

Academic Advising in Iranian Medical Schools

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Abstract

Background and purpose: To measure the status of academic advising in medical schools, the present study was designed at the Secretariat for Education and Student Affairs of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education.

Methods: A benchmarking tool, to assess the quality of different aspects of that field was devised. Every school was asked to introduce a representative who would complete a questionnaire, which was designed to collect schools' information.

Results: All the divisions were visited by one of the project's members to revise and approve the data. Then data retrieval was performed, verified and analyzed at the project's office.

Conclusion: There are 45 public and private medical schools nationwide, which were stratified based on their individual scores for academic advising.

Keywords: ACADEMIC ADVISING, BENCHMARKING

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Introduction

Reviewing the different papers and books reveals that academic advising has a broad definition, therefore each institution declares specific characteristics for it. As a whole, academic advising is a systematic process in which advisor and advisee enter a close dynamic relationship respectful of the student's concerns and intended to aid the student in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the use of the full range of institutional and community resources^{1,2}. In other words, academic advising is the process of helping students match their needs and goals with the college resources so that they get

maximum benefit from their college experience and get prepared for life after college^{3,4}. It also encourages students to think critically, and develop action steps. The desired result is that students will feel a sense of connection with the advisor and a sense of guidance, while realizing personal responsibility for exploring options and making decisions⁴. The advisor serves as a facilitator of communication and a coordinator of learning experiences through course and career planning and academic progress review⁵. Although many individuals on campus, including academic advisors, may assist the student in making decisions and accomplishing goals, the academic advisor is granted formal authority by an academic unit (college, school or department) to approve the student's academic program of study and assist the student in progressing toward the appropriate degree^{6,7}.

As stated earlier, advising is an interactive partnership between the advisor and the student. The followings are some specific responsibilities of

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academic advisors, which are proposed by many educational authorities including High Council of Medical Education Planning of Iran⁷⁻¹⁰:

- Possess skills in helping students to explore their personality, interests, goals, values, and skills
- Have access to an up-to-date record for each student and be respectful to his/her confidentiality.
- Provide students with correct up-to-date academic information about graduation requirements for their selected degree program.
- Assist students with choosing programs and developing a course of study that reflects each student's academic background, personal situation, and educational goals.
- Provide students with information about alternatives, limitations, program changes, university regulations, core, major field and the consequences of academic decisions.
- Arrange regular office hours for students and seek to be flexible to reasonable student needs when possible.
- Use as many campus and community resources such as tutoring, financial aid, counseling, career services, health services as necessary to best advise the student.
- Encourage students to review their progress toward degree completion in order to assure early detection of problems.
- Know career opportunities related to students' majors or refer them to appropriate sources of information

Although academic advising has been recognized as an essential educational service in medical education systems¹¹, it is a relatively new entity in Iran. This paper reports the method of assessment and findings of the status of academic advising in medical schools of Iran. The executive phases of this study were parts of a larger project, National Stratification of Educational Services, that measures the educational performance of Iranian medical universities.

Methods

During a period of two years (from February 2002 to March 2004), this study was performed at the Secretariat for Education and Student Affairs of the Ministry of Health and Medical

Education of Iran.

Upon the approval of the project, several sessions were held to define the elements, objectives, methods and implications of the project. The project team designed primary data collection questionnaire. Different parts of the questionnaire were designed to address as many potentially diverse aspects of academic advising as possible, and guarantee acceptable validity and reliability of the acquired information. Those questions were:

- Number of assigned academic advisors in the faculty.
- Whether the faculty advisors only sign the registration forms or they control all of the registration forms by checking the students' credits and scores.
- Whether the advisors assist advisees with schedule planning and course selection on both long-term and short-term basis. It means that some courses need to be taken in sequence and some of the others are only offered once every year so the students don't miss the opportunity to take needed or desired courses.
- Whether the advisors monitor advisees' academic progress and initiate contact with advisees who are failing to progress satisfactorily.
- Whether advisors provide information about academic policies, procedures like drop/add, retakes and academic probation/dismissal.

Then, the features given above were set in a decision tree template that enabled us to stratify medical schools in the field of academic advising. In the next step, every school was asked to introduce a representative who would complete the questionnaire and serve as the facilitator between the faculty and the project. All the representatives participated in an orientation workshop. Then, they received the questionnaire and completed it in collaboration with different divisions inside their faculty.

Visiting medical school sites was the next phase, when a project's representative, who had been briefed on the questionnaire, and the school's representative visited all the divisions and completed the information that was collected previously. Finally, the data which

was approved by the medical school authorities and the project's representative would be transferred to the project's office for further processing.

Results

There are 38 public and 7 private approved medical schools in Iran and this study covered all of them. The oldest modern medical school in Iran, Tehran School of Medicine, was established in 1934 and the latest ones were built in 1995. Tehran School of Medicine also has the greatest number of medical students (2883) while Ilam School of Medicine has only 131 medical students.

Table 1 shows the academic advising ranking, type, date of establishment and number of students of medical schools in Iran. The score of the number of assigned academic advisor to the number of medical student between medical schools varies from 0 to 14.4%.

Table 2 shows the overall rankings and total scores of the nation's medical schools in the field of academic advising. In this project, the highest score in every single feature of academic advising, which given in previous section, obtains a value of 100 and likewise the other scores proportionately get a value between 0 and 100. Naturally, the total best score, which belongs to a hypothetical Best School, is 100.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to devise a benchmarking tool to investigate the quality of academic advising in Iranian medical schools and stratify those schools based on their potentials. As explained in the previous part, the hypothetical best school is the one made up of the best parts of all the 45 medical schools of the country. Table 2 shows that no medical school can get a score of 100 and even the best ones are far away from the optimal status. The important reasons for this shortcoming may list as:

- Most of the medical students, and even educational authorities, are unfamiliar with roles and responsibilities of faculty advisors.

- There are a disproportionate number of faculty advisors in most of the medical schools.

- Numerous administrative or educational responsibilities of faculty advisors distract their attention from their advisory duties.

- Some of faculty advisors lack ambition or experience to obtain student advisory roles.

The current rankings deal with the schools on the basis of their educational service provision, regardless of the date of their establishment, their size and governing system. Nonetheless, from the practical point of view and to assist the authorities in the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, the results are also separately tabulated, in table 1, according to the schools' date of establishment, number of students and the type of governance. Therefore, the schools that admitted their first group of medical students prior to the year 1978 were grouped together as Group A, those that were established from 1979 to 1991 were named Group B and the rest comprised Group C. Interestingly, most of the top 10 medical schools in table 2 have been established in the past decade and are among the newest ones in Iran. Furthermore, except Shahid Beheshti and Hamedan, all top 10 medical schools have low enrolment. It may explain the reason that why some of the schools with good reputation and large number of students obtain low scores in this indicator.

Since the mid 80's, due to increasing tendency for higher education, private Islamic Azad University has been established. Currently, it has seven approved medical schools throughout the country. As table 1 shows all of those institutions are among the low-ranked schools. It seems that all previous reasons mentioned above would be responsible for this defect in their education systems.

In conclusion, the analysis of the results of this project defines the strengths and weaknesses of Iranian medical schools in the field of academic advising and assists the schools authorities to overcome their shortcomings by enrolling new advising members, implementing educational workshops to foster advisory abilities of faculty members, compiling brief information about roles and responsibilities of academic

advisors for other university faculty and students and; other appropriate solutions.

aaa/advresp.htm

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