HE environment and beyond rather than being limited to academic numerical attainment.

## 26 **Introduction: the changing HE environment**

27 Advising and tutoring have long been seen as critical to student success, persistence and retention  
28 (Drake, 2011). However, the impact of academic advising on attainment, has often been  
29 overshadowed by a focus on the process and models of advising and student satisfaction rather than  
30 the wider impact that it can have (Campbell and Nutt, 2008; Hemwall and Trachte, 2003; Light,  
31 2001; Propp and Rhodes, 2006).

32 Alongside this the Higher Education (HE) environment is changing. Societal shifts towards a  
33 consumer led society are resulting in some students behaving as consumers and equally, some  
34 universities perceiving students as consumers (Woodhall, Hiller and Resnick, 2014). Impacts include

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35 the marketisation and massification of HE (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2011; (Tight, 2017)  
36 with universities focusing on student attainment (The Higher Education Academy (2015) and  
37 employability (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015) in order to satisfy student aspirations and expectations. With  
38 this, many HE institutions are reviewing their approach and model of advising, viewing a  
39 personalised approach to learning and support as critical to the success of the student and overall  
40 strategy of the university. Sheffield Hallam University has undertaken a number of reviews of  
41 academic advising from 2015 to present with an increasing emphasis on the value of academic  
42 advising. As strategic emphasis grows, this case study aims to give an insight into the extent of the  
43 relationship between advising and attainment and identify the critical success factors in achieving  
44 high quality and effective advising.

45 A case study of the advising approach being implemented by Sheffield Business School at Sheffield  
46 Hallam University shall be utilised. This will facilitate an examination of the features of academic  
47 advising delivery and the impact upon student attainment. Research was undertaken with final year  
48 undergraduate students in Sheffield Business School in an attempt to understand the student  
49 perspective on the role of advising and attainment.

### 50 **Models of Advising**

51 Academic Advising implies a singular purpose, to advise students on academic matters, yet  
52 descriptions of multiple definitions extend the role beyond this. Gordon, Habley and Grites (2008,  
53 p524) define academic advising as:

54 *"a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student*  
55 *learning outcomes. Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes students' educational*  
56 *experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities and lives to extend learning*  
57 *beyond campus boundaries and timeframes".*

58 In essence good advising should help students understand the HE environment in which they are  
59 operating and aid identification of skills to enable them to manage their own learning and future  
60 aspirations. Cuseo (nd) supports these assertions by defining an academic advisor as the individual  
61 who:

62 *"helps students become more self-aware of their distinctive interests, talents, values, and*  
63 *priorities; who enables students to see the 'connection' between their present academic*  
64 *experience and their future life plans; who helps students discover their potential, purpose,*  
65 *and passion; who broadens students' perspectives with respect to their personal life choices,*  
66 *and sharpens their cognitive skills for making these choices, such as effective problem-*  
67 *solving, critical thinking, and reflective decision-making"* (Cuseo, nd, p15)

68 What is clear is that high quality advising goes well beyond support related to academic issues and  
69 has the potential to build social and emotional wellbeing, future employability and the development  
70 of a collegial working environment (Small, 2013). Similarly, Drake (2011) highlights the importance  
71 of advisers in not only guiding students through their academic journey but also in supporting  
72 decisions about their future careers. What emerges in this approach is the notion of advisors as what  
73 Strayhorn (2015) terms cultural navigators. These are individuals who are able to assist socialisation  
74 into the HE environment, aid with the navigation of the higher education maze including developing

75 the academic skills and knowledge to succeed and guiding them to make thoughtful decisions about  
76 future careers (Drake, 2011).

77 Previous research into advising and tutoring has focused on a number of different strands and foci.  
78 Some research compares staff commitment to the role (Stephens et al 2008), whilst others compare  
79 the position of the tutor in relation to curriculum and professional support services and advisors  
80 (Laycock and Wisdom, 2009; Earwaker, 1992; Wheeler & Birtle, 1993). Others have taken a  
81 historical perspective and traced the progression from the Oxbridge Tutor (Ashwin, 2005) to Personal  
82 Development Tutor (Strivens, 2006). The commonality here is a focus on the process of advising  
83 rather than the impact. One of the first models to draw links between institutional features such as  
84 academic advising and student outcomes was Tinto's (2007) model in which Tinto identified the  
85 relationship between the HE institution (HEI) and the student as a defining factor in student  
86 achievement. Habley (2004) clarifies this further by stating that academic advising is one area that  
87 institutions can utilise to formalise and integrate quality exchanges between students and the  
88 academic environment.

89 The formalisation of academic advising manifests in a number of ways, from prescriptive advising in  
90 which the emphasis of responsibility falls on the advisor to developmental advising where there is a  
91 focus on the student's needs as a whole (Earl, 1988). A middle ground can be seen with Glennan's  
92 (1976) Proactive Advising in which Glennan sought to blend advising and counselling through the  
93 preemptive provision of information before students requested it whilst also developing relationships  
94 with students. Practice within the case study of Sheffield Business School has predominantly been a  
95 professional services model (Earwaker, 1992), with Academic and Professional Advising seen as  
96 external to the curriculum in line with Glennan's (1976) Intrusive Advising model in which tutors  
97 initiate contact with students at critical points throughout their time at university. Perhaps reflective  
98 of the changing nature of HE, the 2017/2018 academic year saw development towards a more  
99 integrated approach with advising incorporated into the curriculum through a strand in employability  
100 focused modules at each level.

### 101 **Advising and attainment**

102 Attainment is defined as 'cumulative achievements in HE and level of degree-class award' which are  
103 enabled through data driven practice, engendering high student expectations and promoting peer led  
104 learning (The Higher Education Academy, 2015). Similarly, The Office for Students (2020) defines  
105 attainment as the higher education outcomes achieved by students, such as the classes of degree  
106 awarded. Although in the advising literature, the term 'student success' could be linked to attainment,  
107 it is often discussed in relation to retention and progression rather than academic attainment (Yorke  
108 and Longden, 2004). As such there is limited connection between the two concepts of advising and  
109 attainment, with only an inference of a connection in The Higher Education Academy report (2015,  
110 p1):

111 *Students' sense of belonging, partnership and inclusion are essential for achieving these*  
112 *aims, requiring a culture which promotes and enables the full and equitable participation of*  
113 *all students in HE*

114 So far the literature on advising has highlighted the importance of academic advising in facilitating  
115 exchanges between the academic environment and students and identified the role that good advising  
116 plays in relation to understanding the HE environment, facilitation of skill identification and future

## **Underestimating the relationship between academic advising and attainment: a case study in practice**

117 employability support but what are the impacts of these interactions on attainment? A review of the  
118 current literature highlights limited knowledge of the impact of advising on attainment. To date, the  
119 literature has focused on three key streams in relation to advising impact: student success, persistence  
120 and retention (Drake, 2011).

121 The empirical research of Hawthorne and Young (2010) found that satisfaction with advisors and  
122 support provided by the institution significantly influenced satisfaction with the educational  
123 environment and in turn impacted upon student intentions to persist and complete their educational  
124 qualifications. These findings were replicated in Shelton's (2003) study whereby a direct correlation  
125 between perceived level of support and retention and success was recognised. Unpicking this further,  
126 Young-Jones et al. (2013) identified that the perceived level of institutional support was influenced  
127 by the frequency of student and advisor support which led to higher student self-efficacy and study  
128 skill utilisation. The idea of self-efficacy development is an interesting one which places ownership  
129 strongly with the student and indeed, NACADA defines advising as "a decision-making process  
130 during which students themselves reach their own academic potential through a communication and  
131 information exchange with an academic advisor" (Drake, 2011, p5).

132 Having examined four decades of research on student persistence, Drake (2011) identifies three  
133 critical interventions which ultimately link to both persistence and retention: connecting students to  
134 the institution early in their HE journey, a rigorous first year academic advising program which  
135 enables learning communities and solid academic advising. Within this there is consensus that the  
136 component parts of these interventions including supporting skill identification and skill building, the  
137 development of student self-efficacy, educating and socialising the student into the HE environment  
138 and the broadening of employability horizons (see Cuseo, nd; Drake, 2011; Gordon, Habley and  
139 Grites, 2008; Shelton, 2003), all impact upon student success (Young-Jones et al., 2013) which could  
140 by extension include attainment but such links have yet to be fully explored.

141 Various authors who discuss attainment view this as 'educational' attainment and also more broadly  
142 refer to academic achievement linked with the process of progressing through all schooling levels  
143 (Novo and Calixto, 2009; Bahr, 2018). Other authors also discuss the development of 'intellectual  
144 attainment' empowering the learning through critical understanding (Cannan, 2010) and Ning and  
145 Downing (2012) refer to attainment in terms of academic performance in which the student learning  
146 experience and environment are critical to success. More contemporary literature explores student  
147 attainment as complex and multifaceted by looking at how it is shaped by different, often competing,  
148 agendas and vested interests (Steventon, Cureton and Clouder, 2016). Yet limited literature  
149 suggests 'how' and indeed if, academic advising has an impact on student attainment. So, whilst  
150 there is no question as to the imperative value of good quality academic advising; instead this  
151 research has been borne out of the institutional need to examine whether there is a correlation  
152 between academic advising and attainment.

### **153 Methodology**

#### **154 The case study: Context of Advising at Sheffield Business School**

155 In recent years, Sheffield Hallam University has seen a number of iterations of academic advising as  
156 the value of advising has been increasingly recognised and the university has sought the most  
157 effective strategy. In 2015 the Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) Academic and Professional

## Underestimating the relationship between academic advising and attainment

158 Advice Framework (2015) outlined three major strands to academic advising to be undertaken by  
159 academics in the role:

160 i. Pastoral support including social orientation

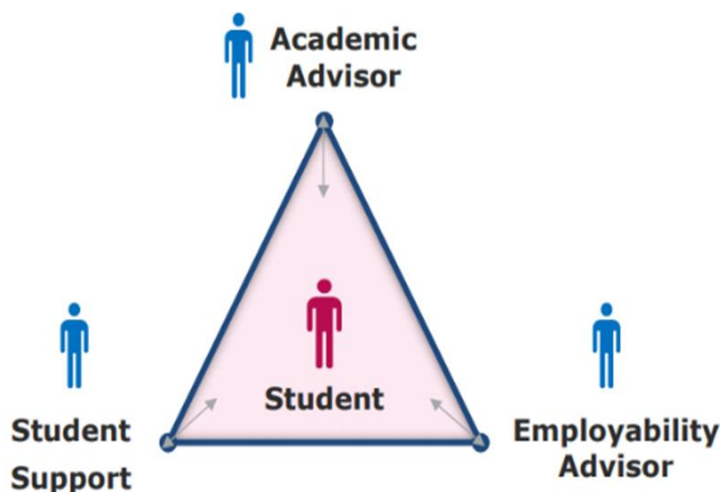
161 ii. Academic advice including student academic development

162 iii. Careers / placement support

163 Yet, contrasting policies and practices were seen across the university generating inconsistencies in  
164 approaches. In Sheffield Business School (SBS), the focus of this study, the SBS Academic Advisor  
165 Role Guide (Sheffield Business School, 2017) outlined the focus of the role as supporting students  
166 with planning their personal development in relation to their academic and employability skills with  
167 the pastoral support of the SHU Academic and Professional Advice Framework (2015) notably  
168 absent. Following further review, the parameters of the academic advisor role at the time of the study  
169 had evolved once more to a focus on supporting students in relation to their academic studies  
170 (Sheffield Business School, 2017), with pastoral and employability support having been separated  
171 and assigned to professional services staff as Student Support Advisors and Employability Advisors  
172 (see Figure 1). The exception to this model is that during the second year of student study, there is an  
173 additional focus on supporting students with their search for a work placement including the  
174 academic advisor acting as a referee and giving CV guidance.  
175

176 **Figure 1: Sheffield Business School Model of Student Support 2017**

177



188

189

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191

192 Such an approach differs to the encompassing approach identified in the literature whereby academic  
193 advisor support, carried out by the academic, includes academic, pastoral and employability support  
194 (see Cuseo, nd and Gordon, Habley and Grites, 2008). This case study aims to understand the impact  
195 of the splitting up of the traditional advising role elements and explore whether there is a correlation  
196 between academic advising and attainment. The research was undertaken by two academics in the  
197 department of Service Sector Management and an independently recruited student Research Assistant  
198 from another faculty in the university as part of a university funded pedagogic project into the role of  
199 academic advising and attainment.

200 **Participants**

201 This study has focused on seven final year undergraduate students studying in the Service Sector  
202 Management Department within Sheffield Business School at Sheffield Hallam University. Final  
203 year students were chosen based on their length of time at the university and their experience of  
204 academic advising as recipients. Furthermore, the third year of university is typically the most  
205 academically intensive for them; focusing on final year students also allowed the study to consider  
206 academic attainment at earlier levels alongside their final classification.

207  
208 The students were recruited through the university's virtual learning environment platform to enable  
209 access to final year students across the department. Self-selecting sampling was applied for this  
210 project as the students identified themselves as willing to take part in the research (Saunders and  
211 Lewis, 2012; Matthews and Ross, 2010). This is a highly effective method of non-probability  
212 sampling due to the relevancy of the cases (individuals); the participants are committed to the  
213 research and overall, this method reduces the recruitment process (Veal, 2011). There are limitations  
214 which were taken into consideration, such as the inherent bias the participants may have, as they  
215 want to 'voice' their views on the research topic which could lead to the sample not being a true  
216 representation of the research population. This study involving human participants was reviewed and  
217 approved by Sheffield Hallam University ethics panel. The participants provided their written  
218 informed consent to participate in this study and for the publication of their verbatim quotations.

219  
220

221 **Research methods**

222 A focus group was selected as the main data collection method, to elicit a deeper understanding of  
223 the student's perceptions of academic advisors, a common and familiar topic amongst the student  
224 group (Collis and Hussey, 2014, Denscombe, 2010). The main advantages of focus groups are: they  
225 are useful to obtain detailed information about personal and group feelings, perceptions and opinion;  
226 in addition they can save time compared to individual interviews, furthermore providing a broader  
227 range of information (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). That said a particular disadvantage of a  
228 focus group is the possibility that the members may not express their honest and personal opinions  
229 about the topic at hand (Matthews and Ross, 2010).

230  
231 A set of focus group questions and prompts were created using the NUS Academic Support  
232 Benchmarking Tool (2015) as a basis. These were divided into four categories relating to the aims of  
233 this study. These categories were: a) Frequency and Nature of Contact, b) Academic Advice, c)  
234 Support services, and d) General questions. To complement the focus group, a simple 10 question  
235 survey was also administered to gain some general background to the frequency, nature and context  
236 of the support received (see appendix 1 for Survey and Focus Group Questions). This brief  
237 questionnaire was a meaningful tool in allowing us to gain a basic understanding of each  
238 participant's experience with their academic advisor (Neuman, 2011). Furthermore, as this was  
239 completed privately by participants before the start of the focus group, it meant that students who  
240 may not have been as comfortable sharing their experiences in front of the group could still provide  
241 details of their experiences (Collis and Hussey, 2014) counterbalancing potential disadvantages of  
242 focus groups. The questionnaires were anonymised by asking students to provide their student ID as  
243 a means of identification during data analysis.

244  
245 All research participants completed both the survey and focus group in a two hour session held  
246 outside of course teaching. Seven students took part with a cross section of students from each of the

247 four subject areas in the Service Sector Department (Food, Hospitality, Events and Tourism). The  
248 session was held in a boardroom on the university campus to ensure privacy for the participants. To  
249 further encourage participants to openly discuss their experiences without the presence of an  
250 academic advisor from their department (who they may have had an academic advising relationship  
251 with), the session was run by a Research Assistant (RA) that had no affiliation with the department.  
252

253 The facilitation of the group is critical to the success of focus groups, with the facilitator viewed  
254 more as a choreographer of the content (Matthews and Ross, 2010) encouraging the participants to  
255 'perform' by expressing their point of view to each other (Denscombe, 2010; Collis and Hussey,  
256 2012). During the focus group, the RA verbally posed each question and participants were invited to  
257 discuss their views. Clarification on points was sought where necessary, and simple reinforcement  
258 and encouragement provided throughout to ensure the discussions remained focused on the topics  
259 (Matthews and Ross, 2010). The RA also encouraged students to engage and share their views if they  
260 displayed any signs of disengagement at any point. Occasionally, in cases where it was deemed  
261 appropriate for the study, the RA asked specific follow up questions after students had contributed a  
262 point in order to gain deeper meaning of the students experience, probing further but not leading the  
263 conversation which can often be viewed as a limitation of focus groups and the role of facilitators  
264 (Collis and Hussey, 2014; Matthews and Ross, 2010).  
265

266 Following the focus group, the data was independently transcribed and anonymised prior to the  
267 academics leading the project receiving it to further protect the privacy of the participants involved.  
268 What follows is an overview of the research findings and discussion in relation to the student  
269 perceptions of the role of academic advising.  
270

### 271 **Findings and discussion**

272 This study addressed the perceived relationship between academic advising and academic attainment  
273 in a group of third year students. In recent years there has been increased recognition of the  
274 importance of non-academic support provided by academic advisors to students, such as assistance  
275 with employability and the provision of social and emotional support (Small, 2013). The findings  
276 highlight the expectations students have of their advisors and the diversity in student academic  
277 advising experiences. Despite the model of advising followed in Sheffield Business School in which  
278 the focus of academic advising is on supporting students with their academic studies three key  
279 strands were identified from the data in relation to student perceptions of what the advising role  
280 encompasses: academic support, pastoral support and employability support. This is in line with  
281 previous research into academic advising (see Cuseo, nd; Drake, 2011; Small, 2013) but it is through  
282 these strands and the stories told that we are able to unpick whether there is a relationship between  
283 advising and attainment which to date has not been fully explored.

### 284 **Academic Support and attainment:**

285 As Habley (2004) stated, academic advising is one area in which the institution can enable quality  
286 exchanges between the students and the academic environment. Thomas and McFarlane (2018) go  
287 further to state that the true work of academic advisors is focused exclusively on student learning.  
288 With Sheffield Business School placing academic support at the heart of the academic advising role  
289 and professional services taking responsibility for pastoral and employability support; it is not  
290 surprising that academic support emerged as one of the main areas that students expected support.  
291 Participants defined such academic support as "*assistance with understanding course material; and*



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292 *support with staff/student relationships"* (All respondents). Within this, aspects of academic life  
293 discussed included course structure, predicted grades, performance on modules, academic goals for  
294 the semester, strengths and weaknesses, and aspirations for the future. In many ways this takes us  
295 back to NACADA's definition of Academic Advising being 'a series of interactions' that cover all  
296 aspects of university life (Drake, 2011).

297 Some students felt that the support they received from their academic advisor was tailored to them  
298 and their aspirations; whilst others argued that they felt support was "*generic*". Students reporting  
299 the latter stated that their academic advisor met them in groups, rather than on a one to one basis.  
300 Although Battin (2014) indicated the potential for group advising seminars to be an effective and  
301 efficient method of advising the students who partook in this study appear to prefer the more  
302 traditional individual models of advising, particularly in the final year of study. Overall, there was an  
303 agreement amongst the participants that whether the support was tailored was based on the advisor's  
304 temperament and interpersonal skills. Haley (2016) supports this by stating that to be an effective  
305 academic advisor, individuals must care about their students and have the ability to interact with  
306 them yet the massification of HE has created a pressure to enhance the 'university offer'. For many  
307 HEI's, including Sheffield Hallam University, this has resulted in the formalisation of the advising  
308 role which includes the introduction of group as well as individual meetings (McFarlane, 2016).

309 With regards to attainment some students felt their academic advisor was sufficiently informed of  
310 their academic attainment such as grades and that advisors asked questions during sessions which  
311 gave them further insight into students' achievements. However, some felt that there was a lack of  
312 consistency in support with a lack of follow up when attainment issues were raised in meetings.  
313 Collectively, based on their experience's students felt that their academic advisor was not always the  
314 best point of contact to discuss 'academic issues' due to the fact that they often lack sufficient  
315 knowledge about modules led by other members of staff. Similarly, when asked whether they felt  
316 that their advisor was helping them to reach their full potential at university there was a general  
317 agreement that academic advisors were not perceived as supporting in "*uplifting grades, helping*  
318 *achievement in assessments, or supporting with course material*". The need for tangible rewards such  
319 as impact on grades needs to be understood in the context of a society of 'want it and want it now'  
320 where instant gratification is preferred (Hall, 2011; Smith, 1989) and the increase in university fees  
321 has amplified student expectations (Budd, 2017).

322 Although McFarlane (2016) states that an essential part of advising is to keep the conversations  
323 going, the emphasis in this study appears to be on the academic advisor leading and initiating the  
324 conversations with students. Conversely, Young-Jones et al. (2013) place the responsibility on the  
325 students to keep the academic advising conversation going and those with stronger study skills and  
326 higher self-efficacy more likely to engage in, and see the tangible and intangible benefits of such  
327 activity. Indeed, several of the participants within this study did reflect beyond the tangible impacts  
328 of advising to acknowledge that the emotional guidance received from an academic advisor did  
329 support academic attainment and thus underpins the idea of seeing attainment from a more holistic  
330 perspective. Some students reported that their advisor played a key role in keeping them focused and  
331 helping them to remember their goal during periods of stress. By acting as a buffer against stress,  
332 some students reported coming away from meetings feeling "*refreshed, inspired and motivated*".  
333 This supports NACADA's definition of advising as "a decision-making process during which  
334 students themselves reach their own academic potential through a communication and information  
335 exchange with an academic advisor" (Drake, 2011, p5). Here, the student takes ownership of their

336 own learning experience and the advisor facilitates "the students rational processes, environmental  
337 and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness and problem-solving" (Crookston, 1994 and  
338 2009).

339 Although the focus of the academic advisor role at Sheffield Hallam University is on supporting  
340 students with their academic studies, most students reported that they did not feel that their academic  
341 advisor was the best point of contact for "academic purposes" and that instead there was other greater  
342 value in the academic advising relationship. This supports Drake's (2011) discussions that although  
343 academic advising has long been seen as critical to student success, persistence and retention; it goes  
344 beyond supporting academic studies and is about 'building relationships with our students, locating  
345 places where they get disconnected, and helping them get reconnected' (Drake, 2011, p8).

### 346 **Pastoral support**

347 In addition to academic support, pastoral support is seen to be an integral part to the students  
348 experience in HE (Cahill, Bowyer, and Murray, 2014). Although the Sheffield Business School  
349 policy states that academic advisors are there to support students on academic and professional  
350 matters and that Student Support Advisors and associated services provide support on pastoral  
351 matters (See Figure 1), the importance of pastoral support from the academic advisor was evidenced  
352 in the data collected. Quantitative data from the questionnaire showed that all students, regardless of  
353 whether they had a positive or negative relationship with their advisor, felt that having an academic  
354 advisor at university was important. When asked to discuss this further during the focus group, the  
355 students expressed that this importance was largely for pastoral reasons with one student summing  
356 this up by stating: *"It might be worth changing the name from 'Academic Advisor' to 'Academic and  
357 Welfare Advisor.'"*

358 This supports the predominant view shared by the participants that the academic advisors were often  
359 a first point of contact for any personal issues they were facing. With students facing increasing  
360 pressures of balancing living, studying and working, universities are becoming a 'melting pot' of  
361 critical incidents that often culminate in personal issues. Academic challenges, increased  
362 responsibilities and living away from home added to the fact that 75% of mental health problems are  
363 established by the age of 24 (Mental Health Foundation, 2018), has led to 1 in 5 young adults  
364 suffering from a mental illness and 20% of students being treated for a mental illness (Skyland Trail,  
365 2018).

366 The majority of participants expressed satisfaction with the relationship they had with their academic  
367 advisor and reported various examples of the pastoral support which they received including support  
368 with motivation during stressful periods, helping achieve a work life balance and discussing personal  
369 and health related issues. One student reported that *"I was in hospital and I had an exam, and my  
370 academic advisor was trying to get an extension for me."* whilst another reported further pastoral  
371 support *"I approached her by email, and we were talking for 2 hours, about personal stuff"*.

372 Despite institutional protocol being to refer students on to appropriate support services, there is  
373 evidence that many students are turning, and returning to academic advisors over the course of time  
374 in part due to the relationships of trust that they have built (Heikkila and McGill, 2015; Hybels and  
375 Weaver, 2009; Sims, 2013) and also in part due to the time lag between referral and the receipt of  
376 further support from wellbeing services (Buchan 2018). What is not being disputed in this research is  
377 the value of the professional service in supporting students but that the simplicity of the referral

378 system does not reflect the complexity of many student issues. The outcome of this is that the  
379 academics continue to undertake the three aspects of advising outlined in the literature including  
380 pastoral care (see Drake, 2011 and Small, 2013).

381 However, others felt disconnected with their advisors stating that “*All he does is send me to other*  
382 *people!*”. This raises a critical issue in the role of the advisor whereby there is a delicate balance  
383 between failing to build a relationship of trust which fosters the ongoing conversations that are so  
384 important (McFarlane, 2016) and stepping into a role in which advisors are not trained to do. Despite  
385 evidence of academics 'bridging the gap' between support services, this is not a pre-requisite of the  
386 role and academic advisors need knowledge of centralised support services is key and to be sensitive  
387 when referring students on to other services so as not to be passing them on and remaining  
388 compassionate (Grant, 2006).

389 A further aspect relates to the way student feel acknowledged and integrated within university,  
390 especially in providing a smooth transition from pre-university life. This aligns with Straythorn's  
391 (2015) concept of cultural navigators in which academic advisors play a key role in socialising  
392 students into the HE environment and creating a sense of belonging. This integrative approach should  
393 not be underestimated in terms of academic advising as students can often be ill-equipped to deal  
394 with the HE environment and the multiple demands of living away from home, managing workload  
395 and working. As such academic advising needs to reflect these individual needs (Thomas and  
396 Hixenbaugh, 2006). Not uncommon is the support that students require not only to operate in the  
397 university environment but also the professional environment whether that be undertaking work  
398 experience or attending an industry event. One student reflected upon the support given to them  
399 during their work placement:

400 *"During my placement year, I was feeling quite homesick, and I mentioned this in a Skype*  
401 *group session with my academic advisor. And she asked me to move the laptop somewhere*  
402 *more private so she could talk to me about how I was feeling.- She helped me keep my goal in*  
403 *sight"*

404 The provision of such a responsive and supportive advising environment can do much to enhance the  
405 student experience. Through identifying and overcoming problems, advisors are able to help improve  
406 retention, progression and completion and in turn increase attainment.

#### 407 **Employability support**

408 In line with the literature, the data supports the role that academic advisors play in supporting student  
409 employability skills and guiding career decisions (see Cuseo, nd, Drake, 2011 and Gordon, Habley  
410 and Grites, 2008). The importance of this area of support is highlighted by Lynch and Lungrin (2018)  
411 who state that career opportunities after graduation remain one of the top concerns for students.

412 The participants of this study outlined employability support as encompassing guidance with writing  
413 job applications, succeeding in interviews and providing references. Students also felt that the  
414 academic advisor should be someone who can mentor them in professional skills through being an  
415 individual who has relevant industry work experience. Although mentoring has been proven to have  
416 a positive impact upon student success (see Foen, Confessore, Abdullah, 2012), just as with pastoral  
417 support, academic advisors are often not trained in this capacity and therefore such a student

418 expectation is not always attainable. Academic advisors are, as we have seen, positioned as the face  
419 of the university and play a vital role in linking the student and the institution (Habley, 2004).  
420 However, they are not intended to be the end point of the support process and instead are the start in  
421 which they play a vital role in signposting students to other specialist services including  
422 employability support. Despite some students reporting expectations for employability support to be  
423 delivered by the academic advisor, many students reported great value in being directed to other  
424 support offers, as illustrated by this response:

425 *My academic advisor referred me to the careers service which I knew about but I didn't know*  
426 *some of the services that they offered, we did psychometric testing and assessment day*  
427 *simulations, I thought they just give you blanket advice on what to do in those situations, not*  
428 *actually run through them. And my academic advisor highlighted that to me.*

429 Here, a knowledgeable academic advisor was able to effectively signpost a student to a further  
430 support service and generate a positive student experience which will hopefully lead to long term  
431 career success. Although retention and graduation rates are important, the Association for American  
432 Colleges and Universities (2007) suggested that the ultimate measure of success is the ability of  
433 students to thrive in professional environments, cementing the importance of employability support  
434 and signposting by the academic advisor.

### 435 **Key Findings and conclusion**

436 What is clear is that the students in this study strongly value the academic advisor support with one  
437 student stating:

438 *"You've got an ally on the course, someone that you can always go to, who you see regularly*  
439 *as well, even passing in the corridor you see them, and they'll ask how you're doing".*

440 In this sense, the results indicate a positive impact on student experience but from a student  
441 perspective the primary focus of advising was not about academic attainment in the sense of  
442 educational attainment as discussed earlier but rather 'holistic attainment'. Within this study, rather  
443 than focusing narrowly on the relationship between attainment and advising (Movat, 2017), these  
444 findings move away from this concept and value the role academic advising offers in terms of  
445 support with a wider range of aspects related to university life and beyond, such as wellbeing,  
446 pastoral and employability support.

447 The results of this case study are in line with Cahill, Bowyer and Murray's (2014) findings, that a  
448 wide range of support strategies, including pastoral and employability, are valued by students.  
449 Positive experiences with such support are thought to encourage learning, decrease attrition rates and  
450 contribute to improved academic achievement (Ning and Downing, 2012) and in support of Bahr's  
451 (2008) study, academic advisors are highlighted here as being critical to providing these positive  
452 learning experiences and environments (Bahr, 2008). In particular, it is evident that students value the  
453 advising relationship and the support provided has assisted them to be better able to manage in the  
454 university environment which in turn impacts on their ability to achieve academically. So, whilst this  
455 study has not found a clear impact between academic advising and attainment, academic advising  
456 does provide an indirect positive impact on attainment, supporting a more 'holistic' view of  
457 attainment.

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458 The findings indicate that the pastoral support given to students over the course of their time at  
459 university provides the scaffolding upon which retention, progression, completion and ultimately  
460 attainment of a degree classification is achieved. On the other hand, the employability support serves  
461 as a way to widen the student perspective beyond that of academic achievements, heightening  
462 aspirations and providing a goal to work towards. Relating this to relevant literature, we know that  
463 the setting of goals acts as a motivator with Locke et al. (1981) stating that they direct attention,  
464 mobilise effort, encourage persistence and facilitate strategy development and as such the practice  
465 could in turn increase attainment.

466 These findings could be likened to the principles of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs in which  
467 individuals' require fulfillment of basic needs, in this case through pastoral support, in order to build  
468 a core foundation upon which higher order needs such as attainment and employment aspirations can  
469 be achieved. In this sense, the relationship between academic advising and attainment is both explicit  
470 and implicit with the latter being evidenced most by the students.

471 Central to successful advising is the quality of the relationship between students and advisors which  
472 is documented in the existing literature with Habley (1987) suggesting that quality academic advising  
473 is made up of three component parts: the informational, the conceptual and the relational with the  
474 latter said to make the difference between academic advising and quality academic advising:

475 *'Communication skills and interpersonal approaches such as listening, interviewing,*  
476 *rapport-building, self-disclosure, and referral directly influence advisor-advisee*  
477 *interactions and are critical to establishing positive advising relationships' (Haley, 2016)*

478 Further to this, Gordon-Starks (2015, p1) defines academic advising as 'relationship-building' in  
479 which the academic advisor acts as a mentor, guide, and positive influence to their students. What is  
480 clear is that if relationships are to be positive then institutions need to take a person centered  
481 approach with the development of an effective advising relationship as a gateway to developing a  
482 wider learning experience (Higgins, 2016). Numerous studies have supported the value of empathy in  
483 that when students feel advisors are empathetic to their needs then authentic and trusting  
484 relationships are built (Heikkila and McGill, 2015; Hybels and Weaver, 2009; Sims, 2013). It is  
485 from these relationships of trust that students feel able to disclose their thoughts, feelings and any  
486 issues that they may be going through as shown in this research. Relationships between academics  
487 and students and the trust this often breeds has been a central theme throughout the data collected and  
488 in line with Yale (2017), the relationship between the student and academic advisor often embodies  
489 the relationship that the student has with the university as a whole and can ultimately have an indirect  
490 impact on attainment.

491 A further contribution is that attainment should be viewed more in line with academic advising  
492 definitions that focus on the holistic development of individuals. Key components of the academic  
493 advising role in this sense include connecting students with the HE environment, creating high  
494 impact learning experiences, developing social communication skills, enhancing behavioral  
495 awareness problem solving skills, encouraging lifelong learning and developing employability  
496 (Cuseo, nd, Drake, 2011 and Gordon, Habley and Grites, 2008). As such attainment needs to be  
497 viewed less about academic achievement and more in terms of holistic attainment whereby the  
498 person is developed as a whole to better equip them to deal with university life and beyond. This was  
499 evident within this small group study, so whilst this may not be fully generalizable to other research

## Underestimating the relationship between academic advising and attainment

500 studies, it is certainly significant within this study. As the Association for American Colleges and  
501 Universities (2007) suggests, graduate attainment is important, student success or in this case  
502 attainment, should be viewed by the student's ability to thrive in professional, personal and societal  
503 arenas. Further research into the relationship between advising and holistic attainment at each stage  
504 of the university experience and post-graduation would be valuable to build a bigger picture of the  
505 impact.

506 Academic advising remains an essential part of the new HE environment and this research further  
507 expands upon what constitutes 'good advising' and supports Light's (2001) view that it is "the single  
508 most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience". There needs to be greater  
509 recognition of the complexity of the role and impact that it can have on 'holistic' attainment that goes  
510 beyond academic achievement (Bahr, 2008). In this context, academic advising requires continued  
511 institutional investment and should aim to develop student agency in order to allow them to reflect,  
512 review and manage their own learning experience and become autonomous learners and  
513 professionals.

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531 **Appendix**

532 **Appendix 1: Survey**

533 Every student at SHU is assigned an Academic Advisor, this is the person who is there to help you  
534 navigate the course and get the most out of your studies. We would appreciate if you could complete  
535 this to provide some general background to the frequency, nature and the context of the support you  
536 receive.

537 Please circle the appropriate responses;

538 1. I am clear who my academic advisor is  
YES NO

539 •  
540 2. I have had an academic advisor for the full length of my current course at University  
YES NO

541 •  
542 3. I know how to best contact my academic advisor  
YES NO

543 •  
544 4. I have met my academic advisor this year?  
YES NO

545 •  
546 5. I don't feel I need an academic advisor  
YES NO

547 •  
548 6. My academic advisor is approachable and friendly?  
Agree Strongly Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Disagree strongly

549 •  
550 7. I feel comfortable talking to my academic advisor  
Agree Strongly Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Disagree strongly

551 •  
552 8. I would be happy to ask my academic advisor for a reference when I complete my course

## Underestimating the relationship between academic advising and attainment

Agree Strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
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553

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9. My academic advisor contacts me if there's a problem with my attendance

Agree Strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
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555

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10. I haven't made much use of my academic advisor this year?

Agree Strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
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558 **Appendix 2: Focus Group Questions**

559 **Frequency/Nature of contact**

560 How is your academic advice delivered?

561 *Prompts - Group sessions, 1:1's, meeting each semester*

562 How appropriate is the current format for meeting with your academic advisor?

563 Do you feel the frequency of contact is appropriate?

564 What kind of support have you asked your academic advisor provided?

565 *Prompts - Pastoral support, signposting to university services, academic advice, professional advice*

566 Has the support you have received been timely and appropriate?

567 *Prompts - Have you been able to meet with your advisor when needed?*

568 Based on the support you have received, which advice have you valued the most?

569

570 **Academic Advice**

571 How well informed is your academic advisor of your current academic performance?

572 How have the meetings and sessions with your advisor helped with your academic performance?

573 How has your academic advisor helped you make sense of your course?

574 To what extent has the support you have received helped you reach your full potential?

575

576 **Support Services**

577 Has the information you have received from your academic advisor about support services been  
578 accurate?

579 *Prompt - has this helped you navigate SHU as a large organisation?*

580

581 **General**

582 What do you feel are the specific positives about the academic advisor role?

583 What should SHU's priorities be to improve the academic advisor role?

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