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## **Academic advising as form of support for students' educational and professional careers**

The objective of the article is to present fundamental assumptions of academic advising and to indicate possibilities and limitations of the implementation of these assumptions in Polish higher education institutions. Academic advising is a proposal that helps students to plan and organize educational and non-academic activities in such a way as to use the individual potential, higher education institution resources and allies in the academic and professional environment to the greatest possible extent, in order to increase the chances of achieving educational, professional, personal and social goals. It seems that academic advising integrates all spheres of students' life and helps them to rationally and optimally choose proper means to fulfil thoughtfully made life plans and pursue set priorities.

**Keywords:** academic advising, career, support

There are not many studies of academic advising in Polish literature on the counselling theory and practice, however, it can be assumed that at least some of its elements have long been part of counselling practice in Polish higher education institutions. Usually, students receive advisory support from student career centres, whose objective is to assist students and graduates in designing professional careers, as well as to prepare them to effectively enter the labour market. The dominating offer of career centres aims to enhance competences - both specialist and social ones - which are considered as crucial in the labour market and in undertaking professional activity. The labour market is the basic and active context for formulating objectives and designing methodological solutions. Career centres and counsellors working there are also considered to be crucial element of quality-oriented policies of higher education institutions, which involve activities demonstrating that their goal is to prepare students and graduates to enter the labour market as smoothly as possible.

From the developmental and pedagogical perspective, it is important to note that higher education studies are not exclusively period of preparation for professional activity. Even though pragmatic goals are significant, they should not overshadow goals related to autotelic motives behind pursuing higher education. Studies can be perceived as valuable period in itself. Despite promoted narrations, dominated by ranking indicators, describing the percentage of the unemployed graduates or average earnings after graduating in given programmes in selected higher education institutions, period of studies can also be analysed as an educational project and period during which people search for educational aspirations, develop passions and interests. The logic of the project suggests that it is worth managing this period wisely. Academic advising is proposal that helps students to plan and organize educational and non-academic activities in such way as to use the individual potential, higher education institution resources and allies in the academic and professional environment to the greatest possible extent, in order to increase the chances of achieving educational, professional, personal and social goals. It seems that academic advising integrates all spheres of students' life and helps them to rationally and optimally choose proper means to fulfil thoughtfully made life plans and pursue set priorities.

The objective of the article is to present fundamental assumptions of academic advising and to indicate possibilities and limitations of the implementation of these assumptions in Polish higher education institutions. Bearing in mind that the concept of support in the form of advising originated in American higher education institutions and that its theoretical foundations and methodological solutions were developed there (Kuhn, 2008, p. 3), it should be emphasized that the author is aware of the differences with regard to systemic solutions and organizational culture of American and Polish higher education institutions. Not all proposals and solutions can be reproduced in Polish higher education institutions, but it is worth analysing and considering whether and to what extent they can be adapted to Polish conditions.

There are reasons for which this concept is interesting. Three of them seem to be the most significant. The first one is changes that occur in the education system. They concern all education levels, however, here the author wants to pay special attention to changes in higher education. One of the consequences of reforms introduced as part of the Bologna system is not only the division of studies into three degrees, but also the differentiation and multiplication of possible paths to achieve educational and professional goals. The separation of studies into three degrees means that decisions about programme or specialization are taken not only after passing the upper secondary school final examinations (*matura*), but also in the course of the studies. The key moment is decision concerning the choice of the second or third cycle of studies. It can be assumed that students then need support from an advisor who will help them to reflect on substantive reasons for taking decisions and suggest ways to plan decision-making

process rationally. The next argument is the dynamics of changes on the labour market and in specific industries. While career counsellors can be helpful when students are preparing to enter the labour market, there is no reason to expect that they will be able to support the process of adjusting an educational path to the requirements of given industry. This task can be carried out by people who know given field, are familiar with the structure and dynamics of the labour market in given industry, and, additionally, have advisory competence. This can be done by academic advisors affiliated with specific faculties or programmes in higher education institutions. It is also worth noting that an academic advisor familiar with given discipline can also inspire students to choose place of apprenticeship, internship or voluntary job, providing value-added assistance. The third argument pertains to students' competence in terms of designing career. When analysing the attitudes of graduate students towards professional careers, Agnieszka Cybal-Michalska (2013) highlighted need to develop proactive attitudes, understood as *strategy for (self-) education in the world of the abundance of possibilities*. Among other things, it means that one should develop students' competences that would enable them to *take responsibility for agency resulting from their own preference*. It can be assumed that students have had some experience with educational and career counselling which aimed to assist them in their choice of profession or the next school. Designing careers that integrate educational, professional, personal and social goals requires different competence and more consideration. It seems to be significant to propose such educational and advisory support that will develop an attitude encompassing attention, reflection and critical thinking about the data related to the labour market and competent planning, analysing and strategic management. Academic advising can be response to these needs. For obvious reasons, student career centres are not able to cope with this task on their own. solution can be transferring these offers to faculties. In such case, academic advising can be treated as means of prevention of academic and professional failures.

### **Assumptions of academic advising**

The concept of academic advising originated in the USA and its development was closely connected with the direction and the dynamics of changes in American higher education. Since the beginning, the objective of activities related to it was building students' involvement in the learning process (Frost, 2000, p.3). This kind of advisory support is defined as educational activity in which knowledge of complex students' behaviours and available institutional possibilities are used in order to help students to establish and fulfil their educational and life plans (Creamer, 2000, p. 18). This definition points to two fundamental aspects of academic advising. One of them is formulating offers provided for

students. The second one is searching and creating system and organizational solutions that will support achieving educational and academic goals.

Currently, academic advising is based on few fundamental values. They are presented in the Statement of Core Values devised by the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). These are: respect, professionalism, inclusivity, integrity, commitment, caring and empowerment. These general values set detailed objectives of activities undertaken by academic advisors from particular higher education institutions. They are taken into account when formulating principles and scope of responsibility, and are implemented through diversification of advisory offers. Therefore, these values refer to both principles of advisory work and their objectives. It should be stressed that, in the context of this paper, the main objective of academic advising is empowerment understood as motivating, encouraging and supporting students and the whole academic community in the process of recognizing their potential, taking up challenges and expressing their own individuality. Referring to core values on which academic advising should be based according to NACADA, Don G. Creamer (2000, p. 19) pointed out that basic objective of this educational activity is not only students' academic development, but also individual and personal one. This objective can be achieved through individual work with students as well as group work methods using group dynamics and cooperative learning mechanisms. On the other hand, from the perspective of higher education institution, it is important to create favourable conditions for advising understood in such way. It means providing offers which enable developing skills as well as deepening reflection on the possibilities of integrating educational goals with the goals connected with other aspects of life. This results in recommendation for advisory work to take into account all aspects of students' life, as their family, social, health and financial situations constitute grounds for individual projects of advisory support.

In traditional, narrowly-defined terms, the objective of academic advising was to help students in their choice of an appropriate programme which would enable them to develop their potential and be complementary to their professional aspirations. Kenneth F. Hughey and Judith K. Hughey (2009, p. 5), referring to the work by Terry O'Banion from 1972, pointed out that advising understood in this way should take stock of elements concerning recognizing life and professional goals, choosing programme and courses as well as scheduling them. Considering these recommendations, current offers include wider range of elements and goals. These are mainly issues relating to self-knowledge, developing soft skills, especially planning, setting goals and priorities, as well as acquiring abilities related to decision-making (Habley, 2000, p. 40). However, it should be noted that each higher education institution, due to its own character, designs and provides students with original programmes and offers of academic advising.

Currently, we can distinguish three basic organizational models of academic advising at American higher education institutions. These models refer to formalized organizational solutions and not to methodological proposals. It is significant distinction, as identifying the following models results from embedding academic advising in an organizational structure of the higher education institution. Therefore, it can be assumed that it is considered not as specific kind of advising addressed to students, but as separate educational offer designed and provided in schools.

When analysing academic advising practices, Celeste F. Pardee (2000, p. 193) distinguished decentralized, centralized and shared models. The first group includes solutions typical of specific departments. When undertaking their tasks, advisors work in particular administrative units of schools and provide specialist help in faculties in which they are employed. Mostly, these are academic teachers specializing in specific fields and they divide their time between advisory tasks and their research and teaching work. In the centralized model, advisory offers are provided by central unit which controls all faculties of given institution. This model is similar to the concept of activities of student career centres in Polish higher education institutions. The shared model applies solutions selected from two first models. An example can be the supplementary model in which advisors conduct their tasks in faculties with support from central unit, which is responsible for formal administrative issues, orders and distribution of necessary materials and resources (Pardee, 2000, p. 196). Hughey and Hughey (2009, p. 4) observed that academic advising and career counselling are often considered to be closely related, and in advisory practice they are often offered simultaneously to students, or provided as one offer combining both advisory paths.

Notwithstanding considerations concerning various relations connected with academic advising and career counselling undertaken in American higher education institutions, the author wishes to refer to three fundamental differences between these offers, which are significant in the context of advising organized in Polish institutions. The first is the scope of competence. In academic advising, advisors do not only support students' decision-making process, but also have broader competence. They can have an impact on decisions in terms of designing individual educational or specialist paths for particular students. In practice, it means approving an internship plan, approving the selection of modules as part of specialization, recognizing the results of education outside of an obligatory programme of studies. From the perspective of recognizing qualifications gained outside the system, the possibility of taking decisions on these issues seems to be of great importance. The second difference concerns the scope of advisory objectives. The offer of career centre aims at preparing students to enter and function effectively on the labour market, whereas the objectives of academic advising also focus on the recentivist perspective. Priority is

given not only to factors leading to more dynamic professional career, but also to these which contribute to achieving goals and conducting tasks connected with academic activity. The third difference that wish to highlight is form of consultation with an advisor. Generally, meetings with career counsellor are optional and take place at the request of student seeking advice. However, some academic advising offers are obligatory. It mainly pertains to approving an educational pathway, an internship or recognizing education results (Rosalska, Wawrzonek, 2011).

### **Academic advising target groups**

Academic advising offers are addressed to students. However, they are not homogeneous group, but differ in terms of both the education level and specific problems they encounter, for which they need an advisor's help. The first distinction is due to the higher education structure, which in Poland stems from the arrangements of the Bologna Process. The second distinction takes stock of the developmental dynamics and wide spectrum of situational problems with which students may struggle.

In studies on academic advising in American higher education institutions, several variables are presented thanks to which students are differentiated. At the same time, these variables also indicate groups which need specific advisory support. These are racial and ethnic origin, gender, student's status, age, place of living, disability, sexual orientation, nationality. M. Lee Upcraft and Pamela S. Stephens (2000, p. 77) observed that variables that differentiate students can also include differences visible in attitudes or preferred values, in the field of physical and mental health and in the level of readiness to start academic education. Factor that triggers the need for specific advisory services can also be student's family and financial situation. Analysing groups of students who require special advisory offers, Virginia N. Gordon and George E. Steele (2005) also identified such variables as cultural distinctiveness, special abilities, age, poor school results, sexual orientation as well as focus on sports career.

Recognizing groups which require specialist support refers to the perspective of situational problems. From developmental perspective, it can be said that all students at given stage of academic education undertake tasks and fulfil goals which result from the dynamics of the studying process. The authors cited above demonstrated that the basic advisory offer should be addressed to three student groups: those starting higher education, those changing programme of studies, and those that are graduating (Gordon, Steele, 2005). In the Polish higher education system, it seems that students who may need specialist advisory support are those of the first and third year of BA or engineering programmes, the second year of MA programmes and doctoral students.

Students of the 1st year of the first cycle degree programme need assistance in the transition from the upper secondary school to the higher education institution. There are three fundamental groups of issues which are worth including in academic advising. The first one is developing competence connected with effective studying. Learning strategies which were useful in upper secondary schools may be not only ineffective, but also harmful. Academic competence includes not only skills connected with studying given subject, but also such competence as time management, work organization, setting goals and priorities, project management and team work. What is also significant, is an offer concerning developing and enhancing students' individual resources, which can contribute to achieving the established goals (see: Buis, Post, Visser, 2016). Therefore, preventing procrastination, i.e. strategies of delaying exams and graduation, can be of special importance here. The second set of issues addressed to this student group involves disseminating information on the resources of higher education institution and social environment resources. Assuming that studies are an interesting and challenging educational project, in addition to strategies for managing this project, it is worth presenting available resources, means and allies to students. As part of academic advising, the 1<sup>st</sup> year students should learn about not only their faculty resources, but also the general offer including library assets, information and technological resources. The information should also include the possibilities of social, financial and healthcare support, as well as psychological help. crucial issue is recognizing allies. These are people who can provide students with help, support and consultation in various fields, including both substantive issues connected with the studied discipline and issues which affect other spheres of students' life. What seems important in this area is the introduction into the academic culture and principles of communication with the authorities of higher education institution and the faculty, as well as administrative staff and academic teachers. The better students know the structure and the procedures, the more effective they can be in managing them. The first two thematic fields concern all 1<sup>st</sup> year students, whereas the third field is addressed to those who have doubts whether they have chosen the right programme, and those who are not convinced if they want to continue their studies. Academic practice shows that every year certain percentage of students terminate their studies after the first semester or the first year. This situation is caused by various reasons and we can assume that cognitive deficits or failures to attend the modules and pass exams are not the only ones involved. This situation constitutes challenge for academic advising. The analysis of factors determining educational choices of upper secondary school graduates is beyond the scope of this study. However, some of these decisions seem to have been made on other grounds than substantive ones. During the first semester or the first year some students can be unpleasantly surprised at the confrontation of their expectations and ideas with the academic reality. Therefore, an academic



advisor can have an essential role. As specialists who know and understand the advisory process, and at the same time knows the character of the programme, specialization or industry, they can help students to think about their goals, priorities and aspirations. The conversation with an academic advisor can make the student form more realistic and far-reaching overview of the situation, which can be starting point for redefining career assumptions and goals, thus adhering to, verifying or changing decisions as to the choice of education field.

Analysing the objectives of academic advising addressed to the 1<sup>st</sup>-year BA and engineering students and outlined above, we can state that the primary objective is to ensure good start in academic communities and structures. In terms of the next target group, i.e. people finishing the first cycle degree programme, the stated objectives concern re-establishing an educational path in the context of educational goals, professional goals and goals connected with personal and family life. This group of students faces questions such as whether they should continue higher education, have break to conduct other professional tasks or tasks related to other life roles. Students have lot of possibilities in this respect. They can continue studying within the same programme or specialization, or change their educational path completely. Students can also search for offers which will be complementary to their previous modules. Due to the possibilities offered by the Bologna system, designing an academic career becomes challenge. An academic path becomes project and not just choice. The author considers the moment of transition from the BA programme to the MA programme as particularly crucial in these projects. Students then have chance to revise their goals. Therefore, the expression “designing career” is of particular significance. It can be assumed that this process requires competence connected with strategic management. The objective is not only to achieve educational goals effectively and efficiently, but also to adapt activities to the social, economic and industry environment.

The third group includes students of the last year of MA programmes. The fundamental objective of advisory support in this respect is preparing them to enter the labour market. In terms of this objective, cooperation between an academic advisor and career counsellor is recommended. Career centres are allies whose task is to support students and graduates in the process of designing professional careers and entering the labour market effectively. However, the advisory offer of career centres mainly aims to develop competence connected with self-presentation, educate about rules of application procedures and enhance soft skills. In terms of designing careers, this offer is important and needed, but it is not adjusted to the character of specific programmes of studies and industries. Only qualified academic advisor, who knows the industry and the character of profession and programme, can show potentially interesting workplaces, fields enabling setting up own business and recommendations for further professional development. It is worth emphasising that academic



advising and career counselling are not competing offers – they are supplementary, or even complementary, offers.

The fourth group to which the academic advising offer is addressed is doctoral students. These are people who need specific support. One of the consequences of recognizing doctoral studies as the third cycle degree programme is that they have become very popular. Between 2006 and 2017, the number of doctoral students increased from 25 622 to 43 181 (according to data by the Polish Main Statistics Office, 2017). There are also various reasons for undertaking third cycle education. Traditionally, doctoral studies are considered as one of the academic career stages. However, changes in their structure, as well as changes in the employment organization and the structure of higher education institutions made continuing academic work just one of many options for planning career after obtaining doctoral degree. Many graduates start to work outside the academia. In advisory work with doctoral students, from the perspective of employment, there are three basic areas of benefits and losses resulting from completing PhD (Secrist, Fitzpatrick, 2001). The first one is developing academic competence which is essential at this education stage. It is not only connected with thesis writing methodology, but also with securing grants, building relationships in the academic environment and skills to present one's own research findings. The second area involves being successful and preventing failure on the labour market understood in broad sense. An academic degree can, but does not have to, improve employability. Especially in the context of the precariat, PhD graduates may be facing higher risk. Competence useful in scientific work is not equivalent to skills required from specialists in given industry. It is also worth noting that doctoral studies postpone the moment of entering the labour market for few years, even though, it mainly concerns full-time doctoral students. An academic advisor can help in the process of designing and developing competence profile which, on the one hand, will be adequate for doctoral student's professional plans and aspirations and, on the other hand, will take into account the dynamics and direction of changes on the labour market, as well as the possibilities of employment in the academic environment. The third area focuses on the possibility of developing soft skills. They are necessary for individual development. However, they are also an essential component of academic as well as professional competence.

The general overview of advisory needs of academic advising target groups given above can constitute one of perspectives on formulating postulates concerning the competence of academic advisors. Upcraft and Stephens (2000, p. 81) claimed that the differentiation of students requires an academic advisor to have extended knowledge of two areas. The first one is knowledge of specific students, their individual aptitudes, experience, resources and limitations. The second one is knowledge of available resources of higher education institution as well

as possibilities and rules of their use. According to the authors' assumptions, this knowledge can facilitate conducting basic tasks, such as revising and developing academic advising programmes, which include ongoing monitoring and taking account of changes in students' needs, establishing cooperation between academics and academic advisors, as well as monitoring and verifying current policies and practice in given field.

### **Examples of solutions in the field of academic advising**

It is not difficult to find examples of good practices with regard to academic advising that originate from American higher education institutions. It is an offer which has rich history and tradition, numerous proposals for theoretical models and methodological solutions and many studies in the literature on the subject. In terms of Polish higher education institutions, it is important to search for the solutions that refer to their specific local character, tradition and culture of studying. As was mentioned above, advising students in Poland is perceived mainly through the activities of Student Career Centres. However, it also involves career counselling aiming at enhancing competences required for transition to the labour market.

For the purposes of this study, the author wants to refer to academic advising offered at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Two first offers are addressed to students of the first-cycle degree programmes and the third one to doctoral students. All classes are conducted in groups and are obligatory.

The first proposal is classes conducted in the Faculty of Geographical and Geological Sciences at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The first-year programme includes the course titled "Academic Competence" which is conducted in the first semester. It is 15-hour course in the form of tutorials. As part of this offer, the content from three thematic modules is discussed. The first one is connected with studying strategies and styles, time management, preventing procrastination, the logic of educational projects and dynamics of team work. During the second module, students learn about the faculty and university resources, supporting and aid institutions, university educational and sports offers. Moreover, the possibilities of studying abroad are also presented. The subject of the third module involves issues connected with developing professional capital. The context of analyses is knowledge of the labour market. Students learn about the academic and non-academic opportunities of developing professional competences, both specialist and social ones.

The second offer is also 15-hour course titled "Planning Educational and Professional Careers". It is run at the Faculty of Educational Studies of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, and is meant for 2<sup>nd</sup> year students in Pedagogy. The objective of the course is, among other things, to develop competence

with regard to designing careers which integrate educational, professional, personal and social goals. Apart from contents focusing on recognizing their own career resources, students learn about the techniques of planning, setting priorities and critically analysing information sources. During classes students work on skills that determine conducting studies-related tasks effectively, as well as skills that can constitute significant resource in professional career.

The third example is the university offer for doctoral students. As part of the wide offer with regard to education on psychopedagogy, the 1st year doctoral students are offered lectures and workshops enhancing students' individual competence connected with performing academic and professional tasks. The workshops cover, among others: motivation and motivating in the context of personal development, tools and techniques in management of professional development, enterprise in career development and self-management over specific period of time.

The above examples constitute proposal for obligatory and formalized classes. They are group tutorials. What is significant is that this offer is not only meant for students who are aware of their needs to develop competences that can improve their academic career. It is the offer targeting all students as, apart from educational and advisory functions, it is of great importance for preventing academic failures and career failures in the future. However, it should be noted that tasks attributed to academic advising can also be implemented in the form of less formalized classes. These tasks are done by internship supervisors, academic cohort tutors and people running student associations.

It can be assumed that higher education institutions will become increasingly interested in introducing various forms of academic advising. One can even risk hypothesis that this offer will become more and more significant, and will be considered as complementary to career counselling. Due to the fact that the student population becomes more diverse, higher education institutions will be implementing solutions contributing to the improvement of learning effectiveness. Such challenges as an increasing number of non-traditional students and foreign students, lack of recruitment procedures and the demographic decline resulting in worsening students' readiness to start studies generate the need for solutions which would improve students' possibilities of exploiting the opportunities created by higher education. In this context, academic advising seems to be beneficial proposal in terms of both the students' needs, as well as interests of higher education institution as learning organization.

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