

## Organizational structure of online academic advising. A case study

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**Abstract:** Academic advising is a key element for learning success in virtual environments that has received little attention from researchers. This paper focuses on the organizational arrangements needed for the delivery of academic advising in online higher education. We present the general dimensions of organizational structures (division of labor, hierarchy of authority and formalization) and their possible forms when applied to academic advising. The specific solution adopted at the Open University of Catalonia is described and assessed in order to draw general conclusions of interest for other institutions.

### 1. Introduction

The process of online learning is based on the existence of a whole range of individual and group services, which complement the course learning resources and are, in fact, the main added value that educational institutions offer to students (Tait, 2000). These services must be able to respond to the needs of students before, during and after the learning process. Thus, they should take into account that the student is the protagonist of the learning process and that developing such process requires support in two contexts: the learning process itself, and the institutional systems which surround it (Thorpe, 2002: 289). Support related to the online learning process has received extensive attention, and numerous studies have been published on teaching methodologies, evaluation systems, teacher-student and student-student relationships in the virtual classroom, and so on. In contrast, there are much less papers published on support related to the institutional systems in online higher education, although this issue is receiving growing attention in the last decade (see, for example, LaPadula, 2003; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; McCracken, 2004; Steele & Thurmond, 2009; Tait, 2003; Thorpe, 2002).

According to Thorpe (2002), support related to institutional systems includes helping the student to know what is on offer, how to apply, how to claim a refund, make a payment, choose a course, etc. These tasks involve two distinct groups of activities: the most administrative or bureaucratic ones (the processes of applying, paying, or claiming a refund, for example), and a second group that requires academic knowledge of the program in which the student is enrolled (knowing what is on offer, choosing courses). The first group is linked to administration services, while academic advisors or counsellors usually perform the second group.

This paper focuses on the organizational arrangements needed for the delivery of academic advising in online higher education. We will use the term *academic advising* to refer to the support that learners receive regarding their operation within the context of an academic program. In this context, students need support to understand the virtual environment where they will be immersed in, to establish relations with their peers, to plan their academic goals and keep striving towards them, to select the subjects they will study each semester, to select extra-academic activities that can improve their learning experience, etc.

Advising activities can be performed in quite diverse circumstances. Particularly, the advisors may have diverse kinds of bonds with the university, they may be assigned quite diverse tasks, and they may be included in different departments or units. These organizational aspects may indeed impact on the final delivery of advising as perceived by the students, as well as on the work burden borne by academic and administrative staff. In spite of these potential effects of organizational arrangements for academic advising, there is extreme shortage of literature on the subject (. As a contribution to fill this gap, this paper analyzes the online academic advising system in a virtual university, with a special focus on its organizational structure.

This paper will discuss the different elements that have to be taken into account in order to develop an effective organizational design for academic advising. After a brief, theoretical presentation of such items, the specific solution adopted at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC, in Catalan: Universitat Oberta de Catalunya) will be described in order to give flesh to the quite abstract concepts used in organizational theory. It is intended that, through the study of this particular case, other institutions will be able to derive useful insights for their implementation or refinement of their online academic advising system. Thus, the remainder of the

paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical background. Section 3 describes the main features of the UOC and the organizational structure of its academic advising activity, which is assessed in section 4. Finally, Section 5 offers some concluding remarks.

## **2. Organizational structure for academic advising**

Classical organization theory states that there are three key components that define any organizational structure (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006: 103): the division of labor, the hierarchy of authority, and formalized rules and procedures. Consequently, these three aspects have to be considered when designing the structure for academic advising in a university.

*Division of labor* refers to what tasks will be assigned to the individual workers, and it can lead to more or less specialized workers, that perform specific or general activities. In the context of academic advising, we can find different degrees of specialization. In the less specialized side of the spectrum, there are those institutions where such activities are assigned to faculty members who have to add advising to their habitual tasks of research and teaching of specific subjects. In these cases, which are quite frequent in Spain, faculty members are not specialized in advising, and may even perceive it as an annoying burden. This may decrease faculty members' effectiveness in and students' satisfaction with academic advising. On the other hand, academic advising may be assigned as the only task to be performed by a group of specialized individuals.

*Hierarchy of authority* defines formal reporting relationships that map the vertical communication channels in an organization (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006: 104). Pardee's (2004) describes four types of models for delivering advising services according to their degree of centralization. She describes them in terms of "where are advisors housed", which is a notion that may be not applicable in virtual universities, since advisors work from home. However, her models really refer to who is ultimately responsible for advising. In the centralized models, professional and faculty advisors are accountable to one academic or administrative unit devoted exclusively to advising. In the other extreme, in the decentralized models professional or faculty advisors are accountable to their respective academic departments. Finally, there are shared models where both a central advising unit and academic departments share responsibility for advising issues. According to the Sixth National Survey on Academic Advising conducted in 2003 by ACT (Habley, 2004) in the United States, more institutions use a shared model of delivering advising services (55%) than use centralized (32%) or decentralized (14%) structures. This distribution is similar to that found in 1997 when the Fifth National Survey was conducted. In general, authors suggest that shared models lead to better student service and faculty satisfaction (see Allen & Smith, 2008; King, 2002).

*Formalization* involves the extent to which explicit rules, regulations, policies and procedures govern organizational activities, and it tends to reduce the amount of discretion employees have in performing their work tasks (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006: 104-105). Formalization of academic advising will be higher when the institution has written advising policies and handbooks for advisors, it has developed a job description for the academic advisor, or it uses other mechanisms that specify how advisors should make decisions and perform work.

## **3. Organizational structure of academic advising at the UOC**

### **Context: The UOC and its students**

The UOC is a fully online university that was founded in 1995 by the regional government of Catalonia (Spain). It was created with the intention of appropriately responding to the educational needs of people committed to lifelong learning, and to make maximum use of the potential offered by the information technologies to complete an educational activity. In 2009, the UOC had over 200 faculty and more than 2.300 teaching collaborators (academic advisors and subject tutors). The educational offer of the UOC consists of more than 850 qualifications for bachelor degrees, and first and second-cycle studies; postgraduate training; open programs; and PhD.

In the academic year 2008-2009, the UOC had over 54.000 students enrolled in its courses, 43.366 of which were studying officially recognized qualifications. The typical UOC student is quite different from the student in face-to-face universities. Many of them left education in order to enter the workforce on completing secondary school or before finishing their degrees, and returned to education some years later to get a university degree. Almost 75% of the students are between 25 and 40 years old, with an average age of 30. Nine out of ten have a job, and four out of ten have children. This results in an intense shortage of time available to devote to study, which corresponds with the mission of the UOC to be accessible to communities that, due to lack the time or territorial mobility, cannot attend other universities.

### **Division of labor**

Division of teaching labor is intense at the UOC, as the tasks traditionally assumed by the faculty in brick and mortar universities are divided between different individuals: the faculty, the subject tutors and the academic advisors.

- The members of the UOC *faculty* are responsible for academic aspects of organizing and running one or more areas of content and, in particular, for tasks related to coordination with teaching collaborators, for the design and development of teaching materials, and for assessing students at the end of their courses. They also carry out research based on their field of academic specialization, and participate in research into e-learning methods and techniques.

Personal support to students at the UOC is provided by teaching collaborators (the subject tutors and the academic advisors), who are professionals that work with the university in a part-time, virtual mode. They are predominantly teachers in other higher education institutions, although there are also professionals in areas related to their program. Teaching collaborators accomplish two different roles:

- The role of the *subject tutor* is to direct the learning process that students undergo in each of the subjects they study, to correct their exercises and tests, and to resolve any doubts or queries they may have in relation to the content of each subject. Tutors normally use the Virtual Campus to perform their tasks from home or workplace, wherever they may be in the world.
- The *academic advisors* accompany and guide students from when they enrol at the University until when they complete their studies. Advisors monitor students' academic progress and become their main source of advice and assistance in relation to any matter that concerns the UOC and does not strictly correspond to a specific subject. With increasing frequency, advisors are alumni of the same program.

More precisely, academic advisors accomplish the following functions:

- To facilitate that students get the most out of their time and money investments. The advisor helps the student to integrate quickly in the dynamics of a virtual university program, through the provision of training and / or advice on:
  - Technological aspects: functionality of the technological platform, the basics needed to operate in virtual classrooms, the technological resources for learning, etc.
  - Administrative aspects: procedures needed, calendar and process of enrolment, assessment of prior studies, selection of the location for the final examination, etc., as well as the channels that students have at their disposal for the resolution of doubts, enquires, or complaints, among other things.
  - Characteristics of the pedagogical model of the university.
  - Students' rights and duties.
- To enable each student to select the most appropriate learning itinerary. Advisors must have deep knowledge of the characteristics of the program and educational offer, as a whole, as well as about each student's needs, educational goals, and time availability. Once the student's main itinerary is selected, the advisor helps them decide their rate of progression towards graduation. This advisory role is embodied in the enrolment process. In this process, after receiving guidance from the advisor, the student makes an enrolment proposal that the advisor must finally assess.
- To encourage the students to attain the selected educational goals. This function acquires special prominence because the risk of drop out is potentially high, given the profile of students and the virtual setting. The advisor disposes of information about the academic behaviour of students (their number of connections to the virtual campus, their qualifications in the activities of continuous assessment, etc). With this personalized information, the advisor can motivate each student in moments of discouragement or unforeseen difficulties.
- To be a person of reference for students in their relationship with the university. The advisor is the person the student contacts with if he/she faces doubts, incidents or unexpected problems, special personal circumstances, and so on. The advisor must solve these problems directly if possible, or refer the student to the adequate service or person in the university.

Each student is assigned an advisor from the moment he/she expresses some interest in enrolling in the university. An advisor and around 75 students of the program share a virtual classroom, which is their natural place for group communication. Individual communication takes place mainly through e-mail, but also through the online enrolment system and by telephone or videoconferencing. The activity of the advisor is proactive (teaching on the various aspects outlined above, informing about the terms and conditions for different procedures and, above all, encouraging students) and also reactive when needed. In reactive communications, the advisor has a compromise to answer students' questions in up to 48 hours.

Advisors are specialized around *academic programs* (e.g., Work Sciences, Tourism, Humanities, Psychology, etc.) with the aim that they develop deep knowledge of one program's features, and of the profile and interests of that program's students. But, in 2004, the UOC further specialized advisors according to the *stage of advancement of their students*. This reorganization was aimed to reduce student dropout in the first

three semesters of enrolment, as internal studies had signalled this period as critical for student retention. Thus, the beginnings and the continuation advisor roles were introduced.

- The *beginnings advisor* receives new students after they have enrolled, academically orients them in all aspects of the educational program, and helps them in developing skills to navigate with maximum efficiency through the Virtual Campus. The advisor also introduces the student to the tools and resources provided by the UOC's learning environment, so that they can attain, as soon as possible, their maximum performance. Finally, this type of advisor helps the student to know the range of opportunities that the university offers. In short, the beginnings advisor facilitates the integration of new students to the university community in a personalized way.
- After the students' third semester, a *continuation advisor* is assigned, instead of the beginnings advisor. The continuation advisor focuses gives advice on any academic issue of the educational process, and on professional aspects linked to the field of study. This advisor also helps students deal with their needs in different academic moments. Finally, the continuation advisor gives advise on the further education strategy of the student, as part of his/her professional career.

### **Hierarchy of authority**

In terms of hierarchy and reporting, the UOC has opted for a creative alternative, which is not found in the literature on the organization of the advisorial function. The academic advisors at the UOC have a double internal dependency, which creates a matrix structure. On the one hand, the advisors depend on the Program academic director. The director selects them, appraises their performance and decides on the renewal of their contracts. He/she provides training and advice and answers questions on everything related to the academic aspects of the program. In addition, throughout the semester, the director advises on the educational problems that may arise. On the other hand, the advisors depend on the Advisorial Function team, which is transversal to the entire university. This team is responsible for providing training and assistance necessary for advisors so that they can, in turn, train students to take full advantage of their effort. Subsequently, the Advisorial Function monitors such training given by advisors. Similarly, this team offers suggestions and monitors advisors' activity in relation to student motivation and university procedures.

The work of the advisors, in collaboration with and dependence on the Program Director and the Advisorial Function person, is mostly carried out virtually. In accordance with the dual line of responsibility, advisors have two workspaces in the virtual campus. In the first one, the Program Director communicates with all the advisors of the program. In the other virtual room, the advisor communicates with the member of the Advisorial Function assigned to a group of programs as well as with the other advisors of those related programs. Obviously, every advisor has also a personal e-mail and can contact directly with the Program Director and the assigned member of the Advisorial Team.

### **Formalization**

Academic advising is not highly formalized at the UOC. Advisors have at their disposal plentiful resources to develop their work, but there are not many written policies, rules or procedures that constrain their decisions. There is only one key process that is tightly bound through the use of technology: the enrolment process.

As advisors work from their homes, they need to have *documents* to consult when they have doubts about their work. This is specially true for newly recruited advisors, who always have face-to-face or telephone initial training sessions with the Program director and with the Advisorial Function to overcome initial difficulties and doubts. At the most general level, advisors are provided with suggestions for the use of the virtual campus, and recommendations for teaching written and virtual communications. They also have explanations on the resources they have as advisors: the virtual classroom, the students' records, the tools available to monitor each student's academic progress, and their student group as a whole. At the level of the program they are involved in, each program director whether it is necessary to develop specific documentation, and what form and content should it have. In general, there is a document with information about the academic program, the indications for the registration of specific subjects, and answers to frequently asked questions from students and advisors.

The *enrolment process* is developed online through a system devised to ensure that students sensibly select the courses they enroll on. Students are asked to make an "enrolment proposal" which is assessed by their advisor. The advisor, who has information on the students' availability and their previous academic performance, gives feedback on that proposal and eventually recommends or advises against it. Although the ultimate responsibility for enrolment lies with the student, who is considered mature enough to make their own decisions, the advisor's feedback is very important and is generally followed by the students. All these steps are recorded and kept for future consultation. In some cases (e.g., when a student wants to enroll more than 36 ECTS credits), the student must submit a request to the academic director of the program, who also counts with the advisor's opinion for or against granting the request. It must be noted that what is formalized here is the

process of matriculation, but not the criteria used by advisors to develop recommendations on enrolment proposals, which are very generally stated in terms of their "feasibility" for the student.

The majority of information for day-to-day advisorial activity is provided through direct communication with advisors. Punctual, general information for teaching collaborators is unidirectionally communicated through the "Teacher's support" electronic board. However, most of the communication with advisors is multidirectional, as it takes place in shared spaces in which advisors receive and provide information both from/to the organization (the academic director or the Tutorial function member) and the other advisors.

## **4. Assessment of the UOC's structure for advising**

### **Dimensions of the organizational structure**

#### Division of labor

The use of professional academic advisors, combined with the task of faculty members and subject tutors, is one of the keys for the UOC's sustainability. The faculty is comprised by a stable, low number of academics that retain responsibility for design, coordination and assessment, which are considered the "core" activities. Teaching collaborators, on the other hand, are variable in number (although changes are not steep) in accordance with the number of students enrolled each semester.

In contrast, the specialization between beginnings and continuation advisors is open to debate today within the university, as it has generated a number of disadvantages that have to be balanced with the benefits initially detected. The main advantage is that beginnings advisors have a deeper understanding of the needs of new students and how to fulfil them. The main drawback of this new model is the loss of a unique reference for the student. Students have several advisors throughout their studies, so they lose the trust they had built with their first advisor and have to start the process all over again with the new advisor.

Furthermore, in the process of transfer from the beginnings to the continuation advisor, relevant information about the student can be lost. To minimize this problem, the beginnings advisor is asked to write a report about each student's academic progress, including other information that can have an effect on such progress, and transfer it to the assigned continuation advisor.

Another motivational effect is related to the composition of the advisee group. Before specialization, in a single advising room there were students who had attained diverse levels of progress courses within the program. Thus, those who incorporated into the group could learn from other peer who had already spent more time in the program. The more experienced students progressively obtained their degrees and left the group, which had an important motivational effect for new students, who saw that it was possible to overcome the initial difficulties they were experiencing.

This organization has also involved substantial accumulation of work for advisors, as all their advisees are in a similar phase of progression within the program. In addition, administrative complications arise in the reallocation of students from the beginnings to the continuation advisor.

#### Hierarchy of authority

The matrix structure used at the UOC provides several notable advantages. On the one hand, being grouped by academic programs, advisors are experts in the program in which they operate. The double line of responsibility provides diverse and timely information to advisors on both academic and administrative aspects, which improves their performance to the students. Moreover, this dual responsibility does not generate conflicts, as the program director has always the last word on academic issues (e.g., criteria for registration, recognition of prior learning, qualifications, etc.), while in administrative matters the various departments set the policies to follow.

#### Formalization

The task of advisors is a complex one, that has to take into account the specific and unpredictable needs of each student. Heavy formalization would not be useful in these circumstances, as no rules or procedures can be written to account for such complexity (Hodge, Anthony & Gales, 2002: 42). Instead, the UOC relies on the knowledge and judgment of advisors, and provides them with the necessary information (about their students, their program and the university's procedures) so they can make their own decisions.

### **General assessment**

The UOC model complies with Pardee's (2004) criteria for an effective advising organizational structure, although they have been slightly adapted in order to suit online education:

- Advisors are accessible when students seek academic guidance, as they can be contacted at any time through e-mail and have the obligation to reply to any message in a maximum of 48 hours.

- There are financial, personnel, and technical resources available to support and staff the structure that is in place.
- Although there is a double reporting line, advisors are not confused by that, since they understand the difference between the issues managed by the advisorial function and the academic direction.
- Students have their advisor as their first stop to obtain information about all their academic needs.
- Advisors understand the structure and their role within the larger system, in particular their relation with other teaching figures as the faculty members and the subject tutors.
- Advisors in different programs can communicate and cooperate through the virtual spaces they share.
- The structure is conducive to sharing information and collaborating with other academic and student service units to create and implement policies that promote student development and success. The advisorial function and the program directors can easily communicate with other areas when they detect problems or devise a possibility for improvement.

In addition, periodical surveys report high student satisfaction with the service provided by the advisors. In consequence, the UOC case shows that it is possible to develop a high quality advising service through online media, with professional advisors who rely on two lines of authority.

## 5. Conclusions

Some conclusions of general can be drawn from the UOC's experience:

- Division of labor is useful up to a certain point. The separation of the teaching roles of subject tutor and academic advisor has had very positive outcomes, as it promotes that tutors are deep into their subject content and that advisors get to know their students best. At the same time, it has proven easy to handle for students, who understand the purpose of each role and relate to them accordingly. However, the division of advising tasks based on the students' seniority seems to have more disadvantages than advantages, as it has not clearly resulted in an improved retention rate.
- The shared model of responsibility for academic advising between academic directors and the advisorial function has been very successful since its implementation. Better information is provided to advisors and, thus, the quality of advising improves. The key for this success rests upon the clear separation of issues handled by each figure, since it allows for specialization in managing certain aspects of advising (administrative or academic). It also requires a tight coordination among academic directors and the advisorial function, given that academic decisions may have administrative effects and vice-versa. At the UOC, both interact frequently through e-mail or phone-calls, e.g. to solve doubts about ongoing problems, or to inform about changes in a program or in the university's processes.
- Formalization cannot be intensive for tasks that are performed in uncertain contexts, which is the case for online academic advising. In online higher education, there is a high variety in students' situations that does not allow for very specific rules to be written. Only general criteria can be developed, but each case must be treated separately by the advisor and, in case of doubt, consulted with the academic director.

Shurville and Browne (2006) highlight that the development of distance education needs a model of flexibility that results in substantial changes at both the individual and the organizational levels, which must be adequately resourced and managed. In order to develop management models for online universities, we must first find and compare management alternatives that have proved viable. However, there are hardly any models available on how to organize the online advisorial activity. This paper tries to contribute to the building of such body of knowledge, through the description and assessment of the main characteristics of the virtual advising system developed at the UOC. Despite being a particular case, the authors hope that it will be useful to other universities that are developing their first online activity, as well as for more experienced institutions that want to reflect on their existing advising system.

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