

GUEST EDITORIAL

Sharing practices to co-construct the profession of academic advising

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Over the past two decades, the South African higher education landscape has been in conversation about academic advising and its role in student success. The practice has evolved, moving from questions of enrolment, credit load management, and participation of students to deeper reflections on student engagement, retention, progression and time to degree. Across various universities, despite significant investment in student success initiatives, many students continue to face structural, academic, financial, and psychosocial barriers that shape their trajectories through higher education (De Klerk & Dison, 2022). It is within this complex terrain that academic advising has emerged as a transformative practice, bridging institutional aspirations for equity and excellence with the lived realities of students and their success.

Academic advising is increasingly recognised as a critical *'golden thread'* of student success (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). Beyond assisting students with course choices or degree planning, advising has been delivered to serve as a developmental, data-centred practice that connects the academic, personal, and professional dimensions of the student journey. Within the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), a collaborative grant was obtained to advance academic advising across the sector. Seven years of evidence illustrates that the intentional implementation of academic advising has resulted in the cultivation of agency, reflection, and belonging, offering students structured opportunities to navigate their educational journeys with purpose and confidence.

The evolution of academic advising in South Africa has furthermore been notably shaped by Academic Advising Professional Development (the AAPD), a short learning programme providing foundational training for academic advisors. Through its collaborative and cross-institutional approach, the AAPD has built capacity, nurtured communities of practice, and established a shared language for advising in both practice and scholarly field. It has helped to position advising as a *profession in the making*, grounded in theory, informed by evidence, and sustained through reflective practice (De Klerk et al., 2024).

However, this progress also calls for a deeper commitment to the contextualisation of theories and practices. Whereas international models have provided valuable foundations, much of their framing arises from contexts that differ from South Africa's historical and socio-political realities. Therefore, contextualising advising is not merely an academic exercise; rather, it is a social justice imperative to ensure that the practice resonates with the lived experiences of South African students.

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Emerging research across various institutions has pointed to several high-impact advising approaches that enhance student success in the local context. *Intentional one-on-one advising*, has been shown to improve retention and performance by fostering accountability and targeted support (Emekako & Van der Westhuizen, 2021). *Holistic, ethic-of-care student advising frameworks* – grounded in attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness contribute to students’ sense of belonging and engagement (De Klerk, 2022). A third approach pinpoints *data-informed and proactive advising*, which allows institutions to identify students at risk and intervene before academic failure occurs, thereby strengthening overall institutional responsiveness (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021; Khumalo et al., 2023).

To secure its future as a professionalised practice, it is evident that academic advising must be institutionally recognised and formally embedded within the structures to have a meaningful and sustainable impact. Consequently, this requires clear definitions of advisor roles, professional competencies, and ethical standards (De Klerk et al., 2024). It also calls for the inclusion of advice on institutional staffing, workload, and reward frameworks, ensuring that it is not treated as an add-on responsibility but as an essential component of the student success ecosystem.

Academic advising in South Africa stands at a promising yet pivotal moment. It has demonstrated its value in shaping student experiences, building inclusive learning environments, and contributing to institutional transformation. The task ahead is to consolidate and better coordinate this momentum to ensure that advising is recognised, theorised, and professionalised as a cornerstone of an equitable and future-fit higher education system.

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