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ENHANCING STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH PROFESSIONALISED ACADEMIC ADVISING: A MODEL FOR IDENTIFYING ACADEMIC ADVISORS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

At South African universities, the role of academic advisors is not easily defined and there is limited literature about the attributes and characteristics required of those who occupy advising positions in the country. This article proposes a model for identifying academic advisors for South African higher education contexts. The authors adopt a phenomenological approach to construct this model. Based on existing literature and data collected from advising interactions with students, the authors share and explain their model for identifying suitable candidates for academic advisor roles in South African higher education contexts. The model consists of seven dimensions: cultural quotient, data analytics, personal/ emotional support, psychosocial and socioeconomic support, scholarly activities and networking, skills formation and support, and teaching and learning. The authors conclude by emphasising the importance of academic advising for South Africa, before making recommendations for using the model to identify suitable candidates for advisor roles.

Keywords: academic advising, academic advisor, advising, higher education, South Africa, student success, student support

INTRODUCTION

Academic advising is a proven high-impact practice (Moodley and Singh 2015, 95; Strydom and Loots 2020) with the potential to enhance student integration at institutions of higher learning and their chances of success (Surr 2019, 6). In a country like South Africa, where high attrition rates and throughput concerns plague the higher education sector (Letseka and Maile

2008; Moodley and Singh 2015), identifying the right individuals to occupy advising positions is therefore imperative. Different from other student affairs roles and functions found at Higher Education institutions (HEIs) in the country (e.g., counselling services, student governance divisions, deans of students, mentoring programmes, and careers services), academic advising is uniquely positioned in the way it functions as a central node between the student, key stakeholders from across the student affairs landscape, and the academic divisions and departments within the faculty where the advisor works (de Klerk 2021, 103). While lecturers and tutors focus on disciplinary or subject-specific teaching and the learning associated therewith, academic advisors concern themselves with:

> "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." (de Klerk 2021, 103).

In this article, we propose a framework for identifying candidates best suited to occupy these unique and important positions within South African HEIs, at a time when the profession is still being developed and defined for this country (Obaje and Jeawon 2021, 18).

CONTEXTUALISATION

South African (SA) universities struggle to retain first-year students (Letseka and Maile 2008; Moodley and Singh 2015). In fact, the non-completion rate of first-year students in their chosen degree programmes is alarming, with first-year retention rates as low as 29 per cent reported by some universities (Scott, Yeld, and Hendry 2007), and a national average of 50 per cent (CHE 2017, 63). Of similar concern is the fact that only 30 per cent of first-time university students had graduated after five years (Scott et al. 2007), with this figure improving to just over 50 per cent ten years later (CHE 2017, 79), which is still worryingly low. It has been shown that the first year of university study plays a crucial role in determining whether students will persist (Schreiber, Luescher, and Moja 2018), and attrition at this early phase speaks to the crisis experienced by the SA higher education (HE) sector. Consequently, in this article the authors highlight the necessity and significance of adequate student success and support services, with a particular focus on academic advising and the role of advisors.

The high attrition rate of South African students, particularly in their first year, was the reason for a University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) project at the institution where all three the authors worked at the time this article was written, which saw the roll-out of academic advisors across all five institutional faculties in 2014/2015. At the time, these advisors were called "at-risk coordinators" and their remit was to focus on first-year student retention

and success, particularly those students classified as "academically at-risk". When the authors were appointed as "at-risk coordinators" in three of the five faculties, they had certain role descriptions and duties assigned to them. However, after approximately a year of holding these positions, they realised that the job entailed more "than what was on paper" and required additional attributes that were not advertised. As the authors were making sense of their roles, they formed a community of practice and in time realised they were doing academic advising work. The community of practice became a space for sharing experiences and similarities in their practice, while also exploring factors enabling and constraining their advising work. Ultimately, these engagements informed future practice and helped them develop shared mitigation strategies to resolve issues or challenges in their advising spaces.

Drawing on the knowledge and experience they had gained, data collected from advising engagements with students, and available literature about academic advising, the authors developed a model for identifying suitable candidates to assume academic advisor positions within SA HE contexts. They draw on their collaborative approach to advising, which has supported improved, enhanced, and more formalised academic advising practices across their individual faculties. Ultimately, this article aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about academic advising in SA, with the authors arguing that academic advisors should be seen as essential role-players for enhancing holistic student success in the country's HE sector. The model is offered to help advance this goal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic advising in South Africa

Within the SA HE context, the mandate of academic advisors is not easily defined. There is limited literature about the work of advisors in the country and the profession is still being conceptualised and developed (Obaje and Jeawon 2021, 18). Importantly though, Drake (2011) highlights the positive influence academic advising can have on student success, which is reiterated by Strydom and Loots (2020), who identified a connection "... between Academic Advising, student engagement and students' academic success" (Strydom and Loots 2020, 30) at their SA HE institution. Considering the throughput and attrition challenges the country faces, there is certainly merit in contributing to the growing body of knowledge on advising in SA.

In comparison, our counterparts in the United States of America (USA) are far ahead, with formalised academic advising structures present since the 1930s (Grites 1979), a National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) existing since the late 1970s (Beatty 1991), and

central advising services "... concerned about [...] students' total educational development ..." (Tuttle 2000, 16) evolving through the 1980s and 1990s, and well into the 21st century. During this time, the impact, potential, and importance of academic advising has been proven repeatedly (Cuseo 2003; Drake 2011).

What has emerged from the research, especially when considering student persistence and retention, is: i) the central role of advising in the retention equation (Drake 2011; King 1993); ii) the importance of enabling students' social integration and sense of belonging by means of support systems to help them connect to the institution as early as possible (e.g., by linking them with an advisor) (Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth 2004; de Klerk 2022); and iii) the positive role of first-year experience programmes of which advisors should form a part (Schreiber et al. 2018). Consequently, formalised academic advising for SA HE contexts is essential to be responsive to the country's unique needs and in order to further enhance SA student success, retention, and persistence.

The irrefutable impact and value of advising, demand that academic advisor roles should be formalised and professionalised in the country[1]. Identifying the right candidates to occupy roles of this nature is therefore crucial. In the USA, advisor roles developed over time and may include a range of duties, such as "... adding and dropping classes, declaring and changing majors, [and] approving graduation plans ..." (Tuttle 2000, 17). Advisor roles have also been tied to effective teaching (Wade and Yoder 1995), enhanced success rates among at-risk groups (Heisserer and Parette 2002), and helping international students adjust and realise academic success (Charles and Stewart 1991). As such, there seems to be a degree of ambiguity when comparing USA definitions of the work academic advisors do (diverse in itself), with the authors' experience of advising at the SA HE institution where they work. Accordingly, this article argues that there is a need to identify the requisite "profile" of an effective and efficient academic advisor for the SA HE context, and proposes a model for guiding such a selection process.

The role of academic advising and advisors

Tinto (1999) considers the relationship between the student and their chosen HEI as integral to student retention and success. Over the years various research studies have corroborated Tinto's claim that, "[though] the intentions and commitments with which individuals enter college [or university] matter, what goes on after entry matters more" (Tinto 1987, 127). Therefore, it is the everyday interactions between students and the university (in both formal and informal academic and social settings), and students' discernment or evaluation of those interactions, that determine retention and persistence or attrition in the early stages of their academic careers.

One important way in which this could be realised is through academic advising (Naidoo and Lemmens 2015).

As part of its core values, NACADA (2022) promotes a holistic advising approach, where both the institution and the needs of its students are understood and valued. Congruently, Tinto (1975) contends that student retention and success is more likely to be achieved in environments where the requirements and expectations of institutions are unambiguous and constant. Academic advisors are well positioned to help achieve these objectives and to support the advancement of student success. Another point reiterated in the literature is the role of institutional/advisor involvement in the student experience (Darling 2015; White 2015), and how this impacts student success (Frost 1991; Glennen 1995; Tinto 1987; Strydom and Loots 2020). Consequently, as Young-Jones et al. (2013, 15) point out, "... academic advising can vitally impact all facets of a student's academic experience, ranging from development of self-efficacy to practical applications of study skills".

For this reason, advisors should be equipped to help students make sense of what the institution requires of them, to enable timely degree completion and ensure that the needs of students and HEIs are met. Strydom and Loots (2020) provide a useful exemplar of how this could work, in sharing how academic advisors at their SA HE institution make the link between faculties and institutional student support services explicit to students. Conversely, inadequate academic advising can lead to increased risk of dropout and may see students "... fail to develop adequate academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, and social support and involvement ..." (Lotkowski et al. 2004, vii). Consequently, there is a need for continuous institutional commitment to effective advising. This point is best reiterated by Nutt (2003, 1), who says:

> "advising is the very core of successful institutional efforts to educate and retain students. For this reason, [...] advising should be viewed as the 'hub of the wheel' and not just one of the various isolated services provided for students [...]. [A]dvisors offer students the personal connection to the institution that [...] is vital to student retention and student success."

This is further corroborated by Cuseo (2003), who outlines three core functions or roles of advisors. First, there is the advisor as humanising agent, who interacts and engages with students in settings where they (the students) feel comfortable seeking advice and support (Cuseo 2003, 14). Second, there is the advisor as counsellor or mentor, who helps demystify institutional procedures and policies for students, provides advice and guidance, and who makes appropriate referrals when necessary (Cuseo 2003, 14). Third, there is the advisor as educator or teacher, who helps students develop academic strategies related to critical thinking, problem solving, learning, and academic success (Cuseo 2003, 15). Ultimately, academic advisors

emerge as individuals that help students navigate HE spaces, support them to make informed decisions, guide them as they adapt and negotiate tertiary studies, and enable for students the cultivation of important knowledge and academic skills needed to succeed (Hunter and White 2004; Suvedi et al. 2015). The model offered in this article is therefore geared towards identifying and employing individuals in advisor roles, who hold the skills and abilities to achieve these objectives.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, and for the purposes of this article, a phenomenological approach (Groenewald 2004; Fisher and Stenner 2011; Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie 2015) was adopted, allowing the authors to scrutinise and theorise about the phenomenon that is academic advising as it manifests within the SA HE context. The authors drew on a quantitative dataset to inform and develop the model proposed for identifying academic advisors for SA HE contexts. The combined dataset consists of student-engagement data reflective of academic advising interactions that two of the authors had with students in their respective faculties[2] between 2015 and 2018. Using spreadsheets, data capturing was initially quite crude with only brief details about the sessions being entered. However, in time the categories against which data was captured became more sophisticated and nuanced. The final dataset from which this study draws is divided into seven overarching categories made up of 34 subsidiary categories. The authors adopt a descriptive approach to analyse the data, which in turn informed the model outlined in the sections that follow.

DATA AND MODEL

Quantitative dataset

Table 1 reflects five of the seven dimensions that inform the model the authors present in this article[3]. Each of the five dimensions consists of various consultation categories linked to academic advising engagements by two of the authors with students between 2015 and 2018.

Table 1: Quantitative academic advisor engagement data (2015–2018)

Dimension	Academic Advisor Consultation Category	Number of Entries	Percentage (%) of entries
Personal/ Emotional Support Dimension	University Life/ Work-Life Balance	140	
	Career Planning and Advising	121	
	Physical Health	11	
	Personal and Emotional Matters	199	
	Sub-total	**471**	**16,9%**

Dimension	Academic Advisor Consultation Category	Number of Entries	Percentage (%) of entries
Psycho-social and Socio-economic Support Dimension	Mental Health	71	
	Stress and Anxiety	52	
	Accommodation	59	
	Clothing	25	
	Food	318	
	Funding	141	
	Stationery	29	
	Textbooks	4	
	Toiletries	93	
	Transport	5	
	Calculator	19	
	Sub-total	**816**	**29,3%**
Scholarly Activities and Networking Dimension	Referred to Academic Tutor	25	
	Referred to Counselling and Careers Development Unit	52	
	Referred to Course Coordinator/ Lecturer/ Curriculum Planner	160	
	Referred to Faculty Officer/ Assistant Dean/ Registrar/ Outside Faculty Advisor/ Centre for Part-Time Studies	75	
	Referred to Fees Office	4	
	Referred to Gender Equity Office	2	
	Referred to Academic Advisor for Consultation or Follow-Up	120	
	Referred to Student Affairs or Student Representative Council	19	
	Sub-total	**457**	**16,4%**
Skills Formation and Support Dimension	Excellence Skills[4]	107	
	General Life Skills	43	
	Time Management	212	
	Sub-total	**362**	**13.0%**
Teaching and Learning Dimension	Academic Advising and Curriculum Planning	483	
	Course Content and Results	93	
	Degree Change and Degree Fit	78	
	Deregistration	26	
	Sub-total	**680**	**24,4%**
	Total number of entries	**2786**	

Column three in Table 1 indicates the total number of interactions for each of the consultation categories (combined for the two academic advisors whose data is used for this article), with a total of 2786 entries informing the model discussed here.

Model

The authors' intention with developing and providing this model, is to assist faculty deans, university management, and other relevant SA HE stakeholders looking to employ academic advisors. The model is intended to provide these parties with requisite guidelines for identifying

suitable candidates for these unique positions. Figure 1 provides a visual representation (clockwise and in alphabetical order) of the seven areas in which the authors propose an academic advisor should be able to perform when assuming a role of this nature.

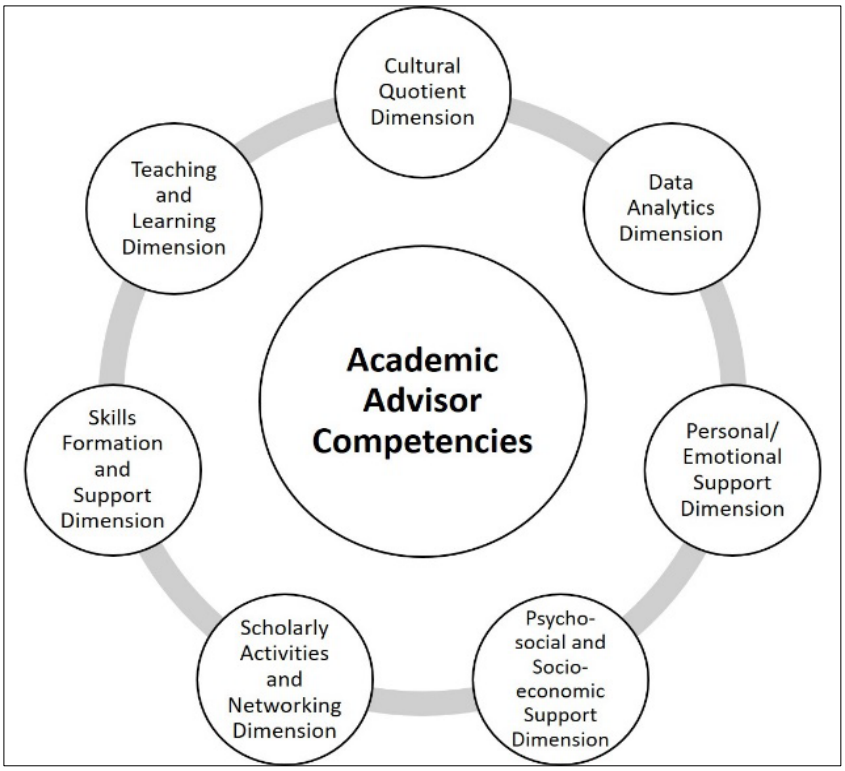


Figure 1: Academic Advisor competencies model

The model assumes the incumbent possess a master's degree[5] (in no particular field) and is familiar with the unique complexities posed by the SA HE sector, matters of learning and teaching, and research. Moreover, the incumbent must be able to network within the institution and the broader HE sector and should possess the requisite leadership skills in order to motivate, lead, inspire, and empower students to grow personally and professionally (Guzzardo et al. 2021; Paul, Smith, and Dochney 2012). What follows is a brief narrative description of each of the seven dimensions outlined in Figure 1.

Cultural Quotient Dimension

Academic advisors should possess cultural quotient (CQ) (also referred to as cultural capital), as they work with students from a range of, religious, socioeconomic, cultural, and personal backgrounds. Students, in turn, may need support with acquiring cultural capital, to help them cope in life:

> "research carried out in more than thirty countries over the past decade has shown that people with high CQ are better able to adapt to unpredictable life situations and work in today's global world." (Ningrum 2019).

Therefore, academic advisors can play a critical role in assisting students to develop their CQ but should themselves also possess CQ to do this and to be effective advisors.

This need to acquire CQ tends to be more urgent for students from low and middle socioeconomic backgrounds (De Graaf, De Graaf, and Kraaykamp 2000), a common characteristic of SA HE students (de Klerk and Dison 2022). To this end, parental CQ is a critical factor for students from these socioeconomic backgrounds, as their parents often lack the requisite CQ that would stand them (the students) in good stead throughout life (De Graaf et al. 2000) and can negatively influence their prospects of success. Students from culturally more homogenous schools tend to require assistance transitioning to the multicultural and integrated environment found at universities, and academic advisors often have to assist students to acquire with this transition. If academic advisors themselves lack the requisite CQ, they will be ill-equipped to help students with the acquisition of their own CQ.

Data analytics dimension

Data forms an integral part of HE, with analytics and big data having become essential in relation to transformation, enhancing student success practices, and in the way it can assist educators to improve teaching and learning practices (Siemens and Long 2011). Data is also important when making evidence-based decisions pertaining to student success and support (Gavriushenko, Saarela, and Kärkkäinen 2017). Accordingly, learning analytics tools and techniques are essential for educators, students, and administrators to help enhance learning and teaching (Aldowah, Al-Samarraie, and Fauzy 2019), and to provide a foundation on which to enact change. In turn, predictive analytics draw on past and current data to make predictions about trends (Rajni and Malaya 2015) that can assist academic advisors to be pre-emptive in their efforts to improve student success. This data can also provide lecturers with real-time insight about student performance, which in turn can inform teaching design and activities (Gavriushenko et al. 2017; Siemens and Long 2011). Moreover, Cele (2021) identifies early alert systems driven by data as something that can help contribute to the design and rollout of institutional intervention mechanisms for enhancing student success. Ultimately, engaging with and making sense of data has become a core part of HE.

Academic advisors work with data for record-keeping purposes, to track student progress, and to help them determine the efficacy and impact of their interventions (Naidoo and Lemmens 2015). Therefore, individuals working in academic advisor roles will likely have access to

datasets that include students' school-leaving information, biographic information (Masango et al. 2020), and current academic performance indicators, among many others. They will be required to analyse and engage with these datasets, draw conclusions, and make informed decisions based thereof, and identify trends in order to implement suitable interventions for those who need it. Academic advisors should thus be able to capture, manage, and use data to make informed decisions about supporting students and enhancing their chances of success. Ultimately, academic advisors must be proactive in locating and analysing relevant student data, and creative in the design, development, and implementation of student support interventions. Consequently, the broad range of available data about the student body at universities and the way in which this data is captured, processed, analysed, and utilised, is crucial to the work of academic advisors.

Personal/Emotional support dimension

Academic advisors often consult with students about matters related to university life or work-life balance, career planning and advising, physical health, and personal and emotional matters. As shown in Table 1, 16,9 per cent of consultations relate to this dimension. During these engagements, academic advisors will assess students' needs, provide initial advice and guidance, and then refer them for further support if necessary. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this type of support became increasingly important, as shown by a study of the social impact COVID-19 had on post-secondary school students in SA (Sifunda et al. 2021).

Universities tend to have health and wellness centres where students can consult with medical professionals. If diet is impacting student health, advisors will consult with them about the issue and advise or refer as necessary. For example, students who struggle with food insecurity (Sabi et al. 2020) will be referred to campus foodbanks (Van den Berg and Raubenheimer 2015). Loneliness or a sense of feeling lost is also something students experience regularly, especially those who are first-generation students (Motsabi, Diale, and Van Zyl 2020) from outside the province or region where the university can be found, and who are living off campus. During such conversations, advisors may refer students to social clubs and encourage them to form study groups, with the view to help them foster a greater sense of belonging (de Klerk 2022). Nevertheless, access to these social networks is often hampered if students stay off-campus or if the cost of joining a club is too expensive.

Furthermore, the pressures and stressors students endure throughout their academic careers are many and varied, and advisors must be able to engage with students in a consultative capacity. Although not necessarily trained as coaches or counsellors, the nature of these engagements can fall broadly within that realm. Some interactions are associated with the

process of maturing and becoming an adult, while others relate to studies and career choices, and others still are of a decidedly more personal nature. As such, an academic advisor may find themselves advising a student on determining a career path, setting goals to pursue that career path, and meet periodically to assess progress and redefine objectives. The interaction between student and advisor may also adopt the form of a mentor-mentee relationship (Guzzardo et al. 2021), where the advisor assumes a motivational/parental role (Meyer and Fourie 2004). In instances like these, meetings may be initiated by the student and can cover a multiplicity of matters (Guzzardo et al. 2021), including academic advising and guidance, personal mastery and reflective practise, personal and professional relationship management, cultural awareness, social responsibility, and career preparation, all of which are geared at student development. Consequently, the effective academic advisor should have at least a basic understanding of the different dynamics that can manifest during advising engagements and must be comfortable interacting in any of the aforementioned ways, as well as be aware of when discussions should be referred to trained professionals, such as the university counselling unit.

Psychosocial and socioeconomic support dimension

In terms of psychosocial matters, students often reach out to academic advisors first when they begin to experience difficulties. Table 1 indicates that the majority of consultations relate to this dimension, with 29,3 per cent of students reaching out to advisors for assistance. The advisor may be the first person to whom a student expresses concerns about their capacity to deal with trauma or stress, or when they suspect they may be depressed or have a mental illness. Similarly, a student may approach their academic advisor about bereavement, domestic distress, relationship issues or sexual abuse. This requires the advisor to act in a counselling capacity, but it demands sensitivity and an acute awareness of when the scope of the problem moves beyond the advisor's mandate and expertise, thus warranting referral to a trained professional.

Students regularly consult with advisors for psychosocial support (Kritzinger, Lemmens, and Potgieter 2018) as they experience uncertainty, feel overwhelmed, or lack motivation. They may have a need for validation at this point and thus require someone who can listen to them. The reasons they cite in these instances vary, but the ability to have contact with "a significant person" (Heisserer and Parette 2002, 69), whom they can trust in a safe space (Petress 2000) and who provides them with "... support, encouragement, and assistance [...] to continue their education ..." (King 1993, 22) is what appears to be valued. Conversations in these instances include the advisor prompting the student to reflect on their experience, addressing the students' perceptions and expectations of HE and the university setting, and reasons why they may lack motivation. In this context, academic advisors play a listening role that requires them to identify

what assistance students may need and then refer them to trained professionals within the institution, depending on the severity or intensity of the student's distress.

Along with psychosocial factors, socioeconomic factors can affect SA students' higher learning experience in diverse ways. This is highlighted by de Klerk and Dison (2022), in their paper on structural and material factors affecting SA HE students and the work of academic advisors. For example, an academic advisor will regularly engage with students who require assistance sourcing and applying for funding opportunities (de Klerk 2021), a major stumbling block for many students (Mdepa and Tshiwula 2012). Advisors will have to be aware of the funding structures and shortfalls in SA, application timelines and eligibility requirements, in addition to impressing upon students the importance of submitting comprehensive and competitive applications. However, more acute socioeconomic needs may relate to textbooks and learning devices, accommodation, and transport challenges (de Klerk and Dison 2022). In these instances, an academic advisor may have to find working solutions for a student who needs a learning device or help a student who has not eaten in days. Consequently, advisors must have close ties with the various support structures on campus (e.g., foodbanks, student affairs services, and campus accommodation services), while at times choosing to address issues by creating in-faculty food or clothing banks to help aid students or launching awareness and donation drives to address pressing needs. These challenges were spotlighted by COVID-19 (Czerniewicz et al. 2020), with student needs increasing due to the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic (Sifunda et al. 2021) on the HE sector.

Scholarly activities and networking dimension

Academic advisors must network and connect with other support services at their institutions to be able to direct students to available help, which is a common advising practice (Troxel 2018; de Klerk 2021). Equally important is the ability and willingness of advisors to engage in scholarly activities aimed at contributing evidence about advising in SA to the knowledgebase. While the data captured for this dimension in Table 1 highlights the importance of networking to enable academic advisors to refer students to appropriate support services when needed (16,4% of consultations), the paper itself supports the notion of scholarly activities.

Collectively, the authors built a network with one another and others at their institution over many years. Initially, this was aimed at enhancing their practice and the support they provided to students. However, in time scholarly activities grew from the initial connections the authors had made. The authors have co-presented conference papers about their academic advising work and have subsequently written this article. Ultimately, academic advisors must be able to network, not only to meet the needs of the students they work with, but to enable

their own professional growth. As the authors show here, professional networks can result in scholarly collaborations and in a country like SA where evidence-informed literature about academic advising for the HE sector remain limited, academic advisors must be able to contribute to the knowledge base and expand what is known about the profession in the country.

Skills formation and support dimension

The transition from high school to university is one of the greatest challenges new students entering SA universities face (Scott et al. 2007). University studies bring an increased demand on students' time, coupled with large volumes of tertiary-level course work that must be navigated using techniques and skills many of them do not yet have (Schreiber et al. 2018; Scott et al. 2007). Furthermore, students are often unaware that they require the aforementioned skills and abilities and are seldom willing to accept that they do.

This is perhaps the reason why this dimension has the lowest consultation rate (see Table 1), with only 13 per cent of consultations accounting for the skills formation dimension of the model. However, it does not lessen the necessity for academic advisors to be able to address these co-curricular skills (Andrews and Osman 2015; Moser et al. 2015). In fact, it highlights the need for this dimension as students *don't know what they don't know* (as the adage goes). Although co-curricular student engagement extends beyond aspects like time management and excellence skills (i.e., academic skills related to learning, such as study skills, note taking, planning, and more), these matters are some of the most prevalent when it comes to this support dimension. Table 1 shows the number of advisor-advisee engagements that revolved around matters of time management and other excellence skills, thus highlighting the importance for advisors to understand the demands on students' time.

Correspondingly, the SA corporate sector demands graduate attributes of students, rather than just disciplinary skills and knowledge. The 21st-century employer requires candidates who display global and moral citizenship by being aware of local and global societal issues and concerns, can engage with others in team settings, has the ability to think critically, has decision-making and enterprising skills, can find dynamic and innovative solutions to problems, engages in lifelong learning, and who is adaptable (Davies et al. 2011; Ismail 2017). Congruently, graduate attributes "encompass values, attitudes, critical thinking, ethical and professional behaviour, and the capacity of a graduate to take what has been learnt beyond the site of learning" (CHE (2013, 18), as cited in Bester et al. 2018, 235). Thus, the effective academic advisor should be aware of on-campus programmes, units, and initiatives that may serve to equip students with the requisite skillsets to satisfy future employers. For this reason, the ideal candidate to occupy an academic advisor role should understand what their students

need, as well as what is needed of their students, and must be able to adequately and appropriately address those needs.

Teaching and learning dimension

Academic advising forms an important part of teaching and learning within HE. Well-designed and delivered advising can link students to important learning opportunities that encourage them to remain engaged in their selected courses (Filson and Whittington 2013). As such, academic advisors should have at least a foundational understanding of teaching and learning practises and principles. This dimension links directly to the academic elements of the student learning experience and although academic advisors may not be content-knowledge experts, they must be able to support students throughout their learning journeys. Here, academic advisors can assist students to integrate their academic and institutional experiences (Schreiber, Luescher, and Moja 2014), while interactions between students and advisors not only support student learning but can help reduce graduation gaps (Guzzardo et al. 2021). Furthermore, advisors are well positioned to assist students to "negotiate the HE maze" (Suvedi et al. 2015, 227) by helping them plan and manage their curricula and study paths (Gavriushenko et al. 2017; Paul et al. 2012), and aid students when they face difficulties.

At the institution where the authors work, academic advisors assist students with curriculum planning and advising, consultations about results and other academic matters, career advising, consulting on course or degree fit issues and changes, and matters of deregistration. Table 1 shows that many consultations (24,4%) relate to the Teaching and Learning Dimension. These activities generally take place on an individual basis, mostly at the beginning and/or end of each semester, although larger sessions with specific cohorts of students may occur from time to time. Academic advisors also provide guidance on administrative matters that may impact student performance, like absenteeism, deferred application processes, and Satisfactory Performance (SP) requirements for access to examinations or final assessments. Consequently, the importance of employing academic advisors with a foundational knowledge of teaching and learning becomes evident.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For an institution and its students to gain maximum benefit from their academic advisors, the right individuals must be appointed to these positions. Academic advisors must have a thorough understanding of the national and global debates and contestations in HE, and how this may impact student success, to be able to be responsive to student and sectoral needs. To this point,

the authors make a series of recommendations related to the implementation of the proposed model.

Recommendation 1

In terms of qualifications, it is recommended that candidates employed in these posts must at least be reading for a master's degree, as this links to the scholarly activities, cultural quotient, and teaching and learning dimensions of the model. While the degree does not necessarily have to be in the field or discipline in which advisors are supporting students, academic advisors must have a thorough understanding of the degree programmes and progression paths within the faculties they work to provide adequate, accurate, and useful guidance to students. This links to the teaching and learning and networking dimensions of the proposed model.

Recommendation 2

Although academic advisors do not have to be trained counsellors, they should be provided the opportunity to go for professional helper training by the institution, with past mentoring, coaching, advising, and/or counselling experience considered desirable attributes. This links to the personal and emotional support, psychosocial and socio-economic support, and networking dimensions.

Recommendation 3

As academic advisors may not always be able to address student challenges themselves, they should be able to network and establish relationships with campus support services, academic and administrative staff within their faculty, and should know about the work of academic advisors in other faculties (and institutions nationally) to enable and advance collaboration, student support, and advisor scholarship. This links to the networking, cultural quotient, and scholarly activities dimensions.

Recommendation 4

Linked to the data analytics dimension, academic advisors must have insight into the value and use of data and data analytics for supporting and enhancing their work and student success. This may require training and resources, which the institution or relevant line manager must make available to advisors.

Recommendation 5

Finally, the authors argue that academic advisors must be employed on permanent, fulltime

academic contracts by the institutions they work for. Being employed in academic posts is likely to lend advisors a greater degree of respect within the academic community. In turn, being employed fulltime grants the advisors a sense of continuity, while grant-funded or short-term contract models often create problems in terms of traction and sustainability of interventions, job security, and promotion pathways.

CONCLUSION

The SA HE sector is at a pivotal changing point. COVID-19 highlighted many of the structural and systemic challenges affecting students making their way through HE (Czerniewicz et al. 2020; Sifunda et al. 2021). At the same time, the pandemic has presented unique affordances for the way learning and teaching takes place. For this reason, now is the time for HE stakeholders and managers to employ academic advisors who are appropriately equipped and able to support SA HE students with diverse needs.

Identifying the right individuals for these positions is crucial as outlined in this article, yet those tasked with appointing them are often uncertain about the skills, qualities, and experience these individuals should have. Accordingly, in this article the authors have presented a model for identifying candidates to occupy academic advisor roles in SA HE contexts. This seven-tiered model is informed by the authors' own work as advisors within the SA HE sector. The model is intended to support those looking to employ academic advisors to identify the most appropriate candidates for these complex positions. The number of consultations that have taken place between academic advisors and students, as shown in Table 1, irrefutably highlights the need for these important roles within the HE and student success ecosystem. In conclusion, the authors support continuous evidence-based contributions to the field of academic advising for SA HE contexts, and research that verify and refine the parameters of the model for identifying academic advisors for the SA context.

NOTES

1. Efforts in this regard began in 2018, with a multi-institutional Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) UCDG project (Tiroyabone and Strydom 2021).
2. The third author no longer works at the institution to which this article refers and so does not have access to the data reflective of *their* academic advising engagements during this period. Nevertheless, the authors are comfortable that: i) the available data sample is sufficiently robust and statistically significant for the purposes of this article; and ii) the available data corroborates the experiences of the third author during the same period.
3. As shown in the discussion section below, the other two dimensions do not link to the quantitative dataset but rather emerged from the authors' experiences of and reflections about their own work as academic advisors.
4. This is an umbrella term for academic skills, including note taking techniques, planning for studies and exams, approaches to pre-reading, reflective practice, study techniques, and exam-/test-taking

strategies.

5. That being said, candidates with honours degrees could be employed in developmental academic advisor roles where they can grow professionally under the guidance of their line manager and/or more experienced academic advisors.

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