A SOCIAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE OF ACADEMIC ADVISING IN A SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT: A STUDY OF PRACTICES AND PRACTITIONERS

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This thesis is submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy (Education) in the Faculty of the Humanities (School of Education) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

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ABSTRACT

The South African higher education sector has numerous challenges to contend with. Students' prospects of success are often vulnerable to uneven secondary schooling, structural and material constraints, massification of the sector, and a range of other factors. In this thesis, I argue that academic advising has the potential to help find responsive and sustainable solutions to address these challenges. Academic advising is well established in the global north. In contrast, it remains an emerging field of practice in South Africa, with a dearth of literature about how advising is developed and practiced within the country's unique higher education context. This thesis aims to contribute to the limited knowledge base about advising as a practice and the work of academic advisors as practitioners in South Africa. The study provides a social realist perspective of the emergence of advising within a South African higher education context. It draws on Margaret Archer's work on structure, culture, and agency, the morphogenetic approach, and the notion of stratified layers of social reality to analyse data, make inferences, and draw conclusions. This is a qualitative study that adopts a mixed-methods approach. The research paradigm is phenomenological, while phenomenographic principles are used selectively to advance the objectives of the study. The data that informs the study consists of a quantitative baseline dataset and qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 academic advisors working at the University of the Witwatersrand. As this is a PhD by publication, the thesis consists of four interconnected papers (i.e., chapters), bookended by introduction and conclusion chapters. The first paper provides insights about advising as gleaned from the baseline data, while the second draws on the same data to highlight the impact of students' structural and material constraints on the work of academic advisors. Papers three and four use interview data to glean academic advisor insights about advising prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively. The thesis concludes by highlighting the transformative potential of academic advising for South African higher education yet cautions that a major shift in the way advising is perceived and practiced is required for its potential to be realised.

Keywords

academic advising; academic advisor; decontextualized learner; higher education; morphogenesis; social realism; South Africa; structure, culture, agency; student advising

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Abbreviation / Acronym	Full Description
CCDU	Counselling and Careers Development Unit
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CLTD	Centre for Learning, Teaching, and Development
CLM/FCLM	Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management
CoP	Community of Practice
COVID-19	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
ERL	Emergency Remote Learning
ERT	Emergency Remote Teaching
ERTL	Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HELTASA	Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa
LMS	Learning Management System
RSP	Road to Success Programme
SA	South Africa
SAIDE	South African Institute for Distance Learning
SoTL	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
T&L	Teaching and Learning

TDG	Teaching Development Grant
UCDG	University Capacity Development Grant
UCDP	University Capacity Development Programme
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand

PREFACE

> He walks in unexpectedly on a busy Wednesday morning. His face and slender features are immediately familiar. His name is slow in its arrival. He has been abroad for almost two years. Can it be that long, I wonder. Yes, I remember him. We catch up on what it is like studying over there. We recall his apprehension to leave; rejoice in the success that it has been. He says good-bye and thanks me for my help; gifts a striped Scottish scarf I will never wear. How can it be that so little means so much to someone? By that evening, he is out of my mind.

If there is one thing I learned during my time as an academic advisor in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), it is that the work of advisors can have a profound and far-reaching influence on the lives of students. As the short narrative above shows (taken from one of my freewriting exercises), the advisor may not be aware of this and bar occasional visits from students they worked with in the past, they may never know how they have helped students. This is not to say advisors always have the answers or are always able to help. Nor does it imply that all interactions between students and advisors are necessarily positive. Yet, instances like the one reflected on above are what make academic advising[1] intriguing to me. It kept me motivated when I still worked as an academic advisor, even through challenging times, and it still drives my interest in advising as a transformative practice in favour of student success within the South African higher education context, even though I have not been an academic advisor since 2019[2]. Consequently, it seemed appropriate – even inevitable – that my long journey towards reading for a PhD would culminate in one about academic advising in South Africa. First though, a little more about me.

[1] While academic advising is defined and discussed in Chapter 1, Section 1.4, it is worth noting briefly that within higher education contexts, advising is considered a high-impact practice aimed at guiding students through the academic and more holistic higher learning experience. It is closely tied to student success, student integration and belonging at institutions of higher learning, and often aims to support students throughout the many and varied challenges university studies may pose.

[2] In August 2019 I became the Assistant Dean for Teaching and Learning in CLM and head of the CLM Teaching and Learning Centre. CLM academic advisors now form part of the Centre, along with other functions like online and digital learning and teaching, and postgraduate writing. However, I still oversee and advance academic advising in CLM and since 2020, the number of academic advisors in the faculty has increased from two to four.

My Journey to Becoming an Academic Advisor

Before I tell my story, I should acknowledge the many privileges I enjoyed growing up and undoubtedly still do today. As a white man living in South Africa, I accept that merely being present or expressing an opinion affords me privileges I may still not fully comprehend. My maleness and whiteness, against South Africa's apartheid backdrop and its perpetuated systems of oppression, saw me raised in a dual-parent household, with two cars, brick-and-mortar houses in relatively safe suburbs, water, electricity, and food. I went to model-C schools with peers who mostly looked the same as I did and enjoyed the same privileges. It would be many years before I could begin to scratch the surface of my privilege and the countless opportunities it had afforded me growing up. However, I always aim to remain aware and to use this privilege to the advantage of students and to advance student success. With this in mind, I will reflect briefly on my journey to becoming an academic advisor.

I was quite timid as a teenager - an ambivert who knew how to win the favour of others by maintaining a balance between introversion and extroversion. On the one hand, I was trying to blend in by being as unobtrusive as possible; always hoping to find my tribe (not a conscious need at the time though). My family moved quite often (on average a new town every three or four years), which saw me attending three different primary schools and three different high schools in 12 years. Navigating new social spheres during identity formation is extremely challenging. Struggling to come to terms with my sexuality, more so. Again, not a concrete, tangible struggle, but an ever-present unease that became far more real in retrospect. Living in a society defined by heteronormative ideologies and beliefs that dictate what is acceptable and what is not, inevitably led to a deep-seated, internalised homophobia. The result was a socially awkward boy (skinny and scrawny in a culture dominated by hyper-masculine and patriarchal worldviews); different, marginalised, and alienated. However, humans are a beautiful juxtaposition of immense fragility and fierce resilience; at once entropic in nature and perseverant in being. I persevered and evolved to the point where the timid teenager is a distant memory, but I will never forget what he had to endure. Those experiences sit at the core of my beliefs about and passion for advising, and it is worth exploring a few critical incidents on my road to becoming an academic advisor in the current South African higher education climate.

On the day I turned 15, I cycled to the closest bookstore, a few hundred Rand in pocket, which I had received from my parents for my birthday. It was the dawn of the millennium (August 2000) and J.K. Rowling had released only four of the books in her seven-part Harry Potter *oeuvre.* The phenomenon that would take the world by storm had not yet become a global sensation. However, I had heard about the boy-wizard's story from a friend and with the pennies in my pocket, managed to buy the first four instalments in a series that would come to shape my future. In Rowling's narrative, I found companionship, adventure, heartache, and friendship, learned about life, love, and loss, and developed critical and reflective abilities that would stand me in good stead in future. More importantly, the love for reading and literature I had developed as a teenager would see me major in English at university, where I continued to read for an honours degree in the same field, and eventually completed a full research master's degree on (none other than) Harry Potter. The adventure was well underway.

I firmly believe that passion drives success. My passion for literature had led me to work at a university where I began tutoring first- and second-year students of English literature when I was in my third year of study. In time, the experience gained from tutoring, coupled with the requisite academic qualifications, saw me move on to lecturing first-year English literature, business English, English for the professions, and academic literacy. Although I had still to obtain a professional qualification in education, I began formulating thoughts and ideas about teaching and learning, informed in particular by the training received as part of the academic literacy (AL) programme in which I was involved. In due course, I began transferring and refining some of the techniques and principles learnt in the AL facilitator training sessions to other classes. These techniques included: scaffolding student learning by recapping work done in previous lessons to help them grasp how the various parts fit into the whole; activating background knowledge at the beginning of a class to help students fuse new knowledge with existing knowledge, thus making it easier to retain and recall what is learned, and allowing students the opportunity to make connections between and among bodies of knowledge I also started experimenting with peer-on-peer and group tasks that allowed learners the opportunity to collaborate and interact with their peers in a safe environment where mistakes are encouraged. This enabled shifting the focus from a right/wrong dichotomy to critical engagement and discussions that

stimulate the construction and retention of new knowledge. Thus, the intention was to conduct classes where the instructor/facilitator creates a safe learning environment for students, thus allowing them the opportunity to move beyond what they know about traditional authoritarian classes, and encouraging them to participate actively in the learning process.

Although I did not know it at the time, my approach to teaching and what I believe about learning can be described as (almost) classically Social Constructivist in nature. I believe learning should be a developmental, exciting, and socially engaging experience for the learner, and should ultimately result in personal and intellectual growth and success (whether academic or other). For this to be realised, an educator must interact with and guide learners through the curriculum or learning opportunity in a nurturing manner, thus facilitating learning in an interactive way. Tasks and activities are then interweaved with teaching in an attempt to make content as stimulating and relevant as possible, and in so doing, engage learners to the extent where new information is integrated with existing knowledge constructs. These beliefs remain constant and formed the basis of my advising engagements with students and the activities designed for the student success programme I co-coordinated. Although my love of English and literature remains, in time I grew to become passionate about teaching and learning, and student success and support. My time in higher education has taught me that there is a fine balance between what would traditionally be classified as teaching and learning, and students' broader learning experience within higher education, which includes but also moves beyond what happens in the classroom or through a Learning Management System (LMS). Two sides of the same coin, these parts of the student learning experience cannot be separated, which continues to become evident in the literature and at conferences. As such, my journey in higher education continues and led to this PhD in the field of Higher Education Studies with a focus on academic advising.

My Advising Philosophy

During my time as an academic advisor, I developed an advising philosophy informed by what I had learnt, and from my engagements with students and peers. This philosophy was written in 2018, shortly after I began reading for the PhD and while I

was still working as an advisor in CLM – two years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the revolution in online and digital learning and teaching. Yet, I deem it necessary to share with my reader what I believed when I started this study and which I will revisit in the conclusion chapter to assess what remains constant and what may have changed. What follows is my advising philosophy as it was in 2018:

I have learned that academic advising is never finite and there may always be new or recurring reasons why students seek advice. Advising must never be viewed as a once-off occurrence, although students may not necessarily come for follow-up sessions. It is a form of learning and teaching that runs both ways, where an advisor can learn as much from a student as the student can from the advisor. There is no limit to the reasons why students visit an advisor, especially if there is advisor-advisee rapport. An advisor must be able to assess a situation, assist where possible, and refer appropriately to other support services if necessary. Advising services across campus must have close relationships with other support services, faculties, and schools, for a student to be helped in the most effective and student-centred manner. Closing the advising loop is crucial: a follow-up meeting must always be initiated by the advisor to maintain the net of support. That being said, students may not always want to come back, and a follow-up meeting must never be forced. An advisor must be in touch with the social, cultural, psychosocial, economic, and other realities faced by students, as these affect the advisor-advisee relationship and engagement: mere awareness is not enough. The advisor must practice an acute awareness of self, which goes hand-in-hand with reflective practice and being reflexive. Advisor attitudes, biases, emotions, prejudices, and personal matters must never affect their engagement with students. Similarly, advisor positionality cannot be discounted. Maleness, whiteness, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs may affect the interaction between an advisor and advisee (from both sides). The advisor-advisee interaction requires a careful balance of professionalism, frankness, and social engagement, where the advisor is not quite a friend, parent, or sibling, but may adopt elements of these roles from time to time. Advising is not limited to an office – it can happen anywhere that an advisor and advisee is present. It can take a few minutes or more than an hour. The advisor must be flexible in everything they do (at least during their time at the office), as advisees in urgent need of assistance do not wait for consultation times, nor do they care about an advisor's meetings or other commitments. Advisors must treat students with care

and compassion, as they may not always know the full extent of what the student is going through. It is crucial to inspire resilience and tenacity in students through the enabling of agency and by empowering students to strive for success as defined by themselves. Advising is made difficult or becomes challenging, not because of the job itself, but because of institutional pressures and bureaucracies.

These beliefs and values evolved from the time I became an academic advisor in October 2014 until I became Assistant Dean: Teaching and Learning in August 2019. I will reflect in more depth on this philosophy in the concluding chapter, by drawing on what has emerged from the study and from my own experiences in the role I currently hold. What follows is a general introduction to the PhD study, which was completed through publication.

CHAPTER 1

Overall Introduction to the Study

1.1. Introduction

The South African higher education landscape is complex. The country's apartheid past continues to have a tangible influence on students and staff within the sector to this day. Many of the structural and material constraints affecting students' prospects of success can be traced back to political and legislative measures imposed by the previous regime. Similarly, massification (Pym et al., 2011; Hornsby & Osman 2014; Albertyn et al., 2016) of the sector (although aligned to similar trends globally) arises (at least in part) from the same legacy and is further complicated by resource constraints within the sector. It is against this backdrop that this study explores the emerging practice and profession known as academic advising.

Academic advising (sometimes referred to as student advising or simply advising) is still in its infancy in South Africa, although it has existed elsewhere across the globe for many years (decades in some instances). Its emergence in South Africa is closely tied to national measures and initiatives implemented to address many of the challenges affecting (and hampering) student success in the country. One such initiative is the Siyaphumelela Project, while another is the South African Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) University Capacity Development Programme and Grant (respectively UCDP and UCDG) (both are discussed in more detail in a subsequent section). In essence, the UCDG has been used to realise academic advising objectives filtering through from the Siyaphumelela Project; or at least that has been the case at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) where this study is located.

Academic advising has existed in the global north for decades, with many years of scholarship and practice informing its evolution over time. In contrast, the nascent

nature of advising in the South African context means that there is a dearth of available literature about advising as a practice and the work of advisors as practitioners. The premise of my study is that academic advisors are uniquely positioned within the institution to act as a bridge among students, academics, and other key institutional stakeholders. I posit that they have the potential to help identify and overcome barriers to student success because of the nature of the work they do and their proximity to the lived realities of the students they work with. To delineate these intricacies, Margaret Archer's work on social realism is used both as a theoretical basis and as a framework for analysing the quantitative and qualitative data that informs this study. Consequently, the study aims to make a substantive contribution to the knowledge base about academic advising in South Africa at a time when it is still being developed and defined for this context.

1.2. Background and Context

Students entering South African universities are often ill prepared for tertiary studies (Scott, Yeld, & Hendry, 2007; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018), with serious challenges related to literacy (McKenna, 2010; Boughey & McKenna, 2016), transition to tertiary education (Schreiber, Luescher, & Moja, 2018), and social integration (Bitzer, 2009; Pather, 2013; Schreiber, Luescher-Mamashela, & Moja, 2014). This stems both from the unevenness of primary and secondary school education in the country, and the fact that a large portion of those entering higher education are first-generation students (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018; Motsabi et al., 2020) without the advantage of drawing on the knowledge of parents (or similar) to help prepare them for the complexities posed by higher learning[1]. For many, their higher learning experience is further complicated by the cost of university study (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Cloete, 2016; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017; Tjønneland, 2017; Essop, 2021), as well as the country's unequal political, economic, and social circumstances[2] (Boughey & McKenna, 2021), thus resulting in large groups of underprepared students trying to navigate these complexities through university. Consequently, South African universities continue to battle the twin challenges of high attrition and low throughput rates (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Lourens, 2020). In an effort to mitigate these challenges,

[1] Anecdotally, there appears to be a slow but steady shift in this regard as more siblings and parents progress through university studies and are able to provide guidance and support to incoming students.
[2] More detail about these circumstances is provided throughout the thesis.

a number of measures have been implemented across the sector and within institutions over the last two decades.

One such national initiative is the South African Institute for Distance Education's (*Saide*) partnership with the Kresge Foundation - an American organization that has committed to bolster South African higher education. From this partnership has come the Siyaphumelela student success initiative. The objective of the Siyaphumelela initiative is to enhance student success and support in the South African higher education sector, through collaboration and evidence-based initiatives underpinned by data and data analytics. The initiative also has close ties to the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), which aims to enhance South African higher education through its University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) and the grant that enables it (the UCDG).

During the first iteration of Siyaphumelela, five partner-institutions (the University of the Free State, the University of kwaZulal Natal, the Nelson Mandela University, the University of Pretoria, and the University of the Witwatersrand) joined the network. Each institution was given funding to focus on objectives common to what Siyaphumelela strives for, such as the development and rollout of evidence-informed initiatives and interventions to enhance student success and support. Some of the key initiatives developed during the first phase (2015 to 2019) included early-warning systems, a biographical questionnaire aimed at collecting background data from first-year students to enhance an institution's understanding of their student body (Masango et al., 2020), data science and analytics capacity, and academic advising (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021a). The common thread though is the use of data and evidence to take to scale what is working and share findings nationally through the annual Siyaphumelela Conference and other platforms. This study is a product of work that was enabled by the DHET's UCDG and has evolved because of Wits's involvement in Siyaphumelela.

In 2014, the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM) (along with four other faculties at the University of the Witwatersrand) applied for funding through a Teaching Development Grant (TDG) distributed and managed by the DHET (the TDG was a precursor to the UCDG). The funding was intended to create academic positions

in each of Wits's five faculties for individuals who would be called At-Risk Coordinators. The term "at-risk" has since fallen by the wayside owing to its degrading connotations and focus on deficits (de Klerk et al., 2017), while the roles themself have evolved significantly. Today, all At-Risk Coordinators are known as academic advisors or faculty student advisors. I was appointed as one of the advisors in CLM and assumed duties in October 2014. Our team was small: two grant holders, each of whom had full-time academic appointments at the time, myself, and one other coordinator (or rather, advisor). The objective of the TDG was to increase the throughput of first-year students by 10% in three years, by working specifically with students identified as at-risk of failure and/or dropout. However, CLM decided to shed the "at-risk" connotation (in line with national movements away from a student deficit focus) almost immediately and created what is now known as the Road to Success Programme (RSP) (see: de Klerk et al., 2017; Spark et al., 2017; de Klerk et al., 2022).

The RSP focuses on holistic, non-discipline specific student success and support, and works with the approximately 5000 undergraduate students within CLM. The programme employs on average 12 senior undergraduate students from within the faculty as peer advisors (Spark et al., 2017; de Klerk et al., 2022), who work closely with the academic advisors to create a network of support for CLM undergraduates. Advisors provide support to students by assisting with curriculum planning and discussions about degree fit, providing psychosocial support with close ties to the university's Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU), focusing on excellence skills development (e.g., time management, study techniques and approaches, note-taking, planning, test and exam techniques, and reflective practice), enabling one-on-one advising sessions with academic and peer advisors, and maintaining close ties with support services, schools, and faculties across campus for collaboration and referral purposes. This is the approach adopted in CLM, but each faculty follows a slightly different model. Nevertheless, advisors from across Wits engage at least once a quarter through an established Community of Practice (COP) that is managed by the Head: Academic Support at the university's Centre for Learning, Teaching, and Development (CLTD), to share best practice and enhance the advising work they do.

This doctoral study emanates from my own work as, first an At-Risk Coordinator, and later an academic advisor, in CLM between 2014 and 2019. The study also partially draws on a baseline dataset of my advising engagements with students between 2015 and 2018, in addition to data gleaned from interviews with 15 practicing academic advisors working at Wits.

1.3. Rationale

There remains a paucity of evidence-informed literature about academic advising as a practice and the work of academic advisors as practitioners within the South African higher education context. The purpose of this study is to make such a contribution with the intention of lending greater gravitas to advising and its potential for enhancing student success and advancing the transformation objectives[3] of the sector. Consequently, this study focuses on the work and experiences of academic advisors at the University if the Witwatersrand where academic advising has existed (across all five faculties) in one form or another since 2014.

1.4. Academic Advising

Academic advising is a well-established practice and profession within many higher education sectors across the globe. It has existed in the United States of America (USA) for approximately four decades, with an established professional body known as NACADA, an annual conference, and an academic journal dedicated to it. Similarly, although maybe not to the same extent as in the USA, advising has been part of European and Australian higher education for some time. In contrast, South Africa has only seen academic advising emerge within the last decade, with meaningful shifts in its acknowledgment and professionalisation beginning to occur as recently as 2017, largely owing to the work of the Siyaphumelela initiative. Strayhorn (2015, p. 62) explains why academic advisors are important within the higher education ecosystem when he says:

> "[t]hey help make the implicit explicit, the hidden known, and the unfamiliar commonplace. They help students navigate college by making clear what students need to know and do to be

[3] These are manifold and include, among others, eliminating entrenched inequalities and inequities in the sector that are tied to the country's apartheid past, efforts to decolonise curricula and pedagogies, preparing students for tertiary studies, and increasing student retention and throughput.

> successful. They help students find a sense of belonging on campus."

As a proven high-impact practice (Moodley & Singh, 2015, p. 95; Strydom & Loots, 2020) that can enhance the overall student learning experience and students' prospects of success (Surr, 2019, p. 9), there is doubtless merit in inculcating academic advising at universities in South Africa. Advisors play a major part in students' social integration at an institution. Research shows that feelings of isolation and/or inadequate social support may cause students to drop out (Walsh, Larsen, & Parry, 2009), which Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth (2004) state are more likely to occur in instances where students are studying away from home and/or are first-generation students – common characteristics of students studying at Wits and other South African universities. Accordingly, students have been found to persevere regardless of academic challenges once they have managed adequate social integration (Karp, 2011; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). This supports the idea that learning is social in nature (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011; Wilmer, 2008) and emphasises the impact of social integration on student success. Therefore, linking students (particularly those in their first year of study) with an individual(s) interested in them, their progress, and their personal wellbeing makes sense (Hill, 1995; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Rendon, 1994).

Congruently, it has been shown that non-academic interactions between students and educators beyond the proverbial classroom, has a positive influence on the student's development, social integration, and performance (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Rendon, 1994; Karp, 2011). This aligns to Jacklin and Robinson's (2007) findings that showed that personal support is crucial to the success of university students. Consequently, I posit that academic advisors in South Africa are uniquely positioned to enhance the student learning experience, aid students' social integration at their institution of higher learning, and act as an important contact point between students, lecturers, and student affairs services within the institution. This is achieved by drawing on social realist theory.

1.5. Theoretical Framework

While social realism is the theory that guides this study, elements of Margaret Archer's social realist work also serve as the analytical framework used to explore and make meaning of the data. Archer's *oeuvre* spans many decades and has its roots in critical realism and the work of Roy Bhaskar (1975). While the various intricacies of Archer's social realist theory are discussed in more detail in the four papers (see particularly sections 2.3 and 4.3 for greater detail about different elements of Archer's work as used in this thesis), it is worth mentioning two dimensions that are of particular value to this study.

The first is what she calls analytical dualism (Archer, 1995, pp. 15, 165-194): the separation of people and parts, more commonly known within social realist theory and educational literature as structure, culture and agency. The reason why this distinction is so useful, is because it allows the researcher to separate out structural, cultural, and agential parts in a study to analyse them independently, as well as to explore their interplay. It also helps researchers gain greater insight into and make meaning of enabling and constraining factors within the context of a study. In this PhD, structure, culture, and agency is used to interrogate and untangle the complexities of academic advising within a specific South African higher education context.

The second dimension of Archer's work that is of value to the study, is what she calls the morphogenetic approach. As part of the approach, Archer offers the morphogenetic framework, which serves as a tool for tracking and analysing change or stasis over time. Whether change has or has not occurred is determined by the study and the objectives of the researcher. In this study, the morphogenetic framework is used to elucidate the state of academic advising in South Africa prior to the COVID-19 pandemic thus establishing a baseline against which to investigate academic advising in future. It is also used to interrogate academic advising during the COVID-19 pandemic and Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL), allowing for important insights and lessons for the future of advising in the country to emerge. What follows is a brief outline of the various elements of the study.

1.6. The Study

In this section I want to make important distinctions among strategy, methodology, and method, to clarify the numerous considerations that helped shape the conceptualisation and execution of this study. I also show how the choices and elements explored in this section, tie to the theoretical and analytical dimensions of the study, as discussed in the preceding section. The aim is to provide the reader with some insight into the way this study was conducted.

1.6.1. Research strategy

This is a qualitative study. Although both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods are employed (see methods section below), the overarching strategy adopted is qualitative in nature. Bryman (2012) proffers the notion of a *research strategy* in relation to discussions about qualitative and quantitative research. The notion proves useful during discussions about these broad strategies, which are often (in my opinion ambiguously) referred to as research methodologies. Bryman (2012) explains that his implied meaning with the notion of a research strategy is simply a way of identifying the "general orientation to the conduct of social research" (p. 35). For the purposes of this study, the distinction helps separate the qualitative nature of the study, from the methodological approach that underpins it (see the next section).

Bryman (2012, p. 36) highlights the following characteristics of a qualitative research strategy: i) there is a tendency to adopt an inductive approach to linking research and theory (although this is not a rule of thumb); ii) there is an inclination to place emphasis on individuals' understanding of the social world; and iii) social reality is usually viewed as a constantly shifting emergent property. While the latter two are true for all four papers, both inductive and deductive approaches are used (sometimes in tandem) intermittently across the four papers. On the whole, the research strategy adopted for the study is a qualitative one.

1.6.2. Methodology

> "…methodology constitutes a whole range of strategies and procedures that include: developing a picture of an empirical world; asking questions about that world and turning these into

> researchable problems; finding the best means of doing so – that involve choices about methods and the data to be sought, the development and use of concepts, and the interpretation of findings…" (Alasuutari et al., 2008, p. 1).

Congruently with the qualitative nature of the study, the overarching methodology that guides the inquiry is one often used in qualitative research: phenomenology. Phenomenology is a philosophical orientation that forms part of the interpretivist paradigm (Bryman, 2012). Bryman (2012) explains that interpretivism "requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action" (p. 30). Thus, there is a fortuitous harmony between phenomenology and interpretivism, and social realism, which is the theory that underpins the study. Babbie (2013), drawing on Schutz (1967, 1970), explains that phenomenology is philosophically rooted in the principle that "reality [is] socially constructed rather than being 'out there' for us to observe. People describe their world not 'as it is' but 'as they make sense of it'" (p. 334). As such, the phenomenological methodology implies that the researcher cannot simply accept research subjects' experiences and accounts as accurate reflections of social reality (Babbie, 2013, p. 334). Rather, they have to make meaning of these experiences and accounts for themselves to distil from it a sense of what is (Bryman, 2012; Babbie, 2013). Archer (1995, 2000, 2005) provides the tools with which to help the researcher achieve this, both through the use of analytical dualism (see papers one two, and four), and through the use of her morphogenetic framework (Archer, 1995) (see papers three and four).

While this study is phenomenological in nature, it also draws on elements of phenomenography to help advance its aims and objectives. Cibangu and Hepworth (2016), in their critical review of phenomenology and phenomenography, explain that the latter is a subset of the former (p. 148). They explain that phenomenography focuses "on people's varying conceptions of a given phenomenon, *not* on the phenomenon itself" (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016, p. 152). This notion of *varying conceptions* is what is important in the context of this study. While papers one and two adopt a phenomenological approach to engaging with the baseline data, papers three and four draw on phenomenographic principles to gain more nuanced insights of the varying experiences and perceptions of the advisors who were interviewed. Ultimately though, the phenomenographic lens enables a broader phenomenological

assessment of academic advising itself, which allows one to make inferences, draw conclusions, and distil a sense of what is.

1.6.3. Method and data collection

Th study adopts a mixed-methods approach, although the overall research strategy remains qualitative in nature (as mentioned above). Here cognisance is taken of the "paradigm wars" (Gage, 1989) and the misconception that mixed-methods research merely implies usage of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). As such, Ercikan and Roth's (2006) argument that the polarisation of these methods is not helpful or productive, resonates. In this study, the mixing of methods occurs by using the quantitative baseline data to inform interview schedules for qualitative data collection process. Table 1 below provides a brief overview of the research timeline.

Table 1: Research timeline.

Date Range	Research Activity
October 2014	Commence with duties as academic advisor in CLM.
January 2015 to October 2018	Build and expand baseline dataset based on advising engagements with CLM students.
July 2018	Register for PhD.
August 2019	Proposal defence.
February 2020	Admitted to candidature.
March 2020	COVID-19 pandemic first detected in South Africa, followed by first hard lockdown.
June 2020	Research ethics clearance obtained, including permission to use baseline data.
November 2020	Interview data collected through interviews with 15 academic advisors.
October 2021	Paper one accepted for publication.
December 2021	Paper one published.
April 2022	Paper four accepted for publication.
April 2022	Paper four published.
July 2022	Paper two accepted for publication.

September 2022	Paper three accepted for publication.
December 2022	Paper two published.
March 2023	Thesis submitted for examination.
September 2023	Projected publication of paper three.

The quantitative dataset (referred to as the baseline data) was created from one-on-one advising engagements between CLM undergraduate students and me between January 2015 and October 2018 (see Appendix A). The data was also captured in the institutional intervention portal, which forms part of the Wits early-warning system. The system is designed to provide student support professionals (and especially academic advisors) with information about students' risk status by integrating several data points. This can be useful to develop targeted interventions geared towards preventing students from dropping out or failing. However, this system captures data against a few high-level categories, while the baseline dataset I created and which forms part of this study adopts a more nuanced approach to making meaning of the kinds of reasons for which students consult with advisors. This is discussed in more detail in subsequent sections of the thesis.

The annual datasets were integrated into a single master dataset, with numerous columns denoting advising categories that emerged inductively from the data. These categories cover a range of academic and non-academic matters, including curriculum planning and mapping, psychosocial challenges, socioeconomic challenges, academic literacies, and administrative matters (see paper one for a detailed breakdown and explanation). The baseline dataset consists of 2240 entries, which represents 1023 consultations with 614 individual students. The higher number of consultations when compared to the individual student count is accounted for by the fact that some students came for more than one consultation during the period the data was collected. In turn, the higher number of entries when compared to both the consultation count and individual student count, is ascribed to the fact that students often consulted about multiple factors during a single consultation.

Once the master dataset had been created and after irrelevant, incomplete and/or incorrect data had been attended to, student demographic and academic data was

integrated into the baseline data. This was done to create a more comprehensive and nuanced dataset. The demographic data incorporated cover categories such as race, gender, secondary school quintile, home language, and funding status (although not all these were necessarily explored in the PhD[4]). The academic data include information about the degrees students who sought advice were enrolled for and their year of study at the time of the consultation.

Finally, the baseline dataset was anonymised by removing all identifying information of the students whose consultation data had been captured to ensure their anonymity. Thereafter, the data was categorised into seven overarching categories consisting of 34 subsidiary categories (see papers one and two). What was gleaned from the baseline data informed interview schedules for qualitative data collection (see appendix B).

Interviews were conducted with 15 academic advisors at Wits over the course of one month towards the end of 2020. This was done virtually using Microsoft Teams, with interviews being recorded for transcription (see 1.6.6. below for more detail about informed consent and ethics). Semi-structured, open-ended questions were used during interviews, which allowed interviewees some freedom in their responses, while affording the interviewer the option to probe and explore unanticipated themes or topics (Mabry, 2008, p. 218). The qualitative data has been used to inform papers three and four[5].

1.6.4. Research questions

The main research question guiding the study is:

> How does academic advising manifest at the University of the Witwatersrand?

Four sub-questions serve to help answer the main research question, each of which is broadly aligned to one of the papers. The four sub-questions are:

[4] There are still various associated research interests to be pursued once the PhD is finalised (see chapter six).
[5] Anonymised copies of the raw interview transcripts are available upon request.

What insights can be gained from the baseline data about the work of academic advisors in a South African university context?

What insights can be gained from the baseline data about students' structural and material constraints, and how does this impact on the work of academic advisors in a South African university context?

What can be learned from academic advisors working in a South African university context about academic advising prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

What can be learned from academic advisors working in a South African university context about academic advising during the COVID-19 pandemic?

These questions are explored through a social realist lens. The findings are used to draw inferences about academic advising at Wits and in South Africa, outline enabling and constraining factors that influence the work of academic advisors, and outline implications for academic advising and advisors within the broader South African higher education context, beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.6.5. Scope of the study

During the initial planning for the PhD, it had been envisioned that three different data sets would inform the study: i) the baseline data; ii) data collected from interviews with Wits academic advisors; and iii) data collected from focus group discussions with Wits students. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic came a shift in the scope and focus of the study and it was decided that the student focus group data would be omitted from the PhD, and that the student voice in relation to advising would be explored once the PhD had been completed. Consequently, this study is confined to what can be gleaned from the baseline data I collected between January 2015 and October 2018, and from the interviews with 15 academic advisors from across all five faculties at Wits.

1.6.6. Ethical considerations

The highest ethical standards were adhered to throughout this study. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Wits Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-

Medical) on 24 April 2020 (see Appendix C). The protocol number for the study is: H20/04/06. Permission to use the baseline dataset as well as to collect data from within the Wits community was obtained from the University Registrar on 25 June 2020 (see Appendix D). Research participants were invited to take part in interviews voluntarily through email and by sharing the participant information sheet with them (see Appendix E). All 15 participants agreed to be interviewed and were asked to sign the participant consent form (see Appendix F) prior to commencing with the interviews. All participants agreed to the conditions outlined in the participant information sheet and consent form, with no one withdrawing from the study or raising any concerns during or after the interviews. The potentially triggering nature of the interviews were considered prior to the interviews being conducted and advisors were verbally encouraged to debrief using existing structures to do so, if necessary, after the interviews.

1.6.7. Research funding

A small research grant was obtained through the Wits Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management Research Committee. The grant totalled R 12 459.50 and was used to cover expenses such as having interview data transcribed. The full amount was spent in the required period of time with no major challenges affecting the grant process.

1.7. Structure

This PhD is done by publication. The Wits School of Education requires candidates pursuing a PhD by publication to produce four interrelated manuscripts that can stand alone as publishable texts. The study can be divided into two parts. Part one (papers one and two) draws on the quantitative baseline data to draw inferences and observations about academic advising, based on my own work as an advisor between January 2015 and October 2018. What was gleaned from the baseline data informed the interview schedule used to conduct interviews with 15 academic advisors from across all five faculties at the Wits. Part two (papers three and four) uses the qualitative interview data to gain a more in-depth understanding of academic advising at Wits before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also allowing me to make assumptions and draw conclusions about advising within the South African higher

education sector more broadly. The entire study is guided by Archer's social realist theory, while also using different elements of her work to analyse data.

1.7.1. Paper one: Insights about advising gleaned from the baseline data

The first paper provides a descriptive analysis of the coded baseline data, which is divided into seven overarching categories made up collectively of 34 subsidiary categories. The paper draws on the work of both Bhaskar (1975) and Archer (1995, 2000) to disentangle what happens across stratified layers of social reality. What emerges are insights about the structural and cultural mechanisms that hold bearing on the work of advisors and the social realities in which they and the students they work with find themselves in.

1.7.2. Paper two: The impact of students' structural and material constraints on advising

Paper two has a strong grounding in contextually relevant literature. This is used to create a comprehensive picture of the multifaceted factors that contribute to the structural and material constraints that affect many South African students' higher learning experience. The paper draws both on elements of Archer's work on social realism, as well as on Boughey and McKenna's (2016) work on the decontextualised learner, to guide the discussion and analysis. What emerges from the scholarly and grey literature is reconciled with the baseline data. The paper concludes by highlighting how students' structural and material constraints impact on academic advising at Wits.

1.7.3. Paper three: Insights from academic advisors about advising prior to COVID-19

The nascent nature of academic advising in South Africa means that the limited literature about it is quite sporadic. Moreover, there is virtually no documentation of the experiences of South African advisors in the decade before the COVID-19 pandemic. Paper three draws on the portion of the advisor interview data that focuses on academic advising at Wits before COVID-19. Using part of Archer's morphogenetic

framework, the paper aims to establish an evidence-informed baseline for advising in South Africa against which future studies can be compared and contrasted.

1.7.4. Paper four: Insights from academic advisors about advising during COVID-19

The fourth and final paper builds on paper three. Here the focus is turned to advising at Wits during the pandemic, with the portion of the advisor interviews about advising during COVID-19 being used. Morphogenesis (Archer, 1995) and structure, culture, and agency are once more used to analyse data with a focus on the way in which the pandemic may have served as a catalyst for how advising is perceived and practiced beyond the pandemic. Whether such a change is realised though, can only be assessed in the years to come. Such an investigation is earmarked to form part of my postdoctoral work.

The manuscript concludes with a sixth chapter, which explores implications for advising based on the findings of the study, while also sharing a reflective account of my own journey as a researcher during the PhD. Lastly, it should be mentioned that while the referencing style required by each of the journals in which the papers have been published is duplicated at the end of each chapter (e.g., Chicago, Harvard, and APA Seventh), a comprehensive reference list of all references used in the manuscript is available after chapter six (and before the appendices). This comprehensive list conforms to the APA Seventh Style of Referencing, which aligns to what the Wits School of Education requires for PhD manuscripts.

1.8. References

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CHAPTER 2

Making Known the Real: An Exploration of Academic Advising Practices in a South African Higher Education Context

The first paper that forms part of this PhD study is a sole authored one and has been published in as special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*. The journal seeks contributions that focus on and advance broad matters of student affairs in African higher education contexts. The special issue focuses on academic advising in Africa and South Africa, which denotes a major milestone for academic advising as a profession and practice in the South African context. The special issue also came at an opportune time for this study, as it aligns with the study objective of producing rigorous and evidence-informed literature on advising in the country. The paper has been reproduced here to form part of the PhD manuscript, but it can be accessed in its original form by following the link above. This journal uses the APA 7th Author-Date Referencing System.

de Klerk, D. (2021). Making known the Real: An exploration of academic advising practices in a South African higher education context. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, *9*(2), 101-121. https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v9i2.3702.

Abstract

This is the first in a series of papers that emanate from the author's doctoral research. This research explores academic advising as a profession and academic advisors as practitioners in the South African Higher Education sector; it focuses on advising within the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management (FCLM) at a research-intensive public university in South Africa. During the period of investigation, academic advising

engagements between students and the author were logged, thus forming a baseline dataset for the doctoral study. In phase one of the data analysis, baseline data were coded and clustered into overarching and subsidiary categories. The baseline dataset consists of 34 subsidiary categories, which form part of seven overarching categories; it contains 2240 entries based on 1023 consultations with 614 individual students during the three-year period under investigation. Using Archer's (1995, 2000, 2005) notions about Social Realism as a theoretical framework, the author critically scrutinises the complex nature of the work that academic advisors do in a layered analysis of the baseline data. The author posits that it is through these layers of interpretation that one moves from the layer of the Empirical (experiences), through the layer of the Actual (events), to what Archer calls "the Real", that is, the layer of mechanisms or underlying driving forces that brings about what happens in the layers of the Empirical and the Actual. This paper focuses specifically on the role of the academic advisor; it postulates inferential observations about academic advising by using the baseline dataset as a way in while keeping the academic advisor central to the discussion.

Keywords

academic advising; higher education; holistic supports; social realism; student advising; student success; student support; structure, culture, agency

2.1. Introduction

It is undisputed that the South African (SA) higher education (HE) sector is in crisis. Matriculants who enter the system are severely underprepared for tertiary studies (Scott et al., 2007) with literacy (McKenna, 2010), transition (Schreiber et al., 2018), and social integration (Karp, 2011; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Walsh et al., 2009) posing serious challenges. These are compounded by the country's political, economic, and social complexities, and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic, which results in large groups of severely underprepared students who are trying to make their way through university. For this reason, academic advising is crucial to the success of 21st century university students who have to navigate the complexities of SA HE studies, and who will find themselves working in an ever- changing and uncertain world (Hodges, 2018). However, reliable, peer-reviewed literature about advising practices in SA remains

limited. There is often anecdotal evidence and a resounding push for additional support services by those working in the sector, but advising requires a rigorous, evidence-based foundation (Surr, 2019) that will lend *gravitas* to SA advising practices. Tinto (2014, p. 6) reiterates this when stating that student-success work "require[s] an intentional, structured and coherent set of policies and actions" that are sustained over time. Accordingly, the objective of this paper is to add to the growing body of literature about academic advising as a practice, and about academic advisors as practitioners in SA HE, by critically exploring and investigating advising practices within the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management (FCLM) at a research-intensive public university in South Africa.

2.2. Background and Literature

2.2.1. Why academic advising?

Academic advisors can play a major part in students' social integration at an institution. Feelings of isolation and/or inadequate social support may cause students to drop out (Walsh et al., 2009), which are more likely to occur in instances where students are studying away from home and/or are first-generation students (Lotkowski et al., 2004). These are common characteristics of students studying at SA universities. Lee (2018, p. 77) speaks about the unique challenges experienced by historically marginalised students studying at HE institutions, which characterises many SA HE students. The author emphasises that academic advisors should understand the daily experiences of the students with whom they work (Lee, 2018, p. 77). Accordingly, students have been found to persevere, regardless of academic challenges, once they have managed adequate social integration (Karp, 2011; Lotkowski et al., 2004), which highlights the social nature of learning (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011; Wilmer, 2008) and its impact on student success. Hence, there is merit in linking students with an individual (e.g., an academic advisor) who is interested in them, in their well-being, and in their progress (Hill, 1995; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Rendon, 1994). Correspondingly, it has been proven that non-academic interactions between students and educators (academic advisors are educators too) beyond the confines of a classroom have a positive impact on the students' development, social integration, and performance (Karp, 2011; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Rendon, 1994). Thus, Jacklin and Robinson's (2007) claim about personal support is crucial to the success of

university students is substantiated. As Surr (2019, p. 6) points out, the evidence in support of academic advising as a practice that helps increase students' likelihood of succeeding in tertiary studies, especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds, continues to grow. However, advising in the SA context is still in its infancy; academic advising for SA HE is still being investigated and defined.

2.2.2. International literature on academic advising

Academic advising as a profession has existed for many years in the global north and in Australia (Clark, 1989; Mann, 2020). The United States of America (USA) has produced a wealth of literature about advising models, practices, challenges and more (Aune, 2000; Donnelly, 2009; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Pizzolato, 2008; Steingass & Sykes, 2008; Tuttle, 2000; Zhang & Dinh, 2017). Beatty (1991) for example, provides a brief but comprehensive narrative overview of the USA's National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), which was established in the late 1970s and is the official body concerned with academic advising in North America. This association boasts a rich history, including an established annual conference and a peer-reviewed journal, which is well known within the American HE sector and globally. The work done by NACADA is ongoing, as Larson et al. (2018) have recently been grappling with the development of a reflective non-colloquial definition of academic advising for the US context. The available literature from global north contexts highlights academic advising as a profession that covers numerous matters such as curriculum advising, degree choice guidance, integration into the institution, orientation, liaising with other support services, engagement with academics and administrators, psychosocial support, and components of mentoring. It is about providing a comprehensive institutional contact point for students, where they can form a relationship with someone in the institution and find information on a range of university-related matters to enable them to successfully navigate academic and non-academic spaces within the institution. This stands in sharp contrast to the availability of reliable SA literature on academic advising, which is virtually non-existent.

2.2.3. South African literature on academic advising

As mentioned earlier, there are a few SA papers published in confirmed predatory journals and in non-accredited journals that discuss academic advising in SA HE.

These are not reliable as per Mouton and Valentine (2017); they are not identifiable as credible contributions to the field. The limited contributions in accredited, peer-reviewed sources that refer to academic advising in SA contexts mostly do so briefly, in passing, and/or without sufficient depth.

Bitzer (2009) fleetingly mentions academic advising as something that could be funded through teaching development grants. It was exactly such a grant that formed the foundation for academic advising in FCLM (de Klerk, Spark, Jones, & Maleswena, 2017), where four permanent academic advisors are currently employed. Yet, little is said about academic advising as a profession in South African HE. Moodley and Singh (2015, p. 95) highlight academic advising as a "proven high-impact practice" in their paper about student dropout rates at SA universities, but they make no further mention of this. Petersen et al. (2009) mention help-seeking behaviour in their paper about disadvantaged SA students, their adjustment to university, and to academic performance, but they do not connect this behaviour to academic advising as a conduit for addressing these challenges. Naidoo and Lemmens (2015) and Kritzinger et al. (2018) mention the referral of at-risk students to student advisors at their institution, but they provide little further detail about how these posts are conceptualised or about what these advisors do. Lastly, Mayet (2016, p. 4) cites the referral of first-year students to advisory staff for mentoring and monitoring, but she fails to elaborate on the role or profile of advisory staff.

Possibly the most influential relevant, and significant contributions to the literature about academic advising as a profession within the South African HE context are by Francois Strydom: Senior Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of the Free State (UFS) (see for example: Strydom, 2017; Strydom & Loots, 2020). Strydom and Loots (2020) highlight academic advising in the SA context as a high-impact practice, which links faculties and student support services at the UFS and which explicates this link to students through advising. Moreover, Strydom and Loots (2020, p. 30) explain that the UFS has made a connection "between academic advising, student engagement and students' academic success." However, Strydom's (2017, p. 104) assertion about academic advising as a means of promoting "student persistence, development, support, and success" having seen "very few literature contribution[s]" in South Africa, still holds true today.

Nevertheless, accredited and reliable literature that addresses academic advising as a SA HE profession, academic advising practices within the SA HE sector, and equity of access as well as barriers to epistemological access, remain extremely limited. This is the case, despite the wealth of literature that exists about underprepared students entering South African universities (McKenna, 2010; Schreiber et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2007), work done to mitigate it, and initiatives/interventions to enhance student throughput, persistence, and success (Case et al., 2018; de Klerk et al., 2017; Spark et al., 2017). In conclusion, while the problem to date has been that South Africa does not have a formal advising framework for HE, such a framework is being developed and funded in a collaborative, multi-institutional DHET-UCDG project. This special edition of the *JSAA* forms part of the project which should, in time, see more evidence-based contributions on academic advising in SA HE.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

During the late 1980s, and throughout the 1990s, and into the early 2000s, Margaret Archer made significant and original contributions to the theory of Social Realism. Her most prominent texts were *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (1995)[1] and *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (2000)[2]. As a sociologist, her focus is on the many layers (or strata) of social reality; on the way in which that stratified social reality is constructed through structures and cultures[3]; on humans as (change) agents within the stated social reality, and on the autonomous, yet interconnected, relationships that exist between and among these cultures, structures, and agents. Archer builds on the work of Roy Bhaskar (1975) who first posited the idea of a layered social reality. Layer one is called “the Empirical”; it is concerned with the experiences and observations made by human agents at this layer. These experiences and observations are relative to individual world views and histories; any given social

[1] In subsequent papers the author will begin to explore and incorporate Archer’s (1995, 2000, 2005) morphogenetic approach as part of the investigation of academic advising within SA HE contexts, and of the analysis of both quantitative baseline data and qualitative interview data.

[2] Although by no means her only meaningful contributions, if one considers other publications like *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (1996), *Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation* (2003), *Social Origins of Educational Systems* (2013), and the chapter titled Structure, Culture and Agency in *The Blackwell companion to the sociology of culture* (2005), among many others.

[3] Here mention must be made of Archer’s extensive theorising about the nature of the relationship between structure and culture, and her contributions about fallacies of conflation in anthropological and sociological discussions about culture over many decades.

incident can be experienced and observed differently by numerous individuals. Layer two is called “the Actual”; it represents events that occur in the real world, some of which we may be acutely or peripherally aware of, and some of which we may not be aware of at all. This layer encompasses layer one; an event that occurs in the Actual can be observed and experienced in unique ways by individuals at the layer of the Empirical. Collectively, these two layers represent our daily social reality. The third and final layer is termed “the Real”, which encompasses everything in layers one and two as well as what Bhaskar (1975) refers to as “mechanisms”. The mechanisms at the layer of the Actual can be described as the underlying interconnected driving forces (whether physical or social) that result in experiences and events at the layer of the Empirical and the Actual. Ultimately, these stratified layers of reality manifest at a micro (individual), meso (institutional), and macro (national) level. Accordingly, Social Realism concerns itself with the ontological; its tenets assert that stratified layers of social reality at micro, meso, and macro level exist independently from the human change agents within this reality. Yet, it cannot be separated from these change agents because of the way in which social reality is constructed through the actions of humans. Similarly, humans find their doing and being influenced by the societies within which they live and which they often attempt to transmute. Ultimately, Archer is concerned with making explicit the Real, while accounting for the complex dimensions of and interplay within that realism. This theory is relevant for two reasons. First, because academic advising is a social practice that deals with students as holistic social beings who bring with them their own unique social realities—realities that have been constructed over time through numerous experiences, events, cultural stimuli, and structures, which implicitly or explicitly influence their (in)ability to enact agency in their own lives and realities. Second, because academic advisors as practitioners do not only engage with these students and their lived social realities, but they also have to do so within the highly complex stratified social reality of their institutions, which form part of the larger SA HE sector.

Therefore, adopting Archer’s (1995, 2000) ideas about Social Realism and, more importantly, about the concepts of structure, culture, and agency (Archer, 2005) across stratified layers of social reality, to analyse academic advising within the complex

realities of SA HE[4], affords one a set of lenses with which to critically interrogate the complex dimensions of the work that SA academic advisors do. Archer provides a triangulated framework that informs the exploration of how academic advising is positioned within the SA HE sector. Winberg (2016, p.174) posits that the interconnected relationship of culture, structure, and agency "is an important concept for understanding university teaching" as both structures (i.e., funding, matters of policy, management and leadership, and human and physical resources) and cultures (i.e., dynamics and values in a division, school or faculty, as well as in an institutional and national climate) affect university teaching and, by association, the (in)ability of university teachers to enact agency. Academic advising as a profession, and academic advisors as practitioners, are subject to the same structural, cultural, and agential forces as university teaching and teachers. In fact, academic advising as a HE practice is a form of university teaching. Moreover, academic advisors tend to be at the coalface of the student experience, which renders them particularly susceptible to structural and cultural enabling factors and constraints (Winberg, 2016) and which, by extent, influences their (in)ability to enact agency within advising space.

2.4. Methodology

2.4.1. Creating the baseline dataset

The phenomenological approach (Groenewald, 2004; Fisher & Stenner, 2011; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015) adopted for this study was chosen because of the explorative opportunities (Groenewald, 2004) it afforded the researcher. The author collected the baseline data between January 2015 and October 2018 while working as an academic advisor at the FCLM. During this period, the author captured information about the nature of his engagements with students by briefly noting the reasons why students sought advice and/ or by coding their reasons according to categories. These categories were created organically as new matters arose; their number increased from approximately five in the first half of 2015 to more than thirty by the second half of 2018. The nature of advising engagements meant that during times of high volume, only brief notes could be taken about any given engagement, or else the engagement would be coded immediately (without additional notes) against all applicable

[4] In their book *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspective's*, Boughey and McKenna (2021) provides a detailed and in-depth example of the application of critical and social realism to analyse the complexities of the South African higher education system.

categories in the spreadsheet. The author estimates that there could have been up to twice as many engagements and/or advising sessions with students during this period than what has been captured in the baseline dataset. However, time pressures and high volumes of students during certain peak periods meant that information about student engagements could not always be captured[5]. Moreover, student engagements via email, telephone, and face-to- face outside the office were not accounted for. For this reason, the baseline dataset does not provide a complete record of the author's engagements with students during the period. Nevertheless, 2240 entries based on 1023 consultations with 614 individual students during the period January 2015 to October 2018 are deemed sufficient to identify common trends and to extrapolate accurate information about student engagements during this period. In addition, inferential observations were made about the stratified structural and cultural complexities that influence academic advising as a profession, and academic advisors as practitioners within the SA HE sector.

2.4.2. Clustering and categorising overarching and subsidiary categories in the baseline dataset

For the purpose of this study, the term "subsidiary category" denotes one of the existing categories against which coding was done in the baseline dataset. The baseline dataset contains 34 subsidiary categories. An overarching category denotes an umbrella categorisation of a set or cluster of subsidiary categories. For example, the subsidiary categories *funding*, *accommodation,* and *food* form part of the overarching category *socio-economic matters*. The baseline dataset contains seven overarching categories. First, all subsidiary categories were clustered by reviewing each category and by assigning it to an overarching category. Second, once the subsidiary categories were clustered, the author colour-coded the overarching categories by assigning a unique colour to each one. Third, each subsidiary category was highlighted according to the colour assigned to its overarching category. This was

[5] The NACADA *2011 National Survey of Academic advising* (Carlstrom, 2013) determined that the ratio of academic advisor to advisee ranges between 1:233 and 1:600 (Robbins, 2013), depending on the size of the institution. At the time when the baseline data for this study was collected, the ratio of academic advisor to undergraduate (UG) student in FCLM was approximately 1:2500. Today, the academic advisor capacity in FCLM has increased to four full-time academic advisors (as mentioned earlier); their focus now includes UG and postgraduate (PG) student support. As such, the ratio of academic advisor to FCLM UG and PG students collectively is approximately 1:2375, although if one factors in the peer advisors (still referred to as 'Success Tutors' in Spark et al. (2017)) who only work with UG students, the ratio of academic/peer advisor to UG student is approximately 1:240, while the ratio of academic advisor to PG student is 1:1125.

done to make it easier to move subsidiary categories around on the spreadsheet and to avoid unnecessary confusion during the clustering process. Finally, once each subsidiary category column had been highlighted in the colour of its overarching category, the subsidiary categories could be reorganised with ease by clustering those highlighted in the same colour; the process of analysing baseline data was thus refined. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the overarching and subsidiary category data captured in the baseline dataset.

Table 1: Overarching and Subsidiary Category Data gleaned from the Baseline Dataset

Overarching Category	Percentage of Total Number of Entries	Subsidiary Category	Number of Entries in Subsidiary Category	Percentage of Overarching Category
1. Academic Matters (Total Entries = 561)	25%	1. Academic Advising and Curriculum Planning	351	63%
		2. Course Content and Results	93	17%
		3. Career Planning and Advising	36	6%
		4. Degree Change and Degree Fit	78	14%
		5. Deregistration	3	1%
2. Follow- Up Sessions (Total Entries = 184)	8%	6. Follow-Up Meeting	120	65%
		7. Mentoring Meeting with Success Tutor	11	6%
		8. Readmitted Student Consultation	53	29%
3. Other Matters (Total Entries = 161)	7%	9. Calculator	19	12%
		10. Miscellaneous	131	81%
		11. Physical Health	11	7%
	9%	12. Mental Health	30	16%

Overarching Category	Percentage of Total Number of Entries	Subsidiary Category	Number of Entries in Subsidiary Category	Percentage of Overarching Category
4. Psychosocial Matters (Total Entries = 193)		13. Personal and Emotional Matters	122	63%
		14. Stress and Anxiety	41	21%
5. Referrals (Total Entries = 283)	13%	15. Referred to Academic Tutor	9	3%
		16. Referred to Counselling and Careers Development Unit	15	5%
		17. Referred to Course Coordinator/ Lecturer/ Curriculum Planner	39	14%
		18. Referred to Faculty Officer/ Assistant Dean/ Registrar/ Outside Faculty Academic advisor/ Centre for Part-Time Studies	75	27%
		19. Referred to Fees Office	4	1%
		20. Referred to Gender Equity Office	2	1%
		21. Referred to Academic advisor for Consultation or Follow-Up	120	42%

Overarching Category	Percentage of Total Number of Entries	Subsidiary Category	Number of Entries in Subsidiary Category	Percentage of Overarching Category
		22. Referred to Student Affairs or Student Representative Council	19	7%
6. Skills (Total Entries = 378)	17%	23. Excellence Skills	107	28%
		24. General Life Skills	43	11%
		25. Time Management	147	39%
		26. University Life/ Work-Life Balance	81	21%
7. Socio-economic Matters (Total Entries = 480)	21%	27. Accommodation	59	12%
		28. Clothing	25	5%
		29. Food	150	31%
		30. Funding	115	24%
		31. Stationery	29	6%
		32. Textbooks	4	1%
		33. Toiletries	93	19%
		34. Transport	5	1%

The findings below are described according to the categories presented in Table 1.

2.5. Findings

2.5.1. Overarching Category 1: Academic Matters

The first overarching category constitutes a quarter of all the entries captured; it has five subsidiary categories. *Subsidiary Category 1: Academic Advising and Curriculum Planning* includes matters such as discipline/subject choice discussions; discussions about degree structure; queries about pre-requisite and progression rules; discussions about credits accrued and credit requirements; academic exclusion processes, appeals and readmission processes; student registration status; queries about results outcome codes; curriculum planning and advising on possible paths to graduation;

and an exploration of student interests in line with disciplines offered in the faculty, among other things. *Subsidiary Category 2: Course Content and Results* covers matters such as: queries about results and student concerns about results; updates about results of tests/examinations or about previous semesters/years of study, as well as script and performance review processes. Entries about course content, in particular, relate to workload issues and problems with course content and understanding. This section also captures general updates about whether students' studies are progressing or not. *Subsidiary Category 3: Career Planning and Advising* denotes engagements where students require advice about possible career paths based on their chosen degree and subjects. *Subsidiary Category 4: Degree Change and Degree Fit* entries both refer to students who are experiencing challenges in the degrees for which they are registered, including inquiries about the process to change degrees, and to consultations where students ask for information about other degrees and study options. *Subsidiary Category 5: Deregistration* covers instances where students inquire about deregistration as an option, instances where students are advised about deregistration processes, and instances where a discussion about deregistration is initiated by the academic advisor as an option in light of current circumstances or events. As Table 1 shows though, the work of FCLM academic advisors involves far more than what Overarching Category 1 covers.

2.5.2. Overarching Category 2: Follow-Up Sessions

Overarching Category 2 represents 8% of all entries; it has three subsidiary categories, namely Subsidiary Category 6: Follow-Up Meeting; Subsidiary Category 7: Mentoring Meeting with Success Tutor (i.e., Peer Advisor), and Subsidiary Category 8: Readmitted Student Consultation. These categories collectively denote engagements with students that follow from a first or initial consultation; cover discussions about plans put in place during previous consultations; provide updates on matters discussed during previous consultations and/or general check-in conversations to see how the student is doing; discuss new matters arising, and provide progress updates. The meetings can have a positive, negative, or neutral atmosphere which depends on what may be happening in a student's life at the time of the meeting. Nevertheless, the fact that the student attends follow-up engagements can be said to show accountability; this may well indicate that the student needs

interaction and engagement, as well as support and advice. Of particular importance here is the fact that the academic advisor prompts the student for a follow-up engagement at the end of a consultation. In this way, the academic advisor nudges the student to be accountable for whatever may have been discussed during their engagement, while sustaining the advising loop. Not all consultations will require follow-up engagements, but to many students it signals an important link to someone within the institution who takes an interest in their well-being.

2.5.3. Overarching Category 3: Other Matters

The third overarching category and its subsidiary categories (i.e., *Subsidiary Category 9: Calculator*, *Subsidiary Category 10: Miscellaneous*, and *Subsidiary Category 11: Physical Health*) are collectively called “Other Matters” because they do not fit into any other overarching or subsidiary category and/or they may not have occurred with enough prevalence to be included elsewhere. This particularly applies to *Subsidiary Category 10: Miscellaneous*. *Subsidiary Category 9: Calculator* may appear to fit into *Overarching Category 7: Socio-Economic Matters*; instead, it relates to a loan calculator initiative coordinated and managed by the academic advisors. Entries about physical health in *Subsidiary Category 11* relate to instances where students’ physical health might have had an impact on their study plans and/or on their degree trajectory, which would require the academic advisor to work with the student to develop contingencies and plans for return after the physical health issue has been resolved or is under control. Jointly, “Other Matters” is an important overarching category, as it speaks to both the diverse needs of students and to the importance for academic advisors to be able to assist with matters that they may never have experienced before.

2.5.4. Overarching Category 4: Psychosocial Matters

Psychosocial challenges and support needs signify an overarching category that interconnects with most other overarching and subsidiary categories. This classification of matters can both result in the types of challenges presented in other categories and/or be consequences. *Subsidiary Category 12: Mental Health* relates to instances where students report mental health challenges; provide feedback or updates on known mental health challenges, or are referred to the institutional

Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) on suspicion of suffering from mental health challenges. *Subsidiary Category 14: Stress and Anxiety* cover entries linked to stress and anxiety about studies, examinations and assessments, relationships, the future and career prospects, family matters, academic progress in relation to peers, and post-examination stress, among others. *Subsidiary Category 13: Personal and Emotional Matters* links closely to *Subsidiary Categories 12* and *14*, but it should not be conflated with either. While students may require professional help for mental health challenges, as well as stress and anxiety management, there are elements of the relationship between the academic advisor and student that falls outside the realm of professional counselling and related services. Having someone in the institution who is not a counsellor or psychologist and who has a vested interest in students and their well-being, can play a major role in students' ability to persist with their studies and, ultimately, to achieve success (see for example Hill, 1995; Karp, 2011; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Rendon, 1994; Surr, 2019).

2.5.5. Overarching Category 5: Referrals

Subsidiary Categories 15 to 22 demonstrate the broad network of relationships that academic advisors must have in the faculty where they work, across the institution, and with Student Affairs services in particular. Although an academic advisor remains the person in the institution with whom the student forges a personal connection, the advisor does not necessarily have the expertise, knowledge, or authority to help address and resolve particular matters. As such, an academic advisor would refer a student to whoever may be most appropriate to address a particular challenge: CCDU for therapy or careers counselling, an Assistant Dean or Faculty Registrar to help resolve an administrative matter or appeal, and/or an academic advisor from another faculty to address matters pertaining to that faculty. A strong referral system is essential to effective academic advising and to the success and well-being of the student. Referrals also provide academic advisors with an opportunity to close the advising loop by scheduling follow-up sessions with students, where they can provide updates and feedback about the referral matters, and establish the students' accountability.

2.5.6. Overarching Category 6: Skills

The sixth overarching category has to do with skills and skills development. *Subsidiary Category 26: University Life/ Work-Life Balance* includes instances where students are finding life at university challenging and/or where they want to engage more actively in activities related to university life. Entries in this category also relate to instances where students find it difficult to manage their work-life balance (e.g., dedicating either too much attention to studies or too much attention to other activities). Entries coded in this category may also include reports of anxiety about graduating and about having to start working. *Subsidiary Categories 23: Excellence Skills* and *25: Time Management* cover time management, note-taking strategies, study and exam planning, pre-reading, reflective practice (e.g., free writing), study skills and techniques, assignment and paragraph writing, and exam and test-taking strategies. *Subsidiary Category 24: General Life Skills* relates to advice about managing general life challenges and instances where students report issues in managing such challenges.

2.5.7. Overarching Category 7: Socio-Economic Matters

Overarching category 7 comprises subsidiary categories 27 to 34 and constitutes 21% of all the entries captured. Socio-economic matters, including funding, accommodation, food security, transport and more, denote a significant dimension of the work that South African academic advisors do. This will be explored in depth in paper two of the current series.

2.6. The Baseline Data

From the baseline dataset (see Table 1), it is evident that an academic advisor must be familiar with a broad range of interconnected matters when providing advice and support to students. These range from academic matters and students' skills needs to psychosocial and socio- economic issues; this supports the notion of students being holistic social beings who come to the academic advising engagement from their own unique social reality. Another crucial role of the academic advisor is to be a referrer. To do this accurately and timeously, the academic advisor must refer students to the relevant support services in the institution, while maintaining a relationship with those referral parties to ensure that students are provided with the best support possible.

This also links to the notion of follow-up engagements, where academic advisors schedule a follow-up meeting with students, thus creating a sense of accountability. Students do not only need to heed the referrals, but they also need to play an active part in addressing and (ideally) resolving whatever issue/challenge about which they sought advice. Ultimately, the baseline data is useful to gain insight into the day-to-day needs of students as a means of tracking and monitoring them, to gauge student uptake and engagement with academic advisors, and to draw conclusions about the nature of the support services required by students and within the institution.

2.7. Discussion

2.7.1. The Empirical, the Actual and the Real

By approaching the data with Bhaskar's (1975) and Archer's (1995, 2000, 2005) ideas about stratified layers of reality in mind, the baseline data afford three layers of interpretation. At the layer of the Empirical, one is able to start identifying the numerous support needs presented by students during the timeframe when the author collected data, which links to their unique experiences in FCLM. By clustering the data into a subsidiary and over-arching categories, one is able to identify thematic areas of support that could require the attention of academic advisors during the course of their duties, while also affording an opportunity to start crystallising the needs of students in FCLM. Moving to the layer of the Actual, one is able to draw inferences about events (whether known or unknown) that result in the experiences of students and, by extent, academic advisors at the level of the Empirical. In considering these layers as a collective, one can begin to draw inferences about the skills requirements and training needs of South African academic advisors, the types of support services required (both by students and within the institution), and the importance of ensuring that there are strong ties between academic advising services and institutional student support services. Moving to the layer of the Real, one can begin to interrogate the unseen structural and cultural mechanisms, whether physical or social, that result in experiences and events at the layers of the Empirical and the Actual. In other words, the baseline dataset gives the author proverbial access to the Real through layers of interpretation and inferencing at the levels of the Empirical and the Actual. This also means that, although the baseline data is only representative of one academic

advisor's engagements with students over a three-year period, one is able to infer and theorise more broadly about academic advising within the SA HE context.

2.8. Making Known Some of the Real

2.8.1. Grants

Since 2014, when the author started working in the student success and support space as an academic advisor, there has been a commendable commitment to student success and support nationally, and by association support for the work of academic advisors. Most notably are the following support initiatives: i) the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), which makes funding available to South African universities through the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) in three-year cycles[6]; ii) the South African Institute for Distance Education's (*Saide*) *Siyaphumelela* (We Succeed) Project[7], which has strong ties with the DHET and the US-based Achieving the Dream Network, which is funded by the Kresge Foundation; and iii) the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) Quality Enhancement Project[8]. The *Siyaphumelela* Network enables networking and collaboration among academic advisors and others working in the student success and support space. It also enables more scholarly work about the realities and unique challenges of the SA HE sector, as well as efforts to address the many structural, sectoral, and institutional issues affecting South African students. In turn, the UCDP has enabled the launching of academic advising as a practice at the author's institution. These enabling structures made it possible for the author to create the baseline dataset and, consequently, more evidence-based contributions about the complex nature of academic advisors' work. Accordingly, this is an example of how national structural support has enabled academic advising as a profession, both by making funding available for its growth and by making academic advisors' work a strategic priority (e.g., the multi-institution UCDG- funded project that aims to professionalize academic advising in SA). However, not everything happening at the national level has been constructive or enabling.

[6] The UCDG aims to transform "teaching, learning, and leading" (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2017, p. 2) to enhance "quality, success, and equity in universities" (DHET, 2017, p. 2).
[7] The *Siyaphumelela* Project focuses on the use of data and data analytics to drive evidence-based initiatives and interventions to enhance student success and support at partnering South African universities (i.e., taking what is proven to work to scale, based on evidence).
[8] The project aims to "improve student success at […] Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and in the […] sector as a whole" (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2014, p. 1).

The idea of academic advising as a profession in the SA HE sector was only introduced at the national level in a meaningful way in 2017 with the commencement of the aforementioned multi-institutional professionalisation project, despite explicit links between academic advising and SA HE student support work made by Bitzer (2009) and Singh (2015). Prior to 2017, work in this space was sporadic and not easily identifiable or defined it lacked the rigorous, evidence-based foundation, which Surr (2019) promulgates, or the intentionality, sustainability, and coherence, which Tinto (2014) deems vital to work in student success. Furthermore, although the availability of grants to enable the work of academic advisors is encouraging, the UCDG has been overshadowed by tremendous year- on-year underspending across multiple grant cycles. Of the approximately R510 million allocated to 24 public universities in South Africa in 2017 (Ministerial Statement, 2016, p. 18), just over R103 million went unspent (DHET, 2018, p. 18). This is by no means anomalous or uncommon.

The idea of funding being available to address systemic challenges (e.g., equity of access and student transitions, among others) juxtaposed with the immense underspend causes frustration, especially when the baseline data shows that many students consulted about matters directly related to these systemic challenges. This indicates an egregious flow in structures governing the spending of grant monies or, possibly, how grant holders and managers might be ill- equipped to spend these. By extension, this affects academic advisors at grassroots level, as they are often the ones faced with having to support and advise students without necessarily being able to find long-term, workable, and sustainable solutions to the structural mechanisms at play. Furthermore, when these factors lead to student dropout or academic exclusion, academic advisors either have to guide students through the trauma of exclusion or else they are faced with the reality that students with whom they have worked and built relationships, have to drop out because of factors beyond the students' and academic advisors' control. In this way, the disjuncture between grant availability and management constitutes a structural constraint on the academic advisors' work, and on their ability to enact agency in the advising space.

2.8.2. Evidence-informed approaches to academic advising

Academic advisors tend to be primarily focused on students as social beings, concerning themselves with the day-to-day challenges which students face at the layers of the Empirical and the Actual—and rightly so. Yet, in order to truly help students be successful, they must use the available tools to capture information about these students and to feed this information into the stream of institutional data that inform predictive analytics models and early-warning systems. In turn, these can enable academic advisors to better understand mechanisms that drive events that are likely to present challenges to students. The *Siyaphumelela* Project promotes and enables the use of data and evidence to take best practices to scale and to share findings nationally (and across the network of partner institutions) through the annual *Siyaphumelela* Conference and other platforms.

Consequently, there has been a structural change overtime at the institution where the author works, in the form of plans and frameworks that aim to address some of the underlying factors that affect the work of academic advisors. This includes efforts to develop and make available early-warning systems, an intervention portal for capturing data about student engagements and interventions, investment in predictive analytics capabilities to enable academic advisors to implement proactive, preventative strategies, and associated interventions. However, structural challenges such as the ongoing national students' funding crisis (Wangenge-Ouma & Carpentier, 2018; Wangenge-Ouma, 2021) exponentially increase student traffic for academic advisors, which then occupies a great deal of their time. This often results in student engagements and interventions not being captured in the intervention portal (or at least not timeously). Consequently, the data stream into the system is not always constant, which then results in (potentially) skewed or inaccurate early-warning flags or alerts. Similarly, the culture among academic advisors is such that not all of them necessarily utilise all these resources consistently and intentionally. Academic advisors' beliefs about at-risk labelling might also affect the culture of regularly capturing intervention data, as might matters of morale in such a high-pressure and emotional environment. The irony is that data fed into the predictive models are meant to generate leading indicators that could help academic advisors in their efforts to prevent future students from being at risk of failing or dropping out.

2.9. Conclusion

First, in a series of papers emanating from the author's doctoral research, this article begins to crystallise for the reader the highly complex nature of academic advising as an educational practice within the SA HE sector. The author uses a baseline dataset created from engagements as an academic advisor with students over a three-year period (2015 to 2018), and he analyses the data by adopting Archer's notions of Social Realism as a theoretical framework and critical lens. This allows one insight into the experiences of students and academic advisors and the events resulting from those experiences. Accordingly, the baseline data has revealed the diverse and multifaceted range of matters that academic advisors need to be equipped with in order to assist students, and the importance of networking with institutional support services and academic advisors from other faculties. In turn, the third layer, the Real, has afforded an opportunity for inferential observations about the underlying mechanisms that drive experiences and events at the layers of the Empirical and the Actual. By briefly observing some of the ways in which stratified structural and cultural elements within the SA HE sector affect academic advisors' work, one can begin to see how these elements potentially affect academic advisors' (in)ability to enact agency within the academic advising space.

In conclusion though, if we consider Social Realism to be concerned with the tenets of a stratified and interconnected social reality, and if we acknowledge academic advising as a social practice that views students as holistic social beings coming to the advisor-advisee engagement, then it is safe to deduce that academic advising as a practice concerns itself with the constraints and barriers (far more than enablers) which affect students' ability to navigate and progress through the complex social reality of the South African HE sector. In this case, the social reality, viewed from the students' perspective, is the institution where they are studying. However, academic advisors are as concerned with epistemology as they are with constraints or barriers to students' progress and success. For in as much as academic advisors work to address or resolve the challenges affecting the holistic HE experience of the students with whom they work, they are ultimately doing so to eliminate barriers to epistemological access for those students. Whereas at the layer of the Empirical, the

baseline data may elucidate the day-to-day experiences (and challenges) about which students seek advice, and whereas the layer of the Actual may provide insight into events that bring about student experiences, it is at the layer of the Real that one comes to appreciate how the actions of academic advisors are intended to afford students equal and equitable epistemological access to HE knowledge bases. This allows one to deduce that, whereas academic advising as an educational practice is concerned with addressing the day-to-day challenges that students experience, academic advisors as practitioners are as concerned with enabling epistemological access to knowledge bases for students, as they are with the daily challenges and barriers SA HE students face.

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Statements

Research ethics

The author subscribes to the highest levels of ethics during his research. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained through the author's institutional Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical). All data is presented in aggregate form and no individual is identifiable from the data shared in this paper.

2.10. References

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CHAPTER 3

Demystifying the Work of South African Academic Advisors: An Exploration of Students' Structural and Material Constraints

Paper two has been co-authored with my supervisor, Prof. Laura Dison. While Laura and I worked closely together on all aspects of this study, I can confirm that the primary contribution is my own (see Appendix G). This paper is also published in the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, although not in a special issue. The contributions made through this paper speak to the advancement of student affairs, student success, and academic advising in South African higher education, thus aligning with the aim and objectives of the journal. Once again, the paper has been reproduced here as part of the PhD manuscript, but it can be accessed in its original form by following the link above. The journal uses the APA 7th Author-Date Referencing System.

de Klerk, D. & Dison, L. (2022). Demystifying the work of South African academic advisors: An exploration of students' structural and material constraints. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, 10*(2), 129-147. https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v10i2.3786.

Abstract

The structural and material factors affecting the lived realities and prospects of tertiary success for South African students are complex and manifold. Inexorably, these lived realities impact the work of academic advisors who guide and support students throughout their higher education journeys. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the growing body of literature about academic advising in and for South African

higher education contexts, and in particular the daily work of academic advisors in the country. This is achieved by first drawing on literature to elucidate the various structural and material constraints affecting the lives of many South African students, before reconciling what emerges from the literature with quantitative data collected by an academic advisor working at a South African university about his engagements with students over a three-year period. This phenomenological study is underpinned by social realist principles as proposed by Margaret Archer and draws in particular on the notion of structure to advance its argument. Additionally, the work of Boughey and McKenna on the decontextualized learner is incorporated to demonstrate why students in this country cannot be decontextualized from their lived realities. The article concludes by highlighting how the complex structural and material constraints that influence students' higher education experiences manifest in the day-to-day work of academic advisors. The authors propose that these insights be used to enhance responsiveness to student needs, while informing how the sector makes meaning of advising for the South African higher education context.

Keywords

academic advising; academic advisors; decontextualized learner; higher education; South Africa; social realism; socio-economic challenges; structure; student success

3.1. Introduction

Academic advising is an emerging profession and practice in South Africa (de Klerk, 2021; Obaje & Jeawon, 2021, p. 18). While decades of literature underpin advising work done in the global North and Australia (Bishop, 1987; Tuttle, 2000; Cuseo, 2003; Mann, 2020), evidence-informed contributions about advising within and for South African higher education has only recently begun to emerge. The country's past and its current-day socio-economic realities[1] mean that unique intricacies and complexities characterise its higher education landscape (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). These complex realities have tangible and far-reaching consequences for many students pursuing tertiary studies, significantly affecting the work of academic advisors working at South African higher education institutions (HEIs) (de Klerk, 2021; de Klerk, 2022).

[1] South Africa has an unemployment rate of more than 30% (Mulaudzi & Ajoodha, 2021, p. 420) and has one of the highest rates of inequality with regard to wealth distribution, globally (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

In this article we draw extensively on literature to contextualize these complex realities by focusing specifically on structural and material constraints, before comparing the findings in the literature with data collected by a practising academic advisor over a three-year period. This juxtaposition of literature and data highlights how the material and structural constraints experienced by students inf luence the day-to-day work of an advisor working at a South African HEI. These insights are crucial for making meaning of the work of South African advisors, as well as for creating a socially just tertiary study environment which addresses student alienation and marginalisation.

3.2. Background

The #FeesMustFall (FMF) movement of 2015 and 2016 placed a spotlight on the national funding crisis affecting the South African higher education sector (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Cloete, 2016; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017; Tjønneland, 2017). Ironically, while protests were happening across campuses nationally, students most in need of funding for essentials like food and shelter (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017) were still going hungry and/or sleeping in libraries and toilets on South African HEI campuses. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, these realities were further exacerbated for many South African higher education students (DHET, 2020a; Sifunda et al., 2021), immediate responses to which brought about emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) (Hodges et al., 2020) in 2020 and 2021. The funding crisis itself continues to pose severe challenges to students' ability to succeed at tertiary studies (Essop, 2021). The consequences and fallout of the crisis is experienced first-hand by academic advisors engaging with students on the ground, despite any transformative educational gains that may have resulted from the disruptions (Dison et al., 2022).

Academic advisors are often faced with requests for food, toiletries, stationery and clothing, enquiries about accommodation, information about funding opportunities, support with funding applications, and are asked for advice about working while studying. Funding within the South African higher education sector is usually channeled towards first-generation, first-year students from the lower income brackets

in the country[2], which leaves undergraduates from the so-called missing middle[3] (Cloete, 2016, p. 121; Garrod & Wildschut, 2021) and postgraduate students (Machika & Johnson, 2015) with limited to no funding opportunities. The problem is further compounded by the "hidden" costs of studying at a university, the pressures associated with *black tax* for many black African students, and warped perceptions by many individuals from the South African middle- and upper-income classes about the socio-economic realities of a large portion of students studying at HEIs in the country. The pressure on young people who must contend with these challenges, while having to fulfil academic requirements and perform satisfactorily is immense (Machika & Johnson, 2015; Case et al., 2018).

Many of these challenges emanate from external factors beyond these students' control, which exacerbate the difficulties they face while navigating unfamiliar social and educational expectations and spaces within their HEIs (Case et al., 2018; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Ultimately, these obstacles often bring about major barriers to equal and equitable (Czerniewicz, et al., 2020) epistemological access to HE knowledge bases. As such, the role played by advisors in helping students navigate these challenges is vital, both in terms of breaking down barriers that hinder students from gaining different forms of access and succeeding academically, as well as enabling meaningful epistemological access for students through their academic engagement (de Klerk, 2021, p. 117).

3.3. Literature and Context

3.3.1. Academic advising

Academic advising is a high-impact practice (Moodley & Singh, 2015, p. 95; Strydom & Loots, 2020) that can enhance student success and the overall student learning experience (Surr, 2019, p. 9). Much has been written about academic advising for global North and non-South African contexts over many decades (e.g., Bishop, 1987; Clark, 1989; Grites, 1979; Beatty, 1991; Tuttle, 2000; Cuseo, 2003; Drake, 2011;

[2] To be eligible to apply for financial support from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in 2021, applicants may not have a combined gross family income of more than ZAR 350,000 per annum (DHET, 2021, p. 7).
[3] This term is used to describe students from households where the annual income is too high for the student to qualify for funding support from NSFAS and many other sources of funding, but too low for the household to be able to cover the cost of tertiary studies.

Zhang & Dinh, 2017; Mann, 2020). Conversely, the literature about advising in South Africa remains quite limited (Strydom, 2017, p. 104). Encouragingly though, meaningful and necessary shifts have begun to occur in the sector since 2017, with the launch of a multi-institutional project focused on formalising academic advising for South African higher education contexts (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021a, pp. 4-5). Tied to this project is a special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (Vol. 9 No. 2, published in 2021), which focuses on academic advising in South Africa (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021b). These shifts signal a significant step towards the laying of a rigorous and evidence-informed foundation (Surr, 2019) for advising in this country. However, a critical investigation of the available literature has revealed a paucity of studies that document the factors that influence the day-to-day work of academic advisors in South Africa.

Studies like those by Naidoo and Lemmens (2015) and Kritzinger et al. (2018) discuss academic advising in relation to at-risk work and early-alert systems for identifying high-risk students. Others, like Emekako and Van der Westhuizen (2021), explore academic advising in a South African context in relation to students' academic performance, or investigate advising during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., de Klerk, 2022; Moosa, 2021). Additionally, much of the literature focuses on the adoption of global-North advising models in South African contexts (Obaje & Jeawon, 2021, pp. 24-25; Van Pletzen et al., 2021), which in itself warrants further investigation, although it goes beyond the scope of the current article. There is an absence, though, of literature about the daily practices of advisors in the country. Consequently, this article aims to contribute to the knowledge base about academic advising in South Africa by foregrounding the complex realities that affect their work. To achieve this goal, the authors first provide an overview of the structural and material constraints experienced by many South African higher education students, which is shown to have consequences for the day-to-day work of South African advisors.

3.3.2. Structural and material constraints

3.3.2.1. Funding limitations within the South African higher education sector

The demand for adequate funding by students within the South African higher education sector far outweighs its availability (Scott, 2016, p. 20) and is projected to

remain problematic for many years to come[4] (Simkins & Task Team, 2016, p. 75). In a 2010 *Report of the Ministerial Committee on the Review of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)*, the committee observed that within the South African higher education sector:

> funding falls far short of demand. Current estimates are that NSFAS has less than half of the funds it needs to meet the demand for financial aid from qualifying applicants, even at current participation rates. The Committee concluded that the main impediment to NSFAS achieving its objectives is chronic underfunding. (DHET, 2010, p. xiii)

More than a decade later, and despite the FMF protests of 2015 and 2016, Ahmed Bhawa (chief executive officer of Universities South Africa (USAf)) reported that South Africa universities were facing a ZAR 14 billion shortfall for 2019 alone, owing to unpaid student debt (Paterson, 2021). Although there was no prospect of recovering this debt, Bhawa explained that universities could not afford to nullify it either (Paterson, 2021).

Most South African higher education bursaries and funding opportunities are directed toward first-year and undergraduate students, with those from previously disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the lowest annual household income more likely to be recipients[5] (Cloete, 2016; Garrod & Wildschut, 2021). As such, funding opportunities for undergraduate students from the missing middle (Cloete, 2016; Garrod & Wildschut, 2021), undergraduates who have been academically excluded and then readmitted (de Klerk et al., 2017, p. 6), and postgraduate students (Machika & Johnson, 2015) are extremely limited. Students in all these categories often approach academic advisors for guidance on how to source funding, which is seldom easily resolved. Ultimately, the crisis remains (Garrod & Wildschut, 2021; Paterson, 2021), as does the strain it places on students, on the advisors that work to guide and support them, and on these students' prospects of success.

[4] Simkins and Task Team (2016, p. 75) project a NSFAS shortfall of approximately ZAR 16,685 million in 2023, which is now likely to be even higher owing to the constraints and realities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

[5] Although, as Masehela (2018, p. 166) points out, high Matric marks do not guarantee any form of financial support owing to competitive demand, while the awarding of bursaries or other forms of financial aid often do not take "account of any disadvantage an applicant may have faced" (p. 166).

3.3.2.2. The "hidden" costs of university study

The cost of university studies goes far beyond tuition and accommodation, which are the two funding areas most bursaries and funders are willing to cover. So-called "hidden" costs (i.e., expenditure not covered by bursaries or funders and that is seldom stipulated or outlined in cost breakdown documents) include: transport, stationery, textbooks and other learning materials, food and toiletries, clothing, other living expenses, medical expenses, and discipline-specific items. Van der Berg (2016, p. 182) points out that the cost of studying in South African higher education is a problem for most students, emphasising that for "the typical student, support of almost half a million Rand over the course of a degree may be required" (p. 182). Considering that this calculation was made in 2016, it is safe to deduce that the amount is now even higher. The maximum NSFAS funding cap was set at (i) ZAR 88,600 in 2019 (DHET, 2019a, p. 7); (ii) ZAR 93,400 in 2020 (DHET, 2020b); and (iii) ZAR 98,700 in 2021 (DHET, 2021, p. 9). This means that students who qualify for full funding through NSFAS annually during their studies (not all students are allocated the maximum amount), would receive in total ZAR 280,700 to cover a three-year degree programme.

However, considering Van der Berg's (2016, p. 182) estimate that a typical student would require approximately ZAR 500,000 over the course of their degree (including "hidden" costs), and that many students require more than three years to complete a three-year bachelor's degree[6] (DHET, 2019b[7]), the endless challenges students face with regard to food security, accommodation, transport, stationery, textbooks/learning materials, and a myriad other expenses should come as no surprise. These are all matters that are prone to arising during academic advising engagements between advisors and students, therefore requiring advisors to be responsive to the lived realities of the students they work with.

3.3.2.3. Food (in)security on South African campuses

Food insecurity on university campuses is a global challenge. A national study of basic needs insecurity conducted in the United States found that 56% of the more than

[6] Students funded through NSFAS and the DHET Bursary Scheme are only eligible for funding for the minimum period of study of a qualification (N) plus one additional year (N+1) (DHET, 2021, p.14).
[7] The DHET (2019b, p. xvi) found that the completion rate of the 2012 cohort of South African higher education students enrolled for three-year bachelor's degrees was just over 29% after three years (N) and only about 63% after five years (N+2).

33,000 participants from 70 community colleges were food insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). Another study conducted at the University of Hawai'i at Ma¯noa more than a decade ago found that 21% of participants were food insecure and a further 24% were at risk of becoming food insecure (Chaparro et al., 2009). Many other US-based studies conducted in the last 10 years share similar findings.

Correspondingly, a South African study conducted at the University of KwaZulu- Natal between 2007 and 2010 found that more than 40% of participants experienced some degree of food insecurity (Munro et al., 2013), while a subsequent study at the same university conducted in 2015 found that more than 53% of participants reported some degree of vulnerability to food insecurity, despite the implementation of a Food Security Programme at the institution in 2012 (Sabi et al., 2020). Another study conducted at the University of the Free State in 2013 found that 60% of participants experienced food insecurity and reports emerged that this may be contributing to high attrition rates (Van den Berg & Raubenheimer, 2015). This aligns with the findings of a study by Payne-Sturges et al. (2018) that food insecurity might affect retention rates. Worth highlighting is that food insecurity at South African HEIs is tied to the national funding crisis (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017), and has been shown to have a negative impact on students' academic performance (Sabi et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2021). Academic advisors are often the first port of call for students who are food insecure and looking for advice on who to approach for support.

3.3.2.4. The South African student accommodation crisis

Access to student accommodation/housing has been directly linked to student success (DHET, 2011, pp. xvii, xx; Xulu-Gama, 2019, p. 15) and to students' integration at HEIs (Sikhwari et al., 2020, p. 9; Simpeh & Adisa, 2021, p. 471). The necessity for safe and secure shelter is a common and basic human need, yet a national study of basic needs insecurity conducted in the United States of America found that 51% of the more than 33,000 participants from 70 community colleges were housing insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). In South Africa, the higher education accommodation crisis (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019; Tshazi, 2021)) is not only tied to the massification of the sector (Mugume & Luescher, 2015, p. 3; Ackermann & Visser, 2016, p. 8; Tjønneland, 2017, p. 2), which has resulted in a shortage of student accommodation, but also to the

country's apartheid past (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019), the legacies of which have contributed significantly to the broader historical student funding crisis.

Mzileni and Mkhize (2019) explain how, during apartheid, "South African universities came to be fixed as physical and cultural elements of towns and cities based on the broader trajectory of settler-colonialism and apartheid urban development, segregation and the Group Areas logic of the apartheid state" (p. 104). The reality is that the physical/spatial location and layout of many South African HEIs remain inextricably tied to the country's apartheid past nearly three decades post democracy, which serves to perpetuate the student housing crisis experienced first-hand by many HEI students (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019), when they have to leave rural homesteads to access HEIs located in urban areas. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that accommodation- related challenges may arise during engagements between students and advisors. Apart from the spatial and associated cost implications for these students, there is a lack of adequate student housing, and living conditions can be substandard.

More than a decade ago, a review of the provision of student housing at South African universities (DHET, 2011) found that "the conditions under which students are being housed in some university-leased buildings can only be described as squalid" (p. xviii), that insufficient and inadequate "on-campus housing is resulting in overcrowding, jeopardising students' academic endeavours and creating significant health and safety risks" (p. xviii), and that "[p]rivate student housing in the country appears to be completely unregulated" (p. xviii). The same report estimated the shortage of residence beds in the country at the time to be in excess of 195,000, while the projected cost of addressing the shortage was said to amount to more than ZAR 82 billion over 10 years or in excess of ZAR 109 billion over 15 years (DHET, 2019, p. xviii). Regardless, the shortage of affordable student housing for South African higher education students (Mugume & Luescher, 2015; Paterson, 2021; Tshazi, 2021) remains a key element that impacts directly on students' ability to succeed at university (DHET, 2011, p. xvii, xx; Xulu-Gama, 2019, p. 15; Sikhwari et al., 2020, p.8).

3.3.2.5. Black tax

Black tax[8] is a sensitive and complex (Mhlongo, 2019, p. 1) cultural and economic phenomenon within the South African context. Mangoma and Wilson-Prangley (2019) define it as "the ways in which the emerging black middle class make financial contributions to their direct and indirect families in South Africa" (p. 443), while Carpenter and Phaswana (2021) describe it as the "financial burden [placed on black South Africans] of having to support direct and extended family" (p. 1). In turn, Fongwa (2019) explains that it is "the process through which a black individual (usually an employed recent graduate) uses a significant portion of their income and savings to support their immediate and extended family" (p. 2). The literature often associates black tax with young people and professionals[9], but seemingly not with students (except when speaking of young working professionals paying tuition fees for siblings who are studying (Fongwa, 2019, pp. 7, 8, 10)).

In reality though, the pressures of black tax are felt by black African students studying at South African HEIs, who often feel obliged to send a portion (or all) of their monthly NSFAS or bursary stipend (or annual textbook allowance) home to assist family members on pension, single-parent households, and/or siblings in primary or secondary school. Consequently, students may go hungry or choose not to buy essential learning resources, which can have a devastating effect on their academic performance and chances of successful degree completion. This is an important dimension to highlight, as the inf luence of black tax on the lives of many South African students has a direct bearing on the work of academic advisors who must support and guide them.

While in the past the far-reaching impact of the aforementioned structural and material constraints could be silenced and (arguably) avoided, the momentous events of recent times mean that they can no longer be ignored (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). In the section that follows, Archer's (1995, 2005) work on Social Realism and Boughey and

[8] Here the authors acknowledge their positionality as white South Africans and accept that they are unlikely to ever fully comprehend the cultural complexities and realities of black South Africans or how they perceive black tax. Mhlongo (2019) in his book *Black Tax: Burden or Ubuntu?* aims to highlight some of the complexities of experience and perception about black tax through a series of essays by "young and old, urban and rural, and male and female contributors" (p.1), in an attempt to determine whether it is "a burden or a blessing" (p.1).

[9] See, for example: Fongwa (2019, pp. 6, 8, 9 & 10); Mangoma and Wilson-Prangley (2019, pp. 443, 449, 452 & 457).

McKenna's (2016) critique of the decontextualized learner are introduced as mechanisms with which to understand the inter-relationship of the aforementioned structural and material constraints with the work of a South African academic advisor.

3.4. Theoretical Underpinnings

This article is underpinned by the work of social realist, Margaret Archer. Archer (1995, 2005) builds on the work of Bhaskar (1975), and theorises about the interplay of structure, culture, and agency (autonomously and interconnectedly) across a stratified social reality to make meaning of complex social systems. The focus in this article is on the non-academic contextual social realities and structural constraints that affect the lives of South African higher education students and by association, the work of academic advisors that guide and support them. Case (2015) provides a useful definition of structure in a social realist context. She explains that structure "has to do with material goods (unequally distributed across society)" (p. 843), tying back to the previous "Structural and material constraints" section of this article. Structure, therefore, has the potential both to enable and constrain. In this instance, the focus is on the effect structural (and material) constraints experienced by students have on the work of academic advisors. Correspondingly, Boughey and McKenna's (2016) work on the decontextualized learner aligns with Archer's (1995, 2005) social realist view of social reality and the discussion about structural and material constraints.

Boughey and McKenna (2016) introduce the notion of the decontextualized learner in relation to academic literacy. The authors describe one of the presumptions in higher education discourse as being that those students who make their way through the system are detached from their "history, culture, and language" (Boughey & McKenna, 2016, p. 6). They further explain that through the decontextualization lens, success in higher education is attributed to qualities or abilities that lie within the individual (Boughey & McKenna, 2016, p. 1). This way of thinking feeds into deficit conceptions of students (Boughey & McKenna, 2021, pp. 59, 60, 80 and 115) who are disregarded as "holistic social beings who bring with them their own unique social realities – realities that have been constructed over time through numerous experiences, events, cultural stimuli, and structures" (de Klerk, 2021, p. 106). This article serves to underscore the premise that students cannot be decontextualized from the structural

and material constraints that influence their social and educational realities, and highlights how these constraining factors impact on the work of the academic advisors.

Ultimately, structural and material factors have an incontrovertible and infinitely complex (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) effect on many South African higher education students' prospects of success at tertiary studies, despite these being beyond their personal control. Moreover, academic advisors work with students as holistic social beings, not decontextualized ones, *because* their engagement with students spans the breadth of those students' lived realities, whether academic in nature or not. In this article, a social realist lens is used to guide the analysis of the findings.

3.5. Methodology and Data

This quantitative study draws on phenomenological research design principles (Groenewald, 2004; Fisher & Stenner, 2011; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). The quantitative baseline data set that forms the basis of this article reflects the advising engagements of one academic advisor's encounters with students (from the University of the Witwatersrand) during a 46-month period between January 2015 and October 2018. The complete baseline data set contains 2,240 entries emanating from 1,023 consultations with 614 students. These data were categorised into seven overarching categories, consisting of 34 subsidiary categories. To analyse the data, we took advantage of the descriptive and explorative opportunities (Groenewald, 2004) afforded by adopting a phenomenological research design (Groenewald, 2004; Fisher & Stenner, 2011; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). This allowed for the data to be interpreted and disaggregated in several ways (see Tables 1 to 3), which enabled the authors to thoroughly interrogate the practice of academic advising and the work of advisors as practitioners. In this article, we focus on overarching category seven, which deals with socio-economic matters, thus providing a window into understanding students' structural and material constraints. To enhance holistic insights into the data, it is cross-referenced with students' race and gender information.

3.6. Findings

The present study has thus far used relevant literature to explicate the intricacies that influence the lives of students and the work of academic advisors in South Africa. Next,

the authors introduce another layer of evidence to support and guide their argument. The data are used to further elucidate the direct influence of students' structural and material constraints on advisors' daily work. Moreover, the data help to elucidate why students cannot be separated from these constraining factors and may begin to offer possibilities for addressing some of these factors through academic advising.

3.6.1. Overarching category "socio-economic matters"

Table 1 shows overarching category seven of the baseline data set. Titled "socio-economic matters", the overarching category consists of eight subsidiary categories that collectively account for 480 instances where students engaged with the advisor about socio-economic matters (i.e., structural and material constraints). Most frequently discussed were issues related to food security (31.2%), toiletries (19.3%), funding/funding applications (24.0%), and accommodation (12.3%). Entries about funding refer to both funding issues and concerns, and enquiries about bursaries and funding applications or opportunities. Other matters covered include clothing, stationery, textbooks, and transport. Students would not necessarily consult about each subsidiary category separately but would, for example, raise matters of food security, funding concerns, and accommodation challenges during a single advising engagement. This demonstrates vividly how the structural and material constraints affecting students are intrinsically part of the work of the academic advisors who support and guide them.

Table 1: Overarching category Socioeconomic Matters and associated subsidiary categories

Overarching Category	Percentage of Total Baselines Dataset Entries	Subsidiary Category	Number of Entries in Subsidiary Category	Percentage of Overarching Category
Socioeconomic Matters (Total Entries = 480)	21%	Accommodation	59	12.3%
		Clothing	25	5.2%
		Food	150	31.2%
		Funding	115	24.0%
		Stationery	29	6.0%
		Textbooks	4	1.0%

		Toiletries	93	19.3%
		Transport	5	1.0%

3.6.2. Student gender and race information

Table 2 below provides a basic breakdown of the race and gender information of students who sought advice from the advisor during the period under investigation (i.e., the complete baseline data set). In terms of race, more than 75% of students were black African with the remainder being Indian and Chinese (11.4%), white (9.1%), and coloured (3.1%), which roughly aligns with the university's demographics (Wits, 2021).

Table 2: Student race and gender information gleaned from the complete baseline dataset

Race and Gender Information	Number of Students	Percentage
Female	326	53.1%
Male	288	46.9%
Black African	467	76.1%
Coloured	19	3.1%
Indian & Asian	70	11.4%
Unknown (Race Information not Available)	2	0.3%
White	56	9.1%

Table 3 provides a cross-referenced disaggregated view of overarching category seven (Table 1) and the race and gender information of students as gleaned from the complete baseline data set (Table 2). Two particularly notable observations are: (i) the fact that 478 of the 480 (99.6%) entries about specifically socio-economic matters were from black African students, which ties back to earlier assertions about how current day student realities are linked to the country's apartheid past (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019); and (ii) that the number of male students who consulted about socio-economic matters is double that of female students, which warrants further

investigation in subsequent studies, seeing as the complete baseline data set contains more entries about female than male students.

Table 3: Overarching category socioeconomic matters cross-referenced with gender and race information

Overarching Category	Subsidiary Category	Entries	Female	Male	Black African	Coloured	Indian & Chinese	Unknown	White
Socio-economic Matters	Accommo-dation	59	21	38	59	0	0	0	0
	Clothing	25	5	20	25	0	0	0	0
	Food	150	44	106	150	0	0	0	0
	Funding	115	50	65	113	1	0	0	1
	Stationery	29	11	18	29	0	0	0	0
	Textbooks	4	0	4	4	0	0	0	0
	Toiletries	93	27	66	93	0	0	0	0
	Transport	5	2	3	5	0	0	0	0
	Totals	**480**	**160**	**320**	**478**	**1**	**0**	**0**	**1**

3.7. Discussion

The constraining factors outlined in the “Structural and material constraints” section of this article can evidently not be divorced from the lived experiences of many South African students, or from the work of academic advisors. The structural and material constraints captured in the overarching category “socio-economic matters” (Table 1) account for 21% of the baseline data informing this study. Accordingly, providing advice on navigating the effects these constraining factors have on students’ tertiary study experiences denotes a significant dimension of the academic advisor’s work. Matters of funding, accommodation, and food security, among others, remain interconnected; with one another, with the country’s past, with the lived experiences of many students, and with the work of academic advisors working in this country.

A racial disaggregation of this overarching category shows that 99.6% of students who sought advice about socio-economic matters are black African. This compelling figure

makes it nearly impossible to refute the systemically entrenched legacy of apartheid and its influence on the South African higher education sector to this day (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019). Important to remember, is how apartheid was used to differentiate among racial groups based on the colour of their skin (in addition to culture), with black Africans affected most severely. Bearing this in mind, the data suggests that nearly 30 years after apartheid was abolished, many black African students are still experiencing tangible socio-economic and related consequences of that era. By extension then, and as shown in the data, these lived realities of black African students also affect the work of South African academic advisors. This is another reason why students cannot be decontextualized (Boughey & McKenna, 2016) from their lived social realities upon entry into the South African higher education system, nor can one divorce these realities from the work of advisors. Although the data is representative of an individual advisor's work, based on existing views about the socio-economic factors affecting South African students (Scott, 2016), it can be inferred that these realities would be applicable to most academic advisors working in South African HEIs.

For academic advisors these structural and material realities can bring about perplexing complexities that often cannot be solved, adding an additional layer of intricacy to their work. Although not directly linked in the baseline data, the advisor whose engagements are captured here recalls numerous interactions with students who had forgone purchasing food (or other necessities like textbooks and stationery) for the month, to comply with the pressure to send money home. The consequences of forgoing NSFAS or other financial aid monies in this way can be catastrophic and must not be discounted when considering the complex social realities students bring to the advising engagement or the institution more broadly. Importantly, this data must be utilised to develop and implement responsive strategies for enabling student success and for improving the integration of academic advising with all other components of South African HEIs (Moosa, 2021), to ensure that students (especially those most affected by the complex realities of the South African higher education sector) reap the benefits.

3.8. Conclusion

The impact of structural and material constraints on the lives of South African students, and the academic advisors who support them, is evident. The COVID-19 pandemic has once again shone the spotlight on the inequities that permeate the sector (Czerniewicz et al., 2020), and the social impact it has had on many South African students (Sifunda et al., 2021).

These structural and material factors can directly impact students' prospects of success, which is why they cannot be decontextualized (Boughey & McKenna, 2016) from their lived realities when they enter the South African higher education system. Although not necessarily in a position to resolve these matters for students, advisors have the potential to help students navigate these complexities, both for themselves and within their institutions or the sector. Moreover, academic advisors may be positioned to enact agency (Archer, 1995, 2005) in the professional spaces they occupy at their institutions, by raising greater awareness about the interconnected realities of the students with whom they work. This emphasises the necessity for coordinated structural efforts to address these challenges and, to work collaboratively with academics and other institutional stakeholders, developing mitigation strategies. Yet the onus cannot rest solely on advisors. There is an urgent need for coordinated efforts to bring about structural transformation in the form of policies, funding and the like (at institutional and sectoral level), as well as to facilitate shifts towards holistic, integrated student support and student-focused pedagogies and approaches to learning and teaching.

Although academic advisors cannot resolve these infinitely complex challenges, an intrinsic part of their practice is awareness of their impact and an understanding of their interconnectedness (Archer, 1995, 2005). This is essential, as advisors are often tasked with helping students navigate these structural and material constraints by enabling agency on multiple fronts. For this to occur effectively, advisors must know to whom to refer students, must be able to devise workable solutions while managing student expectations, and must maintain close bonds with students. Ultimately, the aim is to support students in the best way possible without disempowering them, with the objective of helping students persist and complete their studies successfully.

As the South African higher education sector shifts beyond emergency modes of instruction towards a post-pandemic reality, the conditions for change may be in place: the inequities entrenched in the sector are known and cannot easily be ignored (Czerniewicz et al., 2020); academic advising has emerged as a previously undervalued practice that can bridge gaps between the student, the institution, and the lecturer (de Klerk, 2022; Moosa, 2021); and calls for intentional shifts towards student-focused pedagogies and holistic student support within the South African higher education sector are on the rise. Now is the time for the South African higher education sector and its institutions to draw on the wisdom of these insights beyond paying lip-service to student challenges. The essence of our argument is that it remains the responsibility of HEIs to extract implications and opportunities offered by academic advising for realizing meaningful and long-lasting changes, especially as new modes of teaching and learning continue to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances.

Research Ethics

The authors subscribe to the highest levels of ethics during their research. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained through the authors' institutional Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) (Protocol number: H20/04/06). All data are presented in aggregate form and no individual is identifiable from the data shared in this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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CHAPTER 4

Establishing a Baseline: A Social Realist Perspective of Academic Advising at a South African University Prior to COVID-19

Paper three is a sole authored one that has been accepted for publication in the *South African Journal of Higher Education* (see Appendix H)[1]. The journal currently has a backlog of articles that have been accepted for publication and has indicated that a sub-editor would contact me directly once the volume and issue in which this paper will be published, goes into production. The journal publishes articles of interest to higher education practitioners and researchers, with a focus on education research emanating from within South Africa and from abroad. The contributions made in this paper align with the broad aims and objectives of the journal, and it should therefore be relevant and of interest to its readers. The journal uses the Chicago Author-Date Referencing System.

Abstract

Academic advising remains an emerging practice and profession within the South African higher education sector. Although there has been an increase in literature about advising in South Africa recently, there remains a dearth of literature about the experiences of academic advisors working in this context. This paper aims to make such a contribution, by focusing in particular on the experiences and insights from 15

[1] Full reference information for this paper was not yet available when the final version of this thesis was being created.

South African advisors (from one university) about academic advising prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The data that informs this study was collected through semi-structured interviews. The focus in this paper is on advisor responses to three of the interview questions, which proved sufficient because of the richness of the data. The study draws on elements of social realist Margaret Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework to explicate why this perspective on advising within a South African higher education context is necessary. Archer's (1995, 2005) work on structure, culture, and agency is then used as analytic lenses with which to analyse the advisors' experiences and insights of advising prior to the pandemic. A phenomenographic approach (Marton 1981; Tight 2016) is adopted to explore the varying conceptions (Cibangu and Hepworth 2016) of advising offered by the academic advisors. Nine focal areas emerge from these insights, which are analysed and discussed using Archer's (1995, 2005) structure, culture, and agency. It becomes apparent that academic advising was complex even before the pandemic. The advisors express an urgency to help others, raise concerns about entrenched inequities and resource constraints, highlight the pitfalls of inadequate help-seeking among students, and emphasise the need for better institutional integration of academic advising at the advisors' university, among other things. It becomes clear that there are numerous structural and cultural tensions that constrain advisor and student agency, possibly to the detriment of student success. The paper leaves the reader with insights into the experiences of academic advisors prior to the pandemic, thus providing a baseline against which to measure advising during and beyond the pandemic, at a time when advising in South African higher education is still being developed and defined.

Keywords

academic advising; academic advisors; agency; culture; higher education; social realism; South Africa; structure; student advising

4.1. Introduction

There has, for some time, been a dearth of literature on academic advising within and for the South African higher education context. Encouragingly, this has begun to change, following the launch of a national project in 2017, which focuses on the professionalisation of advising for the South African context (Tiroyabone and Strydom

2021a). Nevertheless, most of what has emerged either focuses on the adoption of Global North academic-advising models within the South African higher education context (e.g., Van Pletzen et al. 2021), academic advising during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Moosa 2021), examples of how academic advising could support students in extended curriculum / access programmes (e.g., Sekonyela 2021), or quantitative studies that aim to document students' reasons for seeking advice (de Klerk 2021). Research on the collective experiences and insights of practising academic advisors within the South African higher education context that documents the nature of academic advising *before* COVID-19 remains scarce. The purpose of this paper, which forms part of a larger study on academic advising as a profession and academic advisors as practitioners within the South African context, is to make such a contribution.

Strayhorn (2015, 62) sheds light on why academic advisors are essential to the higher education ecosystem:

> "[t]hey help make the implicit explicit, the hidden known, and the unfamiliar commonplace. They help students navigate college by making clear what students need to know and do to be successful. They help students find a sense of belonging on campus."

Consequently, the focus of this paper, which comes at a time when academic advising for South African higher education is still being developed (Obaje and Jeawon 2021), is on the collective voices of 15 academic advisors from across a large, research-intensive public university in South Africa (the University of the Witwatersrand, also known as Wits), and their insights, experiences, and perceptions of advising before the COVID-19 pandemic.

This perspective is necessary, as it provides a baseline against which to measure what emerged regarding academic advising in South Africa during the pandemic (de Klerk 2022; Moosa 2021), and it investigates the state of advising as the sector moves beyond the pandemic. Underpinned by social realist tenets, the paper draws upon the notions of structure, culture, and agency (SCA) (Archer 1995) to analyse interview data, along with elements of Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework to explore the

nature of academic advising at Wits before the pandemic. Ultimately, the findings are used to describe advising as perceived by advisors within the context of a South African university. This then serves as a baseline against which to measure academic advising in South Africa in the future, especially as the author argues elsewhere that the pandemic may have been a catalyst for change, both in terms of how advising is practised and how it is perceived within the South African higher education context.

4.2. The South African Higher Education Context

The importance of context and contextual relevance in higher education matters cannot be discounted. Leibowitz et al. (2015, 327) explain "that a deeper understanding of context across higher education institutions could provide insights that might better inform policy at the national level". This claim is significant, as it delineates the autonomous identity and power of institutions within the higher education sector (institutional context), indicating that no institution can function independently from the sector as a whole (national context). These contexts remain interconnected and dynamic. This is noteworthy because, while this paper focuses on academic advising at Wits, the findings are relevant to the sector at large.

Context is crucial to the arguments made in this paper for two reasons. First, the emergence of academic advising as a profession within South African higher education is still nascent, although it has existed elsewhere for quite some time. It is the uniqueness of the South African context and the novelty of academic advising within it that lends relevance to this paper. Second, Archer (1995, 11) speaks of context as an environment in which the features of a system are either reproduced (i.e., remain unchanged: morphostasis) or transformed (i.e., change occurs: morphogenesis). Leibowitz et al. (2015, 316) explain that "higher education institutions are contexts in which features of the higher education sector may be either reproduced or transformed". Consequently, as Leibowitz et al. (2015) explicate, Archer's (1995) explanation of context allows one to consider "some of the ways in which institutional contexts may influence how change occurs [or does not occur]" (Leibowitz et al. 2015, 316), both within the institution and the sector at large. This pertains to the data that emerged from the advisor interviews that inform this paper, and it is central to

establishing a baseline of academic advising within the South African higher education context before the pandemic.

The contextual realities of the South African higher education sector are unique in many regards. The country lies in the Global South, which means it experiences inherent resource constraints compared to countries in the Global North (Leibowitz et al. 2015, 316). However, this alone is not what sets South Africa apart; there are many other countries in the Global South that face similar constraints (what Boughey and McKenna [2021, 9] term “the economic imperative”). Rather, it is the economic imperative coupled with “the social imperative” (Boughey and McKenna 2021, 9) that makes South Africa and its higher education sector unique.

The country’s social imperative (i.e., that which relates to equity) is tied to its apartheid past, which continues to have tangible effects on the sector and its stakeholders after nearly 30 years of democracy (Dominguez-Whitehead 2017). The shortage of funding for students (the economic imperative) from previously disadvantaged backgrounds (the social imperative) is well-known (e.g., Scott 2016) and severely affects many students’ prospects of success. It is within this challenging context, predominantly at the grassroots level of the student experience, that academic advisors work.

4.3. Theoretical Underpinnings

Context is formed through the interplay between and among structure, culture, and agency (SCA). The emergent properties that arise from that interplay constitute contextual social reality at any given moment. Archer (1995) uses the dual autonomy and interconnectedness of SCA extensively in her social realist theorising. Case (2015) explains how Archer (1995) separates the structural domain into two parts: structure and culture. Structure “has to do with material goods (unequally distributed across society) and is also the domain of social positions and roles” (Case 2015, 843), while culture encompasses “the world of ideas and beliefs” (Case 2015, 843.), including propositional knowledge, myths and opinions (Case, 2015). Agency is described as “the domain of human action and interaction” (Case 2015, 843), with actors and agents forming part of and interacting with structure and culture, both of which also interact with one another. This acting and interaction that occurs between

and among SCA is what determines contextual reality at any given moment. Within South African higher education, influenced by the economic and social imperatives (Boughey and McKenna 2021), this acting and interacting lends the sector its contextual uniqueness. It is within this context that academic advisors attempt to mitigate the challenges faced by students in order to help afford them epistemological access to knowledge (de Klerk 2021, 117).

Context and change are connected. Thus, Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework serves as an analytical tool with which to investigate temporal change or stasis, by examining the interaction of SCA. Boughey and McKenna (2021) explain that a morphogenetic cycle commences at T_1, the prevailing conditions (or status quo) at the start of a cycle. The next phase, where SCA interact, is called T_2 and T_3. The interplay of SCA at this phase can lead to the emergence of new SCA, which could in turn change the prevailing conditions at T_1. This interplay can also bring about new morphogenetic cycles. Finally, T_4 is the point at the end of a cycle where one determines whether what occurred at T_2 and T_3 has brought about a morphogenesis of the prevailing conditions at T_1 (i.e., change and a new status quo) or whether the prevailing conditions at T_1 persist (i.e., morphostasis).

To determine whether change has occurred, one must understand what existed at the start (T_1) and what happened thereafter (the interplay at T_2 and T_3), before being able to determine morphogenesis or morphostasis (T_4) as an outcome. A social realist perspective that draws upon SCA can be useful in this regard. This paper aims to establish a T_1 baseline for academic advising at Wits before the COVID-19 pandemic, with the findings potentially extrapolatable to the broader South African higher education context.

4.4. Literature

As mentioned, the literature on academic advising in South Africa remain limited and although the past few years have seen an increase in publications on the practice and profession, additional studies on advising within and for the South African context is needed. A social realist view of advising, which draws upon SCA to explore the

temporal emergence of advising within this context, adds a novel perspective to understanding the changing field of academic advising in South Africa.

A review of the literature indicates that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the few papers on academic advising in South Africa focused on two broad themes: i) identifying students classified as “at-risk” (or high risk) of failing or dropping out and linking them to an academic/student advisor (e.g., Mayet 2016, 4; Moodley and Singh 2015, 95); and ii) enabling student engagement in educational settings through academic advising, by incorporating the student voice in student success and advising work (e.g., Strydom and Loots 2020). None of these papers include the voices of practising advisors, nor do they adopt a social realist lens to analyse the emergence of advising in South Africa.

Literature on South African advising published since the COVID-19 pandemic focuses largely on: i) the adoption and implementation of Global North academic-advising models within South African higher education contexts (e.g., Emekako and Van der Westhuizen 2021; Obaje and Jeawon 2021, 24–25; Van Pletzen et al. 2021); ii) academic advising during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., de Klerk 2022; Moosa 2021); iii) the incorporation of advising in university access / extended curriculum programmes (Ogude et al. 2021; Sekonyela 2021); and iv) quantitative studies that aim to document students’ reasons for seeking advice (de Klerk 2021). Additionally, and most notably, literature on academic advising in South Africa from South African scholars has begun to emerge, signalling a promising shift towards more authentic, Global South perspectives on advising within this context (e.g., Schoeman, Loots, and Bezuidenhoud 2021). However, there is an absence of literature on the experiences and perceptions of practising academic advisors within South African higher education settings before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Insights of this nature are essential at a time when the South African higher education sector is moving beyond the pandemic and advising within the country is still being developed and defined (Obaje and Jeawon 2021, 18). Documenting what is known about advising before the pandemic can provide both a valuable record of the emergence of advising in South Africa and a baseline against which to evaluate the affordances and constraints of advising practices during and beyond the pandemic.

Consequently, this paper documents experiences and perceptions of academic advisors at Wits before the pandemic.

4.5. Methodology and Data

By adopting a phenomenographic approach (Marton 1981; Tight 2016), the study draws upon the varying insights of 15 academic advisors at Wits regarding advising before the pandemic. This is one of the key advantages of the phenomenographic method, as the "focus of phenomenography is on people's varying conceptions of a given phenomenon, not on the phenomenon itself" (Cibangu and Hepworth 2016, 5). As such, the varying insights gleaned from the advisors are analysed by means of SCA, which provides a coherent picture of academic advising at Wits before the pandemic.

Data was collected through interviews by means of semi-structured, open-ended questions, which allowed interviewees some freedom in their responses. Areas that warranted clarity were further probed by the interviewer, as were novel observations made by interviewees. This paper draws upon responses to three questions from the interviews:

1. Do you think there are intrinsic motivators that drive academic advisors to do what they do, and what are they?
2. What are the top three challenges academic advisors face that create barriers to advising? Why do you perceive these as barriers?
3. What are the most common barriers that prevent students from seeking advice and why do students avoid seeking advice?

Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber, before coding and analysis.

The author made use of both inductive and deductive approaches to analyse the data, which as Bertram and Christiansen (2014, 133) explain, is not uncommon. Initially, an iterative, inductive approach was adopted to explore the interview data. The author was receptive to what could be gleaned, with no pre-set expectations (Bertram and Christiansen 2014, 133). Several areas of focus emerged during this phase of the

analysis. Next, a deductive analysis of the focus-area data was conducted, using SCA as the analytical framework (Bertram and Christiansen 2014, 133). This enabled the author to make observations about advising within a South African higher education context before the pandemic. The section that follows presents what arose from this twofold inductive–deductive process.

4.6. Analysis and Discussion

This study is informed by a rich dataset and the author acknowledges that other researchers may have gleaned different insights from the data. Nevertheless, the author is confident that the interpretation and analysis of the interview data shared in this section provide accurate insight into advising at Wits before the pandemic.

4.6.1. Focus Area 1: Urgency to help others (agency)

One of the tenets of social realist theory is the premise that any action, or lack thereof, occurs within a context conditioned by the existing effects of structure and culture (Case 2015, 843). Interviewee 1 states:

> "…when I came in, I found it just a lot fulfilling [sic] […] My thing is just, I wanted to give back, so I think that's what motivates me […] you know […], helping somebody with challenges that I probably went through and […] making it a bit easier for them." [Interviewee 1]

Interviewee 1's agential drive to help others and make a difference is clear, yet they say "…when I came in, I found it just a lot fulfilling [sic]". Thus, while the advisor wants to fulfil their purpose of touching lives and helping students, their agential drive stems from pre-existing structural and cultural influences in their life. For example, they mention their own past and how it has likely contributed to what drives them in their work as an academic advisor – a sentiment echoed by Interviewees 9, 12, 13, and 15.

The need to help also seems to extend to advisors' sense of self, relating both to their professional identity and their position as role models for students:

> "…I didn't like seeing more students struggling [sic]. You know, if there's something that could be done, […] I would naturally […]

> want to step in to do something about it. And I felt like […] in this position that I am in, I am able to actually effect that." [Interviewee 3]
>
> "…academic advising is very much a personal issue…" […] "…you have to care for people, first." [Interviewee 6]

In addition to supporting the comments above, Interviewees 2 and 8 emphasise the importance of supporting both the academic dimension and broader dimensions of the student experience, thus confirming the holistic nature of academic advising.

> "I'm deeply interested in student success and […] it's also about assisting them [students] to navigate this journey, for them to finish the programme. […] that on its own, motivates me. To see that the student is well taken care of outside the lecture room." [Interviewee 2]
>
> "…trying to help the students see their own role within a teaching situation so that they maximize on their learning. So that they know that their learning is not only affected by what the lecturer is doing, but it is also affected by how they position themselves within that learning situation." [Interviewee 8]

This is an important reminder that, while academic advising is a student support endeavour concerned with holistic student success, it is also a teaching and learning endeavour. These advisors work to enact agency, driven by their motivation to help students and break down structural and cultural barriers to epistemological access for students (de Klerk 2021).

4.6.2. Focus Area 2: Representation (agency emergent from structure and culture)

A reality of the South African higher education sector is the continued inequity in the representation of black South Africans in academia (Belluigi and Thondhlana 2022), although shifts are emerging (Breetzke and Hedding 2018). This is a legacy from apartheid (Belluigi and Thondhlana 2022), and while much has been done towards structural reform and transformation within the sector over the past two decades (Belluigi and Thondhlana 2022; Breetzke and Hedding 2018), more is required to achieve meaningful and sustained change. Interviewee 3 identifies the importance of representation by black South Africans within the advising profession:

> "There aren't a lot of […] black South African academics and […] it was an issue for me, in that we don't have […] any representation." […] "…I felt there was a need for representation…" [Interviewee 3]

Additionally, Interviewees 7 and 14 link their work with students in the current climate to their own experiences as black South Africans working in the sector:

> "…intrinsic motivators for a black woman would be the fact that black students are the ones that are disadvantaged…" […] "Black students are the ones who are worse off…" […] "They are most disenfranchised and […] the scales are not in their favour." […] "…the majority of the students that actually need academic advising look like me…" [Interviewee 7]

> "…in my case it would be my experience as a South African who has come from a historically disadvantaged cross-section of the community and being able to identify […] with the students in terms of some of the issues that they struggle with…" [Interviewee 14]

This speaks to the need for cultural and structural change in the sector to move the needle towards meaningful change, while simultaneously counteracting the microaggressions (e.g., microassaults, microinvalidations, and microinsults) experienced by some African academics within the sector (Belluigi and Thondhlana 2022, 144). Moreover, these observations relate to the premise that students are more likely to succeed when they are connected to someone within the institution to whom they can relate and who takes an interest in them and their wellbeing (Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth 2004).

4.6.3. Focus Area 3: Counteracting entrenched inequities (agency stemming from structure and culture)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the inequities entrenched in the South African higher education sector were foregrounded in unprecedented ways (Czerniewicz et al. 2020). However, these inequities had been ingrained in the sector long before the pandemic. The 2015 and 2016 FeesMustFall movements, for example, highlighted them on a national scale (Dominguez-Whitehead 2017). As the discussion in this paper aims to

establish a baseline for academic advising before the pandemic, it is useful to explore how advisors observe the inequities affecting students and the work of advisors pre-pandemic. Consider this quote observation by Interviewee 5 (Interviewees 2 and 8 make similar comments):

> "…disparities between students and not just in material possession, but also in the academic background they come from before they came to university." […] "…you have to really understand where students are coming from for you to be able to help them to the fullest of your ability and to understand […] the roadblocks that they are also facing." [Interviewee 5]

These inequities can constrain advisors' work, which often leads to frustration when advisors are unable to help students resolve certain challenges, thus impeding both advisor and student agency. Consider, for example, the following comment from Interviewee 4:

> "…the social injustices. To see some students who, if they had the right resources, they would make it [sic], but everything works against them. And sometimes, no matter what you try, with some of them you cannot win. And that for me, it's always the one that hits me the most [sic], is to see a person having to leave because there is no more funding." [Interviewee 4]

Nevertheless, academic advisors could work to counteract these entrenched inequities, *because* of their unique roles. Strategically positioned as nodes that connect academic divisions/lecturers, students, and student-affairs entities across the institution, advisors can help clarify the equity-related challenges experienced by students, while helping to find solutions to these challenges. Consider Interviewee 12's observations of the role of advisors:

> "…recognizing that this work needs to be done […] there is a personal motivation to try and help with that. Try and contribute to […] remedying that situation, to playing your part in society…" [Interviewee 12]

4.6.4. Focus Area 4: Enabling student agency by fostering a growth mindset (agency)

While this paper is not intended to delve deeply into the complexities of the work by Dweck and others regarding growth mindset and student motivation (Dweck 2015; Yeager and Dweck 2012), it is related to it. Dweck (2015) found that helping students to change their mindset towards learning (i.e., fostering a growth mindset) could make them more motivated, which simultaneously improves their prospects of academic success and self-regulation. Similarly, Yeager and Dweck (2012, 302) indicate how students' mindset could help them persevere, despite academic and/or social challenges. Concomitantly, academic advisors are often faced with the prospect of guiding students through academic and/or social challenges, with advising becoming a means to help them acquire a growth mindset. Consider, for example, Interviewee 12's observation that:

> "…there is a certain element that comes from students as well, because you do need them to take responsibility for their studies, for their work, and that is not necessarily forthcoming […] They kind of just want you to tell them what to do, and to me that's not really effective advising. That's just telling students what to do, rather than working with them." [Interviewee 12]

Interviewee 12 explains that advisors should not simply tell students what to do but instead work with them to foster a sense of responsibility for their university experience. This responsibility should be shared, with the advisor initially assuming a leading role and subsequently shifting the responsibility to the student as the relationship develops. Thus, there is a link between what Interviewee 12 observes (i.e., fostering students' growth mindset) and enabling student agency.

Moreover, students' growth mindset and agency links to help-seeking behaviour (Petersen et al. 2009). Interviewee 1 explains:

> "…sometimes we get students that are not self-motivated already, you know? So, we need to then […] start to motivate them…" [Interviewee 1]

Here, academic advisors could play an important role in helping students practice better help-seeking behaviour, which in turn could enhance their sense of belonging and prospects of success (Sithaldeen et al. 2022). Sithaldeen et al. (2022, 80) asserts that "[h]elp-seeking is an important self-regulated strategy for student success…". Consequently, students who can self-regulate and identify the need to seek help as soon as necessary are enabled to practice agency. Additionally, advisors from across Wits could collaborate to develop a strategy (i.e., a structural enabler) to facilitate students' help-seeking behaviour. This could positively influence students' ability to self-regulate, thus allowing them to determine for themselves when they need to seek advice and about what. The latter also has the potential to realise cultural change among Wits students over time. An associated benefit could be that the constraints Interviewee 1 experiences in doing their job may be mitigated. However, the matter of students' help-seeking behaviour goes beyond the realm of growth mindset and motivation, as indicated in Focus Area 5 below.

4.6.5. Focus Area 5: Issues of help-seeking among students (culture and student agency)

While the discussion in Focus Area 4 above addressed the matter of supporting students to acquire the awareness to know when to ask for help, Focus Area 5 assumes that some students already know that they need help but deliberately avoid asking for it. Consider the observations by Interviewees 11 and 12:

> "…students that are […] really struggling and they know that there is support available to them, but they do not come and consult." [Interviewee 11]

> "…they see seeking advice as […] a form of weakness […] even when they approach you, they're like: 'you know, I really thought I could do this by myself and I didn't want to ask anyone for help, but I really need it.'" [Interviewee 12]

This speaks to students' internalised beliefs about what it means to ask for help, which could be linked to prevailing cultural pressures at Wits. To this end, Interviewee 7 shows concern about how students viewed the idea of asking for help (this aligns to similar sentiments by Interviewees 2, 3, 8, and 9):

> "…the stigma that if you need advising as a student, it means that you are not smart. It means that you are lazy. It means that you can't figure it out on your own." […] "The stigma about needing help." [Interviewee 7]

While the institution must certainly assume accountability for the prevailing cultural beliefs that may cause students to shy away from asking for help (even when they know where to find it and that they need it), peer pressure could also contribute to this reticence. Interviewee 6 observes:

> "…another reason […] why I think the students are troubled to come forward, is peers. The peer pressure [sic]. 'How it makes my friends judge me'." [Interviewee 6]

This appears to be an instance where culture constrains agency. Interviewee 6 implies that while students may know they need help (i.e., agency), pressure from peers prevent them from seeking it (i.e., culture). Challenging a phenomenon such as peer pressure would be undeniably difficult. However, the institution and advisors could collaborate with student leaders (e.g., the student representative council, student councils within faculties, and peer-mentor programmes) to coordinate a concerted effort to change students' perception of seeking help. Students should be encouraged to voice their fears and failures to their peers, and they should be conditioned to be supportive when a peer does so.

In essence, this speaks to the need for change in the way students interact with one another, as well as the prevailing culture within the institution. These two elements are intrinsically linked and gaining insight into how institutional culture and the culture that emerges among students in a programme, faculty, and/or institution influence one another, could help establish ways to counteract students' reticence to seek help. Academic advisors are well positioned to assist in this regard and addressing this may be crucial to students' prospects of success. Interviewee 13 observes that students often reach out when it is too late, which is echoed by Interviewees 4, 5, and 11:

> "…most students actually come for assistance when it's a little bit too late…" […] "…for some people seeking help is a symbol of weakness." [Interviewee 13]

Consequently, by changing the prevailing cultural beliefs that equate help-seeking with weakness in the minds of students, and thus enabling student agency to the extent where they ask for help as soon as the need arises without fear of prejudice, their chances of success could increase manifold.

4.6.6. Focus Area 6: Poor institutional integration of academic advising (structure and culture)

As mentioned earlier, academic advising remains an emerging profession and practice in South Africa. This appears to result in ambiguity and confusion among students at Wits about the purpose and objectives of the practice, as well as the role advisors could play in their learning journey. Interviewees 5, 8, and 12 make similar observations to Interviewee 2 below:

> "…some of our students actually do not understand what academic advising is. They may know that there is a unit for academic advising, but they are not sure of what support they should be getting from there." [Interviewee 2]

The aforementioned interviewees all emphasise the need for more systematic and coordinated efforts to elucidate academic advising for students. This could include information on the extent and limitations of advising within a faculty or institution, who should approach academic advisors for support, how this should be done, and what areas of support advisors are equipped to focus on. However, the problem appears to go beyond students not knowing what the purpose and objectives of advising are.

Some advisors are concerned about students not being aware of their existence, despite efforts to the contrary. Consider the comment by Interviewee 1 (echoed by Interviewees 3, 13, and 14):

> "…as much as I would have liked to think that students are aware of the services that we have, […] there is still students that come at the end of the year, and they say I didn't know that there was [Academic Advising] and it helps with this and that." [Interviewee 1]

From these and the preceding advisor observations it appears that there is a need for better structural and cultural inculcation of academic advising at Wits; a need that was magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Moosa 2021). This may speak to cultural and structural changes that are necessary within the institution to: i) enhance student awareness of advisors and the support they offer; ii) increase the frequency and intentionality with which awareness initiatives occur; and iii) normalise academic advising within the institution. This should not be the sole responsibility of academic advisors. It requires a systematic approach that involves all student support services, administrative staff, and academics within the institution (i.e., structural measures to promote advising within the institution, such as a coordinated marketing campaign and communication strategy). Moreover, if students themselves realise the importance of advising in relation to their prospect of success, they are more likely to promote it among their peers. Lastly, culturally normalising academic advising among students could also have a positive auxiliary influence on students' help-seeking behaviour and growth mindset (see Focus Areas 4 and 5), thereby enhancing their proclivity for seeking help and taking ownership of their success.

4.6.7. Focus Area 7: Dissonance between advising and the core academic project (structure and culture)

Another area interviewees also voiced concerns and frustrations about, was the way in which some academic/lecturing staff appeared to perceive advising. Interviewee 5 states that there appears not only to be a:

> "…deficit view of the student, but also then of the service. So […] if it's positioned in that way, from other places in the university, that students are only sent to advisors […] if they are 'broken' or 'need fixing' in some way, then it's also bad for the student. Because, to a certain extent, you're telling the student that they're broken as well, or that they have some or other deficit." […] "…a lot of things stem out of how academic advising […] [is] positioned at universities. It is better if there can be some kind of an integration." [Interviewee 5]

This observation shows how deficit perceptions about students seem to be filtering through to academic advising as a practice. Additionally, Interviewee 11 laments the

lack of awareness and understanding that staff exhibited towards advising (also echoed by Interviewees 2 and 15):

> "…there seems to be no understanding of the role of the advisors by the institution…" […] "So, you had to constantly educate and try to convince, particularly the lecturers […] why do you exist in this institution, what is your role." [Interviewee 11]

These advisors allude to the need for structural and cultural shifts in the way advising is understood, integrated, and valued at Wits. The structural and cultural dissonance they observe between the work they do and how it is perceived by academic staff could ultimately disadvantage students. Meaningful efforts by the institution to enhance structural and cultural integration of advising with the academic project is essential. Boughey and McKenna (2021) reiterate the need for a crucial partnership between those doing academic development work and those in academic positions. Academics cannot abdicate this responsibility and, in the case of Wits, academics and advisors should be working together to the benefit of students.

Interviewee 2 proposes that existing structures within Wits (e.g., teaching and learning committees) could be used to help clarify to academics what academic advising is and how academics and advisors could collaborate:

> "…the best thing is actually to use all the teaching and learning committees […] where we actually come together." […] "…make it very clear to them […] what we are trying to achieve, and we are actually trying to assist them…" [Interviewee 2]

This could lead to enhanced integration of academic advising at Wits, which may in turn create a cultural shift in how advising is perceived at the institution, both by academics and by students. However, for this to occur, structure and culture must be complementary (Boughey and McKenna 2021, 133), which requires broad stakeholder commitment.

4.6.8. Focus Area 8: Resource constraints (structure and, to an extent, culture)

At least five of the interviewees alluded to resource constraints affecting their work, with time constraints and the student-advisor ratio appearing to be of greatest concern. These observations by Interviewees 3 and 8 resonate with those shared by others (e.g., Interviewees 4, 5, and 9):

> "…lack of time because […] there are probably […] projects that one could think of and […] because of time you end up not being able to fulfil […] that. And the other could be […] resources, I think as well [sic]. Be it money or funding or whatever." [Interviewee 3]

> "…the advisor-student ratios, so the workload." [Interviewee 8]

One possible reason for these resource constraints (i.e., structural constraints) could be because the profession is not widely integrated within the South African context. This may have significant consequences for advisors working at Wits and other South African higher education institutions. A survey conducted by the American National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in 2011 found that the advisor–advisee ratio in the United States ranges between 1:233 and 1:600 (Robbins 2013). Conversely, I have shown elsewhere that the advisor–advisee ratio in the faculty where I work at Wits was approximately 1:2375 (for undergraduate and postgraduate students collectively) at the time that paper was published (see: de Klerk 2021, 107). This ratio is likely a consequence of the nascent nature of academic advising in South Africa and evidently places inordinate strain on academic advisors.

At Wits, there are on average between two and three academic advisors per faculty. The institution had 40 669 registered students in 2020, of which 24 383 were undergraduate students (Facts & Figures 2021, 6). As such, there is severe misalignment between the number of academic advisors within the institution (15 at the time of the interviews) and the number of students potentially requiring support. Consequently, the observations by interviewees regarding time and resource constraints are put into perspective. The structural under-resourcing of advising at Wits appears to be constraining advisor agency, while advisors' lack of time and

resources may prevent them from developing new and responsive solutions to the challenges their students face. One way to mitigate this is to appoint peer advisors (students within the institution or faculty) to supplement the work of academic advisors (e.g., Spark et al. 2017). However, this requires time and financial support from the institution (i.e., structures), as well as cultural shifts as discussed in Focus Areas 5–7 above and Focus Area 9 below.

4.6.9. Focus Area 9: Manifestation of power relations (culture and, by extension, structure)

Power relations manifest regularly and in diverse ways within higher education settings (e.g., Carvalho and Videira 2019). This observation by Interviewee 1 (similar to one made by Interviewee 6) indicates that hierarchies of power also manifest within academic advising spaces:

> "…there is this gap […] that students come with already, because I could even hear when they come into some of the sessions, they'll already be referring to me as ma'am." […] "…they see me as an advisor up there and then themselves as a student very down there…" […] "…there's just a fear, you know, they have that fear or that anxiety that they just don't want to […] go and approach somebody from the institution…" [Interviewee 1]

Interviewee 1 seems to be observing hierarchical structures within the institution, the way in which these structures appear to constrain student agency, and an associated cultural property that emerges from the interplay between the hierarchical structures and student agency. Interviewee 1's observed reticence among students to engage with university staff, whom students perceive to be superior to them (i.e., an agential constraint), is not uncommon and relates to the discussion in Focus Areas 4 and 5 above regarding students' help-seeking behaviour. If students are not comfortable to engage with academic advisors, who are often a first point of contact, they run the risk of minor problems escalating. This can negatively influence students' experience within the institution, their academic performance, and their chances of persistence and success.

Addressing how students encounter and perceive these structural and cultural realities when entering the institution may be particularly challenging. As Boughey and McKenna (2021, 133) explain, “structures require complementary cultures to be effective”. Thus, even if Wits could make the hierarchical structures within the institution less intimidating (which in itself is often ingrained over many years), the associated cultural power relations that have emerged will also have to change. Academic advisors are uniquely positioned to support these cultural shifts. Kezar and Eckel (2002, 440) suggest that micro-level change within the institution could be the foundation for realising change at higher levels. In turn, Strayhorn (2015, 62) reminds that “effective academic advisors, as cultural navigators, recognize higher education as a culture and know something about this journey called *college*”.

In the case of Wits, if academic advisors can collaborate (across their faculties) to change how students experience power relations within the institution by normalising student–advisor interaction, they could begin to change students’ perceived reticence to “approach someone from the institution” [Interviewee 1] and thus begin to realise cultural change over time.

4.7. Conclusion

The emergence of academic advising within the South African higher education sector continues. In this paper, the voices of 15 academic advisors from one South African university were used to establish a baseline against which to compare the evolving profession as the sector shifts beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Archer’s work on structure, culture, and agency as an analytical lens with which to analyse interview data, a picture emerges of the complexities that characterise the work of academic advisors within the South African higher education context, even before the pandemic.

The nine focal areas elucidate the key elements of the advisors’ work. The paper illustrates how entrenched cultures may prevent students from seeking the help they need and how advisors are suitably situated to help rectify this behaviour. Advisors’ frustrations regarding entrenched inequities (i.e., the social imperative as per Boughey and McKenna 2021) that constrain their agency and that of the students they work with, remind us quite starkly of how these inequities affected many South African

students during the peak of the pandemic and continue to do so. However, as illustrated in this paper, these inequities were affecting the work of advisors long before the pandemic. Additionally, the need for advising to be systematically inculcated at Wits is evident; both to benefit students and to better enable advisors to support and guide the students they work with.

As the South African higher education sector continues to move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, contextual changes are inevitable. There have been shifts in the modes of teaching and learning, and an unparalleled awareness of the inequities entrenched in the South African higher education sector has emerged. Drawing upon the information about advising before the pandemic shared here, and what has been learned about advising during the pandemic (de Klerk 2022; Moosa 2021), the scene is set for structural and cultural change in how advising is practised and perceived in South African.

Declaration of Interests

The author declares that he has no personal or financial interests or relationships that could have influenced this study or its findings.

The author ascribes to the highest standards of ethical conduct in all his research endeavors. This study was approved by the Wits Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) prior to data collection (Protocol Number: H20/04/06).

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CHAPTER 5

Academic Advising During Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning: A South African Higher Education Perspective

Paper four is a sole authored paper that has been published in the journal *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South*. The main focus of the journal is to enable dialogue about matters of teaching and learning in and/or about the global south. Parts of the findings from the study were presented at the Third Biennial SoTL in the South Conference, which took place from 22 to 26 November 2021. Tied to the conference was a special issue of the journal, which was published in two parts. Paper four was published in part one. The paper has been reproduced here to form part of the PhD manuscript, but it can be accessed in its original form by following the first and third links above. The journal uses the Harvard Author-Date Referencing System.

de Klerk, D. (2022a). Academic advising during emergency remote teaching and learning: A South African higher education perspective. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South*, *6*(1), 95-111. https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v6i1.210.

Abstract

Academic advising remains an emerging profession and practice in the South African higher education sector, with an increase in evidence-informed literature about advising for this context in recent years. The disruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have been significant for academic advising. This paper posits that the pandemic has had a catalytic effect on advising, how it is perceived, and how

it is practiced at the university where the author works, thus potentially setting the scene for change. By drawing on data generated through interviews with 15 academic advisors, the paper examines the likelihood of change (or morphogenesis). The examination is underpinned by Social Realist principles. Margaret Archer's notions of structure, culture, and agency, as well as elements of her work on the morphogenetic cycle, guides the study. The focus is on the potential of advising and advisors within and for SA HE contexts. The academic advisors interviewed emerge as a previously under-valued and poorly utilised link among students, lecturers, and the broader institution. The paper concludes by elucidating how the work of academic advisors during the pandemic could bring about greater integration of advising with other dimensions of the academic project, while foregrounding the high-impact potential of advising for SA HE contexts.

Keywords

academic advising; academic advisor; higher education; morphogenesis; social realism; South Africa

5.1 Introduction

Academic advising is well-established in the global north (Beatty, 1991; Aune, 2000; Donnelly, 2009; Hu, 2020) and Australia (Clark, 1989; Mann, 2020), yet remains an emerging profession and practice within the South African (SA) higher education (HE) sector, with a paucity of reliable literature about academic advising for the SA HE context (Strydom, 2017:104). Meaningful shifts have begun to occur since 2017 though. A multi-institutional Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) project funded by the DHET's University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) was launched that year. The project focuses on the professionalization of academic advising in SA. Concomitantly, the southern African community of academic advisors, ELETSA (which means advising in seSotho), was established. Even more encouraging is that there has been an increase in evidence-informed literature about academic advising within SA over the last five years, which includes a special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* dedicated to academic advising (see Vol. 9 No. 2, published in 2021). Nevertheless, the need for rigorous, evidence-informed scholarly contributions that lend gravitas to, define, clarify, and expand on the limited

knowledge base about academic advising as a practice within SA HE contexts remains. The purpose of this paper is to make such a contribution.

The disruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have been significant for academic advising. In this paper, I posit that the pandemic has had a catalytic effect on academic advising, how it is perceived, and how it is practiced at the university where I work (UniMet[1]), thus setting the scene for change. I draw on data generated through interviews with 15 academic advisors working at UniMet to examine this potential change (or morphogenesis). The examination is underpinned by Social Realist principles, and I make use of Archer's (2000; 2005) notions about structure, culture, and agency, and elements of her work on the morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1995) for this purpose. While the challenges, affordances, and lessons that emerged during this study can and should inform structural changes at UniMet through policy at a practical level, the focus in this paper is on the emergent potential of advising and advisors within and for SA HE. At a time where academic advising for SA HE is still being conceptualised and defined, the academic advisors I interviewed at UniMet emerge as a previously under-valued and poorly utilised link among students, academics as university teachers, and the institution more broadly. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to elucidate the way in which the work of UniMet academic advisors during the pandemic could bring about greater integration of advising with other dimensions of the academic project, while foregrounding the high-impact potential (van Pletzen, Sithaldeen, Fontaine-Rainen, Bam, Shong, Charitar…, 2021) of advising for the broader SA HE sector.

5.2 Background and Context

The SA HE sector faced unparalleled challenges brought on by the rapid transition to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) (Cutri, Mena & Whiting, 2020; Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020). This not only meant preparing university educators (Krull & MacAlister, 2022) and students (de Klerk, Krull & Maleswena, 2021) to teach and learn remotely via online modalities, but once again highlighted the severe inequities and inequalities entrenched in the country's present day social reality as a direct result of historical injustices during its apartheid past (Czerniewicz,

[1] A research-intensive public university located in a large metropolitan area of South Africa.

Agherdien, Badenhorst, Belluigi, Chambers, Chili…, 2020). At UniMet, the work of academic advisors remained focused on the holistic student experience, as was the case prior to the pandemic (de Klerk, 2021). Notably, Hodges *et al* (2020) emphasise the importance of holistic student support that goes beyond the academic dimension, while Johnson, Veletsianos and Seaman (2020) corroborate this by stressing the importance of guiding students through the transition to ERTL in order to "support, care for, and enable students to succeed" (Johnson, Veletsianos & Seaman, 2020:16). In the SA HE context, this guidance and support continued throughout 2020 and into 2021, with the initial phases of transition followed by ongoing student support needs, as the pandemic proceeded to shift and present new challenges throughout the year. Academic advisors provided this vital layer of support at UniMet, to help address the many challenges the students they engaged with faced.

During ERTL, students living in rural areas of the country often did not have access to electricity (Sifunda, Mokhele, Manyaapelo, Dukhi, Sewpaul, Parker…, 2021:15), thus affecting their ability to charge learning devices (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2020:7). Moreover, mobile-network coverage was (and remains) poor or non-existent in remote areas (DHET, 2020:8), while students' access to sufficient mobile data (DHET, 2020:7) and the internet (Sifunda *et al*, 2021:24) was constrained. Additionally, home environments often proved unconducive to remote learning (DHET, 2020:7-8; Moosa, 2021; Sifunda *et al*, 2021:15), with many students reporting a lack of understanding by family members or others of the demands of university study. This would require a commitment to household chores during the daytime, thus necessitating students to attend to their studies late at night. Other challenges included suboptimal knowledge about the use of devices for learning and new learning platforms (DHET, 2020:8), feelings of isolation (Sifunda *et al*, 2021:23), and a sense of "being disconnected from lecturers and peers" (DHET, 2020:8). Some students reportedly "experienced mild to severe psychological distress" (Sifunda *et al*, 2021:31). Evidently, the support needs of students during ERTL were diverse.

The pandemic also placed the country's gender-based violence (GBV) emergency in the spotlight once more (Amaechi, Thobejane & Rasalokwane, 2021; Nduna & Tshona, 2021; Odeku, 2021), as many women and children were suddenly forced to spend long hours in confined spaces with violent husbands, fathers, uncles, brothers

and/or partners. For academic advisors working at the coalface of the student experience, ERTL brought new and unprecedented challenges, as they were often the ones with whom students were most likely to engage. Consequently, academic advisors at UniMet served as the node among students, central student affairs and academic departments within faculties, mostly using online modes to interact with these stakeholders.

5.3 Literature Review

Academic advising can have a significant impact on students' social integration at an institution. Walsh, Larsen and Parry (2009) posit that isolation and poor social support increases a student's prospects of dropping out of university. Conversely, it has been shown that students who were able to integrate socially at their institution of higher learning, were more likely to persist with their studies (Karp, 2011; Lotkowski, Robins & Noeth, 2004). Consequently, academic advisors must work to understand the daily experiences and needs of the students with whom they engage (Lee, 2018:77), both to support their social integration at the institution and to ensure they work with students as holistic social beings when they (the students) come to the advising engagement (de Klerk, 2021). Surr (2019:6) highlights how the evidence linking academic advising and students' likelihood of persevering and succeeding continues to grow, which is why there is a need to expand the knowledge base on academic advising for SA HE contexts, where HE student persistence and success remain uneven.

The literature from the global north and Australia about academic advising is extensive (see for example: Beatty, 1991; Clark, 1989; Grites, 1979; Mann, 2020; Tuttle, 2000; Zhang & Dinh, 2017). Academic advising is positioned as:

> a profession that covers numerous matters such as curriculum advising, degree choice guidance, integration into the institution, orientation, liaising with other support services, engagement with academics and administrators, psychosocial support, and components of mentoring. It is about providing a comprehensive institutional contact point for students, where they can form a relationship with someone in the institution and find information on a range of university-related matters to enable them to

> successfully navigate academic and non-academic spaces within the institution (de Klerk, 2021:103).

As mentioned earlier, literature about academic advising in SA remains limited (Strydom, 2017:104), but is increasing. Emekako and van der Westhuizen (2021) explore intentional advising for enhancing students' academic success, which demonstrates the application of a global north academic advising theory within a SA HE context. Furthermore, a special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* shares a series of papers that signals a significant contribution to the knowledge base about academic advising in SA. Tiroyabone and Strydom (2021a) explore the potential of academic advising to enhance student success in SA, by drawing on global literature and a case study of their SA university. Their contribution is noteworthy as it broadens the knowledge base about advising in this country by providing a practical example thereof. Similarly, Obaje and Jeawon (2021) share the academic advising practices at their SA university, while highlighting strengths and challenges for the profession in a SA HE context. Van Pletzen *et al* (2021) provide an overview of their conceptualisation and implementation of an academic advising system at the SA university where they work, with their theory and model of academic advising marking a significant contribution in terms of how advising is implemented within a SA HE context. Additionally, the study by Moosa (2021) about the experiences of SA academic advisors during ERTL at one HE institution supports the notion of advising as concerned with the holistic student experience, while also making recommendations for the integration of advising services with other dimensions of the university. Lastly, Schoeman, Loots and Bezuidenhoud (2021) explore the integration of academic and career advising using the 3-I Process as a framework, while also making recommendations for how the framework could be adapted for use at other SA HE institutions. Beyond this collection of papers, the literature on advising in SA is sparse, which is why evidence-informed literature about the work of advisors is essential, especially as the profession shifts beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.4 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The larger study from which this paper emanates is informed by Social Realist principles. Margaret Archer is considered a seminal Social Realist theorist, having contributed extensively with regard to the notions of structure, culture, and agency

(SCA), and the dual interconnected and autonomous ways in which these elements of social systems interact and emerge. Archer's (1995; 2000; 2005) work revolves around the interplay of SCA within social systems, exploring the many ways in which structures, cultures, and agency (whether individual or collective) can have enabling or constraining causal influences on one another. Structure is said to have "to do with material goods (unequally distributed across society) and is also the domain of social positions and roles" (Case, 2015:843), while culture implies "the world of ideas and beliefs" (Case, 2015:843). Agency is described as the "domain of human action and interaction" (Case, 2015:843) and the "the power of individuals or groups to change their practices, conditions or contexts" (Leibowitz, Bozalek, Garraway, Herman, Jawitz, Muhuro…, 2017:5). In this paper, I use Archer's (2000; 2005) work on structure and culture (and to a lesser degree, agency) to analyse the advisor interview data described below, and make meaning of the possibilities that have emerged during ERTL and what they may hold for the future of advising at UniMet and the broader SA HE sector.

Another key characteristic of Archer's work is the interrogation of whether the interaction of SCA over time results in change (morphogenesis) or a continuation of the status quo (morphostasis). Here, Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework serves as a tool with which to interrogate and better understand the temporal interplay of structures, cultures, and agency, while also allowing for inferences to be made or conclusions drawn about why change may or may not emanate from that temporal interplay. The morphogenetic cycle is separated into four periods (T1 to T4). The first period (T1) denotes the prevailing cultural and structural conditions (or status quo) at the start of a cycle. This is followed by the observation and/or investigation of interactions of agents with structures and cultures, and structures and cultures with one another, termed T2 to T3. Finally, T4 completes the cycle and denotes the point where one determines whether morphogenesis has occurred or not. In this paper, I am particularly interested in T2 and T3, which denotes the novel interactions of academic advisors with structures and cultures during ERTL[2].

[2] The prevailing cultural and structural conditions that existed prior to the pandemic and ERTL are explored in another paper.

5.5 Methodology and Data Analysis

The study draws on phenomenographic principles (Marton, 1981; Tight, 2016). As Cibangu and Hepworth (2016:5) point out, the "focus of phenomenography is on people's varying conceptions of a given phenomenon, not on the phenomenon itself". For this study, I focused on the varying experiences of UniMet academic advisors of advising during ERTL. As such, phenomenography afforded me an opportunity to interrogate the diverse experiences of the advisors (Marton, 2014; Marton & Pong, 2005; Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016), while using Archer's work for analysis and inferencing. The data that informs the study was collected by means of semi-structured interviews, which were conducted virtually (via Microsoft Teams) with 15 academic advisors from five faculties at UniMet. Ethical clearance was obtained via the UniMet institutional ethics committee and interviews took place over a three-week period towards the end of 2020, with each interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were separated into three parts and this paper focuses on part three of the interviews, which explores academic advising during ERTL at UniMet in 2020. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber, who was required to sign a confidentiality agreement in line with institutional ethics requirements. Upon receipt of the transcribed texts, I began analysing responses using a colour-coding system. Adopting an iterative approach, each transcript was deductively analysed according to three broad categories: challenges, affordances, and lessons learned. Once completed, each transcript was revisited to extract and collate data (in the form of advisor quotes) into tables aligned to these themes. Upon completion, this data was used to inform the discussion section that follows below.

5.6 Discussion

A tenet of Social Realism is that actions (or a lack thereof) occur within a preconditioned context that exists because of structures and cultures (Case, 2015:843). Prior to ERTL, academic advising existed as a support structure at UniMet (de Klerk, 2021). However, it remained mostly peripheral, seen as supplementary to the core academic project, and thus not culturally integrated within the broader institution. The pandemic served as a catalyst for change though, forcing a disruption of the status quo where structures and cultures that would not usually interact, were

made to do so (i.e., T2 and T3 of Archer's (1995) morphogenetic cycle – the points of interaction). The interviews conducted with UniMet advisors provide insights into the properties emergent from these interactions in the form of inferences related to the future of academic advising at UniMet and, potentially, for SA HE. The next section explores the categories emergent from the interviews.

5.6.1. Advisor wellbeing to the benefit of student wellbeing and success

In many regards, the pandemic thrust academic advising into the proverbial spotlight at UniMet, to the point where it resulted in a near-saturation of advising services. Interviewees 5 and 8 explain:

> your work day isn't a work day anymore and weekends don't exist. Time doesn't exist and that can be quite problematic, because you sit down in front of your computer in the morning and then 12 hours later you're like, oh, I should most probably have dinner. [Interviewee 5]

> more [was] being expected from advisors [...] if there is a fire an advisor should be there with her fire extinguisher. Any kind of problem, including problems that are definitely out of your hands. I think because everyone was overwhelmed with what was going on. So even things that they can solve in departments and so on, would first be referred to advisors [sic]. [Interviewee 8]

While the latter signals a potential positive cultural shift in the way advisors are viewed and engaged with at UniMet, the extent to which advisors were being relied on during ERTL placed them at undue risk of burnout and fatigue. Interviewee 4 exclaims:

> I'm exhausted, to be honest with you. I'm exhausted. [Interviewee 4]

While Interviewee 5 explains how academic advising during ERTL was:

> quite draining, because to a certain extent you are giving [...] something of yourself to these students and if you just keep on doing that [...] with no kind of set work time [...], it can be very negative and of course, lead to your own burnout. And if you are burnt out, you can't help anyone. [Interviewee 5]

This elucidates an important lesson that emerged during ERTL. Academic advisors need to be supported and taken care of to prevent them from burning out. An advisor who is overworked does not have the capacity to help students, thus having a negative effect on student success. Interviewee 7 states:

> if you [the university] say you care about students, [...] having a working [system of] and supported academic advisors, is a reflection of how much you actually care about your students. [Interviewee 7]

Institutions and the sector must ensure that academic advisors are appropriately supported and adequately resourced, to enable them to support students to the best of their ability. This support could take the form of structural change, such as employing additional advisors to decrease the workload of current advisors, or making available other necessary resources. Although more challenging to implement, it could also take the form of cultural change. A cultural-change agenda could be developed to facilitate enhanced integration of advising services with the work of academics, administrators and other support services. Failing to make these intentional shifts in structures and culture, could lead to a reversion to the pre-pandemic status quo (i.e., morphostasis), where advising resumes a peripheral, unintegrated position within the institution. Yet, concerted efforts to support advisors and to integrate advising within and across the institution, could result in a morphogenesis of the way in which academic advising is practiced at UniMet and, potentially, the SA HE sector, thus building on affordances that emerged during ERTL.

5.6.2. Inequities foregrounded through advising

The inequities that remain entrenched in the SA HE sector and which directly influences HE students' ability to study and succeed, were foregrounded during the pandemic (Czerniewicz *et al*, 2020; DHET, 2020; Sifunda *et al*, 2021). At UniMet, academic advisors found themselves at the coalface of this social reality, with countless students reaching out to them for support, advice, and guidance. Interviewee 8 explains:

> in some cases when I would call a student, and the amount of noise in the background [...] would be so overwhelming for me,

> and I couldn't imagine how that student could be able to sit and study [sic]. And it wasn't one student. It's many students [sic]. So, you call them, and there's absolutely no space for that student to study. No space for them to take a phone call. And this is supposed to be a phone call which is helping them to think about doing better. [Interviewee 8]

The challenges the pandemic posed to the way advising as a support structure operated within the institution also contributed to the complexity of advisors' work during the pandemic. Interviewees 5 and 7 explain:

> the context we live in is quite difficult with quite a big divide, a digital divide between our students. Some students have access to various electronics and the internet and all of those things and some students do not. [Interviewee 5]

> it just highlighted how much the university system is unequal and how much it is inequitable. [...] there's a lack of equality and there's a lack of equity [...] then lockdown happened and all of that was highlighted, the extent to which there is inequality. [Interviewee 7]

Unfortunately, these realities are not confined to the pandemic and are likely to persist post- pandemic, although mitigated by the return of students to campuses and residences. These realities are also far more difficult to resolve, as they are rooted in deeper historical injustices entrenched in the sector and the country. Nevertheless, it remains essential to support academic advisors to help prevent them from feeling a sense of inadequacy in relation to their student support objectives. Failing to do so can have a dangerous influence on advisor morale, especially during high-pressure periods. The mandate of academic advising is student support and advisors often display an inherent conviction to help students:

> I do worry that there are students that we haven't been able to help as much as we perhaps could have if we were face-to-face, because [...] it's more difficult to communicate with students. [Interviewee 12]

This trait is not negative in itself and is, arguably, one of the core characteristics of a good academic advisor. However, prolonged periods of inability to act on this mandate (e.g., as a consequence of the challenges posed during the pandemic because of

entrenched inequities, for which advisors could find no immediate solutions) could have an unintended negative effect on academic advisors. Interviewee 7 states in quite a disheartened manner:

> going forward, like I'm just, I don't know if I want to carry on with working in an unequal ecosystem. Lockdown had brought so many things to the fore. [Interviewee 7]

To help ensure a morphogenesis of academic advising post-pandemic, institutions must work to establish a culture that would bolster advisor morale and empower them, especially during difficult periods. Institutions could also work to harness the collective agential power of academic advisors from across the institution to try and address more complex, systemic challenges affecting their work and holistic student success.

5.6.3. Connecting dimensions of advising: Students, academics and the broader institutional community

The pandemic has made explicit the potential of academic advising within and for the academic project, and holistic student support. At a time where academic advising for SA HE is still being conceptualised and defined, the advisors interviewed at UniMet have emerged as a previously under- valued and poorly identified link among students, academics as university teachers, and the institution more broadly. Interviewees 2, 7 and 8 explain:

> there is a huge need for academic advising out there. This has actually been amplified by this ERTL [sic], because things that we want to assume are very obvious to the learners, may not be that obvious. [Interviewee 2]

> this lockdown period has highlighted even more why we need academic advising [...] why it's a thing that has to exist and why it's a thing that needs to be supported by the university, because academic advising is something that I feel a lot of, if not all the faculties, leaned on, you know. The lecturers, they kind of turned to us to help students [...] bridge that gap, because their job was to, you know, migrate their teaching and their material to an online space, but actually getting students across the bridge to getting their minds right, helping them with balancing their time and study skills, all those things, like lecturers leaned on us a lot.

> I think this period has highlighted why academic advisors are needed in the university ecosystem. [Interviewee 7]

> seeing a greater need for advising because of so many dimensions or the needs that are there amongst the students. So, if there's anything, if there's any change that the pandemic brought to my, at least in my perspective [sic], that's actually that we probably need many more advisors in the faculties, than we have had previously. [Interviewee 8]

This shows how academic advising shifted from the periphery to being a core part of the academic project as a result of the pandemic, thus disrupting the pre-pandemic status quo:

> you realize we worked every single day. There's no single day, people in our [unit] [...] sat down and did nothing. We were overwhelmed [...] That means that in as much as people have been looking at it [academic advising] from the peripheral and thinking oh, they are just support, [...] we are actually very, very key to the development of the students. [Interviewee 6]

Interviewee 9 identifies one of the most significant changes that occurred for advising at UniMet during ERTL:

> advising is not easy and [...] it's a discipline the profession [sic] in itself, it's more than what we thought it was […] you find yourself in between the students and the lecturers and the other stakeholders for the benefit of the student. [Interviewee 9]

This integration of academic advising with all other aspects of the academic project is significant. Enhanced connections among students, lecturers and other stakeholders within the institution is essential to ensuring true shifts to holistic student support, where the student is placed at the centre of the learning experience (whether within or outside of the classroom). What remains to be seen is whether this important shift in the way students are supported and academic advising is positioned within the institution (UniMet in this instance) will be retained beyond the pandemic.

5.7 Conclusion and Way Forward

As the world continues to move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, shifts are beginning to manifest towards a so-called ‘new normal’. Institutions are beginning to explore what the SA university of the future could (and should) look like, while ushering in the era of blended approaches to and pedagogies for learning and teaching. It is at this point that the purpose of academic advising for SA HE should be reimagined. In this paper, academic advising at UniMet is observed at the points of interaction in the morphogenetic cycle (i.e., T2 and T3). Academic advisors (agents) interact with structures and cultures (i.e., the unique and disruptive contexts brought about the COVID-19 pandemic). Through an analysis of the interview data, one begins to appreciate the complexities posed by the pandemic for academic advising and advisors working at UniMet. These experiences had tangible effects on advisors (e.g., feelings of burnout and isolation) and the students they worked with (e.g., challenges with remote learning under circumstances far from ideal for that purpose). Consequently, the pandemic has potentially catalysed the evolution (i.e., morphogenesis) of academic advising within the SA HE context (or at least at UniMet), by foregrounding the diversity of the work academic advisors do and the high- impact potential of academic advising practices on the holistic student experience and affiliated success. However, the risk remains that this opportunity could be squandered and result in a reversion to the pre-pandemic status quo (i.e., morphostasis). It is at this point that the purpose of academic advising and the roles of academic advisors for this yet unknown ‘new normal’ should be reimagined and defined to guard against a reversion to the pervious status quo and the loss of all that has emerged from the pandemic.

What happens next for academic advising is still to be determined: whether morphogenesis and the ushering in of a new era for advising in SA HE contexts, or morphostasis and a reversion to the pre- pandemic status quo where advising exists on the periphery within the SA HE context. Whatever the reality may be at T4, reliable knowledge about the nascent field of academic advising in SA is required. Considering the substantial differences in culture, geographic location, and leadership at SA HE institutions, further research about the nuances of academic advising at other SA HE institutions is essential to the expansion of knowledge about academic advising within

the SA HE sector. While some of this work has been documented in the recent special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, structural differences and nuances existent among these institutions may mean that advising and the work of advisors are conceptualised and/or implemented differently from the way it is at UniMet. Finally, there is a need to incorporate student voices in the study of academic advising for the SA HE context, seeing that the purpose of advising should be axiomatically informed by and responsive to the needs of students within the SA HE sector.

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CHAPTER 6

General Discussion and Conclusion

In this thesis, the ways in which academic advising manifests at the University of the Witwatersrand is explored through a PhD by publication. This was achieved by drawing on a quantitative baselined dataset that informed papers one and two of the thesis, and qualitative interview data collected from 15 practicing academic advisors at Wits, which informed papers three and four of the thesis. Paper one elucidates the highly complex nature of academic advising by outlining seven overarching and 34 subsidiary categories linked to students' reasons for seeking advice from advisors. Paper two draws on the same data, but it delves more deeply into the structural and material constraints some students face within the South African higher education sector, before highlighting the impact of these constraints on the work of academic advisors at Wits. Shifting from the quantitative data to the qualitative data, paper three draws on responses to questions that focused on academic advising prior to COVID-19, outlining the ways in which structural and cultural elements impact on the work of advisors. Finally, paper four explores advising as it manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic and shows its potential as a student success and support practice within the Wits context.

In this chapter I reflect on two dimensions of this study. First, I reflect on implications for academic advising as a profession and academic advisors within the field of practice. Second, I consider implications for me as a scholar and researcher, by exploring the ways in which the PhD experience has deepened my understanding of reflective practice and my own process of critical reflexivity[1]. I conclude by exploring some of the limitations of the study and areas for further research, before making a few closing comments.

[1] It is worth noting that reflectivity denotes the act of reflecting on practice, whereas reflexivity is more about critical self-reflection and how it is informed by other perspectives.

6.1 Implications for Advising and Advisors

Several potential implications for advisors and advising within the South African context have arisen from the study and is based on the findings outlined in the four papers. In this section, I briefly reflect on these implications and make observations about next steps for the profession and practitioners.

6.1.1. Shifting the role of academic advisors

The social realist paradigm that informs this study helps elucidate how the role of academic advisors is easily relegated to a second-class status. As outlined in paper one and explored in more depth in paper three, the emergence of academic advising in South Africa was predominantly a response to poor throughput rates and high student attrition. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, this appears to have assigned to advising and advisors an auxiliary status, and feeds into the notion (among university staff and students) that academic advising is only for students who are at risk of failing or who are struggling to cope with university life. Consequently, and regrettably, the connotation of deficits and the associated decontextualization of students from their lived social realities, appears to have been entangled with academic advising since its inception in South Africa. In paper one, I briefly outlined how we tried to shift this view from very early in our student success and support work in CLM (see: de Klerk et al., 2017). Yet, dominant views and perceptions within the faculty and university are difficult to change. As shown in paper two, the challenges of decontextualisation and deficits are not new, spanning well beyond the scope and focus of this study. Nevertheless, it has direct bearing on the work of academic advisors and what happens beyond this point in time. As argued in papers three and four, what is needed is a permanent cultural shift in the perceptions and practices of advisors and advising, with the roles of academic advisors intentionally integrated into academic programmes and other dimensions of students' university experience.

6.1.2. Intentionally integrating advising into the student learning experience

For the benefits of advising to be fully realised, it cannot operate on the periphery or be viewed as an auxiliary service only required for students classified as at risk of failing or of not completing their studies. Paper one showed the wide range of factors

about which students seek advice, which paper two in turn proved cannot be discounted or ignored when considering students' higher learning experience. For this reason, academic advising should be thoroughly integrated into academic programmes, with advisors, lecturers, university administrative and support staff, and even senior management working together to ensure students have an optimal learning experience (see paper three). Paper four offered a glimpse of how powerful such an integration could be, highlighting some of the ways in which advising could be of greater value to and more intentionally integrated into other aspects of the student higher learning experience. During the COVID years, university stakeholders utilised advising services at Wits far more intentionally and with a greater sense of importance. While perhaps not always for the right reasons (I think of one advisor mentioning during their interview that it suddenly felt like the advisors were responsible for everything others did not know how to deal with or resolve), there was still a foregrounding of advising within the university (as well as of the inequities (Czerniewicz et al., 2020) that still characterise the South African higher education sector). As we move beyond the pandemic though, I can already sense a cultural and structural pull to pre-pandemic realities in terms of how advising is perceived and practiced. If academic advising is to be viewed as a primary function in the holistic student learning experience, now is the time to act and make the necessary structural changes to ensure it does.

6.1.3. Changing how advising is perceived and practiced

For the cultural perception of advising to change, structural adjustments are necessary. This could be achieved by positioning academic advising as a teaching and learning function, rather than as a support function. Academic advisors with the requisite teaching qualifications, should be involved in assessment and curriculum design and review processes, thus bringing their knowledge about student needs into the curriculum. In this way, how advising is practiced can shift from being auxiliary to being primary[2], while advisors would then be able to challenge deficit perceptions of students and work to curb a continuation of student decontextualisation. Yet achieving such a shift may prove challenging. It requires senior stakeholders in the university to

[2] See arguments in paper two drawing on Boughey and McKenna's (2016) work regarding the decontextualised learner, as well as arguments in papers three and four that supports such a shift.

enact agency and promote structural and cultural change. At the same, it requires lecturers and administrators to intentionally incorporate advising in teaching and learning spaces. Both these shifts in the status quo could include using structures such as committees and institutional policies to drive a more intentional integration of advising within teaching and learning (and other dimensions) of the university, while also moving to facilitate and support actions that would begin to shift cultural perceptions of advisors and advising. This latter point would likely be the most challenging, considering the well-known difficulty associated with changing prevailing culture (Benvenuti et al., 2022; Leibowitz et al., 2017). Nevertheless, and despite these difficulties, the potential benefit of changing how advising is perceived and practiced should sustain and drive these efforts, while not achieving the shift may have detrimental consequences for the South African higher education student success agenda.

6.1.4. Student belonging and the role of advising

One of the greatest prospective benefits of academic advising, is the role it can play (and arguably already plays) in helping students foster a sense of belonging within the university community. As mentioned already, I have argued in a special issue of the *South African Journal of Higher Education* on belonging, that elements of Tronto's (2005) Ethic of Care are already present in the work of academic advisors at Wits, following which I made a definitive link between caring and students belonging (de Klerk, 2022c). That paper drew on interview data from this study. Part of the change in how academic advising is positioned within the university, could be centred around the notions of care and belonging. Once again, it would require academic advisors and their line managers, as well as other key institutional stakeholders, to work collectively to facilitate a structural foregrounding of care and belonging in the way advising is practiced (see papers three and four). Ultimately though, academic advisors could help students gain a greater sense of belonging within the university, which has been proven to aid student integration and to increase their prospects of academic success (Motsabi, Diale & Van Zyl, 2020).

The implications for academic advising as a field of practice and for advisors as practitioners reflected upon in this section are by no means exhaustive. Rather, they

should be viewed as springboards for advancing the way academic advising is conceptualised, implemented, and researched within South African higher education contexts. This dynamism is essential, considering the ever-changing nature of advising in South Africa and the myriad challenges and nuances characteristic of higher education in the country (outlined in all four papers).

6.2 Reflecting on my advising philosophy

In the preface I shared an advising philosophy I had written in 2018, which is when I registered for this PhD and while I was still working as an academic advisor. It would be remiss not to reflect on that philosophy five years later, after having conducted the study and considering that I have since assumed a more senior role in the faculty (although I still oversee the work of CLM academic advisors and influence how advising is conceptualised and practiced). To guide the reflection, I will extract and briefly critique segments of the philosophy. This section has been separated into two parts: aspects of the philosophy that have remained the same, and aspects that can be re-envisaged or revised.

6.2.1. Aspects of the philosophy that remains the same

Two statements from the philosophy reads as follows:

> I have learned that academic advising is never finite and there may always be new or recurring reasons why students seek advice.
>
> There is no limit to the reasons why students visit an advisor, especially if there is advisor-advisee rapport.

My assessment is that this remains true today and must be born in mind by both advisors and institutional stakeholders, as it has implications for advisor professional learning and student success. The COVID period exemplifies why this is important. The shift to ERTL (Hodges et al., 2020) had a profound impact on the work of academic advisors at Wits (see paper four and Appendix J), necessitating them to try and support students who had inadequate study environments and required learning devices and mobile data, while also having to learn how to advise online or via telephone. Importantly, academics advisors had to liaise with a variety of institutional

stakeholders to try and sensitise them to the challenges students faced. This is one example of how advising remains dynamic and why advisors have to be responsive to the changing needs of students and other institutional stakeholders. It also necessitates advisor line managers and others concerned with the work of advisors to make sure advisors are adequately trained and resourced to best respond to the needs of students, whether recurring or new[3].

Related to the above is the matter of referrals and relationships. This was touched on in a number of places throughout the study, as well as in the initial philosophy, which reads:

> An advisor must be able to assess a situation, assist where possible, and refer appropriately to other support services if necessary. Advising services across campus must have close relationships with other support services, faculties, and schools, for a student to be helped in the most effective and student-centred manner.

The incontrovertible importance of stakeholder relationships for ensuring effective and sustainable academic advising remains constant. All four papers allude to the interconnection between academic advisors and a range of stakeholders. Whether with lectures and tutors regarding academic matters, or student affairs and services regarding socioeconomic and other matters affecting the student learning experience, academic advisors must focus on nurturing these relationships to support students in the most effective way. This may not always be without its challenges, as prevailing cultures and structures could complicate these efforts from time to time. Nevertheless, I am of the view that this remains a crucial part of academic advising and must be given due attention.

Another thing touched on in the philosophy statement speaks to the more subtle qualities required of academic advisors:

> An advisor must be in touch with the social, cultural, psychosocial, economic, and other realities faced by students,

[3] See observations about advisor-student ratios in papers one and two. See observations and findings about enhanced integration of advising in paper three and Appendix I, and about advisor burnout and fatigue in paper four and Appendix J.

> as these affect the advisor-advisee relationship and engagement: mere awareness is not enough.
>
> Advisors must treat students with care and compassion, as they may not always know the full extent of what the student is going through.

I cannot emphasise the importance of these observations enough and it is as true today as it was when I wrote the philosophy. However, realising this can be extremely difficult. When advertising and interviewing for academic advisor posts, assessing whether these nuanced qualities are present in shortlisted candidates is particularly challenging. In all likelihood, one would only know whether an academic advisor has the self-direction, interest, prescience, and (com)passion required to maintain such an in-depth appreciation for student realities once they have been in the post for some time. Nevertheless, managers and fellow academic advisors should work together to try and instil these qualities in an academic advisor if it is not immediately evident. This could be achieved through regular collaborative debriefs regarding the range of matters about which students seek advice and a sharing of ideas about how to address them in realistic yet empathetic ways. A different section of the philosophy also links to this point and reads:

> The advisor must practice an acute awareness of self, which goes hand-in-hand with reflective practice and being reflexive. Advisor attitudes, biases, emotions, prejudices, and personal matters must never affect their engagement with students. Similarly, advisor positionality cannot be discounted. Maleness, whiteness, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs may affect the interaction between an advisor and advisee (from both sides).

Perhaps this extract and the one above should be viewed collectively when thinking about the continuous professional learning of academic advisors. Instilling the requisite awareness through professional learning could serve to address some of these more delicate dimensions of the profession, while mitigating against potential issues arising. A safe, supportive and collaborative community of academic advisors could also be of great value, although I feel quite strongly that this must not be imposed on advisors and should be led by advisors for advisors. One way of equipping advisors to lead and sustain such a community, is to teach them how to reflect and be reflexive.

Advisors with the capacity to reflect would, arguably, be equipped to drive these processes.

6.2.2. Aspects of the philosophy that can be re-envisaged

A factor not to be forgotten is that there are two parties involved in the advisor-advisee relationship. Consequently, this extract from the philosophy may require some revision:

> Advising must never be viewed as a once-off occurrence, although students may not necessarily come for follow-up sessions. It is a form of learning and teaching that runs both ways, where an advisor can learn as much from a student as the student can from the advisor. Closing the advising loop is crucial: a follow-up meeting must always be initiated by the advisor to maintain the net of support. That being said, students may not always want to come back, and a follow-up meeting must never be forced.

My unease with this statement relates to the implied assumption that all responsibility resides with the academic advisor. While it may be true that the advisor, as a university employee and expert in the advisor-advisee relationship, is required to take greater responsibility, students have a part to play in terms of help seeking and self-regulation (see paper three, Appendix I, and Appendix J). I have learnt that there is an urgency to help foster better help-seeking behaviour in students who must also be equipped to identify challenges on the horizon and know how to try and mitigate them. While this may seem quite generalised, one cannot ignore the concerns and frustrations shared by academic advisors about students who reach out for help when it is too late, or finding out about students who required help but who never sought it. This is perhaps addressed in part by another section of the philosophy, which reads:

> It is crucial to inspire resilience and tenacity in students through the enabling of agency and by empowering students to strive for success as defined by themselves.

However, the phrasing here could also be perceived as problematic, as the concept of resilience in relation to student persistence and success has emerged (in some contexts) as one that serves to further isolate the individual experiencing challenges

(Simard-Gagnon, 2016) while enabling meritocracy[4] within the higher education sector (Maleswena, 2022). Rather, the arguments made in relation to growth-mindset and student motivation (Dweck, 2015; Yeager & Dweck, 2012) in paper three should serve to direct and bolster this excerpt. Consequently, I would moderate this section of the philosophy somewhat to emphasise the part students need to play in the collaborative advisor-advisee relationship, to help ensure their own success but not in a way that would make them feel marginalised. This is perhaps implicit in the following section of the initial advisor philosophy:

> The advisor-advisee interaction requires a careful balance of professionalism, frankness, and social engagement, where the advisor is not quite a friend, parent, or sibling, but may adopt elements of these roles from time to time.

I will end this brief reflection by reviewing the final section of the 2018 advisor philosophy:

> Advising is made difficult or becomes challenging, not because of the job itself, but because of institutional pressures and bureaucracies.

While I would moderate this statement slightly, the core premise remains accurate. It is evident that the job itself can contribute to the challenges of being an academic advisor in the South African context and how advising is practiced and perceived (see all four papers). Nevertheless, certain prevailing cultures and structures within the university complicate the work of academic advisors as much today as they did five years ago. This span entrenched beliefs about students and advising, resourcing, global north versus global south views about advising, and the dominant research culture within the university. These are dimensions of the institutional ecosystem that are not easily changed or recalibrated, and that require ongoing efforts to facilitate the process of advising for advisors.

[4] Here I acknowledge Sobuwa and McKenna's (2019) warning against a singular focus on meritocracy as the root cause of the complex challenges influencing and affecting student success in South Africa, which is not what I am arguing. Moreover, and as shown throughout this PhD study underpinned by social realist theory, I agree with the authors' assertion that numerous complex mechanisms contribute to student success and failure in South African higher education (Sobuwa & McKenna, 2019, p. 13).

6.3 Implications for my Growth as Researcher

The doctoral (PhD) journey is meant to be a transformative one (Albertyn, 2022). Once embarked upon, the budding researcher is unlikely to revert to an earlier state. Yet this evolution is seldom easy and never straightforward, despite being a necessary part of the learning that occurs during the inevitably transformative PhD endeavour. Notoriously lonely, reading towards a PhD brings with it many emotions, ranging from triumph and jubilation when a milestone is completed successfully, to frustration with laboriously bureaucratic processes, to dismay when revisions have to be made for the umpteenth time. During this time of liminality, the researcher is likely to undergo numerous shifts: in scholarly identity; in conceptions if self; in confidence. These shifts are by no means linear as a rule and certainly not finite. Rather, I would argue, the PhD journey is but the beginning; a threshold to the new and the previously unknown.

My journey started in July 2018. Since then, there has been much change in my personal and professional life, as well as in the world more generally. I mention this because, as I have shown repeatedly in the papers, people cannot (and must not) be decontexualised from their lived realities. Context had an irrefutable influence on this PhD, which (I am thankful to say), has been resoundingly positive in my view. While the study was conceptualized and the proposal defended successfully prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, substantive progress (i.e., ethics approval and data collection) only occurred in 2020, during the pandemic. Moreover, the research plan also had to be amended because of the pandemic. Where interviews would have taken place in-person, they were shifted online and conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams. The richness of the data baseline and interview data combined also meant that the interviewee free writes were not included in the thesis and that this would form part of my postdoctoral work. Nevertheless, and despite some of the challenges posed by COVID-19, there were also some affordances.

Quite unexpectedly, the COVID-19 pandemic afforded me opportunities to focus more intentionally and systematically on my PhD work, without which I may not have made the progress I did. While the initial months of the pandemic were preoccupied with transitions to new ways of working and adapting to the stressors imposed on everyday life by a global pandemic, working from home enabled me to allocate time to my

studies more regularly. As an early riser, I would be home from my daily gym workout just after 06:00. Feeling refreshed an energised, I found this a good time to do intellectual work; time that would usually have been spent getting ready for work and traveling to the office. Those early-morning sessions usually lasted between 60 and 90 minutes but proved crucial to gaining and sustaining momentum.

One of the greatest advantages this offered was that my PhD work remained current and foremost in my mind. While I often had to take hiatuses from my studies prior to the pandemic owing to work commitments, I found that I could use my early morning sessions (later extended to include more substantial chunks of time over weekends) to immerse myself more frequently and, by extension, more fully in my work. The ideas would be germinating even when I was not working, whether while driving, during workouts, in the shower, and even at night when I could not sleep. As a result, I felt an increasing need to write; an outlet for a whirlpool of ideas that had to be interrogated and refined.

I began freewriting often, sometimes with pen on paper and at other times on my cell phone. The one affordance was that these informal writing exercises allowed me to generate ideas and tease out entanglements, without the pressure of a perfect product; a pressure I often experience, especially when typing in Word on a computer. The other was that I began writing more often in unconventional spaces like supermarket queues, while waiting at the barber, and on the couch when an idea crossed my mind. Collectively, this allowed for a far more sustained writing process, which I believe contributed greatly to the progress I was able to make in the 12-month period when all four papers forming part of this PhD were written and either published or accepted for publication.

6.3.1. Decision to do the PhD by publication

The decision to do my PhD by publication was perhaps made as a result of my lack of awareness of the demands and pressures involved, yet it turned out to be the appropriate approach for me given my circumstances. As part of my appointment to the post of Assistant Dean: Teaching and Learning at Senior Lecturer level in 2019, a three-year probation period took effect. During the probation, certain requirements had

to be met. The requirements fell into the three broad areas of teaching, research, and academic citizenship, with the research requirement stating that I either had to complete the PhD or publish at least three peer reviewed accredited outputs (i.e., research articles or equivalents). Apart from the sense of agency I felt I would have in the Assistant Dean post in terms of facilitating and catalysing meaningful change in relation to student centredness within the academy and transforming the way teaching and learning happened, I also wanted to grow my profile as a scholar. Consequently, I felt that doing the PhD by publication would achieve various objectives. I would be: i) working towards achieving my probation criteria, ii) progressing towards PhD degree completion, and iii) I would be growing my scholarly profile. My assessment is that all three these objectives were achieved with integrity and a wealth of learning on my part.

My reflection here is on what I learned from the PhD-by-publication experience in particular. While I had co-authored and published a few articles in the past, this was the first time I was responsible of an empirical study of this scale on my own (with guidance from my supervisor, of course). While the broad aims of the four papers were mapped out before I started writing, the minutia had not yet been teased out by the time the first abstract was submitted for consideration. Moreover, the papers ended up not being published in the sequence they appear in this manuscript. Paper one was published first, followed by paper four, then two, and finally three. Nevertheless, I have learned a great deal from the experience.

Paper one was published in a special issue on academic advising in South Africa, about which I had only learnt after the official closing date for proposal submissions. I had asked the guest editors whether they would still accept a proposal after the closing date, and they said yes. Fortuitously, I had been writing the paper for some time before this occurred and so when I got the green light to submit within about a fortnight from when I had contacted the editors, it was not an entirely impossible task. Significant learning occurred during the editorial process. On the one hand, it was my first time sole authoring a publication. On the other hand, I had to reconcile my own thoughts about which parts of the vast pool of data and my own critical insights should and should not be included in the paper, with the expectations of and word limitations imposed by the journal. Particularly, I had to position my argument in such a way that

the paper functioned as a stand-alone text, separated from the context of the broader PhD study and the other papers. This resulted in some extensive revisions during the review process and required reducing the number of words considerably. The advantage, though, was that I gained greater insight about what would be needed in the papers that were still to come, while also honing my ability to maintain a clear focus, refine ideas, and present them succinctly.

Shortly after the first paper was accepted for publication, I had submitted an abstract to the organisers of the Third Biennial SoTL in the South conference. The call had indicated that there was a publication track, with accepted articles earmarked to be published in a special issue of the journal *SoTL in the South*. The snag though was that the final PhD paper (paper four) was the one that aligned to the conference theme. Consequently, when my abstract was accepted, I earnestly began writing paper four, which required a shift in focus from paper one. I rapidly began coding and analysing interview transcripts to extract data relevant to paper four. Fortunately, and as mentioned earlier, the overall objectives of each paper had been mapped out already, as had their sequence and interconnection, which meant I could write paper four in alignment with the overarching purpose of my research quest. Yet, in hindsight, I would have been able to strengthen and refine certain arguments and align the final paper better to the two preceding papers, had I been able to slow down and delve deeper[5]. This is one of the key lessons I learned about doing a PhD by publication. External factors such as special issues, journal timelines, and the fact that learning often takes time, will inevitably influence the articles published. In fact, I would argue that there is a high likelihood that articles published later in the sequence of articles comprising a PhD by publication, would benefit from lessons learned by the PhD candidate when publishing articles that comes earlier in the planned sequence. To this end, my own assessment is that the review and publication processes for papers two and three of this PhD (published third and fourth respectively) were slightly smoother than those of papers one and four. Many other lessons were also learnt though, as discussed below.

For example, while two of the papers were published in a journal that uses APA Seventh Referencing, one other was published in a journal that uses Harvard, and the

[5] I will pick up on this point about slowing down scholarship in a subsequent section.

last in a journal that used Chicago. Consequently, I had to re-learn how to use Harvard (which I had not used since my undergraduate studies), and learn how to use Chicago, which I had not had to use before. Other lessons include using journal submission portals, choosing and refining keywords for articles, managing correspondence with editors and sub-editors, and the importance of having active Digital Object Identifier (DOI) numbers to add to one's research profiles (e.g., ORCid, Google Scholar, and Research Gate). To this last point, I have gained great appreciation for the importance of disseminating one's research regularly, accurately, and to the right audience. I feel like this is one dimension of building one's profile as a scholar that takes time and I regret the time lost over the last 15 years when I could have been research active, even if only intermittently. Nevertheless, I have dedicated many hours to creating relevant accounts and profiles (e.g., ORCid, Google Scholar, Research Gate, and Scopus), as well as populating and updating them. I believe this will pay dividends in time, which is necessary to ensure the findings from this PhD study (and the other projects I am involved in) are accessible and available – essential to ensuring meaningful and evidence-informed enhancements to how academic advising is practiced in South Africa.

This journey has transformed me as a researcher. While I am certainly still an early-to-mid-level researcher, I have grown in leaps and bounds as a scholar in the last two years. Having to go through the experience of publishing with greater intentionality, as necessitated by this PhD, I began establishing other scholarly communities, which in turn led to a variety of research projects (most of which are currently still underway). I also embraced opportunities to publish by submitting abstracts for special issues of journals and calls for book chapters, a number of which were accepted and has been published (see Table 1 below for a full list of articles and chapters published between December 2021 – when paper one of this study was published – and December 2022). In one of these chapters I share a personal, critical reflection of my agential morphogenesis in terms of establishing communities of practise (partially to nurture and sustain my research endeavours), during an 18-month period amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (see: de Klerk, 2022b). In another publication (an article in a special issue of the *South African Journal of Higher Education*) I draw on advising data from the PhD study, along with literature on belonging and Tronto's (2005) Ethic of Care, to

argue that advising is well positioned to help foster a sense of belonging for South African students, thus enhancing their prospects of success.

Table 1: List of articles and chapters published between December 2021 and December 2022.

Nr.	Publication Date	Publication Type	Publication Details
1	28/12/2021	Article	**de Klerk, D.** (2021). Making known the Real: An exploration of academic advising practices in a South African higher education context. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, *9*(2), 101-121. https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v9i2.3702.
2	29/04/2022	Article	Dison, L., Padayachee, K., **de Klerk, D.**, Conradie, W., MacAlister, F., Moch, S., & Krull, G. (2022). Reframing purpose and conceptions of success for a post-Covid-19 South African higher education. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South*, *6*(1), 33-54. https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v6i1.222.
3	29/04/2022	Article	**de Klerk, D.** (2022a). Academic advising during emergency remote teaching and learning: A South African higher education perspective. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South*, *6*(1), 95-111. https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v6i1.210.
4	29/06/2022	Chapter	Benvenuti, S., MacGregor, A., & **de Klerk, D.** (2022). Culture trumps structure in the competitive struggle between teaching and research. In J. Pool, M.M. Fernandes-Martins, & M. Fourie (Eds.) *A scholarly approach to student success in higher education: Volume 2*. Axiom Academic Publishers. 144-175. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7649484.

5	09/09/2022	Article	Brodie, K., Joffe, A., Dukhan, S., Godsell, S., **de Klerk, D.**, & Padayachee, K. (2022). From pandemic disruption to post-pandemic transformation: New possibilities for teaching in South African higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *36*(4), 66-84. https://doi.org/10.20853/36-4-5180.
6	19/09/2022	Scholarly Case Study	**de Klerk, D.**, Maleswena, T., & Spark, L. (2022). Road to Success Programme: A case study. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7654224. In X. Cupido, N. Frade, T. Govender, E. Samkange, & S. Pather (Eds.) *Student peer support initiatives in higher education: A collection of South African case studies*. African Sun Media. 32-38. http://dx.doi.org/10.52779/9781991201874.
7	28/10/2022	Chapter	Krull, G., **de Klerk, D.**, & MacAlister, F. (2022). Reflections from implementing a faculty strategy for academic professional learning during a global pandemic http://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7652597. In R. Govender & A. H. M. Jacobs (Eds.) *Critical reflections on professional learning during COVID-19: Context, practice and change*. DUT Press (HELTASA Imprint). 78-92. https://doi.org/10.51415/DUT.48.
8	28/10/2022	Chapter	**de Klerk, D.** (2022b). Catalytic power of a pandemic: On enacting agency in professional higher education spaces through communities of practice http://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7652567. In R. Govender & A. H. M. Jacobs (Eds.) *Critical reflections on professional learning during COVID-19: Context, practice and change*. DUT

			Press (HELTASA Imprint). 109-128. https://doi.org/10.51415/DUT.48.
9	28/10/2022	Chapter	Fontaine-Rainen, D., **de Klerk, D.**, Frade, N., & Ramrung, A. (2022). Narrowing the geographical divide: A critical reflection of an affordance of the Covid-19 pandemic for collaborative professional learning and development. http://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7652645. In R. Govender & A. H. M. Jacobs (Eds.) *Critical reflections on professional learning during COVID-19: Context, practice and change*. DUT Press (HELTASA Imprint).148-164. https://doi.org/10.51415/DUT.48.
10	23/12/2022	Article	**de Klerk, D.** & Dison, L. (2022). Demystifying the work of South African academic advisors: An exploration of students' structural and material constraints. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, 10*(2), 129-147. https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v10i2.3786.
11	26/12/2022	Article	Benvenuti, S., MacGregor, A., **de Klerk, D.**, Padayachee, K., & Dison, L. (2022). Learning to belong: Navigating liminal spaces between disciplinary and teaching identities. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *36*(6), 88-107. https://doi.org/10.20853/36-6-5517.
12	26/12/2022	Article	**de Klerk, D.** (2022c). Academic advising and ethic of care: Enabling belonging to enhance higher education students' prospects of success. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *36*(6), 152-168. https://doi.org/10.20853/36-6-5485.

By far one of the most important lessons I have learned during this time, is how powerful and fundamental collaboration and community are to sustaining scholarly activity. This means that one must both actively nurture the research communities that function well, while at the same time not being averse to ending engagements with communities that are not productive and/or beneficial to one's mental health and overall wellbeing. This requires an acute awareness, beyond the social niceties that can emanate from these communities, of tensions and dynamics that are potentially harmful or not sustainable. This is a practice that I have integrated as a central part of my work as a scholar and I continue to nurture existing communities, while at the same always being open to new ones[6].

6.3.2. Slowing down scholarship

My earlier point about slowing down scholarship to allow ideas and thoughts to develop and deepen, aligns to arguments in favour of Slow scholarship (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2018). While not the main focus here, the way in which structural demands within the institution and sector (i.e., the focus on research and research productivity and how this informs what and who are deemed successful) elicits an urgency within the researcher (me, in this case) to produce and publish, serves to negate the notion of Slow scholarship, where the focus is in on "attentiveness, deliberation, thoughtfulness, open-ended inquiry, a receptive attitude, care-fullness, creativity, intensity, discernment, cultivating pleasure, and creating dialogues" (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2018, p. 983). Arguably, this pressure is felt far more by early- and mid-career academics who are still learning to become scholars and are still building their profiles as scholars. Thus, the adage "publish or perish" (Callaghan, 2016). Similarly, one cannot ignore how these structures have come to influence institutional culture, especially at a research-intensive university like the one where I work. Two colleagues and I write about the way research culture tends to dominate within the institution and how it appears to constrain the agency of some T&L-focused academics with whom we conducted focus groups as part of a study on academic professional learning (see: Benvenuti et al., 2022).

[6] This resonates with the seminal work by Brockbank and McGill (2007) on dialogic reflection and reflective learning within higher education.

For me, striving to become research active and productive, and building one's academic career and scholarly profile is not the problem. It is the way in which the neoliberal university (whether in South Africa or elsewhere) tends to shift the focus away from scholarship (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2018) and what it could achieve in terms of social advancement and transformation. This may not necessarily be intentional or malicious, nor should my assertion be interpreted as a blanket generalization. Rather, it is my anecdotal observation of a phenomenon that most academics are aware of. Some embrace and use it to their advantage, while others find its effect anxiety-inducing and debilitating, affecting their lives beyond the proverbial walls of the university (Callaghan, 2016). Moreover, it permeates all aspects of the university, from the way in which promotion decisions are made and sabbatical leave is approved, to the supervision of postgraduate research students and the prioritization of time and resources. Yet, despite these complexities, I find joy in doing research (especially when collaborating with others) and strive to realise meaningful change within the sector through the studies I am involved in and by sharing research findings as widely as possible. This beckons the question: what does the way in which research culture manifests and dominates within the institution/sector have to do with academic advising and the findings of this study? The short answer is: everything.

6.4 Final Thoughts

The influence of a dominant research culture on matters of T&L, including academic advising, is irrefutable (Leibowitz et al., 2017; Benvenuti et al., 2022). This is from the way in which academic advising is resourced and conceptualized, to the way in which it is perceived by institutional stakeholders. It is influenced by prevailing beliefs about students and student success, to prevailing beliefs about higher education and what it should strive to achieve. It extends to dominant ideas about what a university can and cannot be held accountable for, to ideas about who the student is within the proverbial classroom as compared to who they are outside it. The research-focus of, at least the university where I work, cannot be disentangled from any of the above. As shown throughout this study, the work of advisors intersects with that of lecturers, senior management, student affairs, and support services.

Advisors' work is either made easier or more difficult, depending on the resources they are given and the way they are perceived by lecturers and students. They often encounter institutional stakeholders who think of students as deficit, decontextualised beings, who have inherent flaws that affect their academic performance. They observe the use of normative, measurement-focused assessment practices that serve to reinforce these beliefs. They experience the consequences of students' structural and material constraints, which are seldom if ever within their control, while struggling to find realistic or sustainable solutions to these challenges. All of these realities are influenced or determined by the culture of the institution, the continuous influence of the country's segregationist past, and the structures and cultures that define the South African higher education sector.

6.4.1. Limitations and further research

Naturally, this study is not without its limitations. For one, it is limited to the experiences and perceptions of academic advisors from one research-intensive public university in South Africa. For another, it presents a social realist perspective of academic advising within a South African higher education context, thus excluding other potential perspectives or approaches for exploring advising in this context. Moreover, the study only focuses on the period 2015 to 2020. While this period is important because of the emergent nature of advising in the country during a time of disruption, it precludes any longer-term lessons for South African academic advising beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and at a time of high volatility for higher education locally and abroad. The lessons learned needs to be clearly formulated and refined, in order to inform sustainable practices. Finally, the study does not include student perspectives or experiences of academic advising, simply because the scope of the study did not allow for it. Consequently, possible areas of further research include:

- Permutations of academic advising in other South African contexts, such as those offered in private higher education, at comprehensive and traditional universities, and even variations of advising that may be found at other research-intensive public universities in the country.
- An exploration of academic-track versus professional-and-administrative-track academic advisor appointments within the South African context. While the

former may offer opportunities for academic advisors to contribute to the scholarship of advising, it could create tensions in priorities (e.g., between supporting students and meeting requirements linked to academic-track appointments). Similarly, the latter could arguably allow advisors to focus solely on their work with students, yet it may influence their clout with academic staff in the schools/faculties they work, which in turn can pose challenges in terms of advancing the advising work being done.

- There is ample evidence documenting variations in peer support initiatives within South African higher education contexts, as well as their role in advancing student success (Cupido et al., 2022). As academic advising continues to emerge in South Africa, variations and permutations of peer advising within this context should be explored. Two colleagues and I have contributed a case study outlining one approach to peer advising within a South African university context (see: de Klerk, Maleswena, & Spark, 2022), which builds on an earlier paper where we were still referring to this form of peer support as *Success Tutoring* (see: Spark et al., 2017). Yet, in the same way our insights into and understanding of peer advising has evolved, further research into other approaches to and models of peer advising is necessary to help bolster our understanding of advising practices in South Africa.
- While this study focused on academic advising as a practice and academic advisors as practitioners, it could not include students' perspectives and experiences of academic advisors in South African higher education contexts. For this reason, further studies are needed to investigate students' perceptions and understanding of academic advising, their experiences of advising engagements, factors that enable and/or constrain their use of and access to advising, as well as students' perceived value of advising. This would add an important dimension to the literature about academic advising in South Africa, which could lead to enhancements to the way in which it is conceptualised and practiced.
- Considering the potential of advising to support structural and cultural shifts within the South African higher education sector, another possible research approach could explore advising and relation to social justice imperatives and

theory. Findings from such a study could support shifts in the way advising is perceived and practiced.

- Perhaps one of the more complex yet rewarding areas of further research would be a multi-institutional study. Such a study could bring together a number of South African universities where academic advising has been implemented to compare and contrast practices and policies, as well as the experiences of students, advisors, and other institutional stakeholders. A venture like this, could potentially contribute to debates and solutions for addressing untransformed practices to the benefit of student success. The initial findings of such a study could even inform further research with institutions who may not yet have implemented advising or is not planning to do so.

6.4.2. Closing comments

As I write these final words and reflect on what has emerged from this study, my optimistic doth realistic outlook on life cannot but wonder what the next decade will bring for academic advising in South Africa. Despite the affordances the COVID-19 pandemic brought for the profession and practitioners, I fear a reversion to pre-pandemic realities. This is informed by what I have observed more generally over the last 12 months, as Wits has shed masks and interventions associated with ERTL. My awareness of subtle murmurings and the things people say in passing or in jest, and my observations about what appears to be prioritised within the university makes me wonder. I wonder whether the glaring inequities that were highlighted during the pandemic have already been forgotten - a clichéd return to the pre-pandemic status quo where many knew, but very few were forced to see. I wonder whether the findings of this study, hard as I am trying to ensure it does by enacting the agency afforded me by my role, will inform and realise meaningful changes in the way advising is conceptualized, practiced, perceived, and resourced. And then, last but in no way least, I wonder about students' experiences and their reflections on their positionality.

They are, after all, the purpose and the goal. Without them, academic advising, the degrees we offer, the teaching we do, and our profession more generally would not exist. To write about transformative educational practices, which I believe academic advising has the potential to be, is to write about students. Yet my sense is that many

institutional stakeholders still view them as existing on the periphery, as superfluous or a necessary part of the academic environment, rather than being the nucleus of it all. Although their voices have been absent from this study, it is merely so because of the limitations on what could reasonably be achieved without producing superficial work. However, focus groups have already been conducted with CLM undergraduates as a starting point and engaging with this data will be the focus of my postdoctoral work.

For academic advising in South Africa to continue to evolve and to see the preferred outcomes to my ponderings shared above, students must be engaged and listened to. Advising cannot and should not exist without feedback from students informing how it is practices (at least partially). Furthermore, this must move beyond paying mere lip service to the call for co-creating with students and should actively involve them in the process. Only time will tell what the future holds for advising in South Africa. To this end, a T4 analysis conducted a few years from now and that builds on papers three and four of this study, would be extremely valuable. Until then though, I aim to continue researching advising within the South African context, as I believe advising has the potential to advance Scott's (2018) notion of designing South African higher education for student success and can help realise a deep:

> "…understanding of the responsibilities that must be taken by […] key stakeholders and the underlying obstacles that must be addressed." (Scott, 2018, p. 1).

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APPENDIX A

Baseline Dataset (2015-2018): Anonymised and Coded

The Excel sheet containing the anonymised baseline dataset (2015-2018) has been embedded as an object. Click on the icon below to access the spreadsheet.

Appendix A -
Anonymised and Cod

APPENDIX B

Academic Advisor Interview Schedule

Part 1: Pre-Interview Task

Start engagement with a free-writing exercise to get interviewees to think/reflect:

1.1. Briefly explain what free writing is and how it works.

1.2. Confirm that they have a pen and paper ready, as was requested prior to the interview.

1.3. Give interviewees 5 minutes for their freewriting tasks.

1.4. Start the opening sentence for them with this prompt: “When I think about academic advising…”

1.5. Once done, as interviewees to take a photo of their writeup and to email it to me.

Note: Before commencing with the interview, probe whether any interesting/unexpected insights emerged for interviewees from the freewriting activity.

Part 2: Academic Advising Before COVID-19

The second part of the interview will focus on questions about academic advising outside the COVID-19 context (i.e., pre-COVID-19):

2.1. What does academic advising mean to you? In other words, when you think about academic advising (or the work you do), what comes to mind?

2.2. Do you think there are intrinsic motivators that drive advisors to do what they do? If so, could you identify 3 and unpack them for me?

2.3. What are the top 3 challenges advisors face that create barriers to advising? Why do you perceive these things to be barriers?

2.4. What would you say are the 5 most common things students seek advice about?

2.5. What would you say are the most common barriers that prevent students from seeking advice? Why do they avoid seeking advice?

Part 3: Academic Advising During COVID-19

The third part of interview will focus on questions about academic advising in 2020, during COVID-19, lockdown, and ERTL:

3.1. In what ways, if any, has your perception and ideas about academic advising changed as a result of the lockdown (because of COVID-19) and the move to ERTL?

3.2. Can you share with me any affordances and constraints (i.e., positives and negatives) that lockdown and ERTL presented to the work you do as an advisor?

3.3. How has COVID-19/ERTL affected academic advising in your faculty?

3.4. What are the lessons (for advisors and students) you have learned during this time?

- End of Interview -

APPENDIX C

Research Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 De Klerk

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H20/04/06**
PROJECT TITLE	Student advising in the faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management at Wits: Practices and people
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Mr D De Klerk
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	Education/
DATE CONSIDERED	24 April 2020
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved Risk Level: low
EXPIRY DATE	23 June 2023

DATE 24 June 2020 **CHAIRPERSON** _____ (Professor J Knight)

cc: Supervisor : Professor L Dison

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10004, 10th Floor, Senate House, University. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/~~We~~ fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/~~we~~ guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/~~we~~ undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee. **I agree to completion of a yearly progress report.**

_____ 24 / 06 / 2020
Signature **Date**

APPENDIX D

University Registrar's Permission Letter

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY REGISTRAR

25 June 2020

Danie De Klerk
Staff/Student number A0036584/747172
PhD Candidate
School of Education

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

"Student advising in the faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management at Wits: Practices and people"

This letter serves to confirm that the above project has received permission to be conducted on University premises, and/or involving staff and/or students of the University as research participants. In undertaking this research, you agree to abide by all University regulations for conducting research on campus and to respect participants' rights to withdraw from participation at any time.

If you are conducting research on certain student cohorts, year groups or courses within specific Schools and within the teaching term, permission must be sought from Heads of School or individual academics.

Ethical clearance has been obtained. (Protocol number: H20/04/06)

Research duration: (December 2022)

Nicoleen Potgieter
University Deputy Registrar

Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050, South Africa | T +27 11 717 1204/8 | E nicoleen.potgieter@wits.ac.za | www.wits.ac.za
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Appendix E

Participant Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND JOHANNESBURG | FACULTY OF COMMERCE, LAW AND MANAGEMENT

ACADEMIC/STUDENT ADVISOR INTERVIEW
Participant Information Sheet

Good day,

My name is Danie de Klerk and I am conducting interviews with Academic/Student Advisors as part of my PhD research. The purpose of my thesis is to explore student advising in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM). However, the opinions and experiences of Wits advisors from all five faculties are necessary for context, and to ensure both student and advisor voices are represented. In this context, advising refers to non-academic engagements between a professional advisor and a student about any number of issues, including (but not limited to): curriculum planning and degree fit issues, psychosocial matters, socioeconomic matters, excellence skills (*e.g.* time management, note taking, test and examination preparation, reflecting on learning, academic literacies, etc.), and matters pertaining to life in general.

As such, I invite you to participate in an interview about your opinions and experiences as an advisor at Wits. This will require approximately 60 minutes of your time. With your permission, I would like to record the interview using a digital device.

Please note:

- **Confidentiality of responses is guaranteed, as your input will not be attributed to you in person, but reported only as a population member opinion.**
- **Any information given by you cannot be used against you, and the collected data will be used for the purpose of this research project, reports, and by other researchers (once they have obtained ethics clearance). Participant quotes may be used, but will not be attributed to you in person.**
- **Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after five (5) years.**
- **You have a choice to participate, not participate, or to stop participating in the interview. You will not be penalised for taking such an action. Participation comes at no personal cost to you.**
- **Your involvement is purely for informative and academic purposes, and there are no benefits involved.**

If you have any questions about this research after participation, feel free to contact me (see details at the bottom of the page). If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), either by telephone at: (011)-717 1408, or by email at: hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,
Danie

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Appendix F

Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND JOHANNESBURG

FACULTY OF COMMERCE, LAW AND MANAGEMENT

ADVISOR INTERVIEW | PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Student advising in the faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management at Wits: Practices and people

Researcher: Danie de Klerk

I, _____, agree to participate in this interview. The interview has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve.

Participant Action (Please tick where applicable)	YES	NO	N/A
I agree that my participation responses will remain confidential.			
I agree my quotes may be used anonymously in research publications.			
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded.			
I agree that the information may be used anonymously by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.			
I agree that my responses may be used in reports and research publications.			

Declaration

I hereby confirm that I understand the contents of the Participant Information Sheet and Interview Consent Form. I confirm that I understand the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the Interview.

I understand that I am able to withdraw at any time, should I so desire.

_____ _____

Participant Signature **Participant Name and Surname**

_____

Date

Ethics Protocol Number: H20/04/06

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Appendix G

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

10 March 2023

To whom it may concern,

RE: OVERALL CONTRIBUTION TO PHD AND CO-AUTHORSHIP OF CHAPTER 3

In accordance with the Faculty of Humanities Standing Orders for PhD Including Publications (S2018-1700):

- I hereby declare that the overall body of work contained in the PhD thesis titled *A social realist perspective of academic advising in a South African higher education context: A study of practices and practitioners*, which has been submitted for examination by Mr Danie de Klerk, can be attributed to him in its entirety.
- I hereby declare that the primary contribution to the co-authored article (Chapter 3 of the thesis) titled *Demystifying the work of South African academic advisors: An exploration of students' structural and material constraints* was made by the candidate, Mr Danie de Klerk.

Article Details
de Klerk, D & Dison, L. (2022). Demystifying the work of South African academic advisors: An exploration of students' structural and material constraints. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, 10*(2), 129-147. https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v10i2.3786.

Should you have any clarifying questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,
Prof. Laura Dison

Signature	10 March 2023 Date

Appendix H

Publication Acceptance from *SAJHE*

Danie De Klerk

From: SAJHE Administrator <sajhe@sun.ac.za>
Sent: Sunday, 04 September 2022 09:25
To: Danie De Klerk
Subject: [SAJHE] Editor Decision
Attachments: B-(1) Main text anonymised - Establishing a baseline for academic adivising (Revised).docx

Danie:

We have reached a decision regarding your submission to the South African Journal of Higher Education, "Establishing a baseline: A social realist perspective on academic advising at a South African university prior to COVID-19".

Our decision is: Accept the Submission
a) To retain the integrity of both author and journal, your paper will be submitted on a Turnitin platform (similarity index). 15% Similarity is the acceptable average. For example, in many cases, doctoral work is used verbatim. If your source is above 15%, we will notify you accordingly. We advise that this matter be addressed considering that the DHET subsidy is gained for both the study and article, this would imply that you need to paraphrase your main position, by using some varying words to explain a similar concept or argument already made elsewhere.
b) Thank you for your patience while we place your article in a future issue (Volume number and year). We will confirm the publication issue in the prefix of your title. Login on your profile to take note of the issue in which your article will be published.
c) Visit our web page (homepage @ announcements) where future publication dates will be confirmed.
d) Please note that the production editor will contact the author 2 – 3 weeks prior to the publication date to confirm the final layout before publication.
e) This journal charges page fees for publications. The managing editor will forward the invoice for page fees payable by the author once the final layout has been confirmed by the copy editor.

***Please take note of the following:**

-Grammar and language editing is the sole responsibility of the author(s).

-The journal is only responsible for layout and reference checking.

Congratulations on accepting your article in the *South African Journal of Higher Education*.

SAJHE Administrator
sajhe@sun.ac.za

Appendix I

Extracts from Part 2 of the Interviews[1]

1. Do you think there are intrinsic motivators that drive advisors to do what they do? If so, could you identify 3 and unpack them for me.

Urgency to help others [agency]

"…when I came in, I found it just a lot fulfilling [sic]. So, it's kind of […] goes with what I think is purpose-driven, you know, to give back. My thing is just, I wanted to give back, so I think that's what motivates me to really want to do what I'm doing, because feel like it just fits into the picture of me wanting to give back and me just fulfilling my purpose of, you know, touching somebody life and you know, helping somebody with challenges that I probably went through and then now just making it a bit easier for them." [Interviewee 1].

"…I didn't have an advisor when I was in tertiary education, so if I can provide that opportunity for somebody else, I feel I would have made a difference in their academic life." […] "I'm deeply interested in student success and […] it's also about assisting them [students] to navigate this journey, for them to finish the programme. […] that on its own, motivates me. To see that the student is well taken care of outside the lecture room." [Interviewee 2].

"…I didn't like seeing more students struggling [sic]. You know, if there's something that could be done, […] I would naturally […] want to step in to do something about it. And I felt like, you know, in this position that I am in, I am able to actually effect that." [Interviewee 3].

"…academic advising is very much a personal issue…" […] "…you have to care for people, first. That is for me it's my driver [sic]. The number one driver." [Interviewee 6].

"…my teaching background, so my background in education, I think does have a role to play…" […] "…trying to help the students see their own role within a teaching situation so that they maximize on their learning. So that they know that their learning is not only affected by what the lecturer is doing, but it is also affected by how they position themselves within that learning situation." [Interviewee 8].

"I just have this passion to help students…" [Interviewee 9].

"The urge to help people to want to help students to do that type of work." [Interviewee 12].

[1] The word version of the PhD manuscript includes my notes and colour coding from when I analysed the data.

"…it's necessary for me to help someone else and make their life a little bit easier…" [Interviewee 13].

"…it's about making a difference. Like really caring a lot about students…" [Interviewee 15].

Representation [agency emergent from structure and culture]

"There aren't a lot of […] black South African academics and I thought, it was an issue for me, in that we don't have […] any representation." […] "…I felt there was a need for representation…" [Interviewee 3].

"…intrinsic motivators for a black woman would be the fact that black students are the ones that are disadvantaged…" […] "Black students are the ones who are worse off…" […] "They are most disenfranchised and […] the scales are not in their favour." […] "…the majority of the students that actually need academic advising look like me, so that's an intrinsic motivator…" […] "…so in a nutshell, the students who need academic advising are students that look like me." [Interviewee 7].

"…in my case it would be my experience as a South African who has come from a historically disadvantaged cross-section of the community and being able to identify […] with the students in terms of some of the issues that they struggle with and then wanting to pass that on, wanting to share the narrative with them in terms of what's possible." [Interviewee 14].

Counteracting entrenched inequities [agency emergent from structure and culture]

"…providing students with […] equal opportunities, because in the environment where we work in, […] first-generation students, they might not [have] these opportunities outside the university [referring to the privileges and resources available to more privileged students]. So, if we then do not provide this intervention for them, it means they will be behind and at the end of the day, they might not be able to express their full potential.' [Interviewee 2].

"…sometimes teaching staff may feel that we are taking the student's side…" […] "…yet we will just be trying to make sure […] there is an opportunity for them to get equal access to whatever the other students had, then, you know, it would improve these students' performance." [Interviewee 2].

"…the social injustices. To see some students who, if they had the right resources, they would make it [sic], but everything works against them. And sometimes, no matter what you try, with some of them you cannot win. And that for me, it's always the one that hits me the most [sic], is to see a person having to leave because there is no more funding." [Interviewee 4].

"…mostly first-generation students, and they do struggle. They come from varied backgrounds and this is so much truer for me at [SAUni]…" […] "The disparities between students and not just in material possession, but also in the academic background they come from before they came to university." […] "…you have to really understand where students are coming from for you to be able to help them to the fullest of your ability and to understand […] the roadblocks that they are also facing." [Interviewee 5].

"…the dualism in South Africa, where you have this huge disparity between the rich, the poor and […] the playing field is not equal for students." [Interviewee 8].

"…recognizing that this work needs to be done. You know, there […] are inequalities, you know that […] all the students aren't experiencing university in the same way and there is a personal motivation to try and help with that. Try and contribute to […] remedying that situation, to playing your part in society…" [Interviewee 12].

2. What are the top 3 challenges advisors face that create barriers to advising? Why do you perceive these things to be barriers?

"Unfortunately, with advising, each and every session or consultation is different, so you can't really rely on something, definitely." [Interviewee 1].

"…sometimes we get students that are not self-motivated already, you know? So, we need to then […] start to motivate them from the basic…" […] "…then academic advising just becomes a bit difficult for the advisor, because then they need to then try and […] change the students' expectations as well." [Interviewee 1].

"…there is a certain element that comes from students as well, because you do need them to take responsibility for their studies, for their work and that is not necessarily forthcoming […], even when you're advising, you ask a student […] 'what are you doing?', 'how do you think it can work?', and […] their responses don't necessarily lend themselves to a developmental approach. They kind of just want you to tell them what to do, and to me that's not really effective advising. That's just telling students what to do, rather than working with them." [Interviewee 12].

"…some of our students actually do not understand what academic advising is. They may know that there is a unit for academic advising but they are not sure of what support they should be getting from there." [Interviewee 2].

"…students not knowing […] what […] the success team [referring to academic advisors], is there to help them with." [Interviewee 5].

"…a lack of understanding of the role of advisors." […] "…it's a lack of understanding of what our role is." [Interviewee 8].

"…not knowing, actually. It's surprising with the marketing that we do and all of that, that students actually don't know that they can approach us for information or advice in general. So, I'm not sure why that is, but they actually don't know what we're there for." [Interviewee 12].

"…sometimes teaching staff may not take the services which are provided by the academic advising unit seriously…" […] "…some of our colleagues feel like maybe all that we do is just time management and study skills and yet it's much, much, much more than that." [Interviewee 2].

"…the best thing is actually to use all the teaching and learning committees […] where we actually come together." […] "…make it very clear to them […] what we are trying to achieve and we are actually trying to assist them…" [Interviewee 2].

"…deficit view of the student, but also then of the service. So […] if it's positioned in that way, from other places in the university, that students are only sent to advisors […] if they are 'broken' or 'need fixing' in some way, then it's also bad for the student. Because, to a certain extent, you're telling the student that they're broken as well, or that they have some or other deficit." […] "…a lot of things stem out of how academic advising […] [is] positioned at universities. It is better if there can be some kind of an integration." […] "…the moment that these types of services are not just seen as a separate fix-it shop but […] integrated into what a university is and how a university functions, I think is actually where we want to go." [Interviewee 5].

"…there seems to be no understanding of the role of the advisors by the institution…" […] "So, you had to constantly educate and try to convince, particularly the lecturers […] why do you exist in this institution, what is your role." [Interviewee 11].

"…you're doing something that you feel it means something [sic], […] but it's not actually appreciated or seen as such. So, particularly in the faculty, we're not taken seriously. We're like a continuation of life orientation and it's just a tick box…" [Interviewee 15].

"…lack of time because […] there are probably […] projects that one could think of and […] because of time you end up not being able to fulfil […] that. And the other could be […] resources, I think as well [sic]. Be it money or funding or whatever." [Interviewee 3].

"…in our faculty there are only two people [referring to academic advisors] and our faculty is the biggest faculty, so it can be overwhelming to do [advise] with such a large number of students." […] "…I find that I'm just one person and I have quite a number of students to deal with…" […] "…there's always so much pressure on me because of the numbers of students that I have to consult with." [Interviewee 4].

"…small number of people who actually do it. I mean, technically, in our faculty, we have two academic advisors for nine schools." […] "…how can you really do a very good job in advising students, if you […] you don't have the physical capacity to do that?" […] "For it to be more successful there should be better relationships […] with better staff [academic advisor] to student ratios." [Interviewee 5].

"…the advisor/student ratios, so the workload." [Interviewee 8].

"…challenge is in terms of numbers." […] "…it's just the two of us, academic advisors that we are looking at something like 3900 and something students…"
"So, you'd find that as much as we would want to do proactive, come up with proactive interventions, […] we are always on the run attending to things…" [Interviewee 9].

"…lack of support. Like for advisors now [sic]." […] "Advisors need so many forms of support, […] we need support from upper management in terms of formalizing certain

advisory structures, because we don't get that. So […] not like given a priority the way that things like research is given a priority…" [Interviewee 7].

3. What would you say are the most common barriers that prevent students from seeking advice? Why do they avoid seeking advice?

"…I've realized that there is this gap […] that students come with already, because I could even hear when they come into some of the sessions, they'll already be referring to me as ma'am." […] "…they see me as an advisor up there and then themselves as a student very down there…" […] "…there's just a fear, you know, they have that fear or that anxiety that they just don't want to […] go and approach somebody from the institution…" [Interviewee 1].

"…they [students] think, because we [academic advisors] are in those offices, we won't understand what they are going through. We'll end up judging them." [Interviewee 6].

"…as much as I would have liked to think that students are aware of the services that we have, […] there is still students that come at the end of the year and they say I didn't know that there was [Academic Advising] and it helps with this and that." [Interviewee 1].

"…we also have students who, because they do not know of the existence of the unit, or maybe they are not aware of what services they can get, they only come to us when it is very late for any interventions […] to give any meaning to whatever challenges they are having." […] "…maybe we are not presenting ourselves out there enough…" […] "…I will [know] that had this student come to me earlier, we would have managed to resolve this." […] "…I would prefer a situation where a student decides not to come through because this is their own personal decision, but not because they did not know." [Interviewee 2].

"…although we try to make sure that students understand and know the resources that they have [sic], […] I'm not too sure if […] the message really gets to them…" [Interviewee 3].

"…another reason why they don't reach out, because they don't know what they should know [referring to the services offered by the academic advisors]." [Interviewee 4].

"…students actually not knowing that there is a place you can go and seek help, advice." [Interviewee 7].

"…lack of knowledge that there are resources out there in the university to assist them." [Interviewee 13].

"…students don't read the communiques from the institution and from faculty, so they're not, although we say it repeatedly, they're actually not aware of the centre or where to find it." [Interviewee 14].

"…there are some students who feel that it's a weakness to be seeking for information." […] "…they feel like there is something wrong with them if they are asking for information. And you know that is not true, but […] maybe they think we expect them to be knowing everything [sic] and be comfortable with everything and be confident everywhere. It might be […] what they think we expect of them. And those students will not come through." […] "…I also want to think there's peer pressure involved. […] "If the others are doing it then I'm also doing it, if the others are not, then I'm not doing it." [Interviewee 2].

"…some of the students are just scared to come out and say, look, we're struggling." [Interviewee 3].

"… [students] only reach out to you when it's too late and I think the reason has to do with shame. Nobody wants to acknowledge that 'I'm failing', especially at [SAUni], because [SAUni] is held at the highest pedestal [sic]. So to be failing at [SAUni] […] there's so much pressure; you got into [SAUni], therefore you must do well." […] "…so you'll find that people [students] kind of think, 'oh, I can still do it, I can do it', and then in the end they realize actually, 'I cannot do [it]', and then they come [to an advisor] when it's a little bit late." [Interviewee 4].

"…students think they are actually doing okay until they […] hit a roadblock, whether it is doing poorly in a test or whatever the case might be, and so they seek help too late." [Interviewee 5].

"…another reason […] why I think the students is troubled to come forward, is peers. The peer pressure [sic]. 'How it makes my friends judge me'." [Interviewee 6].

"…the stigma that if you need advising as a student, it means that you are not smart. It means that you are lazy. It means that you can't figure it out on your own." […] "The stigma about needing help." [Interviewee 7].

"…strength is seen when you are able to solve your own problems. You are not supposed to be a sissy, just going around crying for help. Do it on your own…" [Interviewee 8].

"…they call themselves smart. 'I am intelligent and I belong to this world-renowned university, so going for help would be like you don't belong here'. Why are you here? Because here is the university for smart people." [Interviewee 9].

"…students that are […] are really struggling and they know that there is support available to them but they do not come and consult." [Interviewee 11]

"…the stigma first that you, when you seek advice, it means you have problems that you cannot solve yourself." […] "…students who will see that they are failing but they don't come and then they only start to come when it's already too late…" [Interviewee 11].

"…they see seeking advice as […] a form of weakness. You know, 'I should be able to cope on my own', 'I shouldn't be asking for help', and then even when they approach

you, they're like: 'you know, I really thought I could do this by myself and I didn't want to ask anyone for help, but I really need it'". [Interviewee 12].

"…some or most students, actually come for assistance when it's a little bit too late and you don't know really how to help them." […] "…they don't want to be seen weak or failing, you know. Like, for some people seeking help is a symbol of weakness." [Interviewee 13].

Appendix J

Extracts from Part 3 of the Interviews

The extracts comprising Appendix J have been divided into three main sections, each of which consists of three sub-sections. The first section relates to challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The second section relates to affordances brought by the pandemic. Finally, the third section indicates lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section 1: Challenges Brought by the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 1: High-level summary of the sub-sections comprising Section 1[1]

To the Detriment of Students	**For Academic Advising as a Practice**	**For Academic Advisors as Practitioners**
Difficulty reaching students (never sure if everyone who needs help are known) [4]	Loss of face-to-face engagement with students [14]	Fatigue and/or burnout of academic advisors [2]
Student access to data/devices/connectivity - hampered ability to engage and learn online [7]	Difficulty reaching students (never sure if everyone who needs helped are known) [4]	Triggered memories of own days as a student from a challenging background [1]
Digital divide [9]	Poor attendance of group interventions [3]	Loss of social/collegial dimension of academic advising

[1] Numbers in square brackets indicate how many of the academic advisors interviewed mentioned the particular challenge listed.

		(refers specifically to working with colleagues) [3]
Social and institutional inequities and inequalities [4]	Digital divide hampered academic advising [9]	Blurring of home-/work-life balance: increased workload and worked longer hours [9]
Student home environments unconducive to remote or online learning [3]	Social and institutional inequities and inequalities [4]	Institutional and national inequalities made one academic advisor question whether they still wanted to do this work [1]
Barriers to learning and epistemological access [4]	Saturation of academic advising services [1]	Concerns about students' health [1]
	Student access to data/devices/connectivity - hampered ability to engage and learn online [7]	Concerns about impact of ERT on students' degree progression and completion [1]
	Difficult to help students contain certain challenges to the office of the academic advisor, when working in a virtual space [1]	Concern about health and wellbeing of loved ones [1]
		Steep learning curve during the initial phases of ERT [1]

		Feelings of helplessness and frustration when not able to help all students or find solutions to students' problems [9]
		No guidelines or exemplars for academic advising in South African contexts during an emergency [2]

Table 2: Sub-section 1.1 – Challenges to the detriment of students

Challenge	Interviewee	Quote
Difficult to reach students (never sure if everyone who needs to be helped are known)	Interviewee 1	"There's a lot of students that really are still in need of […] the assistance that we can offer them, but they couldn't receive it..."
	Interviewee 12	"...I do worry that there are students that we haven't been able to help as much as we perhaps could have if we were face to face, because [...] it's more difficult to communicate with students and [...] you're not really sure if the way you're communicating with them, is sending the right message to the student to say you know, you can further engage with me. You can ask me more questions. Or is this really [...] the information you're [referring to students] looking for, perhaps they haven't expressed themselves how they would want to have and so you're not sure if you're actually helping students..."
	Interviewee 15	"...just being able to feel like you can track down your students, because it just feels like we are worlds apart, like I don't know where they are, I don't know what their realities are, as compared to if we are in the same space, it's easier to kind of gauge that."
Student access to data/devices/connectivity hampered their ability to engage and learn online	Interviewee 1	"...because of all these barriers. You know? Them not having data…"
	Interviewee 5	"...the context we live in is quite difficult with quite a big divide, a digital divide between our students. Some students have access to various electronics and the internet, and all of those things and some students do not."

	Interviewee 3	"...I think the major challenges were network, because, or, you know, because students are, you know, in the remote, some of them are in remote areas and so forth, you know, it's not easy to access them, it's not easy to, you know, follow up on them and so forth and so forth."
	Interviewee 15	"...they don't have data." [...] "I feel for my students. You can see they are really having a difficulty and like a really tough time. Even to access the support that they need, because with the data they have they try focus on academics, it's still not enough. So even for them to then use that data to access the support, that's an extra thing, it's something that they're not able to afford."
Social and institutional inequities and inequalities	Interviewee 5	"Some students also don't have the social capital that others have, when they are working from home. Because [...] if you're a first-generation student, your family won't necessarily understand the type of home environment you need to function optimally for studying online, whereas if you are a second or a third or whatever generation student, your parents understand kind of the rigors that you have to be successful at university and they will help to, as much as they can create an environment for you to be successful in."
	Interviewee 9	"...the first years, when they came to university in their first block [first quarter], they were excited about that, then suddenly they are taken back home. So, some [of] them would say, my parents don't even understand what I'm doing and why I am doing it. And my colleagues [peers] did not have a chance to go to university, can't even say why I'm doing what I'm doing, and they are busy playing, and I can't even play with

		them. [...] I'm back now to my old friends, but we no longer click because I'd already started developing new friends and we are not at the same level. So those are some of the issues that you have to understand in order to unpack the complexity of the challenges that students face during Covid-19."
	Interviewee 7	"...it just highlighted how much the university system is unequal and how much it is inequitable. [...] there's a lack of equality and there's a lack of equity [...] then lockdown happened and all of that was highlighted, the extent to which there is inequality..."
Student home environments unconducive to remote or online learning	Interviewee 8	"...in some cases when I would call a student, and the amount of noise in the background [...] would be so overwhelming for me, and I couldn't imagine how that student could be able to sit and study. And it wasn't one student. It's many students. So, you call them, and there's absolutely no space for that student to study. No space for them to take a phone call. And this is supposed to be a phone call which is helping them to think about doing better..."
	Interviewee 9	"...it was very difficult, you had to put yourself in the shoes of the students when they tell you that where I am right now, my family is just, the environment is not conducive at all."
ERTL posed barriers to learning and epistemological access	Interviewee 2	"ERTL was a challenge to quite a number of students. […] Both those who are at risk and those who are like performing well."
	Interviewee 2	"...with the group meetings that we had with the students, it was [...] much easier for students to be invisible, to not say something in the group discussions..." [...] "...it's unlike in a face-to-face [session], because I can pick on somebody, I can ask them to

		give an example..." [...] "...but in a case like this, I would not be sure whether they are still following, [...] they could be having connectivity issues..." [...] "...the interactiveness of our sessions were affected..." [...] "...you easily lose people [in online group sessions]. Especially the bigger the group the more likely it is to lose people."

Table 3: Sub-section 1.2 – Challenges for academic advising as a practice

Challenge	Interviewee	Quote
Loss of face-to-face engagement with students	Interviewee 1	"I think I depended a lot on that [face-to-face contact] and now that we had to do this online and I couldn't even see the students that I was speaking to, and it was a bit of a challenge because we were trying to save data so we couldn't even do the, with the camera online and all of that. It was a bit of a challenge."
	Interviewee 1	"Even though we do invite them, they wouldn't come. So, I don't know, it just requires [...] that human interaction. So, I'm just trying to think of ways to really work around this. […] I don't know. I really don't know…"
	Interviewee 9	"...the obvious change is that from face to face where you would look at the student, you have this conversation and you laugh and things like that, to the one where you just, where it's remotely."
	Interviewee 11	"...the online space, it's unlike when you would be there [on campus] physically and then the person goes through something, maybe on campus. I will make an example with a student who just had an incident, or something that happened to him during like the day. And then the student feels like, okay, I

		need to speak to someone now, right now. [...] So, it [online academic advising] creates those barriers that you cannot have that access. [...] [Y]ou have to go through via the online system, book an appointment or write an email. So, it prevents that interaction that okay, I may feel like talking to someone right now and then I can do just a walk-in..."
	Interviewee 13	"...I always felt like advising needed like, we needed to be in the same room with the student, so that we can have that human-to-human experience and I still think that's true."
	Interviewee 1	"...we couldn't get that, you know, that human interaction, the face to face that is required, you know, for the body language stuff."
	Interviewee 3	"...issues that needed face-to-face were a bit challenging in that, you know, you're not able to see the student in their eyes when you're talking to them and sometimes I think that also goes down to the sincerity of the situations that they're facing, because sometimes when someone walks into your office, and they're sitting right here, you're able to sort of, you know, ask questions and know exactly that [...] it's not as serious as the student is perceiving it to be."
	Interviewee 9	"...not to have face to face interactions with the students…"
	Interviewee 10	"...I would say the [loss of] human touch…"

	Interviewee 11	"...it robbed me of that opportunity of experiencing the students, their normal way, like what are the issues they would have brought around this time of the year, what would be the main things that they are struggling with…"
	Interviewee 14	"...when you're not physically sitting with someone [...] you can't [...] gauge by seeing someone's body language and their facial expressions, you know what I mean, and then sometimes just being, sitting opposite a student and just breathing in itself is very containing and re-assuring for them..."
Poor attendance of group interventions	Interviewee 1	"...unfortunately, during this time of the year, we did try to do those workshops online, but we didn't get attendance […] we didn't get any of the students pitching up to our workshops…"
	Interviewee 2	"...because we still continued to have group meetings with students, sometimes the attendance we have had an issue of attendance. And it could be a case that the students, at the time when we're having meetings, maybe they could also have been having classes or they could not log in like we said earlier, but that has affected specifically the group meetings."
	Interviewee 15	"...issue I've had is like workshops, people not attending, because somehow, they think they won't be seen or maybe a register won't be taken. People just don't pitch, you know, so you go through a programme, you set up a whole thing and people just decide... I mean, there're workshops where I only had like one or two people come, where it was meant to be 200 and something."

Saturation of academic advising services	Interviewee 8	"...more being expected from advisors [...] if there is a fire an advisor should be there with her fire extinguisher. Any kind of problem, including problems that are definitely out of your hands. I think because everyone was overwhelmed with what was going on, so even things that they can solve in departments and so on, would first be referred to advisors [...] so in the end the students become frustrated, and we also become frustrated..."
Student access to data/devices/connectivity hampered ability to advise online	Interviewee 10	"...sometimes you have to be considerate of the data usage for the students…"
	Interviewee 13	"...the challenges that come with the technicalities with online consultations. You know, you are having a conversation with someone now and you're very deep in your thoughts and giving advice, or they are sharing deep experiences and then you have to say I'm sorry, I didn't hear that last part can you repeat it. Sometimes it's traumatic for someone to share something that hurts them over and over again..."
ERTL made it difficult to help students contain certain challenges to the office of the academic advisor, when working in a virtual space	Interviewee 14	"...another negative would be, the positive of being in the office is that the students come to a space, they process something in the space and then they leave the space and so there's a sense of the fact that that is contained there. You know, they can come in and out of the container. I suppose, in this particular context [ERTL] it's, that isn't there […] [T]here's no separation of the issues."

Table 4: Sub-section 1.3: Challenges for academic advisors as practitioners

Challenge	Interviewee	Quote
Fatigue and/or burnout of academic advisors	Interviewee 4	"I'm exhausted, to be honest with you. I'm exhausted."
ERTL triggered memories from one academic advisor's own days as a student from a challenging background	Interviewee 9	"...when they talk of let's say, internet connectivity and so on, you take yourself to the rural space, maybe where I was when I was growing up…"
Loss of social/collegial dimension of academic advising (refers specifically to working with colleagues)	Interviewee 10	"...human interaction amongst the advisors, amongst the peers, you know, just being able to sit there and maybe have a quick laugh and go away feeling okay, now I have learnt something, or I feel okay. That bit is missing…"
	Interviewee 15	"I think as a team it's been difficult in terms of, yes, we have meetings usually, but because you don't see each other often, you take for granted the small chit chat, you know, that you have in the corridors, and it helps to get you all [...] in one mind by doing this. But now it's like [everyone] is working in their own closed space."

Blurring of home-/work-life balance: increased workload and worked longer hours	Interviewee 1	"...I had to work more hours now [...], with some of the students, I had to wait for when there was less network traffic. So, we'd have to have like sessions, you know, up to 6PM, you know, so that's just longer hours for me…"
	Interviewee 4	"...with this working remotely, the working hours are blurred. Before you could get to work at half past seven and leave at half past four. And that is okay, but now, 24/7 you're answering emails. Because also, the kind of queries that are coming, are immediate, you know."
	Interviewee 5	"...your workday isn't a workday anymore and weekends don't exist. Time doesn't exist and that can be quite problematic, because you sit down in front of your computer in the morning and then 12 hours later, you're like, oh, I should most probably have dinner."
	Interviewee 9	"...sometimes you would have to play the employee position […] when you're supposed to play the grandmother position, you're supposed to play the wife position, the mother position and things like that."
	Interviewee 9	"...on the negative I worked longer than I expected…"
	Interviewee 10	"...I probably overworked myself…"
	Interviewee 13	"...having to work from home is a journey. It was very challenging…"
	Interviewee 2	"...as a result I end up having a backlog on the administration side…" […] "Because, I think maybe I feel like the student needs to be attended to at that particular time and obviously that [administrative work] will pile and pile and pile…"

	Interviewee 15	"...the admin of emails, my goodness, I think that's increased a lot, you know, because before people could just walk in or whatever but now, like you have to respond [to] a whole lot of emails..." [...] "...in some ways the work has become more complex administratively..."
	Interviewee 3	"...the torrent of, you know, emails that students were sending…" […] "...it was like literally non-stop and because we've, you know, with remote learning, you can't police the times that, you know, people send emails. Like literally, 12AM…"
Institutional and national inequalities made one academic advisor question whether they still wanted to do this work	Interviewee 7	"...if you're working within a whole unequal ecosystem and you're trying to like, basically enforce equality in a very small corner of what is the whole institutional culture..." [...] "...going forward, like I'm just, I don't know if I want to carry on with working in an unequal ecosystem. Lockdown had brought so many things to the fore."
One academic advisor voiced concerns about students' health during the pandemic	Interviewee 8	"...at the beginning there was a lot of anxiety…" […] "...because you don't know if any of your students are probably going to die from the pandemic…"

One academic advisor voiced concerns about impact of ERT on students' degree progression and completion	Interviewee 8	"...they also are supposed to complete the degree. […] "So, that anxiety, I think, also came through the more we spoke to students…"
One academic advisor voiced concerns about health and wellbeing of loved ones during the pandemic	Interviewee 9	"...the fear of the pandemic itself, you know, because you are with your family, you are always monitoring if somebody sneezes, you monitor all that sneezing or someone who coughs and things like that, which impacted negatively on my part."
Feelings of helplessness and frustration when not able to help all students or find	Interviewee 1	"...impacted my work as an academic advisor, was the fact that often times I felt a lot helpless, you know, because none of these things, we had not prepared for any of this. So unfortunately, so, I felt a lot helpless, a lot of times, you know, I'd go to bed you know, feeling guilty because there's no way I can help a student [...] because you are supposed to be saving these students, but unfortunately because of, you know, circumstances, you can't."

solutions to students' problems	Interviewee 6	"...when it came to helping these students with their study environment. Honestly, I felt so sick about it. Some of these things are really bad [...], I was not able, I could only talk to them and empower them and tell them please don't give up, don't give up. But then, as I said, if somebody tells you [they] are five in a room, what are you going to do about it? But at the end of the day [...], I could not influence their situations at home. And that was frustrating."
	Interviewee 6	"I sometimes felt like crying. It was too much."
	Interviewee 7	"...how hopeless you are in your advising position, as much as you can help, just how limited you are in your reach and in your ability to affect change."
	Interviewee 12	"...I think there's a lot of things we can't do [...] for example, give students those laptops when they stop working and there's no laptops available. We can't make them come back to campus because there's just no more space. So, I think the sense of powerlessness but also there's other issues now that are rising, that we have no control over. We aren't able to help..."
	Interviewee 1	"...we don't have answers because the institution as well, I think, doesn't have answers as yet." […] "...so, I think that was a bit challenging for us, because we would just say to students we don't know. And you know how it makes you look unprofessional..."
	Interviewee 6	"...they are struggling, but I have no powers to change it."
	Interviewee 1	"...we just had to act, everything, like we had to act on our feet each time."

There were no guidelines or exemplars for academic advising in South African contexts during a global health emergency	Interviewee 9	"...you had to shift something […], using strategies that you were not really sure of. So, at first it was really difficult to say whether I really helped the student or not…"

Section 2: Affordances Brought by the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 5: High-level summary of the sub-sections comprising Section 2[1]

To the Benefit of Students	For Academic Advising as a Practice	For Academic Advisors as Practitioners
Empowered students to take ownership of their learning [1]	Increased recognition of academic advising among students and staff [5]	Awareness of power dynamics in the advising space (advisor vs advisee) and the positionality of academic advisors in the advising relationship (e.g., race, gender, rank, etc.) [1]
Foregrounded the diversity of student needs [3]	Strengthening of networks across the institution to support and help students [2]	Greater work flexibility for academic advisors [2]
Strengthening of networks across the institution to support and help students [2]	Increased student consultations (links to greater awareness of academic advising services) [4]	Better use of time - able to do more and be more productive [3]
Some academic advisors reported being able to reach more students during this time [3]	Necessitated academic advisors to think differently/innovate about academic advising as a practice (e.g., developed new resources and new ways of advising) [15]	Enhanced family's/support network's understanding of the work academic advisors do [1]

[1] Numbers in square brackets indicate how many of the academic advisors interviewed mentioned the particular affordance listed.

The removal of certain structural constraints (e.g., students having to move from one class to the next on campus and constraints posed by timetables) made it possible for academic advisors to consult with more students [2]	Increased student responsiveness to academic advisors when they reach out [1]	academic advisors gained greater insight and understanding of the lives and realities of fellow academic advisors [1]
Changes/improved academic advising practices to the benefit of students [2]	Changes/improved academic advising practices to the benefit of students [2]	Enhanced interaction and collaboration with/among team members - more frequent communication [7]
academic advisors established systems and processes to better help students [2]	Enhanced interaction and collaboration with/among team members - more frequent communication [7]	
Some academic advisors reported being able to respond better to student needs [2]	Developed new resources that could be reused in future [2]	
One academic advisor reported that they feel they understand the realities of students better [1]		

Table 6: Sub-section 2.1 – Affordances to the benefit of students

Affordance	Interviewee	Quote
Empowered students to take ownership of their learning	Interviewee 5	"...in the sense of how important it is to leave information with the students so that they can kind of interact with it and make it their own as well. And I think that's an important practice for academic advising as well, because the knowledge shouldn't stay just with you [the academic advisor]. [Else] the moment a student walks out of your office, they walk away from the knowledge." [...] "...they can take it with them and kind of interact with it and make it their own kind of, and that is important."
Foregrounded the diversity of student needs	Interviewee 8	"...many new dimensions of student challenges were coming through which [may] not have come if the pandemic was not there."
Networks across the institution working together to support and help students	Interviewee 3	"...in terms of students reaching out, they've been literally reaching out via email or phone calls or whatever, generally students have been reaching out to all different stakeholders within the university..." [...] "...during lockdown we've seen that, you know, communication would literally come from student affairs [to many different stakeholders], so that we're all working together to assist students. So, I think that was the major positive that I've seen."
	Interviewee 8	"...the pandemic [...] helped the university to care more and I think I'm impressed by what [the institution] has done. They might not have done everything that has to be done but I think I'm really impressed. All the social justice issues that they tried to address as much as possible, couriering learning devices to students..."
	Interviewee 13	"I also saw how like online consultations really allow for more people to come through."

Some academic advisors reported being able to reach more students during this time	Interviewee 6	"The positive is that I was able to reach so many [students]."
	Interviewee 6	"...and even students, there were so many of them I was able to reach who I wouldn't have reached between, before Covid. That is really, really positive."
	Interviewee 13	"...the videos there, it just allows us to reach a greater pool of students. You know, when we send a video, we send to everyone, whereas when we had the group chats and the one-on-ones, it will depend on who came and who is part of the group"
The removal of certain structural constraints (e.g., students having to move from one class to the next on campus) made it possible for academic advisors to consult with more students	Interviewee 13	"...able to see more students online, because you know [...] sometimes the timetables that students run at are very tight [...] whereas when it's online they can just sit in their rooms and have that 30 minutes consultation and get back to whatever they were doing immediately."
	Interviewee 4	"...when you were in the office, you'll have long queues throughout the day and you may not reach everyone. Whereas, having to work remotely, if you realize that there's an issue, you create a group and you can talk to this group one time."
Changed/improved academic advising practices to the benefit of students	Interviewee 14	"...a positive for the students would be that sometimes one could work outside of the traditional hours, because you know, with lockdown, there was no 'the office is closed at 4PM'. People contact you at 5PM or sometimes I was able to help students in the evening, which traditionally one would not have done. You would have seen the email and [...]

		arrange to see the student the next day or within office hours. So, it [ERTL] certainly made a lot more possible."
	Interviewee 15	"...I am just like, wow, this thing is working. Even if we went back to face-to-face, I would still continue with this, just because I'm seeing that it's actually improving […] the student experience."
academic advisors established systems and processes to better help students	Interviewee 4	"...we [...] create[d] eLearning sites and [...] we'll communicate there so, I found what it has done is that it [...] made communication far much more better [sic], and I think it's something that we're wanting to improve on, because unless students know what is it that they need, then as a university, we are doing an injustice to them. So, it has changed how we communicate what we say to the students..."
	Interviewee 11	"...we needed to be more innovative in terms of engaging with students…"
Some academic advisors reported being able to respond better to student needs	Interviewee 1	"...we had a structure in place and then we had assigned duties and I think that made things a lot simpler." […] "...immediately after students contact you, you'd be the one that's going to refer them to the appropriate people…"
	Interviewee 11	"…[we had to] think of technological ways to make it easier for students to engage us in an online platform…"
One academic advisor reported that they feel they understand the	Interviewee 8	"...knowing more about the student circumstances, for me was very helpful, because you don't take anything for granted. You can't have generic advising. Each student is in a different situation."

realities of students better		

Table 7: Sub-section 2.2 – Affordances for academic advising as a practice

Affordance	Interviewee	Quote
Increased recognition of academic advising among students and staff	Interviewee 6	"If [university stakeholders] have to do this, [they] must talk to the advisors. If the students must write, they must talk to the advisors. So, I think we have now been recognized in a different way as compared to before Covid."
	Interviewee 3	"...there's been positives in that, you know, we've seen advising really taking the centre-stage..."
	Interviewee 3	"One major stakeholder that also understood that there is advising within faculties, was on lecturers, in that they were able to refer students to say look, you're facing one, two, three, please speak to the academic advisors."
	Interviewee 6	"...I built relationships with these lecturers I've never seen; I can't wait to see them face to face, I was able to reach so many departments…"
	Interviewee 12	"...our profile has increased with students over the Covid period. So, they're now more aware of us and they are asking for help."
Increased uptake of academic advising services	Interviewee 5	"...a positive is, there was massive uptake in the service, it almost, it has doubled since last year, the use of it." [...] "...the fact that students were now in a kind of context-reduced environment where they didn't have all this interaction, actually prompted them to seek more

(links to greater awareness of academic advising services) [4]		help. That I think is an insane positive, because that's what we want. We are here to help students and if more of them reach out to us to help them, that is fantastic."
	Interviewee 6	"...[during] face to face, you'd end up having 15 students coming through, 20 students. Now you could have an audience of 150 students."
ERTL necessitated academic advisors to think differently/ innovate about academic advising as a practice (e.g., developed new resources and new ways of advising)	Interviewee 2	"...I've had instances where I consult with a student after 5PM, because that is the time that is convenient to them. And, thinking back, it means that, let's say I'm not busy at 5PM and we are back to face-to-face learning, I might as well consult with the students, if that is the time that they are available, [...] then that means I'm reaching out to more students. I'm not like encouraging that we consult outside hours, but I'm just saying, if then we have [...] alternatives, then it means we are reaching out to more students."
	Interviewee 6	"...the methods […] introduced are quite positive. For example, mentoring on the WhatsApp group. It made us reach […] a wider group of students who I wouldn't have reached if it wasn't for the Covid…"
	Interviewee 8	"...we learnt so much. There was so much to learn, which we would not have learnt perhaps in the next five years. Because obviously there has been a drive towards blended teaching, blended learning and so on, and I had not even thought of blended advising [...] as a concept. But I learnt from the webinars that came through, how to advise students also under those circumstances and how to tailor-make them to a situation that matches their lockdown circumstances."
	Interviewee 12	"...we are exploring new things and we're learning about different ways of, you know, working with students and I think that could be something we look at going forward."

	Interviewee 13	"...it allowed us to see the role of advising in a different lens, like the possibilities of how we can really expand our practise [...], which probably caters for more students..." [...] "...having online consultations may improve or make other students feel a little bit comfortable consulting..."
	Interviewee 14	"...learning to work, trying to adapt work […] on a different platform…" […] "...that would be a positive."
	Interviewee 1	"...we just had to act on our feet…"
	Interviewee 4	"...it kind of forced us to rethink and to be more innovative."
	Interviewee 7	"...it's [ERTL] helped us think about innovative and creative ways of how you can be better advisors. I think it's made us better advisors." […] "…surprisingly, it's had a positive impact on the whole practise…"
	Interviewee 8	"...we started thinking more on our feet than we would have in the comfort, in the pre-Covid comfort."
	Interviewee 12	"...we've been looking at other ways to interact with students online…" […] "...we advise via email instead of you know, face-to-face. Our tutors work online with students rather than sitting in their tutorial rooms…"
	Interviewee 13	"...we really benefited positively from this experience and I think it will allow for a much more richer experience in terms of the advising and because the purpose is to reach the student and ensure that they have a successful university experience…"
	Interviewee 13	"...it really helped us with being able to reach even more students and being creative about that."

One academic advisor reported an increase in student responsiveness when reaching out to students	Interviewee 7	"...students reached out to us more than they ever reached out to us in the past. Students were responsive when we reached out to them. Like, the relationship was flowing. We had so much more engagement now, under lockdown, than we have ever had when it was a face-to-face basis, and our offices were open. You know, it brought students closer to us and it made students want to seek out help all on their own accord."
Developed new resources/ developed resources that could be reused in future	Interviewee 15	"...it's improved so many things and the fact that it's recorded, you know, like I'm doing a time management session they are able to play it back, they're able to download stuff."
	Interviewee 12	"There also has been the orientation site [via the institutional LMS], which I think was a great source of information for a lot of students and for other advisors and student support/ academic development professionals, because there's a lot of people that had no idea where to start online and the feedback I've got, you know, is that it's been a good source of information."
	Interviewee 14	"...for instance, I've done workshops online, I can record it, I can refer a student to the same workshop and not have to redo the workshop. Store this workshop for next year. You know, I can record a time management session and share it with students. They can watch it at their own time."

Table 8: Sub-section 2.3 – Affordances for academic advisors as a practitioners

Affordance	Interviewee	Quote
One academic advisor reported increased awareness of power dynamics in the advising space (advisor vs advisee) and the positionality of academic advisors in the advising relationship (e.g., race, gender, rank, etc.)	Interviewee 15	"I actually think it enhanced my advising, you know, because for the first time there isn't a power dynamic to me and the student, or whatever demographic dynamic. So, they don't know who I am. They don't see me. They don't feel, because when they walk into my office it's my office and it's my space and already, they have to call me [by my title] because of my age. So, I could see that they feel so relaxed, that they seemed more happy..." [...] "...it was almost like calling in anonymously on a radio station or whatever, and you're talking to someone. So, they seemed more free..."
Greater work flexibility for academic advisors	Interviewee 1	"...the fact that I had a lot of flexibility [...] gave me more time because [...] the three portfolios that I'm dealing with are quite demanding. So, the flexibility of like working from home, you know, I think it gave me a bit of more time, because you know, the time that I would spend

		travelling to school and coming back from school [...] I could use that time to [...] deal with students..." [...] "So, I think the flexibility was one of the positives..."
	Interviewee 10	"...it has been a productive year so far; it gave me the flexibility to work…"
Better use of time - able to do more and be more productive	Interviewee 1	"...I could carry out the sessions online, that means that I could have more sessions within a small amount of time." [...] "...I could carry out more sessions than if it was on campus."
	Interviewee 9	"...I managed to cover as much work as I would not have done if I was going to the office." […] "...the time that is normally spent in travelling, was converted into productive time in terms of work."
	Interviewee 8	"...we were able to achieve more…" […] "...the remote teaching learning situation also just made us do more as advisors."
	Interviewee 11	"...I had more time to do anything that I would have done." [...] "...it means I have more time rather than the time I would take, wake up at five, catch the train [...] be on the road and I can't work that time. So, that was an opportunity to be innovative and creative..."
One academic advisor said ERTL enhanced their family's/support network's understanding of the work	Interviewee 9	"...working from home got my family to understand the work that I do, and which enabled them to support me as much as possible."

academic advisors do		
One academic advisor reported gaining greater insight and understanding of the lives and realities of fellow academic advisors	Interviewee 9	"...I also learnt to understand people I work with. Accommodate our differences sometimes. Because it's like, when you are talking face-to-face, it's different than when you are doing it remotely. So, you have to consider the other person and in a space where you really think before you say something, because that person is far away and you cannot take back your words..."
Enhanced interaction and collaboration with/among team members, including more frequent communication	Interviewee 1	"...we had to have more meetings than normal..." [...] "...challenges [...] had just come abruptly so we had not planned for it, and so, [...] there will be this challenge and then we'd have to have a meeting just to deal with it and then just a week later we'd have another different challenge now and we'd have to have a meeting..."
	Interviewee 2	"...it [ERTL] has provided us [academic advisors] with alternative ways of communicating [with one another]…"
	Interviewee 3	"...it has increased [...] communications, because as I'm saying, there are issues that had to be referred and you know that when you refer something to someone, they are going to deal with it and so, in terms of [...] the flow of information, it has really increased that."

	Interviewee 4	"...what [my colleague] and I would do, is we have five schools, so what we did was we divided the schools. I took three and she took two and we are responsible for [our] schools, so if I get a query regarding her schools, I immediately send them to her."
	Interviewee 6	"...one thing I've realized, we work very well as a team. Honestly, as my particular team, you know, we bonded so well, we have our WhatsApp and we are able to help each other and it's not only the team, but also management. If the Dean passes on something down, it goes so fast, we escalate to the right person, so the coordination was amazing, how we coordinated. One thing which came out was efficiency, we were very efficient..."
	Interviewee 6	"...each other's space, that's another thing, you know, respect each other's space."
	Interviewee 10	"...as a team, we rallied well together, each of us did our bit. We put together what needed to be put together in terms of the materials, the resources, etc. for both staff and students. I think we all kind of worked well together."
	Interviewee 14	"...it's led to us actually, we always work together well collaboratively, but I think even more so now because we have a very, very good line manager. We have regular [...] meetings. We process very thoroughly the issues that arose and we're able to direct students to the set of services."
	Interviewee 15	"...in terms of the job we actually do, I think it's actually allowed to run more efficiently…"

Section 3: Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 9: High-level summary of the sub-sections comprising Section 3[1]

For Students	For Academic Advising as a Practice	For Academic Advisors as Practitioners
Resilience and self-care are important [3]	Staff and students made the need for academic advising clear during ERTL [9]	academic advisors must be accessible to students, regardless of the circumstances or barriers [1]
Seek/ask for help, even if uncertain - there are often solutions that students do not know about, but academic advisors do [3]	academic advising must be responsive to student needs, regardless of the circumstances [10]	academic advisors need space to rest and debrief - advisor self-care is crucial [8]
Regularly communicate challenges and keep the institution informed of them [1]	academic advising requires flexibility - be prepared for uncertainty and to adapt accordingly [16]	Duties and scope of work done by academic advisors need to be more clearly defined [1]
Be patient - some things take time to resolve, and some things cannot be resolved [1]	academic advising must be adequately resourced [2]	academic advisors must be patient with frustrated students [1]
There is value in academic advising	Develop/establish better help-seeking behaviour in students [2]	academic advisors cannot solve all problems (and that's okay) [1]
Be adaptable and ready for change - acceptance is important [5]	academic advising works to break down barriers to epistemological access for students [1]	academic advisors must operate from a perspective of care [1]

[1] Numbers in square brackets indicate how many of the academic advisors interviewed mentioned the lesson listed.

Take ownership of personal realities (with academic advisor's guidance) - accountability and responsibility [3]	There are still many inequities in South African society, which plays out in the HE sector and the academic advising space [2]	academic advisors must speak up (use agency to facilitate change) [1]
Use time more efficiently [1]	Evaluation strategies need to be implemented to evaluate the work being done [2]	academic advisors must know their students well (personal circumstances, environment, etc.) - do not only rely on what is given in reports [2]
Students learned how to use online tools and technology to learn and to use these as a way of networking/peer learning [1]	Virtual advising could help break down barriers to academic advising in terms of power dynamics that may manifest in the face-to-face advising engagement [1]	
	Cross-faculty collaboration and Community of Practice can play a big part in solving problems [4]	
	academic advising is complex [1]	
	academic advising needs creativity and innovation (including the use of technology) [6]	
	Clear lines of communication with students are required and	

	comms. must occur timeously [2]	
	Empower students to take ownership of their learning (with the help of academic advisors) [1]	
	academic advising is a profession in its own right that requires working with staff and students [1]	
	Retain integrity of academic advising practices, regardless of the circumstances [1]	

Table 10: Sub-section 3.1 – Lessons for students

Lessons	Interviewee	Quote
Self-care and resilience are important	Interviewee 1	"It was very important, for both students and advisors. It was very important now to really […] practice self-care."
	Interviewee 1	"...we [academic advisors] need to learn self-resilience. And that is something that we need to pass on to the students…" […] "...learn self-resilience and then how we can also pass it on to our students."
	Interviewee 9	"...it's important for them [students] also to learn to understand the different environment and develop some resilient skills so that they keep on going and succeed…"
Students must ask for help, even if they are uncertain, as there are often solutions that students do not know about, which academic advisors can help identify/implement	Interviewee 4	"...she said it's over for me, I cannot do this, and I said okay, what is it and she was suicidal, but then also I thought, it's early hours of the morning [...] It could be fixed. But you see, sometimes they [students] feel that it cannot be fixed…" […] "...because they realise that it's okay to ask for help."
	Interviewee 3	"For students I would say you definitely need to reach out when you're having issues…"
	Interviewee 5	"...for students, I think a lesson that they have learnt, and I hope that they take forward, is how easy it is to ask for help."
	Interviewee 12	"...don't hesitate to ask for help, which they do, regardless of whether it's Covid or not. They hesitate. So, you know, asking for help is crucial, whether it's from us [academic advisors], whether it's from the lecturers, whoever it may be. To actually speak if you need help."
	Interviewee 1	"Definitely I still would say students need to be patient…"

Be patient, as some things take time to resolve, and some things cannot be resolved	Interviewee 3	"...[students] need to understand that some of the issues cannot be [...] fixed within a flip of a finger. So, there has to be a bit of calming down, but also know that if you have [...] sent a communication or expressed the challenge that you are having, it will definitely be [...] looked into."
There is value in academic advising	Interviewee 2	"...there is a huge need for academic advising out there. This has actually been amplified by this ERTL [sic], because things that we want to assume are very obvious to the learners, may not be that obvious…"
Be adaptable and ready for change (acceptance is important)	Interviewee 2	"…what it [ERTL] has taught me is that […] both us [academic advisors] and the students […] were not ready for online academic advising."
	Interviewee 8	"...readiness also to change, because there are some [students] who are still saying I can't handle online learning. I can't handle online learning and we are saying it's likely to continue…" […] "...have that readiness to adjust more quickly…"
	Interviewee 10	"...in terms of students it's acceptance. Acceptance of the situation and you know, bite the bullet and get on with it…"
	Interviewee 11	"...make the best of what it is and accept the circumstances that you cannot change." […] "...accepting makes things easier, more especially when it's something that you cannot easily change."
	Interviewee 14	"...for the students is to realize that the world has changed […] and the world is not going to change back to the way it was…"

Take ownership of personal realities (with academic advisors' guidance); students must take accountability and responsibility for their success and wellbeing	Interviewee 10	"...I didn't see them [students] taking ownership..." […] "...I didn't see the initiative aspect coming through."
	Interviewee 12	"...for students the first thing is that I think they have to take more accountability for their studies." […] "...they need to actually take more accountability for their studies and make sure that they are self-motivated and self-sufficient, [...] not exactly to say that they shouldn't be relying on lecturers or their friends [...], but I also think taking that responsibility and structuring their days [sic]. Making sure that they are accountable to themselves and not their lecturers."
	Interviewee 14	"...for students, how to become more self-reliant." […] "...how to work more independently…"
Better use of time	Interviewee 11	"…[students must] use time more effectively…"
Students learned how to use online learning tools and technologies to enable networking and peer learning	Interviewee 14	"...how to also use the technology in a positive way..." [...] "... actually use the online platforms to engage in work with groups or other individuals..."

Table 11: Sub-section 3.2 – Lessons for academic advising as a practice

Lessons	Interviewee	Quote
	Interviewee 6	"...shows how important academic advising is and advising in general [is]."

There is a legitimate need for academic advising, emphasised by ERTL	Interviewee 6	"...you realize we worked every single day. There's no single day, people in our [unit] [...] sat down and did nothing. We were overwhelmed." [...] "That means that it in as much as people have been looking at it [academic advising] from the peripheral and thinking oh, they are just support, [...] we are actually very, very key to the development of the students."
	Interviewee 7	"...this lockdown period has highlighted even more why we need academic advising" [...] "...why it's a thing that has to exist and why it's a thing that needs to be supported by the university, because academic advising is something that I feel a lot of, if not all the faculties, leaned on, you know. The lecturers, they kind of turned to us to help students [...] bridge that gap, because their job was to, you know, migrate their teaching and their material to an online space, but actually getting students across the bridge to getting their minds right, helping them with balancing their time and study skills, all those things, like lecturers leaned on us a lot. I think this period has highlighted why academic advisors are needed in the university ecosystem..."
	Interviewee 8	"...seeing a greater need for advising because of so many dimensions or the needs that are there amongst the students. So, if there's anything, if there's any change that the pandemic brought to my, at least in my perspective, that's actually that we probably need many more advisors in the faculties, than we have had previously."
	Interviewee 2	"...there is a huge need for academic advising out there. This has actually been amplified by this ERTL [sic], because things that we want to assume are very obvious to the learners, may not be that obvious…"

	Interviewee 5	"...the use and request for the type of service I offer has increased drastically because they just sent an email to say I need help and you're like yes, how can I help you."
	Interviewee 6	"...they have learnt we exist, that's number one." […] "...I think we are going to be overwhelmed when we go back to offices."
	Interviewee 6	"...from the feedback I received from students, the students believe that we can add value to their lives."
	Interviewee 2	"...the need that the students have regarding academic advising. Because all of a sudden then we have an increased number of student requests…"
academic advising practices must be responsive to student needs, regardless of the circumstances	Interviewee 3	"...academic advising [...] [must make] sure that students are helped or assisted with the challenges that they are facing throughout their academics. And obviously that involves looking into, you know, all the solutions that, you know, the challenges that they're facing and providing solutions for those challenges."
	Interviewee 5	"...most of our first-generation students come from a background where they would [...] not have all of these types of things [referring to resources that enable learning]." [...] "...what I started to do was [...] a lot of asynchronies work with students. So, I would make short little, like five-minute videos, you know, absolutely no graphics, otherwise it's just too big for them to download..." [...] "And then, kind of encouraging students to interact with me via email or discussion forums, to still create that sense of community and that was, I think, very important."
	Interviewee 5	"...a lot of the students were very grateful for this approach, because they said wow, okay, thank you, now I can work on my academic writing, you know, at three in the morning when

		it’s quiet at home and I still can ask you questions or whatever the case might be. the feedback I got, was it was so useful that they could go back to certain things and listen to it again or interact with the material..."
	Interviewee 13	"...I realized that some students really prefer that [...] we [are] really not too close. They’re more comfortable without the intimidation of my presence. Just hearing my voice. So [...] my mind really changed on that. So, I really think, maybe a blended way of consultation would be great."
	Interviewee 14	"...as soon as we were told that the students may interface with us using WhatsApp calls, it became easier. And I must say, the students have been very respectful." […] "...I’ve learnt that, you know, that if a student wasn’t able, moving forward, if a student wasn’t able to make their way to my office, we could certainly use platforms that traditionally weren’t used."
	Interviewee 12	"...even if we’re [back] on campus, we can still use the online technologies to interact with students where they can be wherever they are, and we can still assist them. So, that type of information, the new approaches, that’s definitely been a positive..."
	Interviewee 8	"...going forward, I don’t see myself always [needing] to have students come into the office." [...] "...I think if a student chooses that they would prefer a call, in the comfort of their room or wherever they are, we could still do that now, because now opportunities have been opened up for advising in other ways."
	Interviewee 2	"...going into the future [...] if we were to move ahead and use both face-to-face academic advising and continue with online academic advising, in my opinion it may even reach out

		to other students who [...] do not have that luxury to come and have face-to-face meetings with us." [...] "...we can have a virtual meeting then; we can do that and they are not left out."
	Interviewee 12	"...we need to be more responsive to these types of changes."
	Interviewee 4	"...I found that also students appreciated that touch [sic], you know…" [in relation to phoning students for advising sessions]
academic advising must be adequately resourced and supported by the institution	Interviewee 4	"...I've got two phones, but the [second] phone […] it's not a personal one, so I've used that mainly for [work]."
	Interviewee 7	"If you [the university] say you care about students, [...] having a working [sytem of] and supported academic advisors, is a reflection of how much you actually care about your students."
Develop/establish better help-seeking behaviour in students (links to the lesson for students to ask for help when they need it)	Interviewee 3	"For students I would say you definitely need to reach out when you're having issues…"
	Interviewee 12	"...don't hesitate to ask for help, which they do, regardless of whether it's Covid or not. They hesitate. So, you know, asking for help is crucial, whether it's from us [academic advisors], whether it's from the lecturers, whoever it may be. To actually speak if you need help."
There are still many inequities in	Interviewee 6	"...these students, I feel sad that they have to write their exams with those who are in a better, you know, who are studying in a better environment and yet they must write the same

South African society, which play out in the HE sector and in academic advising spaces		and they must be judged the same way. And the person tells you, I don't have electricity. What must I do about that? So, for me that's very frustrating [...] those are really major issues."
	Interviewee 4	"...realize that our society has far more injustices [and] that unless we are willing to talk about them, we are not going to change society." [...] "...for us as advisors, it made us stop for a second and say, how do we reach everybody? Besides the ones that I can talk to [virtually] [...], how do I reach [the students who] doesn't have that."
	Interviewee 15	"...their [students'] realities, my goodness, are quite by far hectic [sic] and I think [...] the inequality in this country is quite hectic and I think this has really [...] made them quite extreme and quite visible..." [...] "...with advising you're talking to someone, and you can hear the drama of their life unfolding."
Evaluation strategies need to be implemented to evaluate the work being done by academic advisors	Interviewee 11	"...I don't think we went back to evaluate how it worked. I think that is important. It's something that we should have done..." [...] "...we didn't really have an opportunity to evaluate their experiences [...] and how the students responded to it." [...] "...I think that maybe it's something we should have done."
Virtual advising could help break down barriers to academic advising	Interviewee 13	"...once something becomes a profession, you are a professional staff at a university, students put you in some box or category, [...] I don't know how to describe [it]..." [...] "...you hear on how they begin to address you..." [...] "...it's power dynamics, we can call it that. Like, they put you in some box and they're really uneasy in, you know, letting themselves

in terms of power dynamics that may manifest in the face-to-face advising engagement		out of their shell because of the profession, or the office that you hold." [...] "...I realized that some students really prefer that [...] we [are] really not too close. They're more comfortable without the intimidation of my presence. Just hearing my voice. So [...] my mind really changed on that. So, I really think, maybe a blended way of consultation would be great."
Cross-faculty/institutional collaboration and communities of practice can play a big part in solving problems students face	Interviewee 4	"…[ERTL] showed me that things [referring to student needs] can be done. We just need to be willing to do those things." […] "...things can be done but we [the institution] just have to find ways of being more accountable and actually getting things done."
	Interviewee 9	"...[the cross-faculty] meetings that we have been having as academic advisors, I think it's very important where we share best practises [sic], where we share challenges and maybe learn from each other..." [...] "...it's more of the experience [sic] that we have and sharing that experience with others and learning from one another. So, it doesn't require working in isolation..."
	Interviewee 12	"...the importance of a community has also kind of come to the fore..." [...] "...the advisors [from other faculties] have been, it's been really nice speaking to them, working with them, and just having [...] those community of practice meetings, [...] and they're so willing to share information and practises, to share what they've been doing, but also, they understand. They know. They've been through this Covid thing, and they've experienced everything, so it's nice to speak to people who understand." [...] "...we really need to nurture that community and foster that kind of partnerships."

	Interviewee 14	"...lean on your colleagues and others within the institution when you need to."
academic advising is complex	Interviewee 9	"...it [academic advising] requires more […] of you as the [sic] person [academic advisor] to understand situations out there beyond just doing your work."
	Interviewee 9	"…[ERTL]enabled me to grow in terms of understanding the complexity of advising."
academic advising of the future requires creativity and innovation (including the use of technology)	Interviewee 14	"...fundamentally I'm guided by a core set of values..." [...] "...[ERTL required] thinking about how to attempt to do that [academic advising], using other platforms. So, I don't use the platform we are [using] now [refers to Microsoft Teams] and the [use of] emails are limited. So, a student will make contact with me via email and from that point we take it to a WhatsApp call, because I think [...] just that measure of distance is also useful and gives the student that added sense of security."
	Interviewee 1	"...we may need to really be creative…" […] "…it [remote/virtual academic advising] had not happened before, so we need to just pioneer everything now."
	Interviewee 4	"...we really have to re-imagine how things need to be [done] moving forward."
	Interviewee 9	"...I think blended learning [i.e., academic advising] is the way to go…" […] "...both remote and then the face-to-face, but not concentrate on one and ignore the other."
	Interviewee 11	"...we needed to be technologically savvy and be more creative in that regard…"
	Interviewee 14	"...be innovative and creative …"
Clear lines of communication with students are required and	Interviewee 3	"...made me realize that […] when all things are happening, there just has to be one person who says […] calm down, students. We [are] dealing with one, two, three and then you should expect […] a response within a day or so."
	Interviewee 6	"...prompt response[s]. That was very important..."

communication must occur timeously		
academic advising can (and should) empower students to take ownership of their learning (with the help of academic advisors)	Interviewee 5	"...our jobs is to empower students and if they are only empowered when they're in our presence, that's a problem. But if they can be empowered without us, that's brilliant."
	Interviewee 5	"...create better resources that students can interact with without us. And then of course, they can always still come and see us [...], but I really like the idea of [...] creating that agency and empowering students with well-structured [...] material that they can interact with..." [...] "...in that way, we empower them to also help themselves, which I think is very important."
academic advising is a profession in its own right that requires working with institutional staff and students	Interviewee 9	"...advising is not easy and [...] it's a discipline the profession [sic] in itself, it's more than what we thought it was." […] "...you find yourself in between the students and the lecturers and the other stakeholders for the benefit of the student."
Retain integrity of academic advising practices,	Interviewee 14	"...stick to the fundamentals, so to make sure that the services that we provide are in no way diluted or compromised by the challenges presented by the space we find ourselves in."

regardless of the circumstances		

Table 12: Sub-section 3.2 – Lessons for academic advisors as practitioners

Lessons	Interviewee	Quote
Academic advisors must be accessible to students, regardless of the circumstances or barriers	Interviewee 4	"...I quickly realized how I need to be accessible…"
Academic advisors need space to rest and debrief, and advisor self-care is crucial	Interviewee 5	"...it [academic advising during ERTL] is quite draining, because to a certain extent you are giving [...] something of yourself to these students and if you just keep on doing that [...] with no kind of set work time [...], it can be very negative and of course, lead to your own burnout. And if you are burnt out, you can't help anyone."
	Interviewee 1	"...advisors as well, I think we need to learn self-resilience and self-care as well. It was very important, for both students and advisors. It was very important now to really […] practice self-care."

	Interviewee 7	"...I feel very heavy. Unexpectedly." […] "...I did not think at all that this would be the feeling, but I'm feeling very heavy like […] I actually have tears in my eyes." […] "I do [now] realize how much I'm sitting with."
One interviewee urges academic advisors to be patient with frustrated students	Interviewee 1	"...you [academic advisors] need to have a lot of patience. I learnt a lot of patience because [...] I had to really deal with students that were frustrated..." [...] "...[and] still carry out advising sessions even though I understand that these students are frustrated and I do not have answers for them, you know, to calm down frustrations. Patience is definitely something that I had to learn..."
academic advisors cannot solve all the problems students bring to them	Interviewee 3	"...[academic advisors must take] it easy sometimes. You can't solve all the problems."
Academic advisors must operate from a perspective of care	Interviewee 6	"...advisors [...] really have to show caring." [...] "...they want to know that you care. Already that goes a long way. The fact that you tell them I really care, I understand..." [...] "...that for me is the most powerful thing we did during [ERTL] [...] and I think, if we carry that forward, would be a very good advising growth [sic]."
Academic advisors must speak up and use	Interviewee 7	"...the lesson for advisors is speak up more." […] "...speak on behalf of students who cannot speak for themselves…" […] "...the lesson is always speak up more. And always be honest about your feelings. As honest as you possibly can."

their agency to facilitate change		
Academic advisors must know their students well (i.e their personal circumstances, environment, etc.)	Interviewee 8	"...we [academic advisors] need to know our students more." […] "...we need to see them more, we need to appreciate them more, particularly in the light of the challenges that might be there within their family circumstances, their home environments…"
	Interviewee 12	"...the differences between students' home lives and what they experience [have been highlighted]. So that's definitely something I'll be taking away..." [...] "...in future when I deal with students, [...] what I must keep in mind is that these differences are massive."
Academic advising requires flexibility and adaptability, and for practitioners to be prepared for uncertainty and to adapt accordingly	Interviewee 4	"...instead of me individually going to them, I'll create a WhatsApp group and we'll talk via that."
	Interviewee 4	"I also had to be flexible, more than I ever was before in terms of, you know, we encourage students to consult with us via Teams, Zoom, Skype. But then there's a whole lot of them that cannot do that. So, I had to open up channels to say okay [...] today I'm going to work and I've got a list [of students] that I need to phone..."
	Interviewee 5	"...with a lot of the stuff I've been doing, it really meant that I had to make a mind shift."
	Interviewee 12	"...highlighted the need to have varied practises and to have kind of a plan for online..." [...] "...getting thrown in the deep end, really highlighted the fact that, you know, we need to have more effective online methodologies for advising, to explore those more deeply."
	Interviewee 4	"...it [ERTL] forced us to rethink and reimagine everything…"

	Interviewee 8	"...now opportunities have been opened up for advising in other ways. Whether via video whether via audio calls, […] so I think, this is something that we can take forward."
	Interviewee 1	"...important lesson is, you know, to be as flexible as possible. Anything can happen." [...] "...be as flexible as possible as an advisor." [...] "...you shouldn't really try to stick to a certain plan. You need to be creative; you need to be flexible."
	Interviewee 2	"…what it [ERTL] has taught me is that […] both us [academic advisors] and the students […] were not ready for online academic advising."
	Interviewee 2	"...we found ourselves having to work with what we had at the time and making sure that it worked."
	Interviewee 8	"...we [academic advisors] need to be ready for change. Change is obviously a very difficult thing and this particular change that came with Covid, didn't give us an opportunity to sit down and think, we had to think as we ran and so [...] we should be ready for change in all its forms." [...]
	Interviewee 10	"...technology for one, we learnt the various forms of technology." [...] "...you advise a student and [...] you would think that that's where our role ended and then off the student goes and does what he or she needs to do. But under the circumstances we had to also ensure [sic] that the engagement of the student with whatever appropriate technology [sic] [...] were also available."
	Interviewee 12	"...we've learnt that advising is kind of not a static, not that it was before, but this is a whole new challenge that has arisen, and we need to be more flexible…"

	Interviewee 13	"...I've learnt is that nothing is for sure, nothing is always certain." [...] "...so we need to be able to overcome or rather come up with other measures with regards to the plans that we have and […] willing to change when change is necessary."
	Interviewee 15	"...[prior to ERTL] you are so locked into doing things a particular way and you don't see any other way out. Because in my head I'm just like why didn't anyone think about this before? Like, it shouldn't have taken Covid to force us to go online."
	Interviewee 13	"...nothing is for sure; nothing is always certain." […] "...we need to be able to overcome or rather come up with other measures with regards to the plans that we have…" […] "...being willing to change when change is necessary."