A data-informed approach to Academic Advising using StREAM

Case Study
January 2024

Background

Middlesex University, a StREAM by Kortext client since 2021, deployed the **StREAM** student engagement analytics platform to help support student retention. As part of their deployment approach, the University have revised the institutional provision of academic and pastoral support with the introduction of Academic Advisors. The new model was designed to better assist students to achieve their educational outcomes and utilise the outstanding professional services teams more effectively.

In this case study with Neil Bangs, Associate Professor and Academic Advising Teaching and Learning Lead at Middlesex University, we explore how the University provides outstanding student support and reflect upon how student engagement data is a catalyst for facilitating deeper, richer and action-orientated conversations with students.

A clear institutional definition of Academic Advising

The introduction of **StREAM** at Middlesex University coincided with the collaborative development of a comprehensive, institution-wide approach to Academic Advising. This approach was designed to establish and maintain a consistent standard for this crucial aspect of the student experience across all faculties and departments. The University's definition of Academic Advising aligns with the goals of this approach and aims to provide a shared definition and terminology to foster unity and standardisation:

> Offering students dedicated time to reflect on their educational journey with a member of their programme team, to enable them to maximise their potential to succeed at Middlesex University and beyond.

The accompanying Institutional Academic Advising Agreement details the underpinning rationale to the new role:

1 To help remove pre-existing barriers to learning
2 Add specific skills as needed throughout a students journey
3 To provide early interventions to help students achieve their educational outcomes.

To this end, each subject area or department has nominated an experienced individual to take responsibility for the delivery and enhancement of Academic Advising provision. Academic Advising Leads are senior managers within a department, however the role can be re-assigned to reflect existing leadership structures. The flexibility of the Academic Advising offer provides opportunities for programmes to have differing approaches within a department.

Features of Academic Advising at Middlesex

The standardised offer shown in Table 1 provides a necessary structure for Academic Advising across the University. This structure ensures that all students receive a comprehensive offer of support designed to drive improvements to student outcomes and comprises:

- A named Academic Advisor for all UG students (optional for PG students)
- A minimum of 4 group interactions per annum, spread across the academic year
- Student-centred, coaching style, dialogical approach
- Approaches that support the development of lifelong learning; sense of community; employability and health and wellbeing
- Integration of **StREAM** data to monitor and support engagement with 1:1 contact for those with very low/low engagement scores.

There is some flexibility for departments to tailor its implementation, as relevant to their students and resource constraints, particularly for larger cohorts.

		Standard features of the Middlesex University academic advising scheme
Who	Allocated academic advisor	All UG students (mandatory) PG (optional)
	Delivery team	Member of the programme team (as determined locally)
How	1:1 interaction	Yes, where... (a) students request 1:1 (b) students are not engaging in advising interactions (c) students have low engagement scores (d) the students' programme teams have embedded into the curriculum
	Group interaction	Minimum of 4 interactions per academic year (in scheduled seminars or timetabled academic advising groups)
	Approach	Student-centred group coaching-style dialogue and/or exercises with their academic advisor on student led priorities
	Mode of delivery	In person (online or on campus)
	Timetabled	Yes (wherever possible)
	Focus	Supporting the development of lifelong learning; community mindset; employability/entrepreneurship; health and wellbeing
	Informed by StREAM data	Yes
	Signposting	Identifying relevant support services, asynchronous sessions, and/or information communicated to students regularly
When	Frequency	Spread across the academic year
	Aligned to key points in the academic year	Yes, wherever possible in advance of key student milestones (e.g. welcome and transition; assessment periods)

Table 1: The standardised Academic Advising Offer at Middlesex University

An 'uninterrupted weekly dialogue'

Work to support successful student outcomes at Middlesex is designed to assimilate students to the university environment throughout their induction and will also help Advisors and their Advisees to review academic progress and enable effective signposting to all necessary support networks. Wellbeing is another key aspect of this work, focused around 'academically significant moments' (e.g. welcome and transition, and assessment periods). Other 'significant moments' are defined by data insights from **StREAM** such as when a student has been in the Low or Very Low engagement categories for extended periods of time. Meetings with Advisors and relevant Professional Services teams are triggered by StREAM data and followed up by supportive, in-person coaching conversations.

To meet these expectations, an 'interactive, proactive and close student-advisor relationship is envisaged, providing opportunities for 'uninterrupted weekly dialogue'. Students can expect a variety of support opportunities along a continuum that includes 1:1 interactions, group tutorials, virtual, asynchronous or bespoke meetings that could be in-person but could equally be virtual and synchronous.

A structured approach

The revised approach to Academic Advising is thoroughly embedded within university structures (figure 1) and associated role descriptors detail responsibilities mapped to overall project outcomes. Specifically, the Advisor role descriptor explicitly references consideration of **StREAM** data alongside contextual understanding of relevant personal information and other objective data.
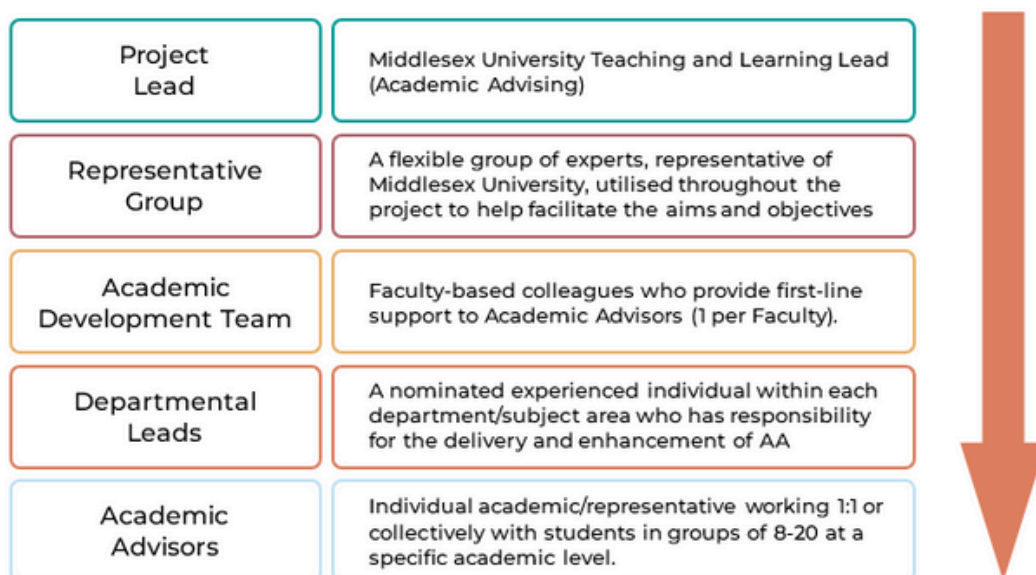

Project Lead	Middlesex University Teaching and Learning Lead (Academic Advising)
Representative Group	A flexible group of experts, representative of Middlesex University, utilised throughout the project to help facilitate the aims and objectives
Academic Development Team	Faculty-based colleagues who provide first-line support to Academic Advisors (1 per Faculty).
Departmental Leads	A nominated experienced individual within each department/subject area who has responsibility for the delivery and enhancement of AA
Academic Advisors	Individual academic/representative working 1:1 or collectively with students in groups of 8-20 at a specific academic level.

Figure 1: Organisational structure for Academic Advising at Middlesex University

In addition to the 'uninterrupted dialogue', departments can develop further strategies that can enhance the standardised offer across the 28 weeks of the academic year. Examples include sending weekly 'what's on' emails to students from the University alongside weekly 'mindset' push messages entitled 'Academic Advising'. Some staff have rebranded 'office hours' to accommodate both academic and advising support. A range of optional educational gain learning programmes are available throughout the year. In addition, staff are encouraged to offer progressive and developmental interactions at each academic level, delivered in a format to suit.

How StREAM complements and informs Academic Advising

Within the advice and guidance provided to Academic Advisors, there is a direct reference to how staff are expected to engage with StREAM and identifies the richness of the data contained within the platform:

> "
> *StREAM monitors far more than simple attendance data to give a richer picture and a more representative view of a student's engagement with their studies.*
> "

All Advisors are expected to use technology to help them 'understand, support and engage effectively' with students, supported by regular training as required. Staff are encouraged to recognise the important role that **StREAM** engagement data plays in helping Advisors to understand how their Advisees are engaging with their studies and to identify where they are dis-engaging and therefore may be at risk of failing to progress. Crucially, the ability for these engagement data insights to recognise where students could achieve better outcomes with support is also explicitly referenced.

Academic Advisors are 'expected' to check **StREAM** regularly, paying particular attention to students in the None, Very Low and Low engagement categories. Information on students who trigger key engagement thresholds is pushed out to staff via a weekly email digest based on and generated by the data in **StREAM**. The associated support process encourages staff to arrange 1:1 meetings with students where they meet these engagement triggers with a view to seeking to understand what is happening, provide tailored support or refer to specialist professional services teams where required. Advisors are also encouraged to congratulate students for sustained periods of high engagement with their academic studies.

Neil is clear on the central importance of StREAM to the new approach to Advising:

> *"*
> *Do not be shy in having high expectations for the use of StREAM and Academic Advising / Personal Tutoring*
> *"*

Through this positive use of engagement data, Advisors are able to open up conversations and triangulate contextual data to better advise and guide their students. Proactive 1:1 meetings provide the opportunity to challenge students' understanding of how they are engaging and the impact that has on their ability to reach their goals, seeking to guide their development, and support them to get from where they are, to where they want to be.

Making a difference

Neil recognises that the developments to Academic Advising, using student engagement data insights from within **StREAM**, take time to embed within the practice of his colleagues. Although it's early days for Neil and his team, the impact of Academic Advising has been far-reaching, enhancing the academic practice of 500+ Academic Advisors and improving student learning for over 10,000 students.

The results for the 2022/23 academic year have been transformative: although it is not a standalone strategy for improving outcomes, this substantial intervention has played a pivotal role. Middlesex's performance in the National Student Survey (NSS) has exceeded the Office for Students benchmark in five out of the seven NSS themes:

Assessment and Feedback	**+ 2.92%**
Student Voice	**+ 2.54%**
Academic Support	**+ 1.08%**
Learning Resources	**+ 0.38%**
Organisation and Management	**+ 2.54%**

Future developments

This academic year, Neil's focus is on continuing to work collaboratively with Advisors and Professional Services to embed the standard approach to Academic Advising and help make it an integral part of their roles. Application of contextual knowledge about the student, their programme of study and the university framework, regulations and policies helps ensure a student-centred approach to support and success.

Longer-term, ensuring alignment to the student journey is essential to Middlesex's strategy around automated alerts and to any actions and outreach initiatives that follow. Advising will also be the subject of a University-wide evaluation and review project to explore the impact on student outcomes in line with the Office for Students requirements around 'delivering successful outcomes for all students' (registration condition B3). Neil knows that turning the dial on these regulatory metrics necessitates a personalised and tailored support offer, informed by intelligent use of data such as that available within **StREAM**.

Conclusions

Neil is clear that Academic Advising at Middlesex will continue to evolve. As the current Chair of UK Advising and Tutoring (UKAT), Neil is able to bring a research-to-practice perspective that reflectively considers best practice examples around student support from across the sector in the light of Middlesex's strategic direction around Advising. In his words:

> " *I'm looking forward to watching StREAM evolve to meet the new challenges across higher education as we look for new insights, pedagogies and strategies to maximise the success for all students.* "

Useful resources

- [The importance of personal tutoring to student success](#)

- [8 ways student engagement analytics can transform your personal tutoring](#)

- [Student Engagement Analytics: A Guide to Using Data for Personal Tutoring and Pastoral Support](#)

For more information...

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