

Implementation of an academic advising program for undergraduate medical students at the University of Zawia: Benefits and challenges

Entesar Omran^{1*}   and Sumia Dra²  

¹ Head of Academic Advising Department, Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, Zawia, Libya

² Deputy Dean of Scientific Affairs, Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, Zawia, Libya

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed

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Abstract: Academic advising is a crucial aspect of higher education, as it helps students navigate their academic journey, achieve their academic goals, and overcome any challenges they may face. The Faculty of Medicine at the University of Zawia, Libya, recognized the importance of academic advising and implemented an academic advising program for its undergraduate medical students in May 2022. This study aims to demonstrate the methodology of creating and implementing an academic advising program for undergraduate medical students at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, and to highlight the rationale behind implementing this program and its associated benefits. Additionally, the study will discuss the challenges faced by the academic advising department team during the program implementation and provide recommendations for improvement. Through a review of the literature on academic advising programs implemented in various international universities, a unique academic advising guide for the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Zawia was designed and implemented to support undergraduate medical students.

Introduction

Academic advising plays a pivotal role in student success and is recognized as a fundamental aspect of undergraduate education [1, 2]. It facilitates student development and supports them in career exploration, academic planning, and goal setting, which are crucial for degree completion [3]. The Faculty of Medicine at the University of Zawia recognized the importance of this and established an academic advising department and program in May 2022 to support its undergraduate medical students. The primary goal of academic advising is to help students develop an academic plan that best suits their interests and abilities while fulfilling degree requirements [2]. An effective advising program ensures students are well-informed about curriculum, policies, procedures, and campus resources [4, 5]. It fosters a supportive environment where students can discuss academic challenges, future plans, and personal issues with their advisor [6, 7]. Regular meetings between advisor and advisee aid in monitoring student progress, addressing issues promptly, and guiding students to available support services as needed [8]. Overall, academic advising aims to empower students and boost their retention, satisfaction, and timely graduation [8-11]. In the field of academic advising, the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Zawia in Libya has demonstrated exceptional leadership among all faculties across the country's universities. Notably, it has pioneered the establishment of a well-organized

advising program and department dedicated to supporting its students. Furthermore, the Faculty's Academic Advising Guide (AAG) stands as the first comprehensive guide of its kind to be developed in Libya. The current study aims to describe the methodology used in creating and implementing this academic advising program at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia. Additionally, the rationale behind the implementation and its anticipated benefits will be discussed. The study will also address the challenges faced during the implementation process and provide recommendations for improvement. The findings from this study are intended to serve as a framework for other institutions looking to establish similar advising programs.

Materials and methods

In May 2022, the academic advising program at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, was designed based on a thorough literature review of academic advising programs implemented at various international universities, including Al Juf University, Najran University, Almansoura University, Edinburgh University, Ohio State University, Copenhagen University, Shaqra University, and Cheyney University of Pennsylvania [12, 19]. The designed AAG includes the organizational structure of the academic advising department, its members, and its mission and goals. The guide also outlined the operational plan for the academic advising department and clarified the distribution of tasks among the department head and the coordinators of academic advising for various academic and clinical stages, from the first year of human medicine to the fifth year. The guide also defined the role of the academic advisor toward the students and the students' duties towards their academic advisor. The guide was designed to provide a comprehensive framework for the academic advising program, ensuring that students receive the necessary guidance and support throughout their academic journey. Furthermore, to promote awareness and understanding of the newly implemented advising program at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, an educational brochure was developed based on AAG. Hard copies were printed and distributed to most medical students and faculty members to introduce the initiative and outline key components. Additionally, a series of educational workshops was conducted for both academic advisors and students to provide a thorough understanding of the program's goals and to emphasize the importance of adhering to the guidelines outlined in the guide. These workshops aimed to foster a collaborative and supportive environment, ensuring that all parties involved were equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate the program effectively and achieve academic success. The approved work mechanism in the Academic Advising Department at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, is as follows: at the beginning of each academic year, the Academic Advising Coordinator for the responsible academic stage divides the students among the academic advisors and provides the necessary recommendations to the advisors to hold regular meetings with their students once a week or every two weeks. The academic advisors document their meetings with students in the official meeting minutes of the Academic Advising Department and submit them to the advising coordinator for that academic stage. The coordinator then reviews all the meeting minutes received from the academic advisors, highlights the main problems and suggestions presented by the students in a report to discuss with the head of the advising department, the dean of the college, and the deputy dean of scientific affairs, to find solutions to the students' problems and take the students' suggestions into consideration regarding the study plan, timetable, exam dates, and other difficulties they may face in their studies.

One of the services provided by the Academic Advising Department is focusing on students who are struggling in their studies. The struggling students are identified and provided with remedial courses in the subjects they are struggling with, in collaboration with the heads of the academic departments. Additionally, the Academic Advising Department does not forget to pay attention to high-achieving students in each academic stage. They are identified and their names are published on the official college page as a motivating and encouraging factor. The college strives to provide further motivational incentives for these students, such as free courses in international English language exams like IELTS, TOEFL, and statistical courses for data analysis like SPSS and others to pursue their studies successfully.

Results

The established academic advising guide for the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Zawia, Libya, includes the following point: The vision, mission, and objectives of the academic advising department, which aim to provide guidance and support to students and help them achieve their academic and professional goals (**Illustration 1**). The organizational structure of the academic advising department (**Illustration 2**) and the distribution of tasks among the head of the department and the coordinators of academic advising for various academic and clinical stages (**Illustration 3A** and **3B**). The role of the academic advisor toward the students, which includes providing guidance and support, monitoring their academic progress, and helping them overcome any difficulties they may face (**Illustration 4**). The students' duties towards their academic advisor which include maintaining regular contact, providing updates on their academic progress, and seeking assistance when needed (**Illustration 4**). The operational plan for the academic advising department (**Illustration 5**).

An academic advising brochure was prepared, and it summarizes the most important points in the academic advising guide, encompassing the mission and goals of the academic advising department, the role of the academic advisor toward the students, and the students' duties towards their academic advisor (**Illustration 6**). According to the information collected from the team of the academic advising department, several challenges were encountered during the implementation of the program, including: The academic advising department faced limitations in terms of essential resources, including computers, software, and staff, which hindered the efficient implementation of the program. Resistance to adopt the newly implemented academic advising program by some students and faculty members, stemming from various reasons such as a lack of complete understanding of the program, disinterest in its benefits, or conflicts arising from scheduling conflicts between the advisor and students' class schedules. An increase in the workload on advisors, as they are burdened with multiple educational responsibilities. These duties encompass teaching, both in theoretical and laboratory settings, as well as preparing for and supervising examinations, including the marking process. Moreover, some advisors are heavily engaged in clinical training for 4th and 5th-year medical students, further adding to their workload. As a result, their availability poses a significant challenge, hindering their ability to meet with students or participate in academic advising training sessions. Lack of well-trained advisors limits their ability to provide effective guidance to students.

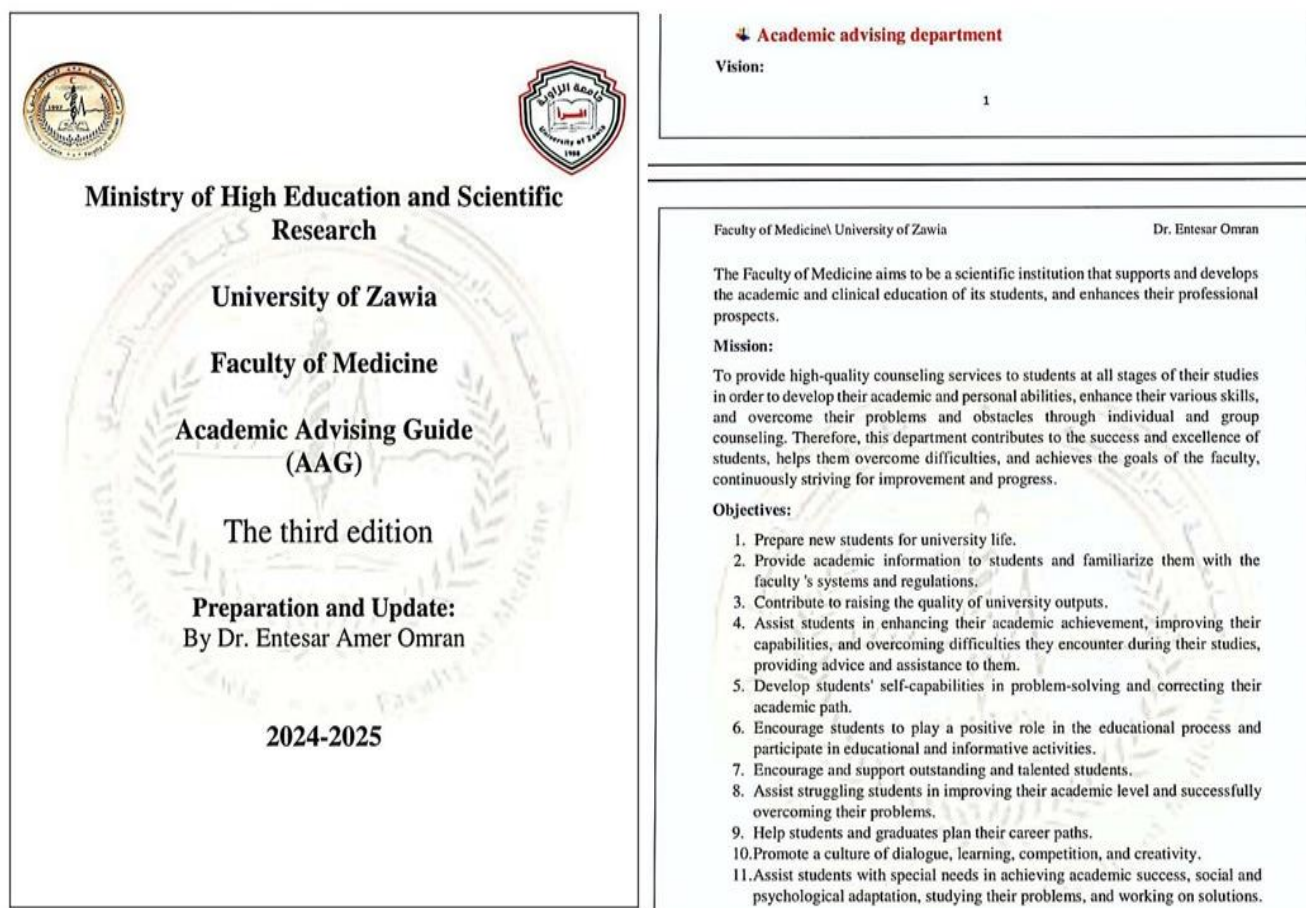


Illustration 1: The vision, mission, and objectives of the Academic Advising Department at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, Zawia, Libya

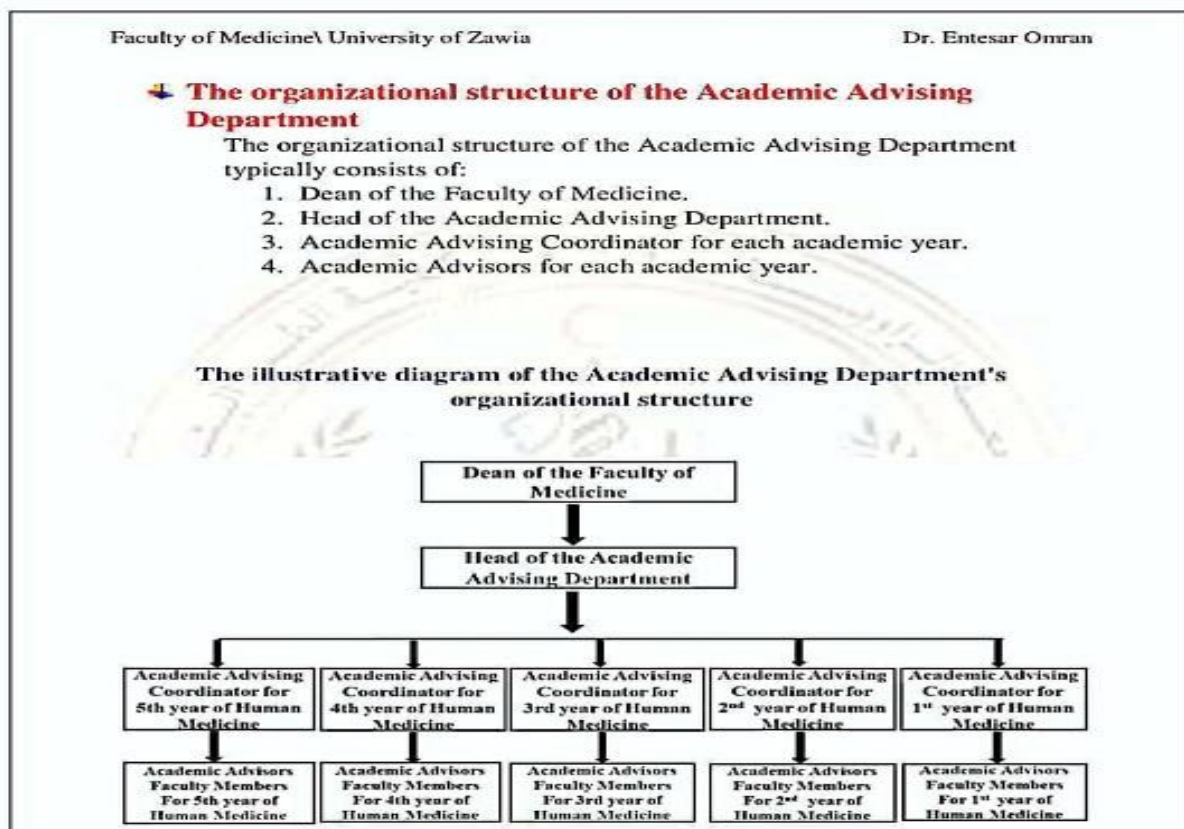


Illustration 2: The organizational structure of the Academic Advising Department at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, Zawia, Libya

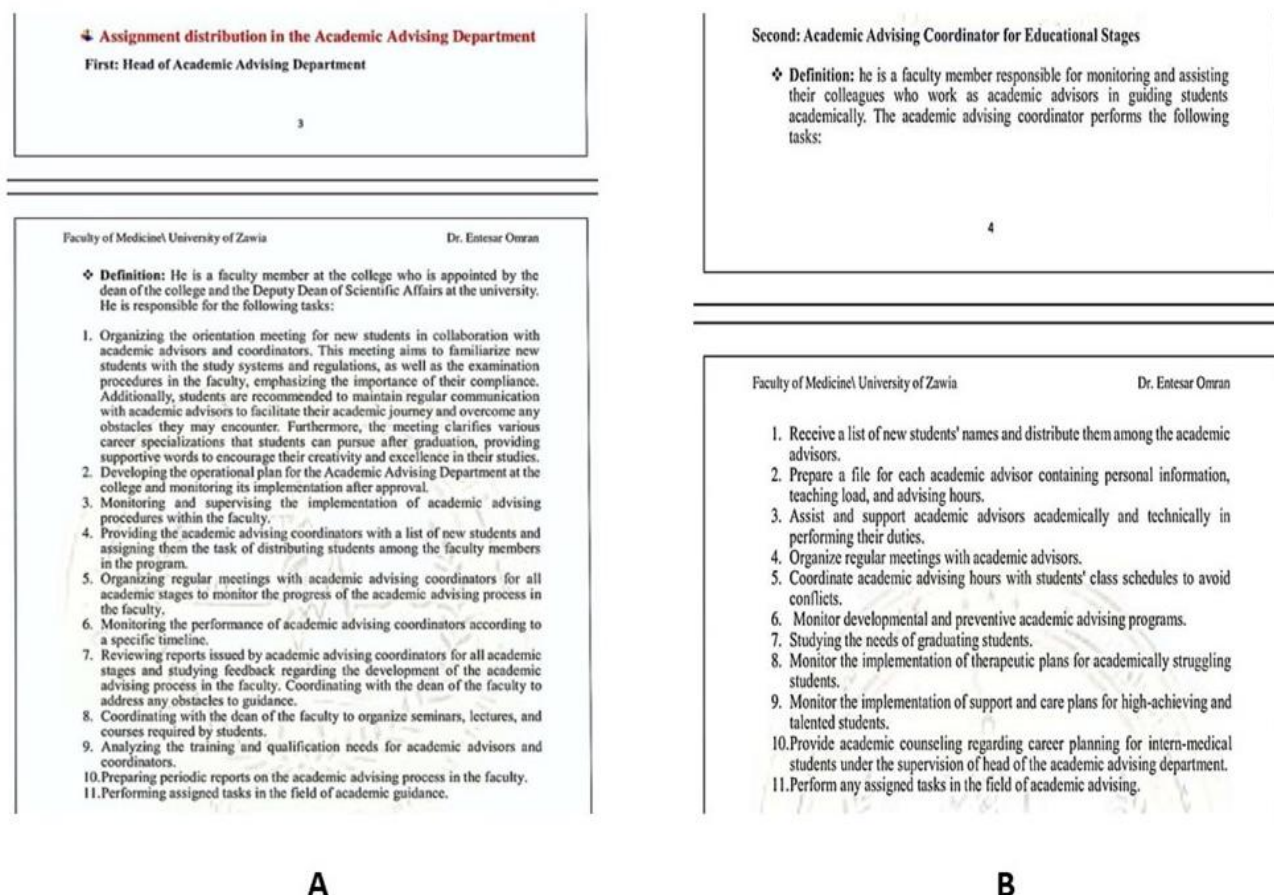


Illustration 3: (A and B). The distribution of tasks among the head of the department and the academic advising coordinators for various academic and clinical stages at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, Zawia, Libya

Third: Academic advisor

❖ **Definition:** he is a faculty member in the scientific department who is responsible for the academic guidance of a group of students assigned to them by the academic advising coordinator for the academic stage, after receiving the student lists from the admissions and registration unit at the faculty. The academic advisor performs the following tasks:

1. Orienting and welcoming new students on their first day of study, introducing them to university regulations and the university environment.
2. Creating a special file for each student, explaining university regulations and systems, familiarizing them with their rights, duties, and graduation requirements.
3. Monitoring and tracking the academic progress of the student.
4. Monitoring students who are academically struggling and assisting them in overcoming obstacles and achieving success.
5. Providing assistance to students in facing difficulties, in cooperation and coordination with the academic advising department, and proposing appropriate solutions.
6. Effective communication with students, listening to them, involving them in planning their studies, and utilizing their experiences so that they can overcome any obstacles they encounter during their studies.
7. Assisting students in solving their academic problems promptly, reducing failure rates, and increasing students' sense of belonging to their educational institution.

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8. Introducing the academic calendar for the academic year and presenting it to the students, especially the dates of midterm and final exams.
9. Encouraging students to participate in awareness campaigns and scientific activities organized by the faculty to serve the environment and the community.
10. Assisting students in discovering their abilities and interests, identifying their goals, and developing their potentials.
11. Studying negative behaviors of some students and working on finding appropriate solutions to address them.

Fourth: the student

❖ **Definition:** The student is the main focus in the educational process and is the target of academic advising process. The student's responsibilities towards their academic advisor include:

1. The student is responsible for meeting with the academic advisor at the beginning of each academic year to assist them in familiarizing themselves with the curriculum and required courses.
2. The student must be familiar with the rules and regulations applicable to the faculty.
3. The student should be knowledgeable about all the requirements of the academic program.
4. The student should adhere to the prepared study plan by the faculty in order to complete all the requirements of their academic program within the specified time.
5. It is expected that the student maintains constant communication with their academic advisor, especially at the beginning of the academic year, before mid-term and final exams, or in case of any urgent circumstances that may affect their successful study progress.
6. The student is obligated to follow all agreements made with their academic advisor and is responsible for any failure to comply.
7. Engage in interaction and participate in dialogue during regular meetings with the academic advisor.
8. Collaborate with the academic advisor in filling out questionnaires to facilitate periodic evaluation and continuous improvement of the faculty, the teaching process, and faculty members.

Illustration 4: The role of the academic advisor toward the students and the students' duties towards their academic advisor, at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, Zawia, Libya

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Table 1. Preliminary Operational Plan of the Academic Advising Department

The topic	The projects	Executive initiatives	Activities/Actions	Executive Officer	Follow-up officer	Execution date	Performance Indicators
Empowering students by encouraging them to participate in scientific research and scientific conferences."	Supporting struggling students through therapeutic programs approved by the dean of the college.	Improving Academic advising services at the Faculty through constructive communication between the academic advisor and the students.	1. Holding orientation meetings for new students at the beginning of the academic year.	Academic Advising Department	Dean of the Faculty	At the beginning of the academic year.	An orientation meeting report
			2. Honoring outstanding students and motivating them at the beginning of the academic year.	Academic Advising Department	Dean of the Faculty	At the beginning of the academic year.	A report of honoring outstanding students
			3. Preparation of reports on at-risk students and therapeutic sessions with them by academic advisors.	Academic Advisors	Academic Advising Department	After the midterms and final exams.	A report on supporting struggling students
			4. Preparation of periodic counseling reports for each academic advisor.	Academic Advisors	Academic Advising Department	At the beginning of the academic year and then regularly every month.	An evaluation report by the head of the Academic Advising Department on the work of the advisors in the college and identifying strengths and weaknesses.

Illustration 5: The operational plan for the Academic Advising Department at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, Zawia, Libya



Illustration 6: The academic advising brochure for the Academic Advising Department at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, Zawia, Libya

Discussion

The implementation of an academic advising program at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, is a significant step towards enhancing student success and achieving the faculty's mission and goals. The program's goals, which include providing guidance and support to students, monitoring their academic progress, and helping them overcome any difficulties they may face, align with the faculty's mission of producing competent and compassionate physicians. The program's emphasis on early intervention and proactive advising is particularly important, as it can help students navigate the challenges of medical school and ensure that they are on track to achieve their academic and professional goals. The current study aimed to describe the methodology used in creating and implementing an academic advising program for undergraduate medical students at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia in Libya. The program was designed based on a thorough review of academic advising programs implemented internationally [12-19]. A comprehensive AAG was developed outlining the mission and goals of the program, the organizational structure of the academic advising department, the roles and responsibilities of its members, the operational plan for the department, and the advising process. The distribution of tasks among the head of the department, the coordinators of academic advising for various academic and clinical stages, the academic advisors, and students ensures that students receive the necessary support and guidance throughout their academic journey. Additionally, an educational brochure and workshops were conducted to promote awareness and understanding of the new program among students and faculty members. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of academic advising in higher education. Previous studies found that effective academic advising has a positive impact on student retention, satisfaction, and success [8-11]. Others reported that Academic advising can also help students develop essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, time management, and communication skills, which are important for their academic success [20-21]. While Al Adawi and Al Ajmi demonstrated that academic advising helps students improve their academic performance by providing guidance, support, and solutions to academic problems, as well as helping students develop their identity and goals [22]. Furthermore, McClellan has shown that academic advising helps

students develop their leadership skills, which in turn enhances their academic engagement [23]. Multiple research studies have illustrated that academic advising extends beyond the scope of course planning and encompasses a broader range of support. It assists students in setting career objectives, clarifying their personal values, and nurturing their decision-making abilities. As a result, academic advising plays a vital role in fostering holistic development and facilitating students' overall growth [24-27]. It has been illustrated that academic advising is particularly important for undergraduate medical students, as it helps them in multiple ways: navigating the challenges of medical school, achieving their academic and professional goals, and promoting their overall development [5]. Therefore, the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, highlighted all these benefits as rationales for its implementation of the academic advising program for its medical students.

The implementation of the new academic advising program at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, is a positive step towards supporting student success. However, the team of the academic advising department encountered several challenges, including limited resources and staff, resistance to adopting the newly implemented program among some students and faculty, an excessive workload for advisors, and inadequate training for advisors. These challenges compromised the effective implementation of academic advising services. Similar obstacles have been reported in other studies evaluating advising programs in various universities in the world [5, 6, 8, 28-29]. Hart-Baldrige reported that faculty advisors faced various challenges related to navigating software systems, perceiving advising as an isolated process, receiving unclear expectations, and experiencing workload inequities [6]. Mathew and Ibrahim reported that faculty advisors struggled with workload pressures and student engagement during advising in higher education institutions in Oman [8]. Afzal and others documented the main challenges that hindered the effectiveness of academic advising and mentoring in private universities in Lahore, Pakistan, and they include limited resources, communication difficulties, and a lack of professional development as a result of the absence of standardized training for advisors, making them unable to provide comprehensive student support [28].

To effectively address the challenges faced in implementing the academic advising program at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, several recommendations are proposed. Firstly, it is essential to provide the necessary resources, such as computers, software, and trained staff, to ensure the program's successful implementation. Utilizing technology, such as advising software and online resources, can streamline the advising process and make it more accessible to students. Secondly, hiring additional staff members within the academic advising department will ensure that all students receive the necessary support and guidance and will reduce the workload on advisors. Furthermore, regular training for academic advisors is crucial in equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge of the advising process, including the use of advising tools and resources, as well as the development of academic plans. Creating a culture of academic advising is also important, as it involves promoting the benefits of academic advising and encouraging students to take advantage of the services offered. In addition, the program should be regularly evaluated to ensure that it meets the needs of students and contributes positively to their success. Moreover, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, including academic advisors, department heads, and students, is crucial to providing comprehensive support for students' academic success. Lastly, continuous improvement of the academic advising program is essential. Gathering feedback from students, faculty members, and staff and using it to make necessary changes and improvements will ensure ongoing effectiveness and relevance.

Conclusion: Overall, this study provides a framework for establishing an academic advising program tailored to the needs of students. With targeted efforts to overcome initial challenges through the recommended actions, the newly implemented academic advising program at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Zawia, shows promise for positively impacting the academic experiences and outcomes of undergraduate medical students. Further research evaluating the impact of this program over time would help demonstrate its effectiveness and provide additional insights for continuous enhancement.

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