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Research paper

Item Analysis for Measuring Student and Academic Advisor's Perspective towards the Function of Academic Advising in Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract

In Malaysian public universities, academicians are appointed as academic advisors. This action often leads to misunderstandings on the function of academic advising among students and academic advisors. Previous studies examining this misunderstanding were conducted using standardized instrument. These instruments were developed by researchers from advanced countries where professionals are employed as academic advisors. These standardized instruments lack of local context, differentiatition between academicians and professionals, and statistical properties including individual item quality and ability. This study fills this gap by identifying the rank of each item of the self-developedquestionnaire regarding the function of academic advising from the perspective of student and academic advisor. The questionnaire in this study was developed based on the findings of the preliminary qualitative study. The questionnaire consists of three constructs: academic, social, and personal. A total of 400 students and 80 academic advisors from two public universities ranked each item of the questionnaire based on four-point scales. The questionnaire was analysed using Rasch measurement model. The findings showed that students perceive academic aspect while academic advisors perceive personal development aspect as the most important function of academic advising. Students and academic advisors perceived social aspect as the least important of academic advising. Finally, students perceived personal development aspect while academic advisors considered academic aspect as the second important function of academic advising. The findings could serve as a guideline to improve the quality of academic advising programme in Malaysian public universities.

Keywords: *Academic Advisor, Academic Advising, Item-Person Map, Higher Education*

1. Introduction

University administrators are enthusiastic to investigate the extent to which students feel connected to their campus environment and campus resources. One of the important tools that many universities employ for examining this purpose is academic advising. This service requires academic advisors to play an active role to support students to complete their studies. Academic advising is regarded a partnership between academic advisors and students throughout their studies. Other researchers considered academic advising a process where academic advisors assist students to develop their potentials in three areas: academic, personal, and career [1, 2, 3]. In this process, an academic advisor is someone that students can trust as they transition from high school or matriculation college to university [4]. This process encompasses the development and delivery of information regarding educational programs, courses, resources, policies, procedures, and career options.

In developed countries, academic advising are carried out by professionals, those who are trained and get their tertiary education in the fields related to counseling and student affairs [5]. Unlike advanced countries, in Malaysia context, academic advising is considered an extra-job of academic staff. The academic advising programmes are managed and handled by the students' respective faculties. In this academic advising programme, academicians (lecturers) of respective faculties are appointed as academic advisors [6, 7, 8]. The educational background of these academicians are not necessarily related to counseling and student affairs. This practice invites many controversial issues particularly with regard to the functions of academic advisors [6, 7, 8].

Studies showed that many universities tend to establish academic advising programme prior to knowing the needs of their students and academic advisors about the service [9, 10]. As a result, academic advising process can be negatively affected by the incorrect perceptions of students and academic advisors as well as those who may have limited understanding of academic advising programme [11, 12]. Additionally, students and academic advisors who misunderstood the functions of academic advising may not get much benefit from the academic advising process including it effects on the students' academic achievement [12, 13]

1.1. Students' Perspective on Academic Advising's Functions

Review of literature indicated that academic advising closely link with making meaning in the practice [12, 14]. Academic advising facilitates the development of meaning through engagement and interaction between academic advisor and student. As a result, students' and academic advisors' perspectives toward the functions of academic advising have a significant influence on the outcomes of academic advising process [2, 12].

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Review of literature also indicated that there were some misundertandings related to the functions of academic advising embracecd by students and academic advisors [15]. Some students may have the perception that academic advising is a profession. They may have the thought that academic advisors will set goals for them throughout their studies. This misunderstanding was enhanced through their experience of high school or matriculation college years where guidance counsellors worked with them. At this stage of education, the students' goals were clear and those goals have been achieved. However, the model of successful matriculation college and high school guidance counselling are not in tandem with the university level education.

Additionally, some students come on campus with the perception that academic advisors are going to decide what courses they should be taken [13]. Again this perception emerged based on their high school and matriculation college experience where decisions about courses to take are relatively fixed by the character of the high school and matriculation college curriculum [16]. Unlike education at high school and matriculation college level, tertiary education students encounter a rich and diverse curriculum. Thus, decisions about what courses to take must be made by the students. Before making any decisions, students may have to collect as much information as possible from appropriate resources. Academic advisors can help in defining what interest the students as well as the areas that the students want to avoid. In the end, the students have to decide their own regarding the content and direction of their education.

Other misunderstanding that often appeared in the literature is the perception that academic advisors are going to meet all the students needs regardless their year of studies [16]. Students often unnoticed that making academic decisions at the university level education is a complex process. Thus, there is no guarantee that a single academic advisor can meet all the students' needs. Students may have to seek advice from many sources in addition to their academic advisors. These sources may include deans, department heads, and their programme coordinators [16, 17].

1.2. Academic Advisors' Perspective on Academic Advising's Functions

Many studies showed that academic advisor's perspective on academic advising function have attracted researches [15, 18, 19]. Templeton, Skaggs, and Johnson (2002) found that the primary duty of academic advising is to assistance with course selection. They believed that the role of academic advisors affects students through the value information related to career development. Kechichian [19] found that in the academic advising proses academic advisors play various roles. These roles include communicator, information provider, nurturer, referral maker, scheduler, and teacher. This study indicated that academic advisors focused on helping student to self-understanding and self-acceptance, self-assessment and make decision making as well as to provide useful information and refer to the campus resources.

In performing those various roles, literature indicated that misuderstanding occurred on the part of the academic advisors regarding what constitudes effective academic advising [2, 12, 13]. Despite agreed with the importance of academic advising programme, misundersting towards the function of academic advising appeared in some studies. Some studies reported that not all academic advisors taking academic advising duties seriously [15, 20]. This suggests that academic advising is only applicable to those who want to advise and reward to those who really deserved.

Additionally, there were few cases of misconception that academic advisors thought that they need to know everything about the curriculum, rules and regulations, and guidelines that govern the management of the curriculum to be effective academic advisors [16]. Other studies show that first year academic advisors know only certain aspects of the curriculum [21]. This shows that if the above misperception persists, then no one could be first-year academic advisors .

The other misconception is that the perception that academic advisors need to be treated as a personal counsellor to their students [16]. This is often becoming an unspoken expectation, not only by the academic advisors but also the students. This incident should not be expected and this is not the purpose of academic advising. Studies show that most academic advisors spend several hours with their students during the course of the year [22]. This amount of time spend shows that academic advisors do not have much opportunity to see their students minds in operation either in class or in writing.

Finally, there was also a misconception regarding the responsibility of the academic advisors to enforce academic rules and regulations that govern the day-to-day running of the academic matters [16]. Students may ask for support in various exceptions to the rules and regulations. Academic advisors may be trapped in their own roles due to lack of clear understanding of their roles. Academic advisors must try to prevent from inadvertent violations of rules and regulations by reminding their students of the importance of fulfilling the distribution requirements.

1.3. Instrumentation for Assessing Student's and Academic Advisor's Perspectives

McLaughlin and Starr [23] found that quality academic advising strongly related to student retention and persistence. Metzner [24] found that lower attrition rates were closely linked to quality academic advising. More recent literature shows that the quality of academic advising on university campuses becomes one of the most powerful predictors of overall campus satisfaction [25]. Based on the above-mentioned benefits of academic advising, some universities set the goals of academic advising programme for student development and success. However, review of the literature indicated that very limited studies have been conducted to determine the students and academic advisors' perspective of academic advising's functions. While these are significant effects on the outcomes of academic advising [26], literature indicated that academic advising service in Malaysian public universities generally was rarely assessed, studied, and reported.

Academic advising is one of the essential elements that supports students' success in higher education [25, 27]. To ensure its effectiveness, continuous monitoring, development, and evaluation should be in place to ensure that students are getting consistent and quality academic advising services. One of the ways commonly used to measure the success of an academic advising programme is to evaluate the satisfaction of students and academic advisors using a standardized scale [24, 28, 29, 30]. Studies showed that many evaluation efforts have relied primarily on one of a few standardized instruments [31, 32, 33]. Previous studies indicated that these survey instruments for measuring academic advisors' perspective have been developed by various researchers working in higher education institutions in developed countries [33].

There is a serious lack of locally developed measurement instruments for measuring the perceptions of Malaysian public university students and academic advisors toward academic advising. This has forced many researchers to use existing standardized instruments to determine students and academic advisors' perception towards academic advising's functions. The existing standardized instruments lack of local context and failed to differentiate between academic staff and those professionals as academic advisors. Additionally, other researchers have used scales with unstated statistical properties [32]. This means that limited efforts have been addressed for item analysis to examine the quality of individual test items. This is also meant that limited efforts have been carried out to collect information from individual item quality to determine whether an item is measuring the content and construct that it was intended to measure [34]. Limited efforts have been

focused to determine the appropriate ability level of each item. This study fills this gap by performing Rasch hierarchical analysis to identify the rank for each item (academic advisor role) regarding the academic advising's function from the students and academic advisors' perspectives.

2. Method

A paper and pencil based survey was conducted to the 400 students and 80 academic advisors from two public universities in Malaysia. Specifically, the sample was selected using stratified sampling. Based on the findings of qualitative study, a set of questionnaire was developed and used for data collection. The self-developed questionnaire consists of three constructs: academic (5 items), social (5 items), and personal (3 items). The academic advisors were required to give their agreement on each item based on the four-point scale (1: Strongly Disagree - 4: Strongly Agree). The questionnaire has been piloted and analysed by using rasch measurement model. Item with higher measure value indicates that the item has higher difficulty perceived by respondents [35]. In the context of this study, item with higher measure value indicates that respondents perceived that particular function of academic advisor as more important.

3. Results

3.1. Students' Perspective toward Academic Advising's Functions

The person item analysis indicates that the measure value for all three constructs were distribute widely (range from -0.096 – 0.106) (refer Figure 1). The average measure value for academic aspect is the lowest (-0.096). This result implied that students perceived academic aspect as the most important function of academic advising's as compared to other functions. Meanwhile, the average measure value for social aspect is the highest (measure = 0.106). This result indicated that students perceived social aspect as the least important function of academic advising's as compared to other functions.

In the academic aspect, students are highly appreciated their academic advisors in "monitor students' academic progress" (measure=-1.00), and "provide students with information on degree requirements" (measure=-0.14). However, students perceived the role of academic advisors as less important with regard to "introduce students to academic resources available in the university" (measure=0.21) and "explain to students on how things (timelines, policies, financial aid, jobs etc) work in the university (measure=0.27). In the social construct, the item "introduce students to non-academic resources available on campus" shows the lowest important rate (measure=0.13) while " decision making skills" shows the most important rate (measure=0.06).

Table 1: Measure value for each item from students' perspective

Rank	Roles of Academic Advisor	Aspect	Measure
1	Monitor students' academic progress.	Academic	-1.00
2	Provide students with information on degree requirements.	Academic	-0.14
3	Develop educational plan with students to keep the course deadlines	Personal	-0.09
4	Discuss with students about their abilities and interests to mater in the selection of courses for registration.	Personal	-0.05
5	Teach students decision-making skills.	Social	0.06
6	Encourage students to assume responsibility on campus.	Personal	0.09
7	Assist students with choosing out-of-class activities (part-time or summer employment, exchange program etc.)	Social	0.10
8	Educate students about the ways to solve their problems.	Social	0.12
9	Develop students' communication skills.	Social	0.12
10	Introduce students to non-academic resources available on campus (counseling center, sports center etc.)	Social	0.13
11	Educate students about time management.	Academic	0.18
12	Introduce students to academic resources available in the university (tutoring, writing etc.)	Academic	0.21
13	Explain to students on how things work in the university (timelines, policies, financial aid, jobs etc.)	Academic	0.27

*Larger measure value indicates less important and vice versa

3.2 Academic Advisors' Perspective toward Academic Advising's Functions

The person item analysis of data indicated that the measure mean for all three constructs were distribute widely (measure range from -0.061 – 0.62) (refer Figure 2). Specifically, the average measure value for personal aspect is the lowest (-0.61). This result implied that academic advisors perceive academic advising is important for assisting students' in individual personal development. Meanwhile, the average measure value for social is the highest (measure = 0.106). This result reflected that academic advisors' perceived social aspect as the least important function of academic advising's as compared to other functions.

In academic aspect, academic advisors perceived students as very important in academic advising role with regard to "provide students with information on degree requirements" (measure=-1.39). However, academic advisors perceived less important for the role of academic advisors to assist students with choosing out-of-class activities (part-time or summer employment, exchange program etc.)" (measure = 1.11).

Table 2: Measure value for each item from academic advisors' perspective

Rank	Roles of Academic Advisor	Aspect	Measure
1	Encourage students to assume responsibility on campus.	Personal	-1.39
2	Provide students with information on degree requirements.	Academic	-1.39
3	Monitor students' academic progress.	Academic	-1.14
4	Discuss with students about their abilities and interests to mater in the selection of courses for registration.	Personal	-0.52
5	Explain to students on how things work in the university (timelines, policies, financial aid, jobs etc.)	Academic	-0.18
6	Educate students about the ways to solve their problems.	Social	0.08
7	Develop educational plan with students to keep the course deadlines.	Personal	0.08
8	Develop students' communication skills.	Social	0.38
9	Educate students about time management.	Academic	0.49
10	Introduce students to non-academic resources available on campus (counseling center, sports center etc.)	Social	0.71
11	Teach students decision-making	Social	0.81

	skills.		
12	Introduce students to academic resources available in the university (tutoring, writing etc.)	Academic	0.96
13	Assist students with choosing out-of-class activities (part-time or summer employment, exchange program etc.)	Social	1.11

*Larger measure value indicates less important and vice versa

4. Conclusion and conclusion

The findings of this study indicates that in the context of Malaysian public universities, students and academic advisors have the same perception with regard to the function of academic advisors in the aspect of social development (least important). This indicated that the social development aspect of academic advising is less attracted to students and academic advisors. The finding is similar to the findings of some previous studies which indicating that academic advising plays limited roles social development of students. Most findings indicating the imporance of assisting students to fulfill the degree's requirement [1, 36]. This finding invites many questions of the need to enhance students and academic advisors perceptions towards the roles of academic advising for students' development in social aspect especially in the present technology advancement era.

Another important thing regarding the finding of this study is that students and academic advisors have different perceptions towards the most important aspects in academic advising functions. While students indicated that the academic aspect is the most important for academic advising sector, academic advisors perceived the "individual development" aspect as the most important in academic advising functions. This finding is similar to the trend of academic advising practice in some developed countries, where academic advising focuses more on the individual development of student.

In Malaysian public universities, academic advising is established with the aims to assist students in academic, personal, and career development. Social development of students was considered as an important aspect of academic advisors roles. None of the local context previous studies examined this aspect. In fact, no local context literature regarding academic advising ever ingestigated this aspect. Hence, the finding of this study contributes to this gap.

The finding of this study implies that academic advisors perceived less important for the development of students social and individual skills. This finding of this study indicated that students and academic advisors pay less attention to the social development of students as compared to academic and personal developments. This may due to the fact that almost all local contact pervious studies used standardized scales developed in well-advanced countries where social development of students is no longer an issue. It is also possible that issue concerning social development of students was addressed by other support system available in the university and academic advising programme is not entrusted to look into it.

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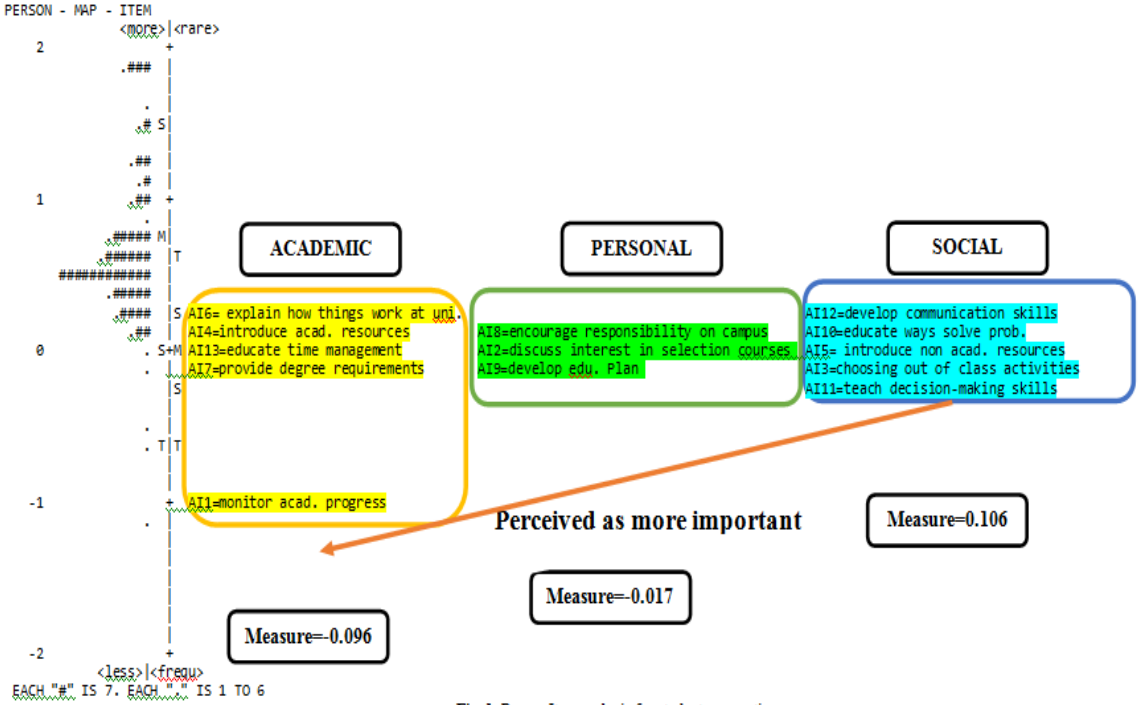


Fig. 1. Person Item analysis for student perspective

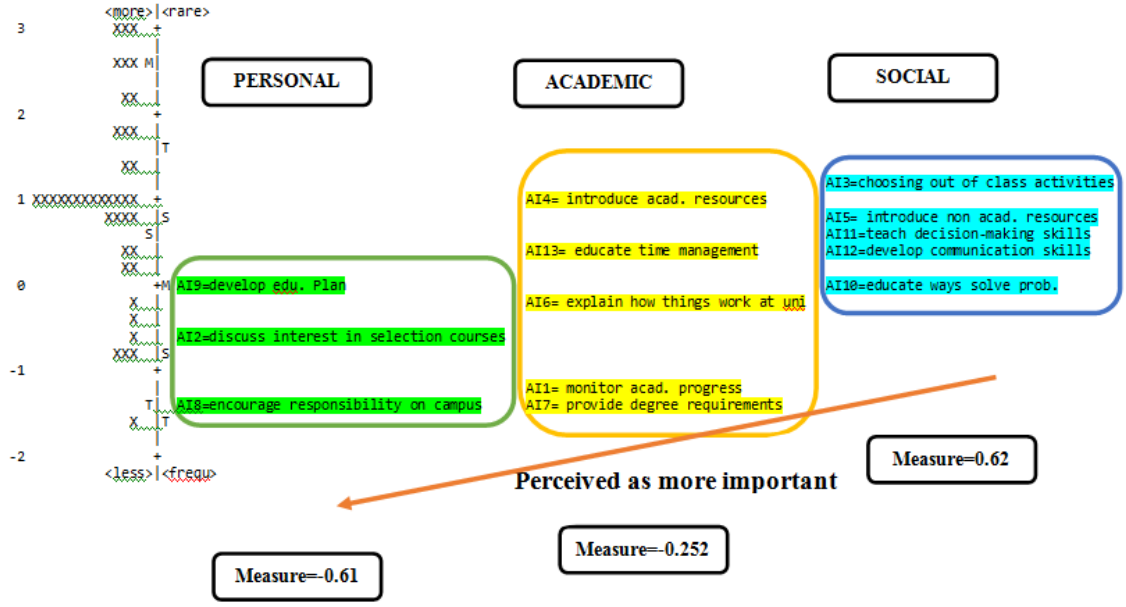


Fig. 2. Person Item analysis for academic advisor perspective