Advising as an equity practice

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This paper will explore the concept of 'the advisory meeting' as an equity practice: whether advisory structures do, or can, promote expanded access to, and engagement with, creative education. I'll start by outlining what an advisory is for the purposes of this conversation, what our academics think about them and what students feel, then cover what the research says about this approach. Finally, I'll conclude with a provocation, a call to action, for rethinking the role that advisories could play in a more fair and inclusive admissions journey into art schools and the wider creative education sector.

For this paper, when I discuss advisories I am referring to an approach towards supporting applicants to our courses which we practice at CSM, and which is widely practiced across UAL (and by some other art schools and creative institutions). In this context an advisory constitutes a semi-formal meeting between an academic member of college staff and a prospective student, applicant, or, occasionally, offer holder. It is 'semi-formal' in that it is planned, private (though it may sometimes take place in a group format), and conducted within a designated time frame. It is not 'formal-formal', because it is not a structured teaching activity, and does not have specific learning outcomes, activities or accountability. Our advisories vary between individual and group meetings, online or in person settings, depending on context, and may be for students applying to FE, UG or PG study levels. Many advisories are also offered to targeted groups – students form specific institutions, from particular countries, or who have engaged with particular prior activities. The key consistent features are that the member of staff conducting the advisory is always an academic with teaching experience and experience reviewing applications, and usually they are a creative practitioner themselves, and that the student attendees are at some stage in the journey between expressing an interest in our courses and enrolling.

At the surface level the aim of the advisory is to increase the likelihood of students completing that journey and enrolling with us – it's a simple recruitment tool. However, beneath the surface the mechanisms of this are far more complicated. The majority of advisories take place during the application preparation phase and so the pedagogical

focus is on the preparation of application materials; student concern is overwhelmingly focused on the preparation of the portfolio. However, during this phase students also require, and value, guidance on which courses they may be suited to. Managing student expectations and understanding of different courses is a significant element of advisory work. Our academics report that students often need redirection to courses better aligned with their interests or to different study levels, and this needs to be carefully managed. Alongside this, younger students are often experiencing pressure from schools, family or even local advisors. International students may lack understanding of the UK education system and especially the arts education system, and the financial stakes can be particularly high for them. In this context, it makes sense to see many International students as facing many of the same kind of barriers to equity as those UK students we traditionally consider 'widening participation' (Barcia, 2026).

Throughout the admissions journey, and with a special focus for offer holders, students often also require practical advice and guidance about a range of things, academic, pastoral and logistical. Increasing their knowledge and understanding in these areas directly impacts their preparedness to enrol and succeed.

Where problems arise, many of the obstacles to effective advisories seem to be those common obstacles faced in all education: technical problems, insufficient time, inappropriate set up for the students concerned, targeting, unrealistic expectations, language barriers and external pressures. Our academics identified the need to be flexible, to respond to the student as they are and to try to avoid making judgements or jumping to conclusions which can inhibit interactions.

Notwithstanding the recruitment objectives, advisories as we conduct them are principally a pedagogic endeavour; teaching happens. Academics see that advisory spaces can function, at their best, like a kind of crit. Through careful questioning and discussion, they can encourage students to engage their curiosity and critical thinking, and begin to extend their work. CSM advisors also liken the advisory to a tutorial or to delivering assessment feedback, highlighting the need to respond quickly to students and to deliver feedback and questions in ways that are clear and useable, and which scaffold further progress. Academics articulate that they use the same techniques in these encounters as in their wider teaching practice and particularly identified synergy between teaching at the FE/Foundation level and the advisory process. They also articulated that conducting

advisories allows them to adapt their on-course teaching practice and to be better prepared for the swift changes to student cohorts which can otherwise catch us off guard. We can also more easily identify students who are unsuccessful in their initial application but might be suited to another course or context. All of this should tell us that these interactions would be unlikely to operate in the same way or to lead to the same outcomes if conducted by those without teaching experience, or by current students (certainly undergraduate students). The academic as advisor is a key part of the set up.

There is a final, much blurrier element to the advisory aims and outcomes which has to do with more intangible questions about confidence, critical thinking and self-efficacy. From our applicant experience surveys we know that students value one to one interactions with academics; they like to talk about their work and to feel seen and valued as practitioners, especially at the postgraduate level. Our advisory evaluations also tell us that students feel more confident and empowered after talking through their concerns and questions. If we combine these two elements we can surmise that advisories could improve student self-efficacy – leading not only to increased likelihood of enrolment, but potentially even to increased preparedness for study.

However – in the end the exchange can be seen as a success on at least one level if the advisee gets from the time what they hoped for, and ideally something more that perhaps they didn't expect. Finally – it's essential to maintain wider goals around student agency and choice in order to safeguard the integrity of the interaction; we aim to equip students to make the right choices for themselves and to communicate their work as well as they can.

We have conducted some initial evaluation surveys with students about their advisory experience. So far, we have only been able to survey a small first sample who were all applicants at the PG level. However, it provides some useful initial insights. All responders strongly agreed that the advisories were well organised, that staff were knowledgeable, engaging and friendly, and that the advisories answered their questions and made them feel more confident in preparing their portfolio and in their understanding of their chosen course. 100% of attendees also said the experience made them more likely to apply to UAL and to accept an offer. The only criticism raised in the survey was around timing, and a desire for longer meetings. The qualitative, free-text feedback also reflects these findings (see comments on the screen), and supports the ways in which are academics perceive and analyse their advisory interactions. Perhaps even more significant, if less scientific, is

the experiences of our academics, who are regularly greeted in college by students now on course who approach them to thank them for their help and support during the advisory process.

So, what does the wider research tell us? There is an established body of research around academic advising and mentoring for students on course and in other settings (especially in the US) which shows that these interventions can be effective at improving student outcomes. TASO's overview of coaching and mentoring interventions conducted with students in the UK pre-entry to HE, with the explicit intention of increasing progression to HE, reveals that evidence of success is variable – but the structure and content also varies significantly which makes drawing solid conclusions difficult. Overall, the wider research tentatively suggests that targeted and structured mentoring-type activities, conducted by well-trained mentors or role models, can be effective at increasing applications to HE, and in some cases acceptances of a place. (Hunter, Wilson and McArthur, 2018, Armstrong and Gleed 2026, TASO 2023)

There is also some interesting research considering gaps between student ability and behaviour, particularly in relation to applying to 'High Tariff', or 'competitive', universities. Disadvantaged students may be less likely to apply to high tariff institutions than their equally qualified, more advantaged peers. Mentoring has been shown to be an effective tool to encourage applications from this group. We should also consider whether these students are equally likely to be accepted when they do apply, acknowledging historic biases in admissions processes and the ongoing work to address these. In so much as art school is seen as (and often is) competitive and selective, it is worth noting this research within our context. Advisories can provide a direct and targeted tool to help students to develop an accurate and realistic view of their own potential and the selectiveness (or not) of our institutions, whilst also developing skills and approaches which may support higher quality applications and so increase their chances of success - though advisories should not be used as an alternative to, or substitute for, addressing our own biases in selection. (Sanders et al., 2018)

Research around Information, Advice and Guidance Interventions (IAG) shows these activities, usually delivered at scale, generally have a limited effect on behaviour when delivered in isolation. 'The more promising interventions are those that are tailored to the students, start early and are integrated into other forms of support.' (Robinson &

Salvestrini, 2020) This then suggests that integrating advice and guidance into the context of an academic conversation could provide a more rounded and complete approach.

In general, for outreach activities designed to widen access to HE, sustained and intensive activities which start early can materially improve progression outcomes. This is only a brief overview and there is plenty of nuance missing from my summary, but, broadly, the literature supports an optimistic view of the possibility for advisories to achieve some of the goals we have set for them around increasing participation in creative higher education.

However, none of this research seems quite to capture the specifics of advisories as we conduct them. Almost none of the interventions analysed, for example, used academics as mentors or advisors and, whilst much is made of the value of current students or professionals as 'role models', the pedagogical benefits of using practitioner-educators creates a potentially significant difference in dynamic which may sit somewhere between a role model structure and a traditional teacher/student structure. The crossover in our advisories between an academic event, a mentoring conversation, and an information or guidance opportunity makes them difficult to map onto the literature – more research is needed.

Finally, the ways in which CSM academics compare an advisory to a crit, or a tutorial, and especially to elements of assessment feedback, point to the fact that the admissions process for arts education can too often be structured as a kind of 'test' for which we are preparing students. Where holistic approaches to assessment are growing on course, admissions processes can replicate the inequalities of traditional forms of assessment. Current discussions around AI in admissions demonstrate that the system cannot always distinguish between an applicant who can practice, and one who can simply produce something that sounds or looks like they can practice – this is not a problem of AI's making, but of ours. Maintaining, or re-introducing, interviews does not necessarily mitigate this; interviews are short, pressured, one off interactions which may simply reward different ways of appearing plausible, and can compound less visible biases. These questions often include additional baggage when considering International Students about language competency, cultural expectations and previous educational experience that we grapple with regularly in advisories, again reminding us of the crossover between International and 'Widening Participation' students. As Martin Trow observed, just because our system looks 'massified', does not mean the elite has vanished (Brennan 2026). Advisories can provide a

crucial tool to disrupt the status quo in which admissions practices for selective creative education can too often bake in pre-existing inequalities, and a model for new ways of thinking about equity and student potential.

Which brings me to the final part of this presentation; a provocation.

What if our approach to finding and recruiting students rested less on funnelling them through the narrow eye of a needle, and more on widening the needle: providing simple, creative, pedagogical experiences to those who have least access to them in their day to day lives – preparing them for success on our courses and in our institutions, rather than testing their preparedness when it's already too late to make a change?

What if we stopped expecting students to understand our languages – both the literal and the metaphorical – and instead spent time speaking their languages, meeting them where they are, and discovering together what their work could be? What if we stopped looking for work and practices that already resemble what we see in our workshops and studios, and instead took the time to try to understand what the student themselves might be capable of, or hoping for, in the future.

What if every student who loves art, who dreams of being an artist, could actually meet an artist or an academic who isn't their teacher? What if they could meet them more than once? What if they could show them their work and talk about it, and wonder together about where it might go next and what it could be? What if they could chat about art school and how to get there, what it might be like in the studio, and what the point of it would even be? What if they could share their worries and feel reassured? If they could ask what to include in their portfolio, and hear what the story they're telling sounds like, and try out better ways to tell it? What if they didn't even need to submit a portfolio or attend an interview because we already knew they were ready?

All of this can happen in an advisory. Of course – we know that money and time and goodwill are in short supply. Of course, it's easier and more comfortable to stay with the status quo and the familiar, to revert to how things used to be. Yet - if advisories were a standard and respected part of the admissions process over the weeks, months, even years before students might come to study with us, then perhaps the work of having a sustainable, better prepared, more diverse student body would become just a little easier.

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