Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

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Academic advising and student support

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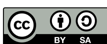

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Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

The *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) is an independent, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary, open-access academic journal that publishes scholarly research and reflective discussions about the theory and practice of student affairs in Africa.

Vision and mission

The *JSAA* aims to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs in African higher education by publishing high-quality scholarly articles, research and reflective discussions by academics, professionals, researchers and students about student affairs and services in African higher education.

The *JSAA* strives to be the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain in universities on the African continent, and an indispensable resource for national policy makers, the executive leadership of universities and colleges dealing with student affairs, deans of students and other senior student affairs professionals, as well as institutional researchers and academics and students focused on the field of higher education studies and student affairs.

Focus and scope

The *JSAA* considers theoretical, practice-relevant and reflective contributions from across the scholarly field of student affairs and professional domains of student development/student affairs, taking due cognisance that the scope is broad, fluid and context-dependent.

The scope of *JSAA* is indicated by keywords such as: student affairs, student career development, student counselling, student development theory and research, student discipline, student engagement, student experience, student finances and financial aid, student housing, disability/disabled students, student leadership and governance, student life cycle, student living and learning, student movement, student organisations, student orientation, student policy, student politics and activism, student sport, student support, academic development (and its intersection with the student affairs co-curriculum), graduate attributes, and teaching and learning support. This list of keywords is not exhaustive. Our key focus area is the core functions of student affairs and services in Africa.

Submissions are encouraged from scholars and reflective practitioners from across the globe. Submissions must be original and relevant to the mission, scope and focus of the journal. Especially encouraged are submissions from African scholars and professionals working in higher education on the African continent. Submissions dealing with student affairs issues from other contexts (e.g. the African diaspora; other emerging economies; developed countries) that are transferable to the African context are also considered for publication. Submissions must be made on the JSAA online submission website. Please register, log in and submit your manuscript at: https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jsaa. For any queries and to contact the editors please email Ms Bronwin Sebonka at bronwin.sebonka@up.ac.za.

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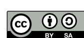

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Editorial

Developing Successful Transition Support for Students in Africa: The Role of Academic Advising

Birgit Schreiber[i], Thierry M. Luescher[ii] & Teboho Moja[iii]

The demand for professional student support and transition programmes is increasing unabatedly while higher education in Africa proceeds on its trajectory of rapid expansion and massification even in the context of the changing circumstances presented by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time as participation in higher education widens, there is also increased pressure for efficiency, relevance, and success, to ensure that students are equipped with relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies, develop personally and socio-culturally, and succeed academically, by making successful transitions into and through higher education and into the world of work and livelihoods. An evidence-based development of high-impact interventions using multiple methods, including student engagement surveys and action research approaches, is a proven strategy (Strydom et al., 2016). The development of context-relevant, high impact co-curricular programmes, support services and interventions by means of a reflective scholarship of Student Affairs and Services (SAS), institutional research and reflective practice, is also an imperative in the professionalisation of SAS in Africa.

Transition support for students with various identities and the intersectionality of their identities with other factors such as coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, being first-

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generation students, and living with a range of visible and non-visible disabilities, is particularly important. Transition programmes and services include orientation programmes, mentoring and related support initiatives (like peer support), tutoring, academic advising, supplemental instruction, and career guidance, to mention but a few (Smith, 2021). Transition support addresses equity issues and provides students the opportunities needed to succeed. This is the role that Student Affairs plays to directly impact on student development and success, levelling the playing ground for students from varied backgrounds, and helping to advance towards students' goals and aspirations. In the process, Student Affairs contributes to the achievement of targets set at national and institutional levels for expected throughput and success rates.

Much of the emphasis in student transitions literature and practice tends to be on students' point of entry into higher education and the first year, however, it is important to see students' lifecycle as a series of transitions, stages and phases. While many models sequentialize this process, we want to acknowledge the complexity and phases that students move through during a transition: perhaps revisiting certain phases, lingering longer in some while swiftly moving through others, exiting and entering and progressing at individual paces, depending on context and many criteria and their intersection. A way of conceptualizing student life cycles and illustrating transitions is offered by Michelle Morgan's "student experience transitions practitioner model". This model involves six stages and transitions: (1) first contact and admission → (2) pre-arrival → (3) arrival and orientation → (4) introduction to study at university → (5) re-orientation and re-introduction (6) outduction back to (1) first contact and admission (Morgan, 2016; Luescher, 2017). As Luescher (2017, p. 14) argued elsewhere:

> *"[By means of student life-cycle models] it is possible to ask quite deep and refined questions of what students from different backgrounds expect at different stages in the student life cycle, and how the higher education system, institutions, and academic and student affairs can respond to those expectations: to anticipate them and meet students at their point of need; to exceed their expectations; or to manage expectations by either creating them or moderating them in line with the available resources. The student life cycle models alert us that student life starts at the aspirational stage; that is before a student actually is a student. Different students move through the first year experience quite differently, encountering different kinds of 'trauma' and excitement and having different capabilities for navigating academic, social and personal struggles. Complex life cycle models conceptualise different stages and transitions in ways that allow for theoretically sound, evidence-based policy making and intervention, at all levels, with reference to dimensions or themes such as finance, teaching and learning, support, and employment." (Luescher, 2017, p. 14)*

There is a growing knowledge base in African and international literature on transitions in the first year and the first-year experience to which the JSAA has contributed greatly over the years *inter alia* with two guest-edited issues on the first-year student experience in 2016

(JSAA, Volume 4 Issue 1) and in 2018 (JSAA, Volume 6 Issue 1). Student transitions have been an important topic in at least ten articles published by JSAA in the past, including most recently the research article by Annsilla Nyar titled "The 'Double Transition' for First-Year Students: Understanding the Impact of Covid-19 on South Africa's First-Year University Students" published in the JSAA Covid-19 Special Issue of 2021 (Nyar, 2021). The knowledge base on transitions must also include research into students' transitions into the correct study programmes; into and through students' senior years and to graduation; and eventually into employment (Getachew & Daniel, 2016; Maree & Molepo, 2004; Young, 2016). Academic advising and career guidance play important roles in this respect (Getachew & Daniel, 2016; Janeke, 2021; Smith, 2021; Strydom et al., 2016).

Academic Advising

Notions and practices of academic advising have proliferated over the past decades in higher education, not only here on the African continent but also abroad. In literature on student transitions, academic advising is seen as an effective strategy to support students in overcoming obstacles towards academic success not only by providing academic support but often also non-academic support (Ogude et al., 2012; Smith, 2021; Strydom et al., 2016; Fussy, 2018).

Academic advising is defined as

> *[…] a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes. Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes students' educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes (NACADA, 2006, p.10).*

With their work as guest-editors of this issue, François Strydom and Gugu Tiroyabone have opened up the conceptual and praxis field on academic advising for Student Affairs in Africa. This work is supported by and focussed on the South African Department of Higher Education and Training's national project on academic advising. The first seven articles in this issue are specifically focused on academic advising and offer case studies, critical discussions, and reviews, on this high-impact practice in higher education.

In addition to the articles on academic advising, there is also a set of articles that deals with a wider variety of themes to keep the JSAA lens as wide and diverse as possible. We start with a case study by Disaapele Mogashana and Moses Basitere of psychosocial support provided within an extended curriculum programme. Robert Kaniki takes the focus to China where he reviews the role of SAS in the cultural experience of international students. The next article explores the barriers and enablers experienced by a range of students in utilising

counselling services, see Sefotho as well as Pitsoane's article. Discussions of student elections by Kwaku Abrefa Busi, Alice Amegah and Francis Arthur-Holmes is followed by an exploratory study around career choices by Chinaza Uleanya, Mofoluwake O. Uleanya, Gedala M. Naidoo, and Yasmin Rugbeer. The issue ends with Hettie Terblanche, Henry Mason and Barend van Wyk's study of first-year students experiences of attending a programme on developing mindsets.

An Expanded JSAA Editorial Board and Structure

The move of the journal from the University of Stellenbosch to the University of Pretoria as its host institution earlier this year has come with a number of innovations. First and foremost, we are proud to announce a group of new editors that join the journal. The new section editors are:

- Dr Angelina Wilson Fadiji, Senior Lecturer: Educational Psychology, University of Pretoria, South Africa;
- Dr Henry Mason, Directorate: Student Development and Support, Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa;
- Dr Annsilla Nyar, Director: South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC), University of Johannesburg, South Africa;
- Dr Vicki Trowler, Post-doctoral Research Assistant: Pedagogic Research, Department of Chemical Sciences, School of Applied Sciences, University of Huddersfield, United Kingdom; and,
- Dr Angelique Wildschut, Chief Research Specialist: Post-schooling and Work, Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town, South Africa.

They are joining the existing team of editors made up of:

- Prof. Teboho Moja, Professor of Higher Education, New York University; Extra-ordinary Professor of Higher Education, University of the Western Cape, South Africa;
- Dr Birgit Schreiber, Africa Centre for Transregional Research, Alberts-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg, Germany; USAf Higher Education Leadership and Management; Vice-President: International Association of Student Affairs and Services;
- Prof. Thierry M. Luescher, Ph.D., Research Director: Post-schooling and Work, Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town; Affiliate Associate Professor of Higher Education, University of the Free State, South Africa;
- Dr Bekele Workie Ayele, Senior Lecturer and Dean: Teacher Education, College

of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Kotebe Metropolitan University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia;
- Dr Martin Mandew, Campus Principal, Qwaqwa Campus, University of the Free State, South Africa; and,
- Dr W.P. Wahl, Director: Student Affairs, University of the Free State, South Africa.

With the expansion of the group of section editors has also come a change to the structure of the editorial board to reflect better its *de facto* operations. The editorial board now has a three-tier structure with the JSAA Editorial Executive sharing the day-to-day executive editorial and operational work. The Editorial Executive is made up of Prof. Teboho Moja as Editor-in-Chief, Dr Birgit Schreiber, and Prof. Thierry Luescher. It is supported administratively by Bronwin Sebonka who also manages the day-to-day online manuscript system. We welcome the new members and are grateful for their service.

The expanded list of section editors focuses on the editorial aspect of specific manuscripts. They help vet the incoming manuscripts, organise the double-blind peer review processes, and advise on the ways to proceed with a particular manuscript. Frequently, reviewers are drawn from our growing list of African and international scholars and expert practitioners. In this respect, we also envisage that our prestigious International Editorial Advisory Board will be renewed in the course of 2022 to ensure that the JSAA continues to have the best support from international experts from across the globe so as to progress on its quest to be the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the Student Affairs domain in universities on the African continent.

A New Publisher

Volume 9 Issue 2 "Academic Advising" is the first issue of the JSAA produced with the University of Pretoria's Emerging Scholars Initiative Press (ESI Press). We are grateful to our publishing team led by Heather Thuynsma and Makone Maja for their work. Over the past decade, the JSAA has been served with distinction first by African Minds publishers and then African Sun Media. The appointment of ESI Press as new service provider is prompted by our move to the University of Pretoria. We are grateful to African Minds Publishers and African Sun Media for the sterling job they performed over the years.

Online Submission, Editorial and Review System

Finally, with the shift to Pretoria University we have moved our entire submission, editorial and publishing processes online. While the JSAA has always used the PKP open access journal management system, it has handled all submission, editorial and peer review processes until

June 2021 using email. This was to accommodate colleagues (especially potential authors) who might lack the internet access to be able to successfully navigate the online journal management system. Covid-19, however, has leap-frogged many, voluntarily or not, into developing the capabilities to engage more successfully online. We have therefore taken the bold step to request all our authors, editors and reviewers to move into the online space and use the website's backend system for managing their interactions with each other. Bronwin Sebonka is ready to provide any support in this regard.

Many of these developments are prompted by the increasing number of manuscript submissions, which is a fantastic development: African Student Affairs is writing! We see more research about, from, and for Africa, across the entire scope of Student Affairs, Student Support and Services, and get submissions from a diversity of researchers and practitioners from our continent as well as overseas. We would like to continue to encourage African Student Affairs practitioners and researchers to contribute to the emerging knowledge base of African Student Affairs scholarship in our quest to professionalise Student Affairs in Africa.

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Guest Editorial

The Academic Advising Issue

Gugu Wendy Tiroyabone[i] & François Strydom[ii]

Academic advising is critical to improve student success and to advance social justice. International research indicates that academic advising is the "single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (Light, 2001) and that "every advising contact is a precious opportunity for a meaningful interaction with the student" (Kuh, 2008). Therefore, the section in this special edition of the *Journal for Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)* on academic advising represents an important milestone for the development of academic advising as an emerging field in South Africa. The seven articles help to address the lack of South African research on academic advising and its impact. These articles share the reflections and research of deeply committed advisors that have been creating "precious opportunities" for thousands of students during their academic journey. The aim of this selection of papers is to advance scholarship in this emerging field in the South African context. The seven articles include five institutional case studies that provide insights into the impact of different institutional contexts on the development of advising. The last two articles pose broader conceptual questions on advising.

In the first article, Tiroyabone and Strydom introduce the development of academic advising in South Africa over the last decade and, more specifically, at the University of the Free State (UFS) which continues to play a leading role in the development of the field. Obaje and Jeawon offer a critical review of the development of an academic advising approach in the context of the Durban University of Technology. In their contribution on the *Conceptualisation and Early Implementation of an Academic Advising System at the University of Cape Town,* colleagues provide fascinating insights into the development of academic advising in highly decentralised institutions. Naidoo, Byles and Kwenaite at the University of Pretoria, emphasise the importance of social integration for first year students as part of a range of academic advising initiatives offered at this institution. The University of the Witwatersrand case study provides important insights into how

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emergency remote teaching during the Covid pandemic has affected advisor perception.

The two conceptual articles start with the article on *Merging Academic and Career Advising to Offer Holistic Student Support: A University Perspective*. In this paper Schoeman, Loots and Bezuidenhoud emphasise the intertwined nature of academic and career advising and how international frameworks can be adapted to the South African context. The final article by De Klerk uses Archer's Social Realism theoretical framework to scrutinise the complex nature of academic advisors.

All the articles illustrate how these scholars are grappling with the definition of academic advising and where and how it should be optimally positioned in institutions. Although the National Academic Advising Association preamble (NACADA, 2006), defines academic advising as a multidimensional and intentional process grounded in teaching and learning, international literature often positions academic advising as part of student affairs. Therefore, it is fitting that this selection of articles is published in the Journal for Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA) to stimulate conversations on how academic advising can develop in South Africa.

It is important to recognise that the development of academic advising would not have been possible without catalytic environments and sustainable support. An important catalytic environment has been Siyaphumelela (2021) which was generously funded by the Kresge Foundation. Vital sustainable support has been provided by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) which prioritised student (academic) advising as one of the pillars in the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) and also approved collaborative grant funding to grow academic advising in South Africa.

We would like to thank the JSAA editorial team for enabling the creation of this platform to share these seven articles. These are the first of many reflective practitioners and scholars who will share the impact and potential of academic advising in creating more equitable institutional environments that enable student success.

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Research Article

The Development of Academic Advising to Enable Student Success in South Africa

Gugu Wendy Tiroyabone[i] & François Strydom[ii]

Abstract

Universities promote social justice by improving student success; a university degree is one of the most powerful tools to change the economic prospects of students, their families, and communities. For students to succeed, it is vital that they are connected to the wide range of support services in a meaningful way. Unfortunately, many students (especially first-generation students) find it difficult to connect to university environments that are complex and that are often not optimally coordinated. International and national research shows that academic advising plays a critical role in improving student engagement and success by facilitating better coordination and integration of support. Academic advising provides students with relevant information, facilitates their conceptual understanding of the university, and allows students the opportunity to form a meaningful relationship with the institution through an advisor and by means of various advising initiatives. This paper shares international perspectives on the critical importance of academic advising for student success. Building on these perspectives, we reflect on the development of academic advising in South Africa, and on its potential for enhancing student success in our context. We provide an institutional perspective by sharing the journey of the University of the Free State. In doing so, we show the positive impact of advising before and during the pandemic, and we conclude with lessons for the future of academic advising in the South African context.

Keywords

Academic advising, student success, higher education

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Introduction

The improvement of student success is acknowledged as a critical social justice imperative. A World Bank analysis of the Returns of Investment (ROI) has determined in its findings that a tertiary education qualification in sub-Saharan Africa has greater returns on investment than in all other economies (DHET, 2015). Therefore, a university qualification (especially in sub-Saharan Africa) is one of the most powerful tools to change the economic prospects of students, their families, and communities. By focusing on student success, universities can become generators of greater equality, social justice, as well as economic prosperity (World Bank, 2018; World Bank, 2021). However, improving all students' chances of success is a notoriously difficult goal, especially in South Africa, which is one of the most unequal countries in the world (DHET, 2016). The task of improving students' chances of success is further complicated by the complex nature of universities that are known to function in silos, which leads to a lack of integrated student support (Craig, 2017; Hunt, 2021; Van Heerden, 2009).

International and national research shows that academic advising improves student engagement and success by facilitating better coordination and integration of support, which empowers students with information, enhances their conceptual understanding, and provides an opportunity to form a relationship with the institution through an advisor and/or advising interventions (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2018; Habley, 1994; Kuh, 2005; Strydom et al., 2017).

In this paper, we share our perspective as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983), who are reflecting on more than a decade of institutional academic advising interventions and research projects, as well as more recent national developments in this field. By taking a more reflective stance (Patton, 2015) towards both our practice and research, we hope to share our thoughts on the development and potential of academic advising for student success in a new normal.

Defining Student Success

To better understand the ROI of an undergraduate degree in South Africa, one needs to reflect on the complex ways in which student success is defined and measured. In their report on student access and success, Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) indicate that student success should not be merely understood as graduation, but that it should rather be understood to encompass quality, employability, and personal growth, particularly in addressing transformation challenges in access and success. They emphasise how South Africa's low student success rates have been recognised as having systemic causes, including poor school education. From an international perspective, Tinto (2012) highlights through his work, the complex nature of student success. He argues that student success does not arise by chance; instead, it is fostered. Moreover, student success is a by-product of intentional, structured, and proactive actions and policies.

Linking these international and national perspectives to what student success is and to how it is defined and measured, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) describes student success as "enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally, and socially valuable" (CHE, 2014, p. 1).

Considering these different perspectives, our definition of student success is that it includes, in addition to passing grades, the development of cognitive and social-emotional competencies, as well as the acquisition of proficiencies that speak to the demands placed on 21st-century graduates by employers. This includes being able to actively participate in a team; being able to work with and learn from diverse people and environments; and the ability to recognise and live out the social responsibility of a democratic citizen (Strydom et al., 2017).

Why is Academic Advising Critical for South African Higher Education?

Reflecting on the development of higher education in South Africa, evidence points to various iterations of policy, governance, and funding models that are committed to supporting not only participation (access) in higher education, but also to student success (NCHE, 1996; DHET, 1997 & 2013). The focus on access and success is directly linked to the objectives of the National Development Plan to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality (NPC, 2011).

From 2000 to 2008 Undergraduate Cohort Study for Public Higher Education Institutions (DHET, 2016), 19.8% of the students who entered the system in the 2005 cohort in contact mode graduated after three years of study, 57.1% after six years of study, and 63.6% after ten years of study. These statistics paint a concerning picture for the sector. However, they also provide opportunities to confront the challenges through the development of effective interventions that enable reasonable chances of success. National student engagement shows that 70% of entering students are the first in their families to enter university, which means that they need advice on how to navigate higher education successfully (Universities South Africa (USAf), 2018).

As mentioned earlier, student success requires structured, intentional interventions that integrate different student support initiatives to meet students where they are, and to engage them in activities that enable their success (Strydom et al., 2017). Habley (2007) and Tinto (2012) describe academic advising as a safety-net or "hub of the wheel" that meets students (especially first-generation students) where they are and that create coordination points for support services.

Lowenstein (2013) goes further to describe academic advising as a "locus of learning" that helps students better understand the "logic" in their academic curricula in relation to their career plans or aspirations. Considering the challenges of fragmentation and the lack of coordinated student support within higher education institutions, it is clear that academic advising as a potential "hub" could provide a possible solution, which could help facilitate better coordination and integration of student support in higher education.

International Perspectives on Academic Advising

The diverse expectations of academic advising across different institutional types and contexts complicate the definition of academic advising. As a result, no standard or universal definition of academic advising exists. However, Larson et al. (2018) propose that academic advising applies knowledge of the higher education landscape to empower students and campus members to successfully navigate academic interactions that are linked to higher education.

Research has found that the process of academic advising has a powerful effect on student persistence and retention when the advisor provides support (Drake, 2011). Yarbrough (2002) indicates that research and practice show that the brief exchanges between advisor and advisee have the greatest impact on the student's sense of self-efficacy towards completing their degree requirements.

When advising is viewed as an educational process and done well, it holds great potential in being central to the process of connecting students with learning opportunities that foster and support their engagement, success, and the attainment of key learning outcomes (Campbell & Nutt, 2008). Student engagement researchers affirm that advising can be viewed as a way to connect students to the campus and to help them feel that someone is looking out for them (Kuh et al., 2005). The importance of advising is emphasised by Light (2001), who proposed that academic advising is potentially the "single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81).

Cuseo (n.d.) reports that academic advising has a number of other positive benefits (which indirectly may increase student persistence and retention in tertiary education), including increasing students' overall satisfaction with their tertiary experience, increase utilisation of campus resources, developing educational and career decision-making skills, and facilitating more frequent student-staff contact outside of the classroom. It has also been found that contact with a concerned, caring staff member from one's tertiary institution plays a significant role in student retention and academic success by increasing students' engagement, development, and cognitive growth (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Different aspects of advising such as advisor accountability, advisor empowerment, student responsibility, student self-efficacy, student study skills, and perceived support have all significantly linked academic advising to student success (Young-Jones et al., 2013). Finally, academic advising has also been positively associated with students' sense of development and satisfaction with the university and it can have an impact on all facets of a student's academic experience—ranging from development to practical application of study skills (Pargett, 2011).

A Brief History of Academic Advising in South Africa

In the international arena, particularly in the United States, academic advising has been in

existence for over four decades. We would like to share our reflection—as researchers and practitioners—on the development of academic advising in the South African context. In South Africa, a direct reference and record of academic advising can only be traced back to 2010, stemming from the work of the South African Survey on Student Engagement (SASSE). The SASSE findings highlight the importance of academic advising and underline its importance for student success (Strydom et al., 2017).

In 2010, two universities piloted initiatives based on academic advising principles. The earliest definition of academic advising in South Africa is that of the UFS that describes it as a developmental teaching and learning high-impact process, which is aimed at enhancing student success. The UFS was also the first institution to be affiliated to the global academic advising community, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), which is based in the USA.

For the purpose of positioning academic advising within the South African higher education context, it is important to reflect on the important role that national policy changes have played in the development of academic advising. As stated before, higher education policy has always emphasised the importance of student success. In the early 2000s, the Teaching Develop Grant (TDG) offered by DHET encouraged the development of student support. However, it was only when the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) (2018) included student advising as one of the "pillars" in enhancing student success that advising rose to prominence. The DHET intentionally supported the development of advising by providing collaborative grant funding for seven institutions, led by the UFS, to develop academic advising in South Africa. The collaborative grant initiative was built on the work in the Advising work stream, which formed part of the Siyaphumelela (2021) initiative. The collaboration in this work stream provided a national definition of academic advising. This definition asserts that academic advising is an ongoing and intentional teaching and learning practice that empowers the student in their learning and development process to explore, align, and succeed in their personal, academic, and career goals. Therefore, as a shared responsibility between the Academic Advisor and advisee, advising aims to maximise the students' potential by facilitating a conceptual understanding, sharing relevant information, and developing a relationship focused on promoting academic success. The envisaged result is that students have a meaningful academic experience while in higher education, and feel a sense of belonging to the institution while maximising their potential to succeed (ELETSA, 2021).

The collaborative grant also led to the formation of ELETSA (*Advising in Sesotho*), the first academic advising association for South Africa. Across universities, there has been a progressive effort to position academic advising as a practice that improves coordination, effectiveness, and enhances student success (Habley, 1994). The development of this profession in South Africa is facilitated through the Academic Advising Professional Development (AAPD)—an accredited Short Learning Programme (SLP) which is offered by the UFS.

The Journey of the UFS

In this section, we reflect on different stages in the development of academic advising at the UFS over more than a decade. Each new stage was the result of an interplay between intentional evidence-based and literature informed planning, interaction with international peers, and also changes in the institutional environment. This includes reflections on how the COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced advising.

Research and Conceptual Foundation

The drivers of academic advising development at the UFS were first, the institution recognising in 2006 that student success, especially the achievement gap between black and white students, needed to be addressed and secondly, the development of the SASSE, which introduced academic advising as critical to student success. Therefore, student engagement research guided the development of academic advising at the UFS; this research highlighted the potential of academic advising to support an increasing number of first-generation students by empowering them to make sense of the support that was available at the institution, thus enabling them to connect with the institution through an advisor.

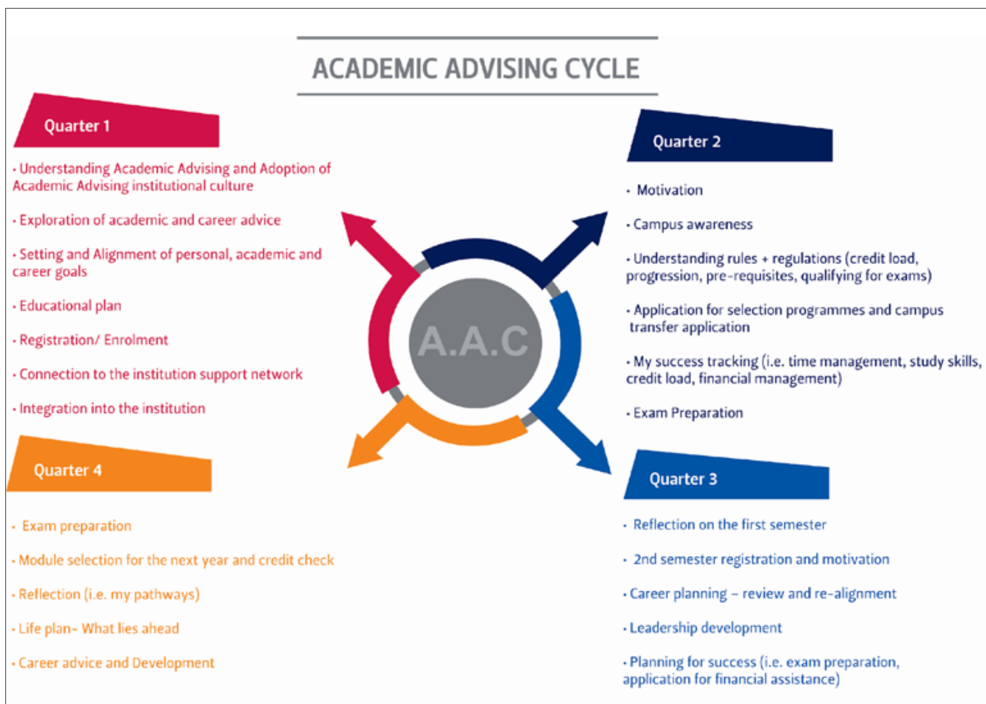
As mentioned, the UFS was the first institution in South Africa to join NACADA in 2010. Our collaboration with this global community helped us learn from the journeys of other countries. We were able to identify similar struggles, but also unique differences that would deeply influence the development of academic advising within the UFS. Since its inception and definition as a professional role within higher education, academic advising has globally been viewed as a process within the teaching and learning arena. Habley (1993) identifies the three core pillars of academic advising as to the informational, the conceptual, and the relational. Using these three pillars, the development of advising at the UFS needed to consider:

- what information students needed and when (informational);
- how to empower advisors to help facilitate students' conceptual understanding of their academic journey through the institution (conceptual); and
- how to facilitate the development of meaningful advising relationships between advisors and students through various platforms (relational).

The three pillars provided the foundation for the development of an advising system at the UFS that assists students proactively in navigating the institutional structure and systems, thus helping them to integrate their academic, personal, social, and emotional development in mapping their careers. By exploring the students' personal, academic, and career goals, the advising process promoted alignment, better use of student support, and the enablement of student success.

In structuring and sequencing academic advising for students at the UFS, the Central Academic Advising Office, which is based at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), has developed a generic academic advising cycle (see Figure 1) to guide the deployment of advising, while ensuring that support is "just-in-time" and responsive to where the student is. The cycle also instils in students a sense of ownership of their studies as aligned with the activities of the academic year.

Figure 1
UFS Academic Advising Cycle



The development of the academic advising cycle was complemented by an analysis of students' credit load. The importance of course selection in advising is supported by Habley (1993). In addition, Volkwein and Lorang (1996) indicate that a student's credit load for the first semester tends to be predictive of the credit load in the second semester. An investigation of the impact of students' academic credit load had shown that a significant number of UFS students, especially those in extended curriculum programmes, were registering for too many credits (CTL, 2013). From this 2011-2013 longitudinal report, the UFS had identified the causes of credit overload, and the university had worked to drastically reduce the number of students who were taking

too many credits. By helping students with their course (module) selection, academic advisors were able to engage individually with students in the alignment of their academic and career plans. This intentional focus on managing credit load enabled the university to ensure that it was optimising the subsidy through more accurate enrolment, while enhancing student success.

Capacity Building and Innovation

The development of academic advising at the UFS, results from a continuous interaction between innovations in support and expanding capacity. In 2010, academic advising constituted 50% of a full-time staff member's job. However, as the benefits of academic advising to students and the institution became clearer, more staff was appointed in the CTL-based Central Academic Advising Offie, as well as at faculty level. Today, the institutional Academic Advising Forum includes 38 Faculty Managers and Academic Advisors across all faculties and campuses at the UFS. Internally, the capacity of these staff members took the form of basic academic advising training, which, since 2018, has morphed into an accredited NQF level 5 Short Learning Programme, Academic Advising Professional Development (AAPD). Additional academic advising innovations at the UFS include:

- improved academic advising practices during registration;
- online advising (including email and Facebook);
- residence-based advising workshops;
- senior and post graduate student-focused workshops;
- an advising unit in the First Year Seminar module;
- a programme to support quintile 1-3 students; and
- the development of student advising guidelines.

Demonstrating the Impact of Advising

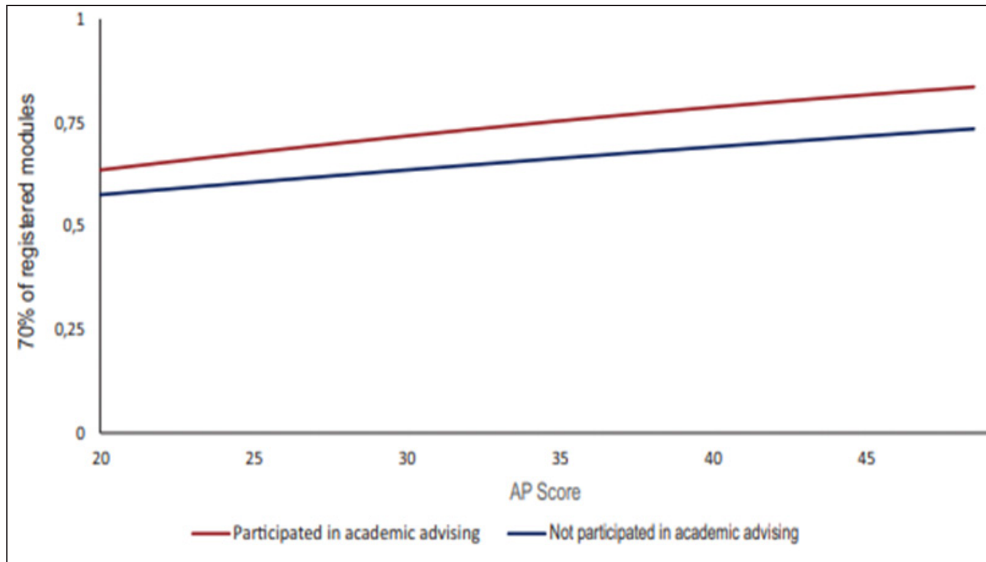
Kuh (2008, p. 79) noted that "every advising contact is a precious opportunity for a meaningful interaction with the student." Nel (2014) affirms the importance of advising by showing that academic (student) advising can go a long way in aiding students to cope with challenges that they experience. Academic advising helps students to "connect the dots" between academic and non-academic development and support, enabling them to turn their challenges into manageable possibilities.

In quantifying the impact of academic advising at the UFS (pre-Covid), a longitudinal study titled "Creating Pathways for Success: Academic Advising and Student Engagement" was conducted and reported on in 2018. This study used mixed modelling (see Figure 2) to show how students who participated in academic advising have had a higher probability of

passing more than 70% of their modules than a comparable group who had not participated in advising. This was the case regardless of students' Admission Point (AP) scores.

Figure 2

Impact of Advising Interventions Pre-Covid on Probability to Pass Modules (UFS 2015–2017) N=1456



The UFS was able to show this impact because it had scaled advising to reach over 10 000 undergraduate students per year before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Pivoting Advising for Emergency Remote Learning and Teaching

In response to the pandemic, the UFS developed the Keep Calm #UFSLearnOn and #UFSTeachOn campaigns. The #UFSLearnOn campaign focused on pivoting student support online, which included academic advising, while the #UFSTeachOn campaign focused on pivoting staff support online. The Central Academic Advising Office extended its advising practices and approaches to include online student support. It was important for the Central Advisors to approach advising students online with the same process and methodology that they would have followed in a face-to-face setting, while being cognisant of the unique needs and limitations that students were having at the time. While providing one-on-one support through telephonic advising appointments, the advisors also recognised the need for scaled group interventions to address some of the common themes that emerged through various student interactions; these resulted in an E-Advising strategy. The activities and initiatives presented by the

Central Academic Advising Office served students across the Bloemfontein, South, and QwaQwa campuses. Table 1 is a summary of the activities and pivoted initiatives provided by the Central Academic Advising Office during 2020.

Table 1

Scaling of Advising Services during the Pandemic (2020)

Academic Advising initiatives in 2020	Student reach
Online workshops	394
Online residence workshops	270
Telephonic Q & A appointments	113
Peer Advisor training and development (i.e. tutors, success coaches, mentors, SRC, gateway buddies, residence committee)	578
UFSS (First year seminar module)	8 310
Podcasts (6 recorded)	543
No student left behind (NSLB) – Individualised proactive support	413
Digital Teaching & Learning support magazine – #UFSLearnOn (11 editions)	77 400 aggregated hits on a webpage 171 369 Facebook reach 357 Twitter likes, 221 retweets
Individual online advising appointments	1245
Facebook reach (UFS Academic Advising)	2691

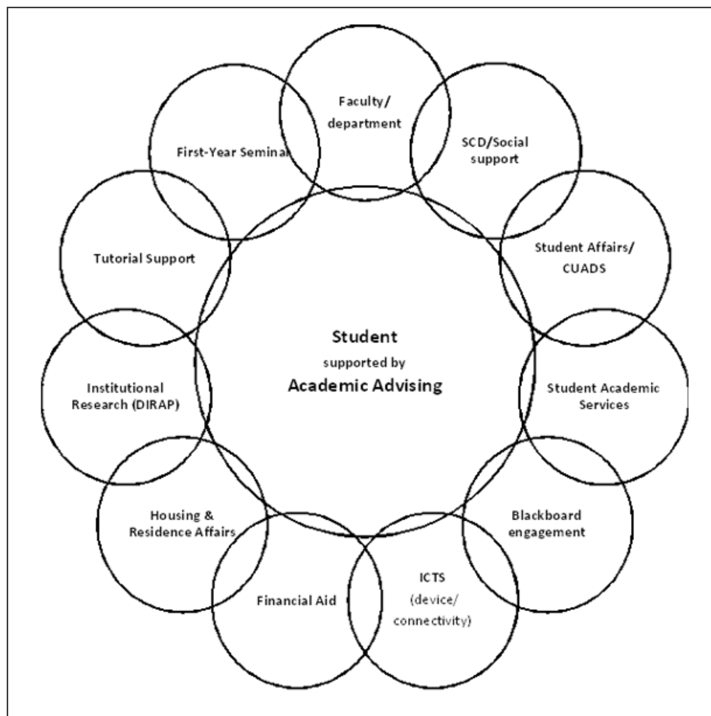
Leveraging Data to Support the Students

In addition to advancing and pivoting advising services for a blended future, the scaling of analytics to provide timeous and proactive support to especially vulnerable students during the pandemic became a growing necessity. In response, the UFS had developed the *No Student Left Behind* (NSLB) initiative. The NSLB initiative was based on an analysis of Blackboard activity (or a lack thereof) throughout 2020, and it also included vulnerable students who were identified through other avenues (e.g. lecturers, facilitators, the Student Representative Council (SRC), among others). These students were contacted by the Central Academic Advising Office to find out why they were not active on Blackboard and to identify the challenges that they might have faced in completing their academic activities while they were

in a remote online environment. In an effort to provide holistic and responsive support to students, academic advisors kept students at the core of the initiatives by listening to them, by empowering them, and by referring them to relevant support structures such as online tutorials, mentoring, writing support, mental health support, connectivity support (via the Global Protect VPN), and/or to laptop and printed material provision. Figure 3 provides a graphic illustration of the student who was positioned at the centre and who was referred to the relevant support services to ensure appropriate advising.

Figure 3

Academic Advising Ensuring that Students Receive Support



Throughout, data was captured on the Learner Case Management System and analysed to determine trends in the types of support that these students needed. The NSLB enabled 99.95% of students to participate in the 2020 academic year. Alternative educational plans were put in place for the 0.05% of students who were not able to participate.

The NSLB initiative highlighted the importance of academic advising as a hub that can help coordinate and improve the efficiency of student support initiatives. The NSLB illustrates how data analytics can further assist evidence-based and systematic academic advising approaches to enable student success.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shared our reflections on the development of academic advising in South Africa and at the UFS. We have argued that academic advising can play a critical role in serving as a hub to advise students on how to optimally make use of academic and non-academic support and opportunities to enhance their chances of success while promoting cohesion between students and their institution.

We have learned valuable lessons during our national and local journey. First, the conceptualisation of academic advising needs to be informed by global literature, then deeply contextualised by using quantitative and qualitative data of experiences, as illustrated in the UFS journey. Second, quality advising in a post-Covid blended future needs to be an integration of high-tech and high-touch initiatives; that is, technology can enhance efficiency and the early identification of students in need of support. However, it is the advising relationship that creates a connection and that enables a student to succeed. Third, the ethical use of data and data analytics can help to create differentiated and individualised support to students at scale. Fourth, continuous professional training and development are vital to the development and growth of advising. Finally, for academic advising to become the hub of improved effectiveness and of enhanced success, all parties involved need to commit to the journey as expressed in the following African proverb:

"If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

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Research Article

A Critical Review of the Adopted Academic Advising Approaches at the Durban University of Technology: Unpacking its Strengths and Challenges

Timothy Aduojo Obaje[i] & Rosheena Jeawon[ii]

Abstract

This paper offers a critical review of the adopted academic advising strategies at the Durban University of Technology. It is worth acknowledging that academic advising as a scholarly practice is in its developmental stage at South African tertiary institutions. The paper draws on the experiences of the authors as academic advisors to reflect on the strengths and challenges of the practice of academic advising. It interrogates and analyses the authors' experiences vis-à-vis the extant literature on academic advising practices. In this way, the paper engages and advances best practices while simultaneously contributing to the body of literature on academic advising in South Africa.

Keywords

Academic advising, higher education, first-year students, student support, academic excellence

Introduction

South African higher education institutions (HEIs) are committed to finding ways of creating and developing a productive relationship with all students. The establishment of affable relationships with all the students (including postgraduate students) is an objective that is considered mutually beneficial in HEIs. A healthy relationship between individual students and the institution increases the prospect of meeting students' needs; thus pleasant academic experiences are created. The obvious need for intervention into students' academic journeys

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as a pathway to enhanced academic experiences, and ultimately to improve throughput rates, presents challenges in determining the best way to address this need (Khauoe, 2020; Botha, 2010; & Kanakana et al., 2010). One of the many deficits which (subject to one's school of thought) may equally be considered as a strength, is the lack of a common approach that could be adapted by all institutions in the country. Although the unavailability of such a uniform approach is generally perceived as a shortfall, this paper favours the inherent strength of a diversified approach to support students' academic experiences across South African HEIs. Hence, this paper offers a critical review of strengths and challenges that are pertinent to the academic advising strategies of the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Academic advising as a professional and scholarly practice at many South African HEIs is in a developmental phase. In this paper, the authors interrogate and analyse their experiences vis-à-vis the extant literature on academic advising practices. In this way, the paper's recognition of some of the best practices in academic advising contributes to the advancement of improved academic advising practices in South African HEIs.

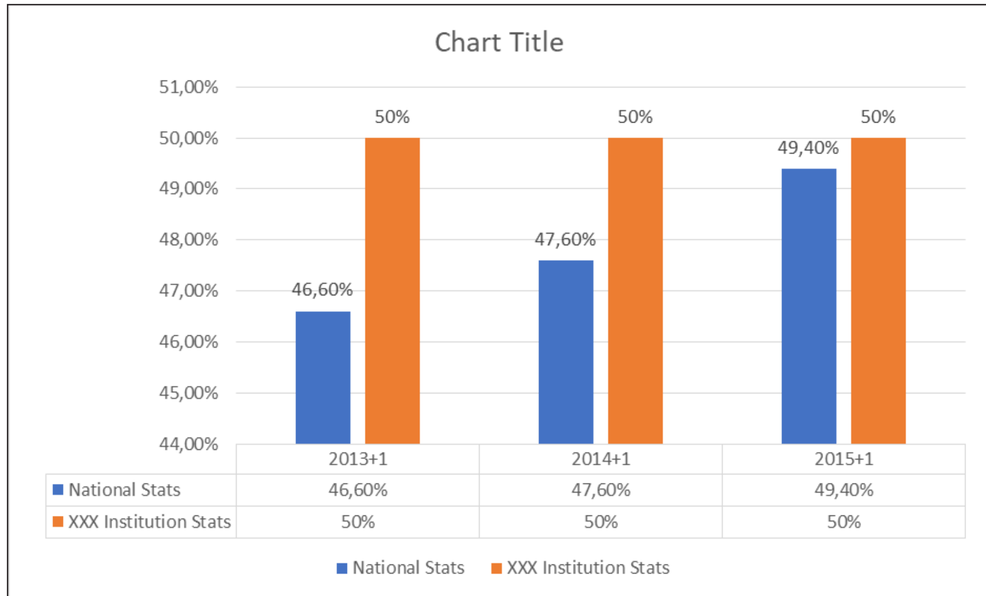
Historical Background to Academic Advising at the Durban University of Technology

The White Paper for Post-school Education and Training of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2014) asserts the need to develop graduates with the skills and competencies that establish the fundamentals for lifelong learning. These include critical, analytical, problem-solving, and communication skills, as well as the ability to deal with change, diversity, and in particular the tolerance of different views and ideas. This places a high demand and expectation on the South African HEIs to reposition them with the goal of attaining the abovementioned White Paper's objective. It is common knowledge that the vision and objectives of the White Paper for Post-school Education and Training (DHET, 2014), which link with the idea of "free higher education", present HEIs with added challenges. This was uniquely affirmed by Pinheiro (2019, p. iv) in his assertion of the significant levels of pressure which confront the HEIs, where there is a responsibility to support large numbers of students with varying needs, backgrounds, priorities, and expectations. He further notes that "it is within this dynamic context that the South African Council on Higher Education implemented the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) devised the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP)" (Pinheiro, 2019, p. iv). It is noteworthy that these university-wide interventions (QEP and UCDP) were designed to systemically enhance higher education in South Africa without surrendering or jeopardising academic excellence in our institutions.

The figure below, which is a product of a report by the DHET and the annual report of the DUT, underscores poor throughput rates across the HEIs in South Africa.

Figure 1

DUT Institution and National Total Percentage of Graduates for Three-year Undergraduate Qualifications in Contact Tuition



Comparable to the statistics of university students' national throughput rate, the 2018 Annual Report of the DUT displays similar trends in the throughput rate of its students during the same period. Despite the fact that the DUT's graduate throughput rate exceeded the national average, it is worth emphasising that a 50% throughput rate is still below the desired rate. The graph in Figure 1 makes an indispensable case for the provision of a deliberate and strategically developed programme that is geared towards students' academic development and success. Beyond throughput rates, students' under-preparedness is a cause for national concern; the DUT is no exception. According to Schreiber (2007), the unpreparedness of students is compounded by the fact that some students from rural areas seemingly cannot function effectively in the city-style university environment. The exclusive use of English as the medium of instruction, finding suitable accommodation, and financial challenges compound students' challenges to have productive academic experiences.

In response to the poor throughput rates and in line with global trends, many South African HEIs are now making a conscious and concerted effort to enhance the performance of their existing students through a variety of student interventions. Academic advising is one such student development intervention at the DUT. The Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) steers the academic advising intervention. CELT is a centre that remains pivotal to the enhancement of quality learning, teaching, and assessment across all academic programmes which are offered at the DUT.

It is positioned to advance and drive the attainment of the DUT's ENVISION2030[1] through its execution and fulfilment of the four interlinked areas in academic development, which include student development, staff development, curriculum development, and institutional development. Within the ambit of student development, the DUT offers a variety of student support services in addition to academic advising. These include but are not limited to the First Year Students' Experience, the Residential Education Programme, and the Technology for Learning. The next section delves into the discourse of academic advising as evident in the extant literature, with a particular interest in the theoretical underpinnings that guide the provision of academic advising at DUT.

Academic Advising Defined

Generally, academic advising is construed as a process where appointed academic advisors provide ongoing guidance, information sharing, and other relevant support (both academic and non-academic) to students to improve their higher education experiences and to promote their success (Medernach, 2018). There is a widespread understanding that the concept of academic advising was initiated in the United States of America. Considering the benefits associated with it, the trends of academic advising was exported to and implemented in other North American countries. Through such exportation and adaptation, the concepts spread to universities across the world. Its widespread adoption fostered rapid advancement of academic advising, and this is displayed in the chronological history of academic advising in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Chronological History of Academic Advising

Era	Description
First Era: (1620 – 1870)	The first era lasted between 1620 and 1870 and was characterised by a prescriptive approach to academic advising
Second Era: (1870–1970	In the second era (1870–1970), student advising as a concept was yet to be articulated. Nevertheless, HEIs were beginning to provide basic informal forms of educational support (Shandro et al., 2020, p. 318)
Third Era: (1970 – 2003)	The process associated with student advising had gained predominant importance within universities; these efforts corresponded to the needs and efforts to acknowledge, understand, and address students' needs at universities

1 ENVISION2030 shows the DNA strands of the DUT and facilitate DUT's community's comprehension of the institution's strategic perspectives.

Era	Description
Fourth Era: (2003 – Undefined)	The fourth era had continued from 2003 onwards and continues up to the immediate past. This era was defined by its effort to establish formal educational councils to monitor students' needs
Fifth Era: Characterised by technological advancement	The fifth historical era may be understood as the current phase of academic advising; this is the era with an increased invasion of technology in the academic advising space

Based on the views of Cardona (2019, p. 1830) and Jones (2019, p. 450), the history of academic advising can be delineated in four phases, and with increasing arguments for a fifth phase. There is no direct correlation between the eras and the approaches to academic advising. This implies that the first era does not solely translate to the first approach to academic advising. Building onto this understanding, the first and second eras in the development of academic advising were dominated by the prescriptive approach to academic advising, given its status as the pioneered approach that generally guided academic advisors. The prescriptive approach is renowned for its use of set protocols that guide actions taken by the advisor, and also for its distinct power dynamic between the advisor and the advisee (Crookston, 2009). Within the frame of this form of advising, the advisor-advisee relationship is strongly guided by the advisor's authority in relation to the student. The students are simply instructed on the line of action that they should take to achieve set goals. Barbuto et al. (2011) encapsulated this approach as the student's adherence to the advisor's input; whereas Drake (2011, p. 10) holds that "prescriptive advising involves limiting advising sessions to academic matters such as course selection, the process of registration, and explanations of degree curricula". Elsewhere, prescriptive advising is understood as a "one-directional" approach. It entails a direct transfer of information from the advisor to the student (recipient), which results in somewhat passive participation of students in the advising processes. It was on this basis that Lowenstein (2009) claimed that the prescriptive model constitutes little more than book-keeping, in the sense that it does not encourage a sense of growth and/or development within the student and/or the advisor-advisee relationship. In summary, the alleged loopholes of the prescriptive approach underscore its superficial and partial nature. Consequently, this approach denies students and the advisor the opportunity to make a positive difference in the life of the student in this unique phase of their journey in life.

The third and fourth eras saw a series of evolution and development in the comprehension, process, and objective of academic advising. These account for the rapid progression of academic advising to include developmental, learning-centred, strength-based, and appreciative approaches. The need for active and engaged student participation in their academic development and learning experiences became evident in the 1970s in a comprehensive set of observations about the value of student-faculty relations. Hardee (1970), cited in Grites (2013, p. 5), advocated for the holistic education of students

that embodies intellectual, emotional, physical, social, vocational, moral, economic, and aesthetical development. This insight has greatly inspired thinking about the advancement of the developmental approach to academic advising. It advocated a collaborative mindset in advising students; a collaborative disposition encourages a close student-advisor relationship, which is intended to aid students in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the utilisation of the full range of institutional and community resources (Winston et al., p. 1982). In light of this understanding, writers such as Appleby (2008) view developmental advising as a gradual reallocation of responsibilities for their development from the advisors to the students. In so doing, the students will cultivate the value of accountability, as well as the development of problem-solving and decision-making skills.

The learning-centred approach focuses on the academic competence of the students. Consequently, academic advising within the framework of this approach strives to meet academic-oriented goals rather than developmental goals (Kerr, 2018). A key theoretical difference between learning-centred and developmental approaches is that in learning-centred approaches, the advisor performs a teaching role in the life of the student.

The fundamental tenet of the strengths-based theory is a focus on identifying and working with students' strengths instead of applying deficit remediation when students struggle at university. In strengths-based approaches, students' talents are used as the foundation for advising and everything the processes entailed, including career planning and addressing non-academic concerns that students might express.

Appreciative advisors work with students to identify strengths, sources of motivation, and potential by using a process of positive questioning (Hudson & Bloom, 2007; Truschel, 2008). This approach assumes that levels of student motivation and persistence peak when institutional expectations align with student perceptions of ability. Hence, the appreciative advisor focuses on attaining this alignment with the student (Truschel, 2008) by means of action-oriented, positive questioning, and the use of positive, supportive language.

The fifth era is characterised by technological advancement. As evident in Tyton Partners' (2015) assertion, technology is becoming increasingly popular as a means of creating and maintaining effective student advising systems at HEIs. This consultancy holds that between 2015 and 2017, the number of South African HEIs that reported on the use of technology to enhance student advising has increased from 32% to 53%. The advent of technology in academic advising offers enormous benefits given the inherent advantages of technology in education. Technology provides fast and efficient ways for advising systems to contact university students. It is cost-effective and it can be centralised as a feature on the university's student advising webpage for easy access, thereby reassuring students that their queries are taken seriously and that a response is delivered timeously.

Globally, one of the key challenges to academic advising is the lack of trained professionals

in the field Mikluscak (2010), in his study of training and development provided to community college academic advisors, re-echoed that advisors with the appropriate knowledge and expertise could help students overcome adversities. He noted that without skilful advisors to guide them, students rarely discovered the persistence necessary to successfully navigate the challenges of higher education, and found themselves dropping out within the first year (Mikluscak, 2010). He further asserted that the lack of training and development for advisors contributed to deficiencies in advising services.

The study conducted by Ayuk and Koma (2019) demonstrated that the ratio of permanent academic staff to students in public South African HEIs has progressively improved from 55 students in 2016 to 51 in 2019. In contrast to this, the ratio of academic advisors to registered students at the South Africa HEIs calls for urgent attention. Similar to the DUT, many HEIs in South Africa employ the services of one academic advisor for an entire faculty, college, or department. Practices of this nature undermine the inherent worth of academic advising services, thus making the realisation of the academic advising vision and objectives unattainable.

At the DUT, academic advising is a developmental process that assists students with the clarification of their life/career goals and with the development of educational plans for the realisation of these goals. The advisor serves as a facilitator of communication, as a coordinator of learning experiences through the course and career planning and academic progress review, and as an agent of referral to other university agencies. The following section builds on this understanding of academic advising at the DUT to unpack the institution's adopted academic advising approaches.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Approaches to Academic Advising at the Durban University of Technology

As acknowledged above, academic advising is informed by a variety of theories subject to the contextual realities of each institution. The various foundational theories include student development, cognitive development, career development, learning, decision-making, multiculturalism, retention, personality, moral development, and adult development (Creamer, 2000). At the DUT, academic advising is informed by the cognitive development theory. In the context of this theory, the institution adopts intrusive and proactive approaches for its academic advising practices. The following section discusses a synopsis of the cognitive-developmental theory and how it informs academic advising practices at the DUT.

Synopsis of the Cognitive Development Theories

Various theorists have, over time, engaged with cognitive developmental theories. Scholars such as Giligan (1982), Kitchener and King (1981), and Kohlberg (1984) understood cognitive

development as an ongoing advancement through irreversible, ordered stages of cognitive structure that organises how experiences are perceived and how reasoning functions. Cognitive theories analyse people's thinking processes, rationality, and perceptions of reality around them, with the understanding that "development occurs when [an individual's] cognitive structure is changed, thus enabling new ways of incorporating experience" (Creamer, 2000, p. 23). Such transformation or change occurs when individuals are confronted with the experiences that demand a rethink of prior experiences, long-held beliefs, reconstructed reactions, and answers to events and circumstances.

These theories inform and explain the DUT's institutional practice of academic advising. Academic advising within this institutional context is considered to be an interactive process through which the advisor engages with students to set and achieve their academic goals. According to Creamer (1994, p. 19), "developmental academic advising is the use of interactive teaching, counselling and administrative strategies to assist students to achieve specific learning developmental and life goals." In a similar vein, Tinto (2014) considers academic advising as to the interaction between student engagement and valuable student-staff interactions that allows students to see themselves as valued members of institutional communities. Within the broad spectrum of cognitive-developmental theories, academic advising at the DUT adopts intrusive and proactive approaches in the delivery of their services.

Durban University of Technology's Adopted Approaches to Academic Advising

This section engages with the approaches to academic advising adopted by the DUT. In addition, it offers a rationale for the implementation of the integrative and proactive (intrusive) approaches to academic advising. Academic advising at the DUT is informed by the embedded strengths and potentials of the integrative and proactive/intrusive approaches. As a result, advising at the DUT adopts a hybrid model that employs best practices from the integrative and the proactive approaches to academic advising.

The Integrative and Proactive (Intrusive) Approaches

The integrative approach is the product and reflection of the core values of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). This approach attempts to delineate the responsibilities of academic advisors in their relationship with students. The approach borrows and combines various aspects from each of the other theoretical models; it largely depends on the needs and/or concerns of each individual student within a given advising session (NACADA, 2017). The reductive advising technique is consistently utilised in the advising context. According to Church (2006) cited in Pinheiro (2019, p. 35), "reductive advising is a strategy that uses deduction to help students decide which courses to choose in assembling a

coherent curriculum for their degree". This technique is adopted and utilised in the facilitation of students' comprehension and acquisition of decision-making skills.

The intrusive approach is also known as the proactive approach to academic advising; it is more pre-emptive in its dealings with students. Central to the proactive approach to academic advising is its anticipatory disposition. This approach inspires the advisors to deliberately search for potential issues, concerns, and/or stumbling blocks that could negatively interfere with students' academic journey and success. According to Pinheiro (2019 p. 36), "in proactive-intrusive approaches, advising processes are not confined to traditional advising spaces. Instead, the relevant information is obtained from other locations based on campus, including classroom spaces" from lecturers, the department, and the faculty at large to provide timeous and valuable interventions. At the DUT, the intrusive-proactive approach to academic advising emphasises consistent contact with students, lecturers, and students' departments; awareness of students' potential; and actual challenges, early interventions, goals, expectations, needs, and practical tasks.

The adoption of this mixed approach to academic advising helps to position academic advising at the DUT as a safe, effective, and valuable place of support to students in their academic journey. It facilitates the institution's journey with each student in providing a variety of resources and support towards rewarding learning experiences, personal growth, and development.

Best Practices of Academic Advising at the Durban University of Technology: Unpacking its Strengths and Challenges

Consistent with existing literature, the identified strengths in the best practices of academic advising at the DUT include collaboration and promotion of accountability, whereas the recognised challenges include lack of capacity and required resources.

Academic advising at the DUT, as previously mentioned, is underpinned by the broad cognitive-developmental theoretical perspectives, while employing the strengths of the intrusive and proactive approaches in every sphere of academic advising. Collaboration with colleagues in the student academic development units and with non-academic support units is an indispensable aspect of our strategy. Cross-unit collaboration is a positive element of academic advising at the DUT; this has also been confirmed in other studies related to collaboration in the academic environment (e.g. Bourbous & Bavaro, 2013). The effort and success in working with the Writing Centre, Student Counselling Office, Student Residence Unit, and even with the Faculty Staff is critical to the successful delivery of academic advising services. The advent of Academic Advising at the DUT was instrumental in building bridges between the various student support units. As academic advisors, the collaborative approach expedited our ability to reach out, thus increasing the level and quality of engagement with students. The collective

approach to decision-making in certain situations and services delivered to students enriches the value of the services offered. Student observation of such collaboration helps to better encourage the students' reception and valuation of our services. In simple terms, some of the services rendered to our students would not have been possible without the Students' Counselling Office, where counselling was required to realign students to their academic and life goals.

From a managerial perspective, the collaborative element in the academic advising delivery process is drawing attention to issues of accountability and responsibility towards one another as colleagues, and towards the students who are the beneficiaries of the services. As noted by MacTaggert (2017, p. 1), "twentieth-century leadership approaches will no longer suffice the need of contemporary society is acknowledged." The challenges and higher performance expectations from institution management, threats of student unrest, and the severe competition for students and resources necessitate the development of a collaborated and less fragmented approach, to increase the likelihood of delivering on student success. Academic advisors' collaborative skills are instrumental in harnessing the strengths of like-minded units in joint efforts towards the realisation of each stakeholder's objectives. The referral system is of particular significance in academic advisors' delivery of their services. At a secondary level, the referral process and generic collaboration at various levels produce unintended consequences such as keeping watch over one another's services, which ultimately leads to improved quality of services offered to the students.

The sudden outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic adds a unique twist to the delivery of accountability in academic advising services. The pandemic has resulted in the shift of services provided in contact mode or within classrooms to digital platforms (Demuyakor, 2020). It has been illustrated that adaptation of learning through digital platforms has been difficult for both students and teachers, and many students have been psychologically demotivated. In response to these challenges, the implementation of academic advising programmes was valuable in promoting the accountability of various stakeholders to the students. This was promoted through the academic advisors' consistent demand of the university community's synchronous and asynchronous service provision to the students. Thus, the DUT was effective within the South African context in advancing best practices in its support and services to the students.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the adopted academic advising approaches at the DUT through its enquiry into the experiences of academic advisors in the institutions. The article has offered an opportunity to share and reflect on best practices of academic advising, as evidenced in the collaboration between the advisors, students, and other stakeholders in this institution of higher

learning. A key aspect of this article is its emphasis on the strategic position of collaboration in the delivery of effective and impactful academic advising services. The article demonstrates the interrelated and interdependent nature of student academic and non-academic support services. An effective academic advising service inherently relies on the well-being and availability of other stakeholders to collaborate with the goal of rendering much-needed support to the students.

The article has also highlighted a serious challenge of the dearth of trained academic advisors in higher institutions. The ratio of advisors to students still leaves much to be desired. It is strongly recommended that future studies and research delve into this area of interest. It would be a worthwhile effort to decisively unpack and analyse the ratio of academic advisors against students in institutions of higher education to render effective services to the scholarly fraternity.

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Research Article

Conceptualisation and Early Implementation of an Academic Advising System at the University of Cape Town

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Abstract

Academic advising is a High-Impact Practice that supports better outcomes for all students, particularly those encountering structural barriers to success. This paper presents a case study of processes followed in a three-year project (2018–20) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) to conceptualise, design, and start implementing an academic advising system. Three goals were formulated:

1. *to develop conceptual capacity and a theory of academic advising;*
2. *to develop an academic advising model responsive to institutional context and student need; and*
3. *to develop structures, relationships, tools, and resources to implement a coherent system.*

An informed grounded theory approach was used to analyse baseline data of existing support and advising at the institution. Data was collected through document and desktop research, interviews with stakeholders,

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and student focus groups. A monitoring and evaluation framework was developed to track and reflect on progress against the goals. Iterative cycles of data collection, analysis, and reflection took place as implementation started. A key finding was that UCT's advising structures incline towards a decentralised faculty-based model, complemented by centralised support services that encompass advising functions. Low levels of integration were found, as well as inefficient duplication of services. To address these challenges, the conceptual and operational capacity of the academic advising team needed to be advanced. This was done by assembling a multidisciplinary team, undergoing professional training, and by running a journal club. A promising theoretical approach that emerged was a capability approach to academic advising. A shared model of academic advising was found to be best suited to the institutional context and a three-tiered model operationalised by faculty, professional, and peer advisers, as well as by automated advising tools, was designed. Implementation started through pilot projects. During Covid-19, innovative concept and centralised systems development that connected students to institutional resources, enabling them to practise agency and supporting their ability to achieve despite unprecedented structural barriers, demonstrated the viability of the capability approach adopted for steering further development of the system.

Keywords

Academic advising, student success, capability approach, Covid-19, automated advising

Introduction

Levels of student retention and graduation in South Africa remain unacceptably low (Scott, 2018). Only 30% of the 2013 cohort registered for three-year degrees at contact universities graduated in regulation time, and only 59% in six years, while significant racial inequalities persist (CHE, 2020). Likewise, despite having a competitive admissions policy, the University of Cape Town (UCT) experiences high attrition rates, with 22% of the 2013 cohort enrolled in three-year degrees dropping out over a five-year period (University of Cape Town, 2018). Institutional data reveals a racialised achievement gap: 58% of South African black students enrolled in three-year degrees in 2013 graduated within five years, compared to 81% of white students. A total of 32% of black South African students left the institution without qualifying, compared to 15% of white students (University of Cape Town, 2018).

Performance figures such as these do not only capture loss of potential; they also suggest high levels of cultural alienation and discontent associated with educational attrition (Strydom et al., 2016; Tinto, 2014). This could explain the intensity with which students at UCT participated in #MustFall activism (2015–17), foregrounding the urgent need for institutional transformation (Godsell & Chikane, 2016). Tinto (2014) argues that there is a strong link between students' experience of engaging in the academic and social communities of the university, and their chances of persisting and completing their studies. Engagement that makes

students see themselves as valued members of an academic and social community (Tinto, 2014) is particularly important in diverse student bodies. Kuh's (2008) seminal work on High-Impact Practices (HIPs) and student engagement has proven invaluable to universities trying to maximise student retention and engagement.

The study of student engagement and success started in South African higher education in 2007, and by 2015, based on national survey evidence, a total of 11 developmental HIPs supporting student engagement and success had been identified (Loots et al., 2017). Similar to universities in the United States (US) (Armstrong-Mensah et al., 2019; Huber, 2010), universities in South Africa that designed curricula to include HIPs found a significant and positive relationship between student engagement and academic performance, and by extension, retention (Schreiber & Yu, 2016).

Among HIPs, academic advising has emerged as a promising set of practices to promote student engagement and success. While research on the impact of academic advising remains scant (Alvarado & Olson, 2020), and particularly so in South Africa (Strydom et al., 2017), the literature indicates that academic advising contributes to student success in terms of improving students' university experience and supporting their developmental trajectory, improving retention, and increasing their chances of graduating (Chiteng Kot, 2014; Swecker et al., 2013; Young-Jones et al., 2013). In South Africa, a report published by the University of the Free State's (UFS) Center for Teaching and Learning showed that regardless of entrance scores, students at UFS who participated in academic advising had a higher probability of passing more than 70% of their modules, compared with nonparticipants[1] (UFS Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2018).

Key to effective and meaningful academic advising is developing a context-specific system that meets the diverse needs of a particular institution's students (White, 2015). Given the scarcity of research on academic advising in South Africa, this case study aims to give an evidence-based account of the processes followed in a three-year project (2018–20) at UCT to conceptualise, design, and start implementing academic advising system. We formulated three goals:

1. to develop conceptual capacity and a theory of academic advising;
2. to develop an academic advising model responsive to institutional context and student need; and
3. to develop structures, relationships, tools, and resources to implement a coherent system.

While the goals are presented in a linear way, the different processes and activities of the project overlapped and fed into one another in an iterative and cumulative manner.

1 This data is based on an N of 1,456 students at the UFS who responded to the South African Student Engagement Survey (SASSE) in 2015 and 2017. SASSE is administered at participating institutions every two years.

Methodology

We followed a case study approach (Yin, 2009), with the three-year academic advising project at UCT as the unit of analysis. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University's Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) (CHED REC, 2018_25_Van Pletzen).

To obtain an understanding of academic advising at the institution, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 staff members involved in academic advising across six faculties, and four institutional stakeholders coordinating centralised services. Three student focus groups, each with five to six participants, were conducted. All participants received information about the project, including assurance of confidentiality, and gave informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained in all data representation by omitting information that could link participants' identities to specific viewpoints.

The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Three of the researchers used an informed grounded theory approach (Thornberg, 2012) to independently code and analyse the data thematically. They then worked together to complement one another's analyses until a point of saturation was reached. Additionally, two other researchers reviewed a variety of existing resources (such as institutional handbooks and websites) to draw up a stakeholder map of available student support and advising services.

A monitoring and evaluation framework was developed to track and reflect on progress against the three goals of the project. Once implementation started through pilot projects, and the development of centralised tools in response to the Covid-19 context, we continued to collect and analyse data to feedback into further cycles of analysis, reflection conceptualisation, and implementation.

Results

We report the results of our case study under headings that relate to the three stated goals.

Developing Conceptual Capacity and a Theory of Academic Advising

The Academic Advising Project was started at UCT under the auspices of the Academic Development Programme (ADP), which adopts a strong social justice approach to educational development (Scott, 2009; Van Pletzen et al., 2020). Academic and non-academic support structures offered by Academic Development units have been identified as early vehicles for academic advising in South Africa (Pinheiro, 2019). Collaboration with the First-Year Experience (FYE) was established early on, and later with the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (ISFAP). During early theorisation, the Academic Advising Project

benefited from this collaborative team's commonly held theoretical approach, particularly their social justice approach, their adoption of a holistic vision of student support, and their rejection of the "deficit approach", which locates challenges that students experience in students themselves instead of in social conditions or in institutional structures and policies that could exclude individuals (Hamshire et al., 2021; Tinto, 2014; van Pletzen et al., 2020).

A first step towards building conceptual and theoretical capacity was to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework that steered regular planning and reflection sessions throughout. The team grew from two to nine participants during the three years, with eight staff members completing the Academic Advising Professional Development Short Learning Programme offered by the UFS. A weekly journal club was formed in 2020 to engage more deeply with the theoretical dimensions of academic advising.

Initially, the team adopted an informed grounded theory approach, which posits that researchers' engagement with relevant literature could stimulate research questions, provide a conceptual repertoire, and enrich data analysis (Thornberg, 2012). Using this approach, analysis of interviews with staff in faculties and other professional stakeholders on campus revealed that faculty-based academic advising predominated at UCT. However, an extensive range of centralised support services that encompassed some advising functions was also available to students. The institution's advising structures are inclined towards a decentralised model (Pardee, 2012) with most structured academic advising opportunities offered in the faculties. There were, however, some elements of a shared model, where students also received advising in central units (Habley, 2004; Pardee, 2012).

The decentralised advising based in the faculties was highly variable, most likely because of the devolved nature of the institution and the autonomy with which each faculty designed student advice and support. Faculty-based advising covered areas such as academic registration, the structure of the curriculum and progression rules. This aligned to what is called "prescriptive advising" in the literature (Lowenstein, 2005). To a lesser extent, faculties offered forms of developmental advising (Lowenstein, 2005)—an approach that focuses on students' personal development, aspirations, or problems. Opportunities to receive developmental advising ranged from ad hoc advising by deputy deans, course convenors, lecturers or administrative staff, peer-mentorship, and ad hoc workshops on topics like study skills and time management. At the more structured end of the spectrum, two of the faculties offered credit-bearing courses to first-year students that explored personal and professional values, goal setting, and career development. These offerings aligned to what is called "learning-centred advising" (Lowenstein, 2005); they made use of aspects of strengths-based advising (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005) that identified and developed the knowledge, talents, and strengths that students brought with them into the institution. The largely decentralised nature of advising structures resulted in different kinds of support that students could access in each faculty, in inconsistencies in advice received by students transitioning between faculties, and in differences in the amount and type of training

and recognition that advisers received.

The baseline results also revealed extensive centralised support services that mainly provided information, but also included some developmental advising, for instance, offered by the Department of Student Affairs (DSA) (which coordinated housing, financial aid, student governance, and student wellness), and the libraries. Two centralised units that offered structured developmental advising, delivered by professional advisers, were the Careers Service and ISFAP. Both the Careers Service and ISFAP drew on learning-centred and on strength-based advising approaches (Lowenstein, 2005; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).

Overall, results from staff interviews showed low levels of integration of faculty-based and centralised advising and support structures, as well as inefficient duplication of services. This made it challenging, from both staff and student perspective, to navigate the advising and support services on offer.

Results from student focus groups reinforced this finding Despite the considerable range of support and advising structures on offer, students often did not know where to go for information or assistance and many found themselves isolated and alienated from institutional support. Most students said that they found the first months of studying at university overwhelming. Many achieved good results at school, and the experience of doing less well or even failing at university deeply unsettled them. Frequently, they engaged in dispiriting and time-consuming attempts at solving their own problems. As one student commented:

> *When one thing goes wrong . . . it's more like my foundation is cracked. The whole building's just going to come down. So, now I have to start afresh and make a whole new plan. So, for me, it takes like a whole week trying to figure out things . .*

Or worse: "I feel like most of your first year is made up of lying in bed, thinking about your failures, and trying to revise your plan."

Some students argued that academic staff (including faculty advisors, at times), were often not well placed to give advice since there could be a conflict of roles, for instance, course convenors "can't be objective" as advisers, since they were also responsible for assessing students, and "it's very difficult also to approach someone that's giving you all this hard work and expecting you to make it." One student explained a preference for getting advice from a peer adviser: "You look at them [academic staff] . . . and you're like, "You don't even know what I'm going through! I feel like with a group of students, you know, because they went through this . . . I can trust them."

Students who had been in the role of peer advisers; however, raised their own concerns with one commenting:

It seems as though now we have to take on the roles of being a psychologist and we have to talk to our friends and support each other and it can get tough on us as well because we're not really experienced and it's hard to be objective and not take in all those emotions that are experienced by someone else. So, it's like, I wish they [the university] could just improve their system. . .

Another area that students commented on is the institution's mode of communicating information about advising and support services. Several said that they felt overwhelmed by high volumes of e-mail. Their recommendation was that fewer announcements should be made, and that important information should be communicated via WhatsApp groups or social media sites. Students also made other constructive recommendations. They advocated for the inclusion of pre-enrolment information in the first communication they received from the university, such as letters of acceptance. They further recommended the inclusion of a glossary of terms (such as "curriculum" and "credits") and information on curriculum structures and pathways. They argued that such information would have facilitated their first academic encounters.

In summary, analyses of staff and student data surfaced challenges in the structural organisation and praxis of academic advising at UCT (both at the centre and in the faculties), and the impact of these challenges on students' experience and success. Engagement with the data took the team through a process of theory-building that recognised the importance of prescriptive advising, but also the need to harness existing pockets of developmental, learning-centred, and strength-based advising at the institution. Most of all, the team realised the importance of formulating a composite theoretical framework that would connect and organise the many components and approaches encountered into a coherent social justice approach to academic advising.

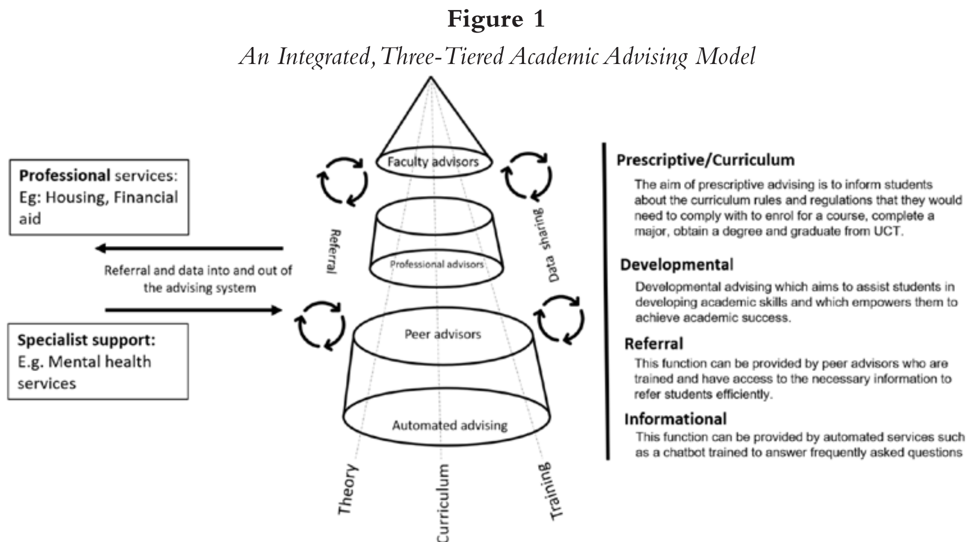
A theoretical approach that holds promise is the capability approach (Sen, 1999), as applied to education (Nussbaum, 2006; Unterhalter & Walker, 2007). This approach has been widely applied to questions of social justice, access and the conditions for student success in South Africa (Calitz et al., 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2011, 2015). The capabilities approach's anti-deficit understanding of the impact of social structure on individual well-being and achievement (Calitz et al., 2016), and its recognition of personal agency and freedom of choice within these powerful structural conditions (Wilson-Strydom, 2011, 2015), clearly brings to attention the generative potential of this approach for theorising academic advising. The approach further provides a way of capturing the multiple contact points between a diverse student body, and the institution that a well-functioning academic advising system would create, as well as the channelling of student agency into the institution that could contribute to the much-needed transformation of institutional structures and culture in South Africa.

Developing a Model Responsive to Institutional Context and Student Need

Increased conceptual and theoretical capacity enabled us to develop a three-tiered model operationalised by faculty, professional, and peer advisers, as well as by automated advising tools (Figure 1). It is a shared model of academic advising (Habley, 2004; Pardee, 2012) that accommodates the spread of decentralised and centralised student advice and support structures at UCT, as well as needs expressed by students. Shared models are flexible and rely on the strengths and differentiated knowledge base of different types of advisers; they do, however, require high levels of collaboration and coordination (Pinheiro, 2019).

Figure 1

An Integrated, Three-Tiered Academic Advising Model



The model accommodates four basic advising functions: information sharing, referral, prescriptive advising, and developmental advising. It includes mechanisms that allow for referral to other parts of the system, as well as data sharing for a more seamless student experience.

Faculty-based curriculum advisers are located at the top tier and provide mainly prescriptive advising. Other professional services, for example, Student Housing and Financial Aid, also provide advice that is rules-based; these services are therefore placed adjacent to the prescriptive space.

Peer advisers are located at the lowest tier of the model. They are envisaged as performing mainly referral services and providing information, while also playing a mentoring and support role (within defined boundaries). Referral advising requires some interrogation of student concerns and an ability to match this with an appropriate existing service. Purely informational

advising is the least complex form of advising and can be supported by automated and web-based services such as a simple chatbot or a static webpage, which we place at the base of this tier.

Between these tiers, the model envisages a tier of professional advisers working from a centralised unit (though their work may be associated with a specific faculty) and playing a key role in coordinating all types of advising. They would relate closely to faculty and peer advisers, as well as to other institutional stakeholders in student support. An important task would be to develop (and update) a stakeholder map and a referral network to be used by all advisers and stakeholders. They would also create advising guidelines, resources, and materials for use by advisers and students. Other roles would be to assist faculties in tracking students' progress, based on a range of personal and performance indicators. They would further train, supervise, and support peer advisers, and manage advising tools like a helpline and chatbot. A key student-facing task of professional advisers would be to provide developmental advising (incorporating aspects of strength-based and learning-centred advising) that engages students in exploratory activities related to their personal growth, academic studies, and career goals.

Developing Structures, Tools and Resources to Implement a Coherent System

To begin operationalising the model we initiated several activities and pilot interventions. Two centralised activities undertaken were to develop a data framework for academic advising and to embed academic advising more securely in institutional strategy. Progress on the data framework was limited due to siloed data systems and insufficien data analytics capacity in the institution. The project achieved some structural integration by regularly reporting to the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee and by reporting on the project in the annual Teaching and Learning Report, which has had the effect of creating awareness and embedding academic advising in UCT's Teaching and Learning Strategy.

In 2020, we supported a faculty-based peer-advising hub in Health Sciences. Its purpose was to provide rapid response to needs such as exam preparation, study skills, and technological assistance. While the peer advisers were committed to supporting students, they sometimes became overwhelmed by their psychosocial needs. We analysed the data from student queries sent to the Faculty of Health Sciences to their peer-advising hub—224 queries were received between April and December 2020 (~25/month). From a funding perspective, the hub model proved not financially sustainable.

Another faculty-based pilot was run in the Science Faculty to improve connectivity with the Careers Service. This initiative, which linked four career development modules to a first-year course, is modelled on a strength-based and learner-centred advising approach developed by the Commerce Faculty's Educational Development Unit (EDU). Student evaluation of the pilot was good, and it was targeted for upscaling.

The Covid-19 pandemic reinforced the need for an integrated advising approach that spans centralised and faculty-specific student advising and support. Even before the crisis, data showed that students often did not know where to go for information or help, resulting in duplicated queries to different departments, high levels of frustration and anxiety, and loss of motivation. These challenges became more severe during Covid-19, on and off campus, necessitating new modes of structural integration and communication. In April 2020, we launched an emergency central helpdesk called UCT CARES (UCT Central Advising and Referral Service) that connected students to information or support via e-mail. The service handled a total of 437 queries (~49/month), 25% of which were resolved at the first point of contact. The success of this system depends on cost-effectiveness, training, service standards, consistent mapping and updating of available services, and information to make better referrals, data collection, analysis, and feedback.

To alleviate high volumes of e-mail, an external service provider assisted in developing a simple chatbot providing information directly to the user. The bot, Destination UCT, is a static WhatsApp-based list of frequently asked questions (FAQs). Launched in January 2021, it covered a range of categories including Admissions and Student Housing, Student Funding and Fees, Orientation, Student Life, updates and essential information on Covid-19 for first-year students. In three months, the tool answered 44,632 queries from 17,865 unique use cases. Data collected from this pilot are being used to develop an advanced chatbot.

Discussion

The three-year Academic Advising Project at UCT provided a typically siloed university with a unique opportunity to be innovatively collaborative across faculties and other professional stakeholders on campus to focus on ways of enhancing the student experience through intentional and appropriate academic advising.

The first important lesson from the case study is that staff capacity is key, both in the project team and in the broader institution. While initial conceptualisation could be undertaken by a small original project team, proper conceptualisation and implementation could only start once the team had been expanded and capacitated to take on the development of a theoretical framework, advising structures, resources and tools, as well as specific responsibilities such as training peer advisers. If academic advising is to become an integral part of the student support system at UCT, then there is a pressing need for differentiated training and training resources for all types of advisers to strengthen all advising functions envisaged in our model (Gordon, 2019). An enabling factor related to capacity-building is the project's location in a national collaborative project led by UFS, which has contributed significantly to capacity-building, not only by developing conceptual capacity and by professionalising advising through the UFS training programme, but also by providing a collaborative learning space in a network of seven participating South African institutions.

A second lesson is that academic advising should be conceptualised as a system of practice and not as discrete offerings. Tinto (2014) argues that a positive and empowering student experience demands a set of policies, practices, and people working together to guide students on a successful journey through higher education. This case study shows that a coherent academic advising system could perform such a guiding function, but that it requires a strong theoretical framework to prevent fragmentation. The Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) and its applications to education (Nussbaum, 2006; Unterhalter & Walker, 2007; Wilson-Strydom, 2015) has been identified as a promising theoretical framework promoting social justice, student agency, and transformation within unequal social and institutional contexts and cultures.

In terms of implementing a system of academic advising at UCT, the case study points to some achievements. A responsive and evidence-based shared model of academic advising emerged (Alvarado & Olson, 2020), with functions of advising that are split among three adviser types (Arnold et al., 2015). We also developed a definition mission, and vision aligned to the institutional vision; a practice identified in the literature as beneficial to building a strong academic advising system and better student outcomes (Troxel, 2019). Good progress has been made in establishing a more coherent picture of central academic advising structures and practices, especially under the crisis conditions of Covid-19, which called for accelerated design and implementation. During Covid-19, innovative concept and centralised systems development that connected students to institutional resources, which enabled them to practise agency, and which supported their ability to achieve despite unprecedented structural barriers, demonstrated the viability of both the model and the Capability Theory adopted for steering further development of the system.

However, the case study also presents challenges. Central advice and support structures and services still overlap or do not link up, which makes a systemic approach difficult. The autonomy and devolved authority of the institution's faculties continue to hamper attempts at shaping academic advising across the institution. In such a context, each new advising initiative needs to be negotiated repeatedly, with multiple partners and stakeholders, involving different sets of variables and resources. A further challenge is that while qualitative institutional data is reasonably accessible, access to reliable quantitative data essential for designing an evidence-based academic advising system (Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018; Kurzweil & Wu, 2015) remains problematic. Systematically gathering data from students at regular points can also prove challenging.

A third lesson is that academic advising should ideally be designed and implemented by a network of stakeholders and partners with common objectives. This should involve joint exploration of making academic advising more coherent across the institution, for instance through engaging in a collaborative institutional project that explicitly designs and implements an overarching academic advising curriculum for the institution (Kraft-Terry & Kau, 2019; Lowenstein, 2005), and that could provide consistency in the academic

advising outcomes experienced by students across the university. At UCT, existing prototypes of such curricula could be expanded.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A first recommendation is that staff capacity must be considered in setting up timelines for project development and implementation. A strong collaborative team drawn from across the institution and representative of all stakeholders and partners should be assembled.

Second, the coherence of an academic advising system should be increased by embedding it firmly in the institution's vision and teaching strategies. This makes it more likely that leadership will endorse the work and help embed it in existing structures. Participation by institutional data providers would help with bridging departmental siloes and with designing an appropriate data framework for an advising system.

Finally, the design of an academic advising system must be guided throughout by students' experiences. Focus groups provide rich data but are difficult to organise. Existing student councils could provide more accessible and regular feedback on the performance of the advising system. Creative use of technology could also be harnessed as further sources of feedback.

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Research Article

Student Support and Transition Through a Buddy Programme to Foster Social Integration

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Abstract

The University of Pretoria (UP) began offering formal academic student support in 2011 when the first faculty student advisor (FSA) was appointed. Although many more FSAs were subsequently appointed, assistance to all the students in need of support remained insufficient. However, financial assistance through the collaboration grant received from the Department of Higher Education and Training in 2018 made it possible to explore new areas of support. The UP was able to pilot four innovations due to the availability of additional funds. These included generic workshops across faculties; the creation of a hub in the library, which served as a common contact point for students requiring assistance; the appointment of peer advisors; and a Buddy Programme for first-year students. This article explains the Buddy Programme as perceived by the senior students who mentored the first-year students. The mentors are known as "big buddies". Our work on this programme is based on Tinto's (1975) ideas about social integration. The Buddy Programme was introduced to assist first-year students in their transition from school to university life. This paper highlights the challenges that first-year students faced and it explains how the concepts could become institutionalised once university activities have been normalised in the post-pandemic future.

Keywords

Advising, mentoring, buddy system, peer support

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Background and Context

As part of our support to students, the University of Pretoria (UP) has a number of practices that address the academic and social aspects of a student's life (Kuh et al., 2005). The UP focuses on five spheres of student support that the institution regards as essential for student academic success, namely faculty student advisors (FSAs), tutors, mentors, academic orientation, and UPO[1] workshops.

In the context of interventions implemented to support students, this paper looks at a new initiative involving a buddy system introduced in 2019. The data was extracted from Naidoo and Kwenaite's (2019) more comprehensive research report on the evaluation of new interventions for student support. These new interventions (summarised later) were conceptualised in the context of those already existing.

Existing Interventions

The *FSAs* are responsible for academic development; they are managed by the office of the Deputy Director: Academic Development and Support, and by the deputy deans of teaching and learning in each faculty. The UP concurs with Troxel and Joslin (2018) that *advising* is an important touchpoint between the students as primary stakeholders and its learning mission. FSAs focus on first-year students, but they also provide academic advice to other undergraduate students who contact them.

The various departments provide *tutors* to all students who need additional support. Tutors are trained by both the academic departments and by the Department for Education Innovation. They are supervised in the faculties to ensure that their effectiveness is monitored and evaluated. FSAs are responsible for referring students who are struggling academically to tutors in their particular departments.

The Department of Student Affairs provides *mentors* to students who are identified by the Student Academic Readiness Survey (STARS),[2] which measures the non-cognitive, financial and academic needs of first-year students, as well as their potential risk of failing. The senior students who are members of house committees act as mentors in the residences. Mentorship programmes are meant to provide psychosocial support.

1 University of Pretoria Orientation Programme (UPO) is an online academic orientation module intended to provide information and to assist first-year students to cope with the skills required for success at university level.

2 The Student Academic Readiness Survey assesses students' academic readiness by gauging their needs in fields such as motivation, well-being, integration and support, goal orientation, academic skills, anticipated / current academic involvement, and vocational identity. Based on the results, a programme consisting of peer mentoring and academic advising is developed to support students who are identified as being at risk of failure or withdrawal. The purpose of the programme is to facilitate the transition from school to university in order to have students fully integrated into the university environment within the first quarter of the first year.

Academic orientation is considered to be a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008), which is applied to ensure student retention and success. It involves complementary co-curricular and curricular processes. A core element of academic orientation involves informing students about what it means to study at a research-intensive university.

As an extension of the one-week academic orientation programme, students complete a compulsory eight-week online module (called UPO), which is specific to their faculty. The aim of the UPO module is to assist students in making a successful transition from high school to university. According to Kuh et al. (2007), being academically underprepared for university-level work is one of the risk factors that threaten persistence and graduation from university.

Despite the increase in active FSAs from one in 2011 to eighteen in 2016, support to all the students who needed it was still insufficient. A serious concern was that, by 2018, only 45% of the 2016 cohort registered for three-year degrees, and 38% of the 2015 cohort registered for four-year degrees, graduated in the minimum time allocated for the completion of these degrees (University of Pretoria, 2020).

Tinto's integration theory (1975) requires that institutions channel support for both academic and social integration. Looking at the existing interventions until 2018, it is evident that the FSAs and tutors, together with academic orientation and UPO, have focused on academic aspects, whereas mentoring has provided support at the social level. A study undertaken at the UP (Eloff, 2020) showed that not enough attention was paid to student wellness.

In 2016, a campaign called *FLY@UP* (the Finish Line is Yours) was launched to encourage students and to enable them to graduate in the minimum time. This campaign provided a channel through which interventions to improve completion rates in the recommended minimum time could be facilitated.

The key messages that were consistently communicated to students emphasised the importance of maintaining a good semester mark, not dropping or changing modules unnecessarily, and registering for the correct number of credits in order to have a balanced credit load for completion in the minimum time. Perna and Thomas (2008), having scrutinised definitions of student success extensively, list ten indicators – two of which the FLY@UP campaign aimed to address. By focusing on academic readiness and on university achievement, academic performance and persistence to complete a degree were encompassed.

The interventions for student support, which were piloted in 2019, were aligned with the FLY@UP campaign and were guided by the UP Institutional Plan (2019, p. 15). This plan stated that "the adjustment of students to university life during the first six months following enrolment is a critical determinant of their progress and success." The formal messages to the students were of an academic nature, but they were also encouraged to enjoy the "fun" side of university life. Whereas all students were invited to participate in the campaign to take responsibility for their studies, the Buddy Programme aimed at making individual students aware that they were valued.

Interventions Piloted in 2019

FSAs and peer support interventions direct students towards resources to improve their quality of life in terms of their university careers. Some of the aims of these interventions are to reduce the confusion and frustration experienced when access to resources is limited and students become disengaged (Henning et al., 2015).

At a workshop held with the FSAs on the findings of a benchmark study, it was established that many faculties were presenting workshops on the same topics to small groups of students. This seemed to be an inefficient use of the FSAs' time and it was decided that generic workshops would be offered to all students across the university. Topics covered included but were not limited to study skills, time management, understanding curricula, and motivation, all of which contribute to first-year success. This falls in line with Thalluri's (2016) focus on mass higher education.

The *hub* was established to give the FSAs more exposure and to encourage students to use their services. A desk was installed in the library, in full view of students on their way to the computers or when they were leaving the library.

The funds that were made available enabled the FSAs to employ senior students as peer advisors for the first time. The first criterion in the selection of peer advisors was that they had to have interacted with their FSAs in the past; therefore, the best person to select a peer advisor would be an FSA. These students attended to students' minor queries and also prioritised their challenges before they saw an FSA.

Although a mentorship programme already existed at the university, there was a need for a more inclusive programme to focus on the social integration of the first-year student. This took the form of a voluntary peer support programme called the "*FLY@UP Big Buddy Programme*". The "Buddy system" was introduced to help first-year students adapt to university life. This paper highlights the challenges that had to be overcome, and it offers suggestions about how the concepts could become institutionalised when university activities return to normal in the post-pandemic future.

The FLY@UP Big Buddy Programme

Findings based on evaluations (Mphanda, 2017, 2018) of the existing STARS mentorship programme show that the criteria used for the selection of the mentees, namely first-generation commuter students, who are aged younger than 21 and who are from a rural/township home environment, should be reviewed in favour of a voluntary or self-selection model. Some of the mentees incorrectly understood mentors to be similar to tutors (Mphanda, 2018) and they expected the tutors to assist with academic issues. The main difference between the STARS mentorship programme and the FLY@UP Big Buddy Programme was that participation by first-year students in the latter programme was voluntary.

The intention was to enable the big buddies to create a safe and friendly environment in which to listen to the problems encountered by the first-year students. The aim was therefore to complement university services and to inform students of what was available. Being familiar with university life, the senior students could promptly identify those who were not adapting or who were struggling (Ford, 2015). In many cases, big buddies are the first to discover student challenges and they can alert professional staff so that problems can be addressed before they cause students to drop out (Tinto, 2012).

Methodology

The larger research was undertaken to explore the effectiveness of academic student support interventions implemented in 2019. This paper looks at the Buddy Programme as a case study of the support offered to first-year students; it evaluates the Buddy Programme based on the experiences of the participating big buddies. It is limited to examining the perceptions of the big buddies. Salkind (2010) refers to case studies as the inquiry into a bounded entity by examining the entity in its social and cultural context.

A qualitative research methodology was used for this research, i.e. descriptive data were obtained by collecting "people's own words" through which researchers "develop concepts, insights, and understandings from patterns in the data" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 18). This differs from gathering data that can be used to evaluate a predetermined model, hypothesis, or theory (Taylor et al., 2015). Thus, this research uses data collection methods that aim to gather data directly from its subjects to gain insight into the Buddy Programme.

The FLY@UP Big Buddy Programme, hereafter referred to as the Buddy Programme, was introduced to give first-year students the opportunity to opt for support through contact with a senior student. The senior students were referred to as the "big buddies", whereas the first-year students were the "new buddies". Kuh et al. (2005) and Tinto (1975) emphasise that both academic and social support are required to enable a student to succeed. Universities are increasingly becoming aware of the need to support students holistically as they grapple with the various elements that have a bearing on their motivation to learn (Ford, 2015). Peer relationships foster a feeling of security and belonging in student groups, which can affect students' experience of the university, their attachment to the institution, and their academic performance as they adapt to university life (Ford, 2015).

Big buddies were invited to assist the new buddies through their transitioning process. A major criterion was those big buddies needed to have attained an average of 60% in their studies. In 2018, 1 000 students volunteered to become buddies in 2019. These students were contacted in January 2019 and they were invited to participate in a training day before the Buddy Programme began.

Three hundred big buddies responded and they were trained to receive the new buddies on 1 February 2019. Big buddies were informed of the purpose of the programme and its relation

to the FLY@UP campaign. They were also introduced to the growth mindset (Dweck, 2015), and how it could bring about a paradigm shift in a student's thinking. In addition, the training included a focus on student wellness and on the ability to study effectively. A session on listening was also presented to prepare the big buddies to take on the role of listener. Towards the end of February, once the new students had indicated their fields of interest and what they would be studying, an electronic sorting process was used to match three new students with each big buddy.

The first-year students completed a survey in UPO so that those without a mentor could indicate whether they would like to have a big buddy. This method of self-identification was necessary to start developing agency in the first-year students. The questions put to the students took the form of screening. The students in the residences who were automatically allocated to a mentor, and the STARS students to whom a mentor was allocated by the Department of Student Affairs, were filtered out. The first-time day-students received an opportunity to be supported by a senior student should they wish to do so. Only UPO modules offered on the Hatfield Campus were included in this pilot programme to ensure that the logistics would be manageable.

Ultimately, there were 250 big buddies supporting 752 new buddies. In mid-March, each big buddy received a voucher to take the new buddies for coffee. At the time when the vouchers were handed over, the students were taken through some ice-breaker exercises which they could do with the new buddies. Relevant 'dos and don'ts' were also discussed with them. The purpose of the vouchers and the exercises was to empower the big buddies to take a leadership role.

In April, the big buddies submitted their feedback through an online survey, after which second vouchers were made available. At this stage, when groups arrived to collect the vouchers, focus group interviews were held to discuss possible solutions to their challenges. Pairs of big buddies were asked to introduce all their new buddies to each other so that the new students could have a larger pool of peers with whom to interact. It was left to the big buddies to choose with whom to pair. In May/June the big buddies received data vouchers to enable them to contact the new buddies through WhatsApp to provide support during the examination period, as the big buddies were focusing on their own studies; they might not have had time to meet them in person.

Limitations

Since this was a pilot programme, the implementation of the Buddy Programme focused on the campus housing six of the nine faculties, which favoured easy programme management. A further reason for the limited focus was that the Health Science Faculty already had an established mentorship programme for its students.

This study focuses on the perceptions of the big buddies. Without buy-in from the big buddies and their willingness to improve the experiences of the new students, the Buddy Programme would not have been possible. However, the stakeholders included the new buddies and it is acknowledged that feedback received from them can improve the programme. As a first stage, it was necessary to consider the opinions of the big buddies, but future research will include feedback from the new buddies.

Data Collection

Primarily, data was collected by way of three online surveys, which will be referred to as Surveys A, B, and C. These surveys were administered to big buddies by using Google Forms. Data concerning the big buddies' perceptions of their interventions were collected using semi-structured interviews. These focus group interviews were conducted with the big buddies at the end of each session when they collected the vouchers for the next phase. The interview discussions revolved around the challenges that big buddies had experienced in attempting to meet their new buddies. Participants offered solutions to their groups to improve the implementation process.

Ethical clearance for this study was covered by a larger process of ethical clearance obtained under the STARS project. The data collected was analysed by determining common themes that emanated from the students' responses.

Results

Big buddies were requested to complete three online surveys in which they reflected on three aspects of the programme, namely on feedback after their first and second face-to-face meetings, and on feedback concerning their WhatsApp communication. Table 1 below shows the participation rate for each survey.

Table 1

Big Buddy Participation per Survey

Survey	Faculty	Total number of big buddies	Number of completed surveys	%
SURVEY A Feedback: Meeting between big buddies and new buddies	EBIT	46	42	91%
	EMS	68	64	94%
	HUM	48	46	96%
	LAW	22	19	86%
	NAS	61	52	85%
	THEO	7	6	86%
TOTAL		**252**	**229**	**91%**
SURVEY B Second-quarter feedback	EBIT	46	41	89%
	EMS	68	55	81%
	HUM	48	38	79%
	LAW	22	18	82%
	NAS	61	51	84%
	THEO	7	5	71%
TOTAL		**252**	**208**	**83%**
SURVEY C Final feedback: Buddy WhatsApp communication	EBIT	46	17	37%
	EMS	68	15	22%
	HUM	48	17	35%
	LAW	22	6	27%
	NAS	61	14	23%
	THEO	7	1	14%
TOTAL		**252**	**70**	**28%**

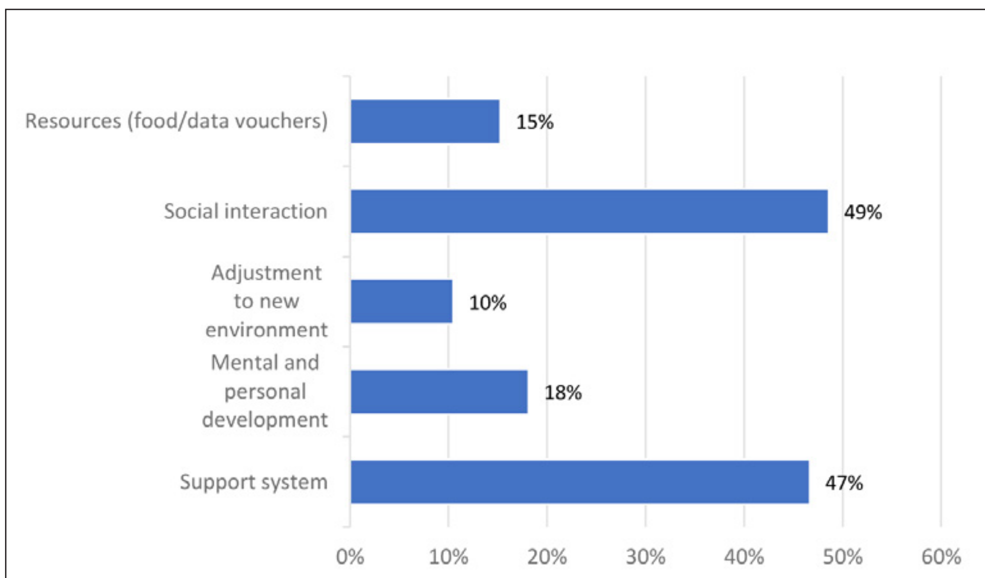
There was a high participation rate for the first survey, with 91% of the big buddies participating. For the next survey, the participation rate dropped by 8% to 83%. This was followed by a drastic drop of 55% in the participation rate for the final survey, with only 28% of the big buddies participating. However, the overall participation rate was well above average at 67%. The last survey was conducted during the examination period, which could explain the low participation rate.

Findings

The data analysis identified the big buddies' descriptions of the positives that they had experienced during the Buddy Programme as the main category of programme positives. Figure 1 illustrates the major themes that emerged from big buddies' descriptions of these positives.

Figure 1

Major Themes Emerging from Programme Positives



The most common positive theme that was identified related to the social interaction that the programme provided. Big buddies commented on how they enjoyed meeting new people, sharing their experiences with new buddies, getting to know someone, making new friends, learning about different cultures, and developing a sense of belonging. Two big buddies' comments suitably summarise these experiences in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Excerpts from Survey B Linked to Social Interaction

> "Meeting new people is good for me as I get to make friends, that is what me and buddies ended up, we are now friends."
>
> "… the fly buddy programme develops a community of mentees and mentors. It helps both the big buddy and the buddies to have a sense of belonging."

The second-most common positive was linked to the concept of a support system. Several big buddies saw the programme as an opportunity to help and support the new buddies by providing them with guidance and advice on how to face their challenges. This support system was also seen as a means of reassuring the new buddies that they were not alone. It also surfaced that some big buddies felt that it was good to give the new buddies the kind of support that they had not received as first-year students. Some big buddies pointed out that peer support was appreciated when students could meet without judgement, as indicated in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Excerpts from Survey A that Deal with the Concept of a Support System

> "Having peers that support you and each other, you don't feel alone."
>
> "The fact that we meet up with students and discuss challenges we are facing in school without judgement. The buddy programme is a safe group for the strong and the vulnerable."
>
> "… give buddies advice regarding university stuff that they would otherwise not know, for example the impact of deregistering a module, the value of attending tutorials and to consult with lecturers and stuff that will await them in future years, for example vacation work and bursaries."

The theme of personal development included elements described by big buddies as relating to mental well-being and development, motivation, positive impact, fulfilment and the development of new skills as a result of being a part of the Buddy Programme. Some big buddies described how they were able to motivate the new buddies not to give up or to work hard, who allowed them and their new buddies to develop and to feel empowered. Several big buddies said that helping others gave them a sense of fulfilment.

Figure 4

Excerpts from Survey B that Express Positives Linked to Personal Development

"Motivating first-year students that they should not give up."

"It's rewarding to see students open up to you about what's letting them down and how they feel about certain things and seeing their paradigm shift once you are done talking to them."

"You learn so much about yourself, benefit from a sense of fulfilment and personal growth … leadership skills and gain a personal sense of satisfaction from knowing that I helped someone."

Some of the big buddies appreciated being given resources such as data and food vouchers, which contributed to creating a conducive social setting in which the buddies could meet and interact.

Figure 5

Excerpts from Survey B Linked to Having Resources

"The fact that they give us vouchers to buy food, it really helps with coming together and also to break the silence if some of the members are shy."

"The food was a great way to bond and get to know the buddies."

"The best part is I get to meet with my buddies while we are having something to eat. It is not something formal, it is easy to meet with buddies in an environment that enables us to talk freely, and share jokes."

The theme about which the least was said, but which is nevertheless important, is the adjustment to a new environment. Some big buddies understand that first-year students have to make a "leap" from high school to university. These big buddies see their role as having to help the new buddies to adapt to university life, settle into a new environment, and cope with the transition.

Figure 6

Excerpts from Survey A and B Linked to Adjustment to a New Environment

"… helping them settle into a new space."

"… helps them cope with the transition from high school to university."

"Being able to help first-years cope with the jump from high school to university and helping them relax and find their footing"

"It also helps the students cope with the life in university, my first-year students' life in university is different from what they thought, so it is helpful to have a support system to help them get used to and manage it properly."

In general, the big buddies appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the programme; they stated that it was a valuable experience for them and that they believed that it was a good support platform for first-year students.

Figure 7

Excerpts from Survey C that Express Appreciation

"Thanks for a great awesome experience fly big buddies, this programme helped me to see life in a different perspective, and also it helped me to get out of my comfort zone."

"I would just like to thank you for this initiative! This helps students to deal with situations in a more effective manner because they know they have someone to advise them, or just to basically know that someone is there if they ever need a shoulder. The vouchers are such a nice initiative!"

"I think this is a great programme that helps a lot of first-years."

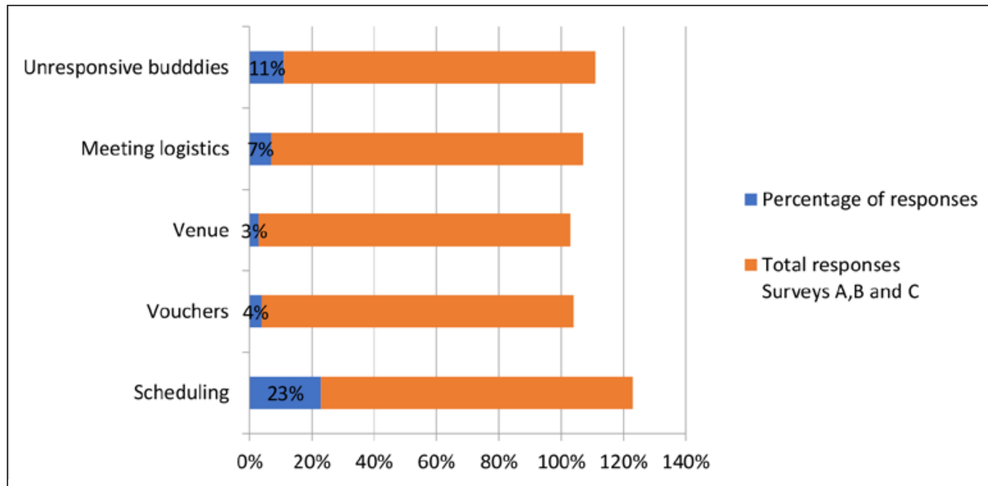
"The programme has a good setup. It isn't burdensome in that we only have to be people who give guidance and we can help the buddies get more help from the appropriate people if it is needed."

"The programme really helps the first-years feel welcomed and being taken care of. Also they have someone to talk to concerning any problems with access to some school facilities."

The feedback surveys asked the big buddies to reflect on what challenges they faced and what their greatest frustrations were. The five themes that emerged from the analysis of their responses are presented in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8

Major Themes Emerging from Big Buddies' Descriptions of Programme Challenges



Scheduling was a major source of frustration to some big buddies who found it difficult to arrange meetings for times that would suit everyone, due to timetable clashes and busy schedules. In some cases, new buddies would arrive late for meetings, which put strain on the already limited time. Even though this was a common problem mentioned by big buddies, it was fairly insignificant at 23% of all responses in Surveys A, B, and C combined. A related problem was the issue of arranging physical meetings with group members. Some big buddies reported that new buddies sometimes cancelled meetings and in some cases, the big buddies were unable to keep their appointments with their groups. Some big buddies stated that new buddies were unresponsive, indifferent to the programme, and that they did not pay attention. This was attributed to the delayed commencement of this intervention. Consequently, some big buddies believed that their new buddies had already made friends (in some cases with senior students), had adjusted to university life, and that they no longer needed their support.

Very few big buddies experienced problems with the venues that were used for meetings with their new buddies (3%), and with the data vouchers that they received to use for communication with their buddies (4%). Complaints about the venues were that they were overcrowded and noisy. The main problem with the vouchers was that they had sometimes expired before they could be used.

Discussion

The overall experiences of the big buddies were positive. Several big buddies suggested that the programme should commence earlier than was the case in 2019. The buddies started meeting

after semester tests had begun, and several big buddies found it difficult to arrange meetings with their new buddies who were preoccupied with preparations for tests. Some big buddies suggested helping their new buddies with examination preparation skills. This suggestion can be directly linked to the timing of the commencement of the programme, and to their acute awareness of the stress levels experienced by new buddies at that time of year. However, it should be noted that such assistance would fall outside their ambit of peer support as they are not supposed to offer academic support.

Several big buddies suggested that quieter, less crowded venues should be made available for their meetings with new buddies. Big buddies realised that issues with unsuitable venues could have been diminished by simply collecting lunch from busy establishments and moving to a more conducive environment for interaction with their new buddies.

Some big buddies suggested that there should be more one-on-one meetings than group meetings to give new buddies the opportunity to discuss private matters that were causing them problems. Some of the questions suggested in their interactions were perceived to be impersonal and more like interview questions. They wanted to put their new buddies at ease and create a deeper connection with them but were unable to do so. Others suggested that they should have more face-to-face meetings with new buddies to be in a better position to attend to their specific needs. Although the programme did not limit the number of times when the big and new buddies could meet, the availability of funds could have given the impression that there should only be three sessions.

Lastly, several big buddies suggested that the data vouchers should be made available earlier than was done in 2019 so that they would have enough time to use them before the expiry date. Some suggested that the vouchers should be valid for both data and airtime to allow for more personal communication.

Recommendations and Conclusions

It is essential for an institution to organise its resources in a way that will encourage student engagement through which student experiences can be influenced (Kuh et al., 2007). The aim of this research was to examine the value of establishing a buddy programme as support for first-year students.

Ford (2015) highlights the importance of training and supervision in the execution of a peer support programme, as a person trying to help a peer may feel inadequate. This feeling of not being sufficiently prepared surfaced when a big buddy expressed disappointment about not being able to deal with a new buddy's emotional breakdown. The Buddy Programme tried to address this by providing the big buddies with initial training, and by requiring accountability from them through reports at every phase of their interaction with new buddies. However, this training should be more frequent and broader, and the

supervision needs to be more comprehensive.

In this pilot programme, information could only be shared with new buddies once they had registered and completed their academic orientation. A new pre-orientation programme has since been developed and established at the University. Potential students who participate in this pre-orientation should be able to request a buddy. The big buddies can then be allocated their new buddies before the academic year begins, and meetings with new buddies can take place during the academic orientation. This will prevent challenges in terms of time clashes and will help them to establish more meaningful connections before the commencement of semester tests.

Vouchers are a useful resource for big buddies. Their ability to invite their buddies for coffee gave them a sense of leadership as they were able to make decisions about where and when they could meet. A suggestion from the students regarding the data vouchers was that they should provide for both data and airtime to enable them to choose how to communicate with their new buddies. The type of vouchers to be provided needs a re-think in light of a post-pandemic learning environment.

Finally, any future programme needs to consider how to best support the big buddies, as the feedback clearly indicated a need for more support. Since the FSAs are best placed to support the big buddies in the faculties, a working relationship needs to be established between the big buddies and the FSAs.

The overall purpose of the interventions at the UP is to enable students to complete their studies in the minimum time. Although the majority of these interventions have had an academic basis in the past, it has become evident in recent years that there is a need to also consider the social aspects of support. To this end, the further development and impact of the Buddy Programme has relevance. With future implementation, it will be necessary to also document the perspectives of the new buddies.

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Research Article

Advisors' Perceptions of the Value of Advising Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study at a South African University

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Abstract

Traditional advising responsibilities are shifting to include a holistic, learning-based, and developmental approach that favours advising of the entire university experience. A dearth of systematic empirical evidence exists on advisors' perceptions of the value of advising students during the Covid-19 pandemic in the South African context. The purpose of this study is to elucidate advisors' perceptions of the complexity and challenges inherent in their responsibilities during the pandemic. This case study draws on a qualitative research design; it is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews undertaken with nine advisors in 2020. The central research question posed in this study is: How do advisors describe their perceptions of their responsibilities within the Covid-19 pandemic, and how might these contribute to future practices? The findings indicate that advising during the pandemic has transcended the typical transactional dissemination of information to include addressing contextual, environmental, and resource challenges, social justice imperatives, emergency remote learning, asynchronous advising challenges, and data-informed advising. These responsibilities have encompassed a holistic approach to advising and to getting to know students as 'whole people'. Adjustments and transitions to emergency remote learning have highlighted social inequalities in access to data, to the internet, and electricity connectivity, which have served as impediments to students' learning and educational experiences. Some home environments were not conducive to studying but necessitated doing household chores and herding cattle. The findings also indicate that an institution's advising delivery model should enhance advisors' abilities to perform their responsibilities. A network of cascaded responsibilities that incorporates greater involvement of lecturers in advising could contribute to a shared responsibility between lecturers and central, faculty, and peer advisors. Insights gained may lead to a more nuanced understanding of advisors' responsibilities as they relate to student learning and to the overall educational experience to promote retention and student success in a post-pandemic era.

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Keywords

Advising structures and systems, responsibilities, social justice, retention, student success, advisors' perceptions, Covid-19

Introduction

Traditional advising responsibilities are shifting to include a holistic, learning-based, and developmental approach that favours advising of the entire university experience. Mueller and Meyer (2017) argue that providing holistic support to students by connecting them to academic and non-academic resources and career goals are considered advisors' responsibilities. These responsibilities include assisting students in meeting graduation requirements, career exploration and graduate school options, assisting with navigating university systems, and empowering students (Hart-Baldridge, 2020). Providing accurate information, referring students, and "being an honest resource to students" (Hart-Baldridge, 2020, p. 14) is also regarded as advisors' responsibilities. Financial and personal issues are dealt with in the advising context because they impinge on a student's ability to achieve academically (Larson et al., 2018). Advising is posited as a crucial component of student success (Thomas et al., 2018). Extant literature internationally suggests that advising can contribute to retention, and ultimately to student success (Thomas et al., 2018; 2017). In this study, student success is operationalised in terms of its ability to integrate students into an institution by allowing them to navigate and understand the institutional culture, policies, and information (Hart-Baldridge, 2020). Advising efforts geared towards retention are viewed as strategies aimed at allowing students to graduate. Advising in the United States of America (USA) has its roots in addressing students' personal and academic needs. Today, it is entrenched in higher education (HE) as a means of addressing retention concerns (Drake, 2011). Kuh (2008) proposes advising as a high-impact practice that affects student success. He defines advising as "situations in which an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about academic, social, or personal matters" (Kuh, 2008, p. 3). Advising occurs along a continuum from developmental advising to more proactive, intrusive forms of advising, where a developmental approach allows for collaboration between advisors and advisees (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Institutions have thus developed advising structures, for example, hybrid advising structures are common in the USA (Miller, 2012).

Very little is known about perceptions of advising by those in leadership positions who make decisions that affect how advising is structured and undertaken within an institution (Menke, Duslak & McGill, 2020). A misperception exists that "anyone can simply step into the role and perform the work of an advisor" (Menke et al., 2020, p. 87). McGill (2021), who holds that the role of academic advising in higher education (HE) is misunderstood, has

identified the need for academic advisors to communicate the value and complexity of their work. Menke et al. (2020) thus argue that it is important for advisors to elucidate their daily roles and responsibilities in order for advising to be understood by everyone in an institution. It is envisaged that an understanding of advising practices is able to provide advisors with a language to explain what they do (McGill, 2021). Menke et al. (2020) maintain that the benefit of advising as it relates to student success is ongoing and that it needs to be understood. We cannot assume that the literature emanating from the USA is transferable to South Africa without further investigation. As such, more research is needed on how advising is perceived in a variety of institutional contexts (Menke et al., 2020). Accordingly, Menke et al. (2020) advocate for further research to advance the field and to examine the place that academic advising occupies.

A dearth of systematic empirical evidence exists on advisors' perceptions of the value of advising during the Covid-19 pandemic in the South African context. The purpose of this study is to elucidate advisors' perceptions of the value of advising during the Covid-19 pandemic. The central research question posed in this study is: How do advisors describe their perceptions of their responsibilities within the Covid-19 pandemic, and how might these contribute to future practices? Insights gained may lead to a more nuanced understanding of advising responsibilities in relation to student learning, and to the overall educational experience to promote retention and student success in a post-pandemic era. A review of advising responsibilities is followed by a description of the case study context. The methodology and findings are outlined with limitations and suggestions for future research before concluding with implications for policy and practice.

Advising Responsibilities

Initially, advisors in the USA focused on assisting students with course selection to enable them to complete their degrees (Menke et al., 2020). This is a widely acceptable advising responsibility that is regarded by advisors as to the 'nuts and bolts' of advising (Hart-Baldridge, 2020, p. 14). Advisors are directly in touch with challenges experienced by students (Steele & White, 2019), and they are thus ideally placed to implement interventions to support students in achieving their goals (Menke et al., 2020). Extant literature indicates the importance of faculty-student advising interactions to promote student success (Hart-Baldridge, 2020). Institutional communication is also enhanced through advising interactions (Hart-Baldridge, 2020). By means of these interactions, connections are formed between students and advisors, which provide students with an in-depth understanding of the institution and of its context and resources (McGill, 2021). Advising thus has an impact on student learning and on broader educational experiences (Hart-Baldridge, 2020). McGill (2021) argues that the possibilities related to student learning are limited by the perception that advising in HE involves

transmitting information to students to allow them to graduate. In agreement, Menke et al. (2020) contend that advising encompasses more than this. Menke et al. (2020) argue that the institutional status of advising has shifted from a prescriptive approach to a learning-based developmental approach that favours holistic advising of students' entire university experience. Advising responsibilities are typically undertaken as individual functions in silos. The need to break down silos has led Hart-Baldridge (2020, p. 16) to argue that "if we did it together, we could do it better". Shared advising responsibilities could thus contribute to retention and student success (Hart-Baldridge, 2020). Students are involved in decision-making when they decide to act in a manner that allows them to accomplish their goals (McGill, 2021). In this way, advising transcends transactional information dissemination (McGill, 2021). The ultimate responsibility is thus to help students connect their academic experiences and goals (Hart-Baldridge, 2020).

Asynchronous Advising

Asynchronous advising in online space has predated the pandemic even though it was limited. To facilitate emergency remote learning, advisors were forced to move to asynchronous advising. Miller et al. (2019) argue that multiple methods are required when advising students online. Electronic online resources may be used by advisors to provide just-in-time asynchronous advising (Ohrablo, 2016). Emails are as important as in-person advising sessions; Ohrablo (2016) recommends effective written and oral communication skills to mitigate the challenges of online advising. Video conferencing software such as Zoom and Skype comes close to the face-to-face advising experiences in terms of visual cues (Ohrablo, 2016). Students who make use of online advising often feel lost because they lack a contextual framework that characterises face-to-face advising (Ohrablo, 2016). A visual frame of reference is absent in an online advising setting, whether it be on email or telephone; its absence increases feelings of disconnection and frustration (Ohrablo, 2016). Technical problems are inevitable and these need to be mitigated by alternative forms of communication such as a telephone call. According to Ohrablo's (2016) study, students prefer telephonic and email communication. A study by Hart-Baldridge (2020) also indicates that advisors experience challenges in navigating software. The digital divide has existed before the pandemic and it is a reality which advisors and students continue to confront (Rendón, 2021).

Advising Case Study Context

Similar to most HE institutions in South Africa, the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) experienced a decline in the percentage of undergraduate student graduations between 2005 and 2010, which raised concerns. Evidence of a data-

informed approach in 2013 was available from national studies (CHE, 2013; CHE, 2006). Institutional data also suggested that student retention and success should be prioritised with the initial input directed to students who were at risk in their first year of study. To provide structural support and to systemically address the retention of at-risk students, resources were allocated to faculties for the employment of faculty coordinators to provide academic, psychosocial, and economic advice to first-year students who were identified as being at risk. The term advising was not used; instead, owing to the focus on at-risk students, faculty coordinators were termed 'At-risk Co-ordinators'. Consequently, advising was instituted in 2014 and was resourced largely from the Teaching Development Grant: 2014–2016 of the Department of Higher Education and Training. It was envisaged that the appointment of advisors in the faculties would improve retention and the long-term student success goals of the university.

Organisational Structures and Delivery Systems

An institution's organisational structures for advising are able to hinder or facilitate advising. King (2008) argues that institutions are able to organise their advising services using centralised, decentralised, and shared organisational structures. In 2013, a shared organisational structure was selected with central coordination for the establishment, staffing training, sharing of practices, and with decentralised delivery programmes at the faculty level. The chosen model also depended on the resources available and existing support in the faculties. Faculty operational and human resource budgets were allocated and these enabled the employment of eight advisors. As advising delivery systems, faculties were able to design their advising programmes, which were termed 'Passport to Success', 'Road to Success Programme' and 'Academic Success Programme', to name but a few.

Technology is an integral part of advising (Gordon et al., 2008). Institutionalising advising thus relied on developing technology in tandem with support advising and student success. A data warehouse and dashboards to identify students who are at risk, a case management system to log advising interventions, and a biographical questionnaire were developed to inform advising. Frameworks on student success and data governance were developed in 2019. Consequently, governance structures for advising are built on student success; advising activities are reported to the Student Success Committee, which feeds into the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee and the Senate.

The current context has retained the original advising structures and delivery systems. Faculties have taken the initiative to convert the initial eight contract grant funded posts to permanent posts. The number of faculty advisors has also increased to fifteen with some advising posts still being funded by the University Capacity Development Programme of the Department of Higher Education. Donaldson et al. (2020) thus acknowledge that advising is characterised by a high student-advisor ratio. Over an eight-year period, capacity has increased

but a high student-advisor ratio remains. The limited number of advisors could become a major disadvantage in the shared structures model (Kapinos, 2020). The findings provide further insights into current advising practices.

Methodology

This case study draws on a qualitative research design; it is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews undertaken with nine advisors in 2020. A case study approach (Stake, 2005) is appropriate for a reflective paper that seeks to reflect upon the benefit of advising students from advisors' perspectives. This descriptive case study is part of a broader analysis of advising practices at Wits. A convenient sample (Bryman, 2016) of nine advisors was selected. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained, and participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their participation. Owing to the small number of participants, faculty and departmental affiliation were not revealed as these would violate anonymity. To mitigate this, demographic information on gender, nature of position, and years of experience is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Advisor Demographics

Interview	Gender	Nature of Position	Years of Experience
1	Female	Academic	1
2	Female	Academic	6
3	Female	Academic	4
4	Male	Professional and Support	3
5	Female	Professional and Support	3
6	Female	Professional and Support	8
7	Male	Academic	3
8	Female	Academic	3
9	Female	Professional and Support	2

Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the pandemic, and some interview questions included:

- Describe your function in terms of what your job entails?

- How do you get to know what your students' needs are?
- How does your background make it easy or difficult for you to advise students?
- What challenges have you experienced during the pandemic?

Interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. The analysis involved the descriptive coding of the data, which were then categorised into code groups and themes (Saldaña, 2021) in ATLAS.ti version 9. First-person accounts were used as evidence to support the findings.

Findings

The findings are derived from a thematic analysis of interview data, and they provide structure and depth to an understanding of advisors' perspectives of their responsibilities. Five major themes have emerged: advising context, transactional information dissemination, social justice imperatives, learning experiences, and data-informed advising during the pandemic. Subthemes are also presented to augment these themes.

Advising Context

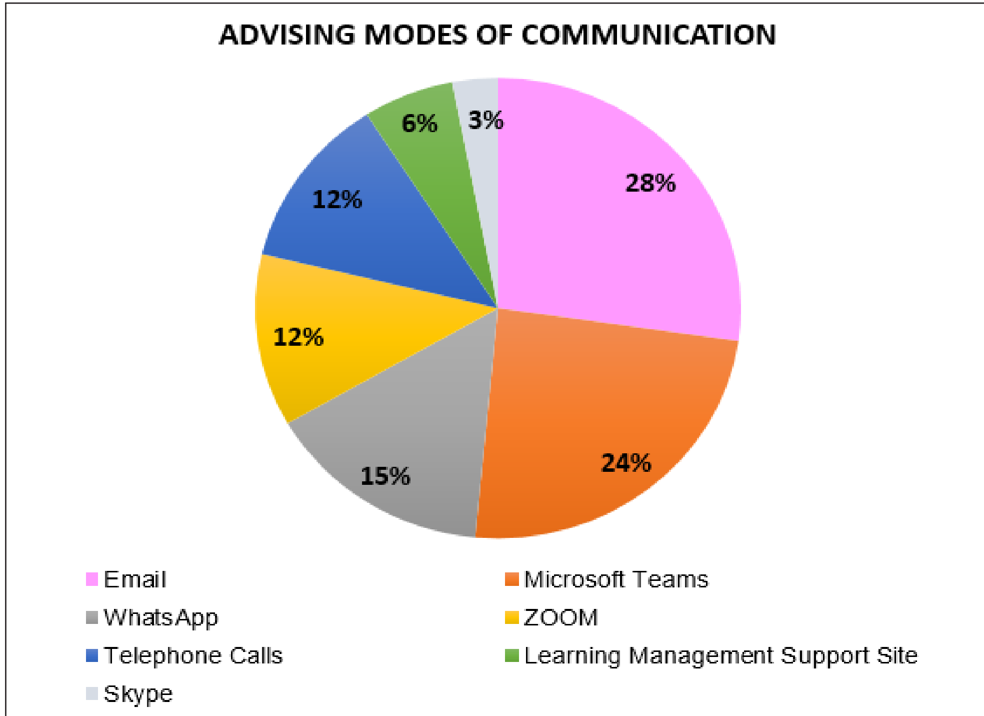
The context that shapes advising responsibilities has revealed the importance of the mode of communication, as well as an understanding of students' and advisors' backgrounds and context.

Modes of Communication

Multiple modes of communication were used to communicate with students during the pandemic. The preferred mode of communication was emails, followed by advising students on Microsoft Teams. WhatsApp, ZOOM, Skype, and telephone calls were also used in addition to various Learning Management Support Sites (see Figure 1). An advisor reported the dominance of email communication: "On a day-to-day basis I get a lot of students just sending me an email to request an advising session" (Interview 1). An advisor illustrated the use of the different modes:

> *My cell phone became something that I used quite often uhm outside of Teams because Teams sometimes was not that friendly. I used a lot of Zoom. Uhm, even when I do my workshops, Teams doesn't work. So, I schedule meetings with myself to record on Zoom and I upload that to the e-learning site that I have created. Uhm, I use Skype uhm then I also do a lot of phone call* (Interview 3).

Figure 1
Advising Modes of Communication



The majority of advisors reported that various modes of advising had assisted them in individual sessions; group sessions, and in providing online resources on the learning management support sites. An advisor summed this up by stating that "it's either we are responding to those requests over the email or presenting group sessions or we're having one-on-one sessions with the students" (Interview 5). Conducting group sessions online was challenging due to "ethical issues" and "not wanting students to feel uncomfortable during COVID" (Interview 3). A distinction between pre-COVID and COVID advising sessions in terms of "how we do advising" was highlighted by one advisor (Interview 1). This advisor maintained that advising sessions were based on "an open-door policy, so group sessions and the one-on-one sessions are normally done" (Interview 1).

Online communication was reported to have a wider reach: "I'm sort of happy with the online because I feel like we reached more students than we could have when we were in our office(Interview 6). Online resources were made available on the learning management system (LMS), and due to the overall value of communicating with students online, one advisor

advocated for a blended mode in future that would combine face-to-face and online advising. This was articulated as follows: "I'm not saying we take away the face-to-face contacts but I would advocate that we continue doing it in conjunction with face-to-face because we reach more students" (Interview 6).

Students' Backgrounds and Contexts

Most advisors valued a holistic approach to advising and to getting to know students "as whole people" (Interview 2). Students' backgrounds were viewed as important when trying to understand their contexts. An advisor reported focusing on "students who are from underprivileged backgrounds" and always looking "at the background of whomever you want to assist" (Interview 4). Advisors considered it important to be aware of the work that was published by the National Academic Advising Association: The Global Community of Advising (NACADA). However, getting the best results from the international experience was only recommended if these were relevant to the South African context. Most advisors reported that the backgrounds of the South African students differed from students internationally and that they considered students' context before assisting them:

> *Our students are not necessarily from the same backgrounds as the ones that they usually post on NACADA. So … you always have to try and contextualise whatever that you want to do uhm to the students that you're dealing with . . . because the context if it's not the same you're not gonna [sic] get the best results if you just trying to implement it to the students that you're dealing with* (Interview 4).

While students' backgrounds informed advising, advisors also drew on their own backgrounds and found their experiences to be a helpful "frame of reference" (Interview 7) to understand student dynamics and challenges. An advisor reported the benefit of understanding students' challenges and background by stating that "I would be able to sit with them and then explore the question; …and some of them were just appreciating the fact that they've got someone who can understand their background" (Interview 4). Seeking to understand students' context involves introspection and a contextual understanding of the advisor's background and experience. Acknowledging that it is possible to transcend their rural background and to obtain their degrees, allowed some advisors to identify with students' context and to motivate them to do the same:

> *I know where I'm from… and a lot of them share similar backgrounds …I grew up in a very rural area…I managed to make something out of that so when you speak to students you get to know where they're from, you're able to understand exactly what they are going through* (Interview 4).

An advisor felt that "Black South African" advisors were better placed to allow students to speak freely and express themselves in their "mother tongue" without any language barriers (Interview 8). This was exemplified in the following explanation: "I'm in the position to say you can speak with me in Pedi for example or in Zulu uh and look into the problem that you are having and I'm able to explain from that perspective" (Interview 4).

Some advisors also viewed the understanding of students' backgrounds as a means of breaking down silos between departments: "We're an office that likes to work in a very integrated way with stakeholders knowing where different types of resources sit" (Interview 9). Serving students were at the heart of advisors' perceptions of the advising that they provided. Breaking down silos between advising undergraduate and postgraduate students was also common. While the focus on advising had initially been on "at-risk students", advisors indicated that the focus was extended and that "postgraduate students were advised on a demand basis" (Interview 5). An advisor was of the opinion that "I have to serve students, mainly undergraduate students, though we do not really chase the postgraduate students when they need help" (Interview 5).

Transactional Information Dissemination

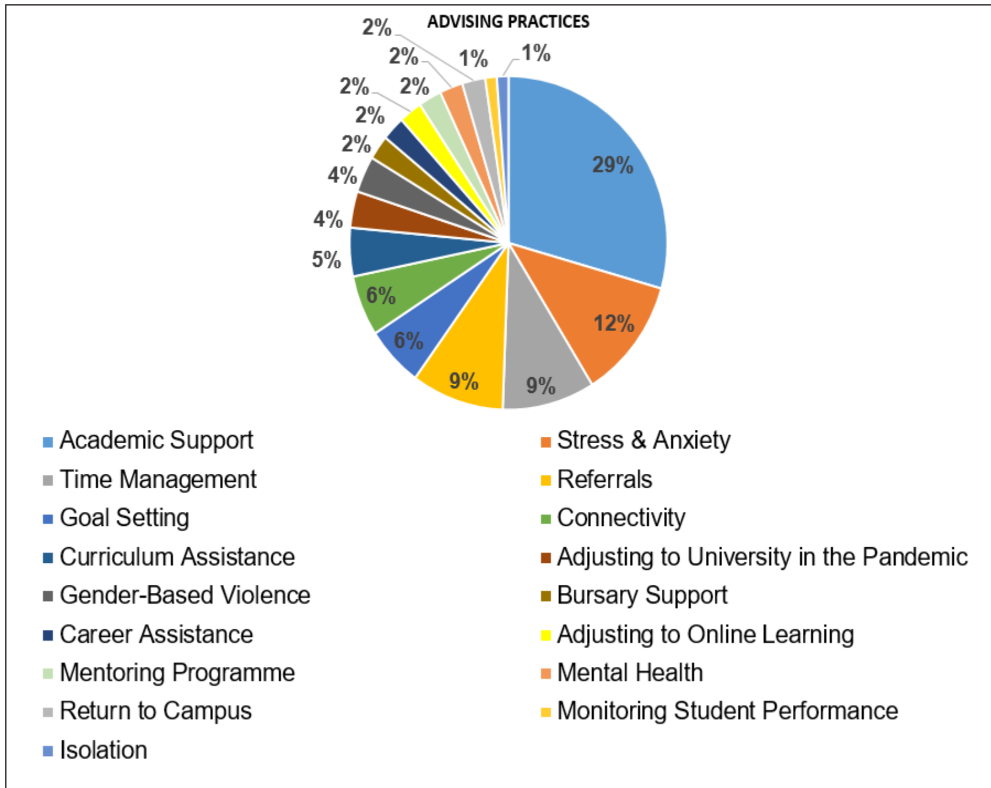
Transactional information dissemination was undertaken in advising responsibilities related to academic, curriculum, career, goal setting, and time management and in connecting students to network points. Advising was reported to encompass a wide spectrum of responsibilities and "was open-ended enough to include any issue from answering student queries based on anything basically" (Interview 7). An advisor captured this as follows:

> *Yeah uhm, so, we, don't actually use the term academic advising because I, I think that people are advising on socio-economic issues for example, so if a student doesn't have finance, we help them with that, if a student is struggling with connectivity, we help them with that uhm so it's those psychosocial type of support that we give, which is not really like academic as such. So, we just talk about advising, so anything to do with advising* (Interview 7).

The proportion of issues with which students requested assistance is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Advising Practices



Advisors reported that the majority of students requested assistance with academic issues. Advisors assisted students with their "applications for remarks and with late assessments, without compromising the standards of the university" (Interview 5). Advisors were of the opinion that "students are extremely stressed, extremely anxious" (Interview 1). Triggers for stress were viewed as "the family situation or relationship, anything that might have an impact on them being able to pass their degree" (Interview 2). Acting as a "referral point" (Interview 5), guiding students to the correct resources and trying to "get them to use the resources that are available for them" (Interview 1), were regarded by advisors as a central aspect of their services to students. Assisting students with their "curriculum and career" were common advising practices (Interview 2). Advisors felt that they had a positive role to play with regard to "students obtaining a degree" (Interview 8). Most advisors reported dealing with time management "on a day-to-day basis" in their advising sessions (Interview 8). This was articulated by some advisors: "part of my work is to teach students time management"

(Interview 6). Most advisors reported that they used "developmental advising" (Interview 7) in sessions because it was a collaborative activity that relied "on the student following through on what was discussed" (Interview 8).

Addressing Social Justice Imperatives

Special attention was devoted to the social justice cohort of students. Advising these students included a focus on "economic, socio-economic issues, social problems at home and study skills, for example" (Interview 8). Owing to the relaxation of the Covid-19 lockdown levels, some students were able to "return to campus" after having been identified by advisors as eligible to return (Interview 8). A true understanding of students' context and environments and where they lived was absolutely essential in making decisions regarding who was allowed to return to campus. One advisor, who was from a "rural area", used an understanding of the rural context to "contextualise the situation, struggles and challenges" that rural students found themselves in during the lockdown period (Interview 8).

Actively addressing social justice issues were regarded as integral to advising. An advisor was of the opinion that "a lot of our students have social justice issues" so "I can't run away from factors like social problems at home, economic, socio-economic issues" (Interview 6). More particularly, social justice issues included access to electricity, food, and running water. An advisor conveyed this as follows:

> *There'd been quite a few students who mentioned that uh they perhaps don't have a reliable electricity supply, where they're saying they have no signal uhm perhaps they are from uh poorer backgrounds where they don't have the necessary resources at home like food or even running water and uhm those are the types of social justice issues* (Interview 1).

Recommendations regarding who should return to campus led some advisors to report that they had found themselves in situations where they needed to "understand that the student is not lying" (Interview 8). As such, advising was understood to take place in an environment that was conducive to "listening to students" (Interview 6). A distinction was made between advising and counselling. Although some advisors had a psychology background, they highlighted the difference between the two fields by stating that "I don't just listen to them, I have to get involved, not direct counselling, it's to motivate them, give them that hope" (Interview 6). An advisor conveyed a situation that had occurred during an advising session where a student explained to the advisor that "when he sends emails to the lecturers asking them to recommend him to return to residence they don't even respond" (Interview 8). This advisor subsequently recommended the student to return to campus due to an understanding of the inequality between students from rural and urban areas by illustrating the following situations:

> *The major ones were, with regards to the kind of house chores that he had to do. It wasn't normal house chores, just cleaning around the house, you know. As a male child, he had to uhm go and take care of the cows. The herds, he had to take care of the cattle, he had to also clean around the yard. He also had to go and fetch water from a far uhm area. So, you know, those kinds of things I understood. These are the types of situations that actually do occur uhm in such areas* (Interview 8).

Learning Experiences

During the initial lockdown period, advisors made every effort to allow learning to continue by facilitating the shift to emergency remote teaching and learning and to online advising.

Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning

The dominance of requests for academic support as a result of the move to remote online teaching and learning. This move was challenging for most advisors. An advisor captured the initial "move to remote online teaching and learning" (Interview 4) as "[t]he main thing that we did when COVID started was providing support with adjusting to online learning for the students", which involved "doing the orientation in that regard and then we received a lot of queries regarding the challenges they experienced" (Interview 7). The reality initially described was that "emails will just be flying through from the staff as well as the students" and subsequently "[w]e stabilised a bit now and once everyone was comfortable with online learning, it became a bit easier, much, much easier" (Interview 4). The drastic nature of the situation was emphasised: "[g]eez! COVID obviously, we had to move onto online and be at the forefront of everything" (Interview 4). The support provided included "assistance for lecturers to record videos and induction programmes for students on how to transition into online" (Interview 4).

A few advisors strongly felt that "the one big challenge students were facing was the fact that they thought they were not going to be able to learn online" (Interview 3). However, students used their agency to identify their own needs. Most advisors felt that "students are able to be very specific about what it is that they need assistance with" (Interview 9). Advisors recognised that students had multiple needs and that "it's not only one subject; it's multiple subjects that they struggle with and multiple like social issues as well" (Interview 1). Issues related to "adjustment" (Interview 7) and "transitioning" (Interview 3) to remote online learning during the pandemic presented challenges to all students. An advisor made a comment that "adapting to learning from home and being by yourself is very different to receiving that in face-to-face interaction" (Interview 1). However, the pandemic presented contextual recourse issues related to "data, connectivity, electricity, house chores, and the need to return to campus" (Interview 8). Most advisors reported that they felt helpless because they had "no

control over external issues such as electricity and internet connectivity" that students were highlighting "things that you cannot really solve" (Interview 8) and that "sometimes we didn't even really have anything to help with when it comes to those challenges" (Interview 7).

Once advisors understood what students' challenges were, they then "relayed that information to schools to inform lecturers why students were not engaging with their courses" (Interview 3). Lecturers were also able to assist advisors by proposing interventions to assist students. An advisor captured this as follows: "lecturers approached us to assist them to better support and connect with students" as well as "to come up with ideas for interventions" (Interview 3). In this manner, advisors worked with "the schools and the departments" to find ways to assist students (Interview 3). Important connections were thus formed between advisors and lecturers. Advisors reported that some lecturers extended the deadlines for assessments and tests to allow students to navigate around their "network issues and electricity issues" (Interview 8). The lecturers' reports indicated that they were sensitive to these contextual challenges. Advisors reported that in advising sessions, a student would mention: "I could not complete my test due to network issues" (Interview 8). Connectivity issues meant that advisors could not "even have a meeting on Zoom" (Interview 7). Advisors mentioned that students had informed them that they needed data, which the university subsequently made available. These challenges affected advisors' ability to facilitate learning.

Some advisors experienced challenges when working on technology, such as Microsoft Teams: "Initially I had problems working online because I had never done it before, ever" (Interview 5). A personal challenge to connect with students and to arrange meetings was conveyed by an advisor who stated: "I had a bit of a challenge but once I got the hang of it, I'm now comfortable with it" (Interview 5). This learning curve was overcome and communicated: "It has been improving ever since because of continued use" (Interview 5). An advisor also empathetically communicated students' technological challenges with regard to meetings on Teams and suggested "multiple avenues to connect with students" by stating that "as much as I as an adult was having difficulties you can imagine how an 18, 22-year-old would have struggled" (Interview 5). However, advisors reported that "students seem to be quite adjusted after June" (Interview 7). Some advisors mentioned that students informed them about the learning experiences that they had acquired and that they intended to learn from their challenges: "There were those that were not really happy about their marks" and who stated that "had they been like in normal learning, they think they would have done better" (Interview 7). The learning opportunity was further expressed in the following way: "they have learnt what were the main challenges and how they think they will address them in the future" (Interview 7). The potential for advisors and students to build on past learning opportunities was thus articulated by an advisor: "in as much as at the beginning there was a bit of challenge but as we are moving all forward, it is opening up opportunities that we will most definitely use post-COVID" (Interview 5).

Online Advising

Advisors reported that they needed to "move away from face-to-face advising" and "adapt to online advising" (Interview 1). An advisor mentioned that the challenge was that "90% of our programmes were face-to-face" and "in the wake of COVID we really had to adjust very quickly along with the rest of the University" in order to "formulate a plan about how we were going to continue to roll out our programmes online" (Interview 9). Nevertheless, an advisor stipulated: "We were able to just rise to the occasion and adapt our programmes to really link in with online learning" (Interview 9).

A few advisors mentioned that they found it "easier to communicate with students live with face-to-face contact" (Interview 8). Online advising without video functionality prevented advisors from "reading a student's body language and reactions" (Interview 1). Advisors gauged students' emotions with ease during synchronous advising, which was not possible when communicating with students on WhatsApp. This was articulated as "I found contact advising easy, because I could tell the kind of emotions that students would have at that particular time" (Interview 8). The benefit of synchronous advising was described as follows: "when students show those emotions, I would know how to direct my advising", whereas "unfortunately this time around it was a bit difficult because it was via WhatsApp calls" (Interview 8). However, advising on WhatsApp incurred financial costs for both advisors and students due to data costs. An advisor stated that "having to search in my own pocket to have these sessions and then also from the students' side as well" was a disadvantage "because then they had to use their data as well for WhatsApp calls" (Interview 8). The advantage was that WhatsApp allowed advisors to reach out to international students: "sometimes WhatsApp just works because we had international students as well that I had to give uhm direct calls" (Interview 8).

A contrast between advising in a pre-Covid-19 and Covid-19 context was highlighted by an advisor in terms of the challenges students experienced and the simplicity of advising responsibilities before Covid-19:

> *In general, uhm advising was really difficult during this time and because you are trying to assist students with normal challenges that you know, they'd bring to you, time management, note-taking, all those excellent skills but now the challenges that they're bringing to you, it's just with regards to things that you cannot really solve; I'm having network issues, I could not complete my test, you know. Uhm so even in the advising session, it's you know, students really just focus on the challenges or the struggles that they were going through rather than trying to develop themselves. Whereas in other years, the advising was much simpler, you know, it was focussed on excellent skills, trying to assist students with regards to that, rather than trying to help them find ways to overcome network issues or trying to work around the house. So, I think advising this year was very, very difficult it was definitely a difficult year* (Interview 8).

Overall, advisors were of the opinion that online advising had "stabilised a bit now" and that they were "comfortable with online because it became a bit easier" over time (Interview 4).

Data-Informed Advising

Systems were developed by the university to assist advisors to monitor students' progress. Advisors reported using technology such as the "Students Persistence Dashboard and the Biographical Questionnaire" to support their advising (Interview 2). It was collectively reported that the systems were useful for providing information on the "contextual realities" to monitor student performance (Interview 1). Some advisors based their advice on background information obtained from data. Within the context of Covid-19, advisors needed to be innovative and to respond with new approaches that would allow them to support students. Advisors reported that they elicited feedback from students by administering online surveys on the advising services which they rendered. Feedback was requested on psychosocial and resource issues as well as on students' general well-being. Some advisors used "feedback from emails" (Interview 6), "surveys" (Interview 8), "virtual check-in sessions" (Interview 5) and "evaluation forms" (Interview 2) to obtain data to support their advising and interventions in a manner that responded to students' challenges. Using data allowed advisors to assess which students were "logging into the LMS" and engaging with their courses (Interview 3). Contacting those who were not logging in proved to be an effective means of indicating who needed advising and of elucidating contextual realities such as the need for "laptops" (Interview 3). Most advisors linked feedback to "course performance" (Interview 4) and to whether students' "marks were improving" (Interview 2). Advisors acknowledged that improvements in students' marks could not be attributed directly to advising but that advisors "added value" (Interview 5). Feedback from students was seen as an essential form of data upon which to base advising, as well as interventions in the form of "webinars to address students' challenges" (Interview 8).

Limitations and Future Research

The findings are derived from a small group of advisors' perceptions and cannot be generalised or transferred to other institutions because this study was undertaken at one institution. The interviews were conducted in 2020 during the lockdown period. Owing to the focus on the pandemic, perceptions of advisors' responsibilities may not capture the full range of responsibilities. Triangulating advisors' perceptions with students' marks and obtaining the viewpoints of students is a limitation of this study. However, it is also an area for future research, which could thus explore from students' perspectives whether advisors' responsibilities and roles are viewed as beneficial.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Perceptions of advising responsibilities influence both policy and practice. Advisors' perceptions of their responsibilities and the value of their contribution to student success, as indicated in this study, enable policy shifts in an institution. This study indicates that advising involves facilitating social justice imperatives to fulfil advising responsibilities related to facilitating student learning and to participation in educational experiences. The different levels of privilege between students from urban and from rural areas, and the varying opportunities to succeed due to social inequalities such as access to electricity and internet connectivity were recognised, and addressed by advisors. Advising responsibilities beyond the pandemic could encompass blended forms of advising, including synchronous and asynchronous advising, which takes into consideration the limitations of online advising.

The advising delivery model and systems should not impede advisors' ability to perform their responsibilities; instead, it should enhance this ability. Cascaded responsibilities that incorporate greater involvement of lecturers in advising could contribute to a shared responsibility between lecturers, central advisors, faculty advisors, and peer advisors. This network of advisors has the potential to break down silos and empower advisors at different levels of an institution. An awareness of advisors' responsibilities and challenges provides a basis to inform changes about how advising could be supported and how resources could be allocated. This study indicates that advising is able to shape students' learning and educational experiences. An institutional accountability system should ensure continuous monitoring of advising and constant evaluation of the relevance of its advising system and delivery model, resources, budgets, and advisor-student ratios to facilitate effective and efficient advising practices. Conveying the complexity of responsibilities and challenges to those in leadership positions who make resource allocation decisions related to staffing and budgets could thus enhance the profession, and ensure that sufficient resources are allocated in a post-pandemic era.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the value of advising practices through the perceptions of advisors. It has added to the literature by providing a contextual description of how advisors perceive the complexities and challenges inherent in advisors' responsibilities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Advising during the pandemic transcended the typical transactional dissemination of information and included addressing contextual, environmental, and resource challenges, social justice imperatives, online learning and advising experiences, and data-informed advising. These responsibilities encompass a holistic approach to advising and to getting to know students as 'whole people'. Adjustments and transitions to emergency remote learning highlighted students' contextual resource needs for data, connectivity to the internet, and electricity, which

served as impediments to learning. Some home environments were not conducive to studying and necessitated doing household chores and herding cattle. During the 'new normal', advisors became cognisant of students' agency to identify their own needs to facilitate retention and long-term success. Advising responsibilities during the pandemic have allowed students to make informed decisions and to continue to benefit from learning experiences in order to achieve their goals. These insights may lead to a more nuanced understanding of advising responsibilities as they relate to student learning, and to the overall educational experience to promote retention and student success in a post-pandemic era.

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Research Article

Merging Academic and Career Advising to Offer Holistic Student Support: A University Perspective

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Abstract

Higher education in South Africa has focused extensively on widening access to further inclusivity and economic development. However, as students need to persist and succeed in their studies, access alone is not enough. Furthermore, the responsibility of higher education to help students succeed does not end with graduation; institutions need to produce graduates who are ready to enter the labour market. Therefore, it is important to integrate career information and concepts into these practices when conceptualising holistic academic advising. Since academic advising is still developing as a professional practice in the South African context, no clear, practical framework has been used uniformly at universities. Career advice is also not necessarily integrated into academic advising in a conscious manner. This may result in students who are struggling to integrate all academic and career information provided to make informed decisions regarding their studies and career paths. This paper argues that the 3-I Process is an appropriate framework for the integration of career and academic advising in the South African context. In this case study, we draw from the experiences of nine advisors from the central advising office, faculties, and the career office at the University of the Free State to understand the extent to which they have been incorporating the elements of the 3-I Process into their existing academic advising practices, and how they view the possibilities of following a more integrated approach.

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We also map how the framework can be adapted to the broader South African context to inform and develop more holistic and professionalised advising practices, as well as to contribute towards students' success beyond university.

Keywords

Academic advising, career advising, higher education

Introduction

Over the past few years, the focus on widening access to higher education (HE) in South Africa has extended to include a strong emphasis on student success. Significant progress has been made to retain and successfully graduate students (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2019). This can be attributed to increased efforts in advising, mentoring, orientation programmes, and early warning efforts to intervene with students at risk of failing, counselling, and Supplemental Instruction that has been shown to impact student success (e.g. Cassells, 2018; Erasmus, 2017; Manik, 2014; Masehela & Mabika, 2017; Mayet, 2016). Among these interventions, academic advising stands out in international contexts as having the greatest impact in assisting with timely degree completion (Angulo-Ruiz & Pergelova, 2013; Miller, 2013; Page et al., 2019), especially when it is comprehensive, effective, and combined with other support efforts.

Despite some progress in improving student success rates, there are many challenges to still overcome. For example, approximately a third of students graduate within the minimum time frame of three years (DHET, 2019), of whom 11% are unemployed (Centre for Risk Analysis, 2021). The vast majority (at least 70%) of students who enter HE in South Africa are also the first in their generation to do so (Universities South Africa, 2018). This implies that most students might not be familiar with the options that they have when they access HE, nor are they familiar with how things work at university. These and similar challenges imply that HE institutions' responsibility to help students succeed should not end in assisting students to graduate. Instead, students also need to be guided in postgraduate career-related matters (Gordon, 2006; McCalla-Wriggins, 2009). Research shows that quality career advice (guidance and coaching), which will enhance clarity about students' career ambitions and interests, personal development plans, and employability, should be considered in all institutions (Okolie et al., 2020). It is thus crucial that in addition to academic advising, institutions should also look at career advising efforts.

Internationally, academic advising has developed from an undefined and unexamined activity to the present era, where academic advising is a defined activity that is rigorously examined in practice (Crookston, 1994; Daly & Sidell, 2013; Kuhn, 2008; O'Banion, 2009).

As such, the practice has long been professionalised and the curriculum well conceptualised. However, it has only recently been professionalised in South Africa, as evidenced by the recent launch of South Africa's first Academic Advising Association, ELETSA, in 2021. The only academic advising training programme in the country, which is accredited by the South African Qualifications Authority, is offered by the University of the Free State (UFS). This HE institution has also been playing a central part in developing academic advising. Since 2018, the Academic Advising Professional Development (AAPD) programme at the UFS has trained more than 174 advisors from seven South African institutions. This programme has contributed significantly to professionalising academic advising in the country.

Given the importance of career advising in HE, and considering that academic advising is still a relatively new concept in South Africa, the article suggests that this is a good time to consider how we can integrate academic and career advising to provide more holistic support to students. Currently, no specific framework for the provisioning of holistic support to students exists in South African HE. The objective of this paper is to argue for the integration of academic and career advising and to propose a contextualised framework to achieve this integration.

Literature Review

Academic and Career Advising

Academic and career advising has various definitions. A brief discussion of these definitions follows, and an argument for merging the two concepts, *academic advising* and *career advising,* is presented.

Academic advising is defined in different ways. For example, Kuhn (2008, p. 3) defines it as an action when "an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter. The nature of this direction might be to inform, suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or even teach." Other definitions which include career advising, are more holistic. For example:

Academic advising is a process where students and their academic advisers meet periodically to discuss progress, plans, ideas, and needs, as the student pursues academic and career goals. These meetings provide a time when students may talk with advisers who are knowledgeable about available resources to aid student progress. Students are encouraged to meet with their advisers during the year to discuss academic progress, problems, or educational and career goals (Wartburg College, 2021, para. 1).

At the UFS, the definition of academic advising also includes career advising; it states that academic advising is "an ongoing and intentional teaching and learning process to support and encourage advisees in aligning and fulfilling their personal, academic, and career goals. It is a

high-impact practice directed at connecting, empowering, and supporting students to achieve academic success" (University of the Free State [UFS], 2021, p. 6).

Career advising has roots in academic advising, but it also forms part of career development practices. However, career advising differs from the psychologically intense career counselling performed by registered counsellors and psychologists, as well as from career services where the focus is more on connecting to the world of work and on showcasing employability skills (Gordon, 2006; Herr et al., 2004; Hughey & Hughey, 2009; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). Career advising could be described as assisting students to "understand how their academic and personal interests, abilities, and values might relate to the career fields they are considering and how to form their academic and career goals accordingly" (Gordon, 2005, para. 2). There are some overlaps between career advising and similar practices in HE, such as career counselling and career services. Some of these overlapping aspects include professional competencies used by advisors who provide career advice, counsellors who provide career counselling, and other professionals who collaborate with career services. These professional competencies include relationship-building and communication competencies, career decision-making, planning, setting goals, and using similar career theories and resources (Hartung & Niles, 2001; Hughey & Hughey, 2009).

An Argument for Merging Academic and Career Advising

Students' decisions regarding the selection of their academic programmes and future planning are seldom made without considering how these relate to potential careers (Gordon, 1984; Nkomo, 2018). Studies have also found that students identified career-related information and concepts that are integrated into advice, as a continuous need throughout their studies (Chetty &Vigar-Ellis, 2012; Manik, 2015). Yet, degrees are often suggested for students without acknowledging their individual needs, motivation, or personality (Gordon & Steele, 2003). Undergraduate students are also known to start engaging with career services later in their education (Lynch & Lungrin, 2018). The lack of earlier engagement with career services might contribute to some students having unrealistic ideas about what certain careers entail, or about the amount of coursework required to enter into certain careers, which in turn could result in mid-study course changes (Tudor, 2018). Gordon (2006) asserts that should advisors not assist with this integration between academic programmes or majors and careers, and should they not help students with this planning, students will tap into other sources that might not be accurate, timely, or reliable. Thus, academic advisors should take advantage of their position to facilitate a more integrated and career-oriented approach to academic advising. They should assist students in developing academic goals and career plans that are congruent with their interests and values in order to be successful (Hughey & Hughey, 2009).

A Framework for Merging Academic and Career Advising

Although a few frameworks for the practical application of academic advice exist and are useful, they do not intentionally include career advice (Bloom et al., 2013; Cate & Miller, 2015; Egan, 2010; Hutson & He, 2011). Virginia Gordon (2006) presented a framework for such integration between academic and career advising named the 3-I Process. This framework for the integration of academic and career advising is highly recommended by the largest global community of academic advising, National Academic Advising Association (NACADA; e.g.) (Gordon, 2006; Hughey et al., 2009). The 3-I Process is widely used by academia in the United States of America (USA); however, it has not been adapted to different contexts beyond the USA. Therefore, this paper describes and discusses how the 3-I Process could be contextualised to propose a more integrated approach at a South African university that is based on academic advisors' current practices.

The 3-I Process

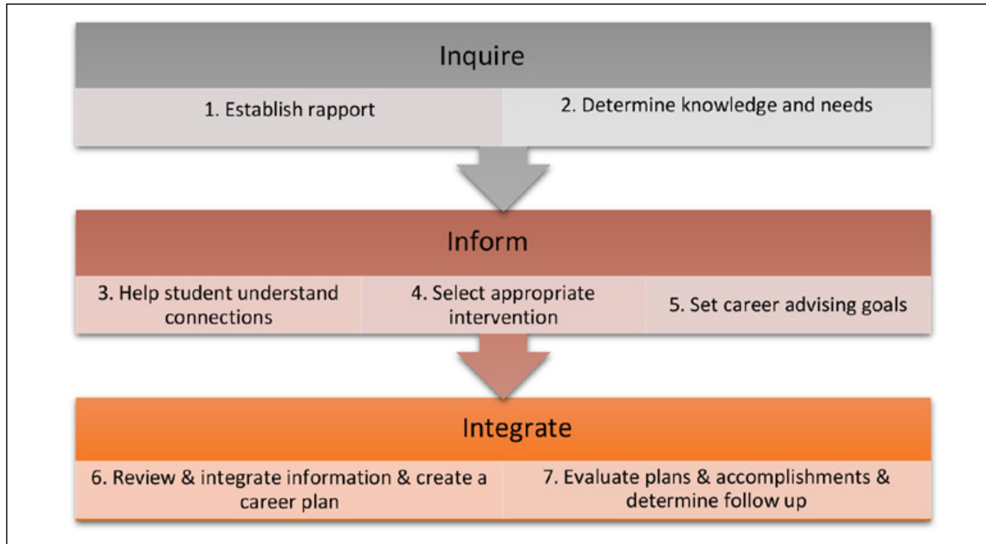
The 3-I Process consists of three main phases: inquire, inform, and integrate (Gordon, 2006) that derive from the following basic principles of career advising. These are:

1. choosing and maintaining a career as a lifelong process;
2. having effective career decision-making skills which are learned and used over a lifetime;
3. having career decision-making centres on knowledge of oneself, information about education opportunities, and facts about the world of work; and
4. making career decisions that are based on values. To have a satisfying career, one needs to clarify a set of beliefs and act upon them.

The 3-I Process was originally conceptualised as having three phases (see Figure 1). However, over the years, others have built on this framework. For example, Damminger (2009) further elaborated on these phases by breaking them down into seven steps in the career advising process. Although these steps seem to occur in a sequence, it is important to note that regression is possible. Figure 1 provides a brief overview of these steps.

Figure 1

Three Phases and Seven Steps of the Career Advising Process (Damminger, 2009)



During the *Inquire* phase of the 3-I Process, the advisor identifies and clarifies the students' academic and career concerns (Gordon, 2006). Damminger (2009) suggests distinguishing between two steps during the *Inquire* phase: building rapport and determining what the student's knowledge and other needs are. Thus, the advisor takes time to establish a relationship with the student and to find out where their needs lie. Damminger (2009) found that students' educational experiences and subject interests are important factors during an integration of career advising into advising sessions. Such discussions allow the advisor to understand the motivations underpinning students' decision-making processes, which in turn helps the advisor to support the student. After the initial steps, advisors guide students towards the next phase of the 3-I Process, which is known as the *Inform* phase.

The success of the *Inform* phase relies on the extent to which students acquire and effectively use educational and career information (Gordon, 2006). In this phase, advisors need to help students to gather relevant information that will guide their career choices. Such information includes: (a) personal information about their attributes such as likes and dislikes, or about their strongest abilities and values; (b) educational information such as how their academic decisions relate to possible career decisions; and (c) occupational information which is related to the student's career goals. Building onto the *Inform* phase of the 3-I Process, Damminger (2009) suggests three steps to follow when students reflect on the information that could help them connect their educational and career choices. These are: (a) help students understand the

connections among their self-awareness, educational choices, occupational information, and academic and career planning; (b) help students select interventions to assist in self-, major-, and career exploration and career planning; and (c) set career advising goals with the student. The first step of the *Inform* phase helps the student understand the academic career connection. After this, the advisor and student select the appropriate intervention, which may take the form of a referral, should the student's needs fall beyond an advisor's scope of practice.

After the selection of appropriate intervention, the 3-I Process concludes the *Inform* phase through collaborative goal-setting. This might include the identification of a certain career or career cluster and an exploration of the ways in which the student could move closer to such careers. Student success strategies such as time management and study skills can also be selected as interventions or stepping stones towards goals.

During the *Integrate* phase of the 3-I Process, the advisors assist students in integrating information, planning, and developing implementation plans, after which they support students to evaluate their accomplishments and they determine how a follow-up procedure would work (Damminger, 2009). As part of the first step of this phase, advisors assist students in reviewing and integrating the information they have gathered or have reflected on. During the first step, advisors further offer support to students in mapping the goals which they have set in relation to an overarching implementation plan. This helps students align their interventions and goals, and ultimately reach their desired career track. The second step in the *Integrate* phase consequently assists the advisor in teaching success strategies to students when they need additional help.

The 3-I Process is valuable to advisors; however, it might need to be adapted for effective implementation at a South African university as it was developed in the USA. Learning from other contexts requires reflection or assessing whether practices could be adopted without any changes, or whether practices could be contextualised by adjusting content or processes to better align with local ways of being and doing. To position the 3-I Process as a framework that could guide South African institutions in merging academic and career advising, we mapped the advising experiences of academic and career advisors at one institution against this framework.

Methodology

The study was situated within the constructivist paradigm; participants' experiences were interpreted to understand their views on advising. We implemented an instrumental case study research design. Stake (2000) describes this design as using a single case example to gain insight into an issue or to revise a generalisation. The study thus used the UFS as a case study to gain insight into academic advising practices, and how advisors could adapt their practice to include career advice and provide more holistic support to students.

Within the UFS, the research population comprised sixteen advisors who were involved in academic and career advising at the institution. They were located at the career services office in the faculties and the Central Advising office of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). Owing to the small population, the study used non-probability purposive sampling, where the research participants were deliberately selected for their suitability (Rule & John, 2011). Of the 16 faculty advisors who were invited to participate, six agreed. These six advisors included at least one advisor per faculty, except for the faculties of Theology and Religion and Health Sciences, which were the smallest faculties of the institution. Both advisors appointed in CTL, as well as the advisor from Career Services, agreed to participate. Of the six advisors, all but one had two or more years' experience, specifically in academic or career advising. The study collected data using semi-structured interviews. However, because the two central advisors fulfilled similar functions, we conducted a semi-structured group interview. This allowed the participants to build on each other's ideas when answering the questions. Participants were asked about: their views on academic advising and how these related to career advising; conceptual frameworks that guided their work; the challenges that they faced; and how they would describe an ideal advising framework. These questions were included in the information that was emailed to the participants in advance to help them prepare for the interviews, should they wish to do so.

The data was analysed deductively and inductively in a two-cycle coding process. The first cycle in the coding process was done by deductively applying the themes of the 3-I Process to see whether and how the framework fits (Saldaña, 2009). A second cycle was then implemented in the coding process to inductively code themes beyond those suggested by the 3-I Process framework (Saldaña, 2009).

Findings and Discussion

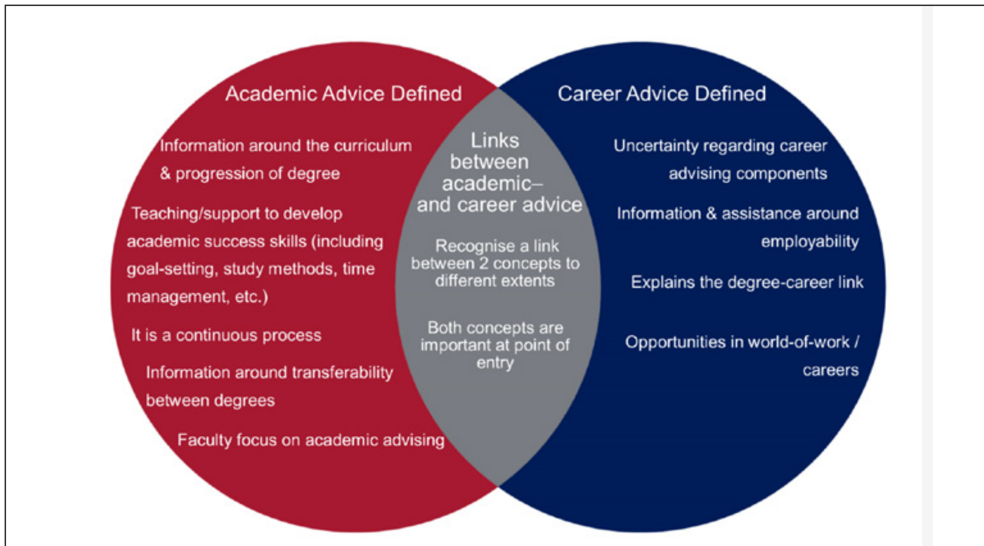
The interviews focused on an exploration of advisors' experiences in integrating academic and career advising, and on an exploration of their perceptions about conceptual frameworks to guide their practice. The findings are firstly presented in terms of how participants view the relationship between academic and career advice and secondly how their advising practice is conceptually guided. Lastly, we incorporate relevant practices into the 3-I Process for a more contextual representation of the framework.

The Perceived Relationship between Academic Advice and Career Advice

The advisors were asked how they viewed the role of career advising in relation to academic advising, what the components of academic advice were, and what they perceived as career advice. Figure 2 illustrates how the advisors viewed academic advice, career advice and the possible links between the two.

Figure 2

The Relation of Career Advising to Academic Advising



Whereas the advisors had a comprehensive understanding of what academic advice entailed, they were much more uncertain about career advising (Figure 2). However, some of the advisors recognised the link between academic advising and career advising. For example, one noted: "…you can't even give academic advice without knowing what careers this person wants to go into, so you can't separate the two." Another advisor recognised the link, despite feeling that it should not be as prominent: "…career advising is a part of academic advising, but it does not always go hand in hand with academic advising, so it's not necessarily that when a student comes… for… advising that you do career advising."

Various advisors indicated that they do not provide career advice, despite acknowledging its importance. One such advisor stated: "I don't really see it as separate; I know there are links, but it's just that we solely concentrate on academic advice because it's important for us that students know what they have to register for, what they have to pass and those kinds of things."

Another advisor agreed: "So, I think our jobs are purely academic advising, but yes, there's definitely a link to career advice as well".

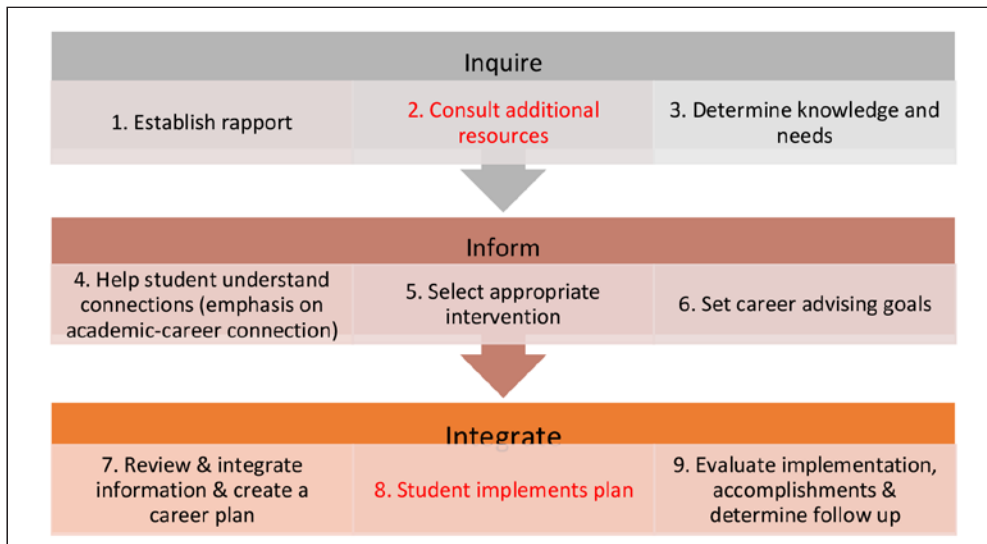
Another advisor added: "I think the two are related, but I never saw my role as an academic advisor as also per se a career advisor." When probed, some of these advisors alluded to not feeling equipped enough to provide career advice: "I don't think we really have at this moment all of the skills to do it…" and "… I'm not doing [it] at all because I'm not an expert in that and I see myself as an expert in academic life and in what students need to do to obtain specifically a degree within our faculty."

Next, we explored what aspects of the 3-I Process were already being used by the advisors in their academic advising practices. The various advisors were asked: "What steps do you follow when you provide academic or career advice, and which conceptual framework is this based on?" The researcher deductively ascribed the answers of the advisors to the various steps in the 3-I Process. The findings indicated that each advisor follows different steps to provide advice, even within the same type of advisory category.

Advisors' current steps and answers about the ideal framework provided ideas on how the 3-I Process could be adapted to the institutional context. Figure 3 provides a visual summary of this adapted framework.

Figure 3

Phases and Steps of the Adapted 3-I Process as an Integrated Academic and Career Advising Framework



The adapted 3-I Process as an integrated academic and career advising framework still consists of the 3-I phases (*Inquire*, *Inform*, *Integrate*), but additional steps have been incorporated into the *Inquire* and *Integrate* phases. As part of the *Inquire* phase, advisors establish rapport with students. Only the central advisors explicitly mentioned establishing rapport with their students. Despite this, we still include this step because establishing rapport is crucial to the advisor for building a working relationship that is based on mutual trust and respect. When a working relationship is established, the student is more open to listen to the advisor's advice and to value the information provided. The advisors also consult additional resources, which would help them understand the student's background better. This is reflected by an advisor, who stated: "[I]

usually print their verification registration document and then [I] print the curriculum of the year."

Another advisor stated: "[I] would firstly draw the student's study record to see what the student's study history looks like, where the student is in their study period… [to] get a whole…"

This step has thus been added to consult *additional sources* in the adapted framework. After the advisors have consulted additional resources, they determine the student's knowledge and need for seeking advice.

During the second phase (*Inform*), the advisors help the student understand connections between information and sources. The participants recommended no additional steps. Although all the advisors' practices loosely relate to the *Inform* phase, only two advisors explicitly stated using occupational information. This confirms one part of the research problem: advisors do not deliberately integrate career information and concepts when advising students. In addition, although the advisors did not explicitly state the inclusion of goal-setting due to its importance to know what the student is working towards, this step is still included.

Although the advisors did not indicate creating a career plan with their students that could fit into the first step of the *Integrate* phase, most indicated some form of integrating information and developing a plan. This was evident in an advisor's answer: "…then they've got like a big colourful picture to see exactly, this is done, this is what I (the student) need to do… If I (the student) meet these requirements, I know I will graduate." However, as mentioned earlier, career information and concepts need to be integrated into advising. Therefore, the decision was to keep this step, with a focus on career concepts in addition to academic information. In the *Integrate* phase, the second step is supported by the advisors' responses to the steps they take: "…then implementation where the student goes and implements by themselves..."; "…let them then go and read about it or visit the different departments where those courses are situated."; and "…they can make a responsible decision on where to go."

Another advisor stated that she allows the student to make the final decision: "I can give you some options that you can consider before you make that final decision." This step, therefore, empowers students to implement the plans made. Subsequently, students learn to become independent and a follow-up appointment is made for the last step of this phase.

During the last step of the 3-I Process, the advisor and student evaluate the plans made and the accomplishments achieved by means of the implementation step.

Practical Application of 3-I Process

The previous section illustrated what this framework could look like in a context that differs from that of the UFS. This section will demonstrate how the adapted framework can be integrated into practice. This can be explained through an understanding of the challenges that the advisors raised together with their recommendations.

The advisors mentioned various academic and career advising challenges that could influence the integration of the adapted 3-I Process into practices at the UFS. These challenges include the following perceptions: The system (both nationally and institutionally) does not allow career advice to take place; advising is not yet professionalised; collaboration is challenging; and feeling that they are ill-equipped to provide career advice. One advisor noted: "The system doesn't allow it. For academic and career advising to take place coherently. System meaning nationally and institutionally. Some institutions go deeper than others, but the system doesn't allow it. For instance, career advice should start in school… and you know, the system has never allowed it, so by the time a student comes to the institution; we first give them a word of career advice that they've never heard of… they never focused on where their progression is leading them to what careers. By the time they get to an institution of higher learning, it's a whole new foreign concept."

In addition, participants mentioned that they found it challenging when they needed to help students find alternative directions, particularly when those directions were across faculty/year borders. One advisor stated: "… [It is challenging when] students who want to do a certain degree, mostly out of our faculty, and then do not meet the requirements, and now they are forced to come to one of our degrees with lower admission requirements and then to help them find a way to make this work for them as well. The career [seems closed now] they're devastated; they feel their dreams are shattered… To help the student find an alternative that will still feel that they are doing something worthwhile [is a challenge]."

The advisors also provided recommendations that could assist in addressing some persistent challenges that the sector faces. For example, one recommendation is that academic and career advising should be integrated to assist students holistically. An advisor highlighted this by stating that: "… both of them (academic and career advising) will have to run together."

This implies that the advisors can see the value of a practical framework such as the adapted 3-I Process. However, more needs to be done to integrate academic and career advising institutionally to implement the adapted 3-I Process. This may include developing and reviewing a rationale and vision, and getting institutional buy-in by sharing the benefits of integrating academic and career advising when assisting students. The establishment of advising networks can also assist with institutional buy-in. In addition, these can assist in planning the integration process carefully, and in identifying tasks that need to be completed. In doing so, the challenge raised that collaboration is challenging can be addressed.

Deliberate training and networking can also assist advisors to gain specific competencies to integrate academic and career advising. Deliberate training introduces advisors to the relevant career advising theories and to aspects on how they could assist students more holistically. In addition to training the advisors, student learning outcomes can also be developed for the application of integrated academic and career advising. Once this integration has taken place, it can be evaluated to improve the practice.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an argument for merging academic and career advice to provide holistic support to students, and to help them succeed beyond graduation. Furthermore, this case study has provided a useful, practical framework for the integration of academic and career advising at a South African university. The contextual inputs provided by participants in this study might reflect responsiveness to the fact that the majority of students in South Africa are first-generation students. They might need a bit more guidance in the *Inquire* phase to find information. and an extension of the framework in the *Integrate* phase to allow them to implement their plans and to provide them with feedback. The adapted 3-I Process could function as an exemplary practical framework to serve South African students. In addition, the adapted 3-I Process can theoretically be valuable in assisting students to succeed by improving the effectiveness of existing academic advising practices. Thus, contextualising such frameworks to meet the needs of the institutional student population is an important lesson to learn from this work.

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Research Article

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

Danie de Klerk[i]

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 7 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

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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.

Background and Literature

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.

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.

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.

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 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

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.

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.

Methodology

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

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.

(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 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.

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

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.

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 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%

Overarching Category	Percentage of Total Number of Entries	Subsidiary Category	Number of Entries in Subsidiary Category	Percentage of Overarching Category
3. Other Matters (Total Entries = 161)	7%	9. Calculator	19	12%
		10. Miscellaneous	131	81%
		11. Physical Health	11	7%
4. Psychosocial Matters (Total Entries = 193)	9%	12. Mental Health	30	16%
		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%
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.

Findings

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.

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.

Overarching Category 3: Other Matters

The third overarching category and it's 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.

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).

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.

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.

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.

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.

Discussion

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.

Making Known Some of the Real

Grants

Since 2014, when the author started working in the student success and support space as an academic advisor, there have been a commendable commitment to student success and support nationally, and by association support to 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;

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).

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.

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

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).

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.

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.

Conclusions

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.

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Research Article

Experiences of Students with Visual Impairments at an Open Distance and e-Learning University in South Africa: Counselling Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of the qualitative study on which this article is based was to explore the experiences of students with visual impairments, registered at an Open Distance and e-Learning University in South Africa, through a phenomenological research design. Literature was reviewed on student support in distance education and concepts from the critical disability theory, biopsychosocial model of disability, connectivism, and affect theories formed the conceptual framework for the study. Telephonic semi-structured interviews were used as a technique to collect data from seven participants. Data were transcribed and then coded employing ATLAS.ti. The emerged themes centred on students' counselling experiences, the synergy between the departments, and accessibility of services. It was also determined that students lose academic time due to the lack of resources and study materials in alternative and accessible formats. While policies and implementation plans were claimed to be in place, they do not address the reality on the ground, due to a lack of coordination of disability issues, and late referral of students to counselling services. The study recommends the prioritisation of disability issues, and it needs to be incorporated in the wider university strategic plan to accelerate its implementation. This will translate in (i) training ICT staff on various computer software programs needed to support students with visual impairments, (ii) developing alternative, formative, and summative assessments, (iii) developing a job readiness intervention programme for graduates to empower the students financially and to add value to the university's employment equity agenda, and lastly (iv) putting the disability unit at the centre of all disability matters for coordinating purposes.

Keywords

Counselling, access, Open Distance and e-Learning, visual impairment

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Introduction

The Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system in South Africa has made significant strides in ensuring that students with visual impairments have the right to decent, appropriate, reasonable accommodation, and services (DHET, 2018). However, despite the transformed social reforms and aligned policies to move from inclusion and equality to promote equity, students with visual impairments in the mainstream education system continue to experience ineffective support (Singh & Mahapatra, 2019).

The White Paper for PSET (DHET, 2013), emanating from the South African National Development Plan Vision 2030, states that counselling should be an integral part of the post-school system for both Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) and contact universities (The Presidency - South African Government, 2012; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). Furthermore, it strives to complement the career guidance engagements for institutions of higher learning and high schools, which could ensure that institutions of higher learning positively contribute to sustainable development goals (SDGs). The SDGs are the blueprint for each governing state to create a stable, prosperous future at institutions of higher learning through its policies. The White Paper aims to promote inclusivity by highlighting factors that should not be overlooked regarding first-time students' academic readiness for institutions of higher learning when they register at such an institution. There is an increasing lack of access for students with disabilities in the higher education landscape, yet little is known about their academic attainment, and how counselling services contribute to their learning experiences (Richardson, 2015). It is based on this rationale that the study sought to investigate the experiences of students with visual impairments from a counselling perspective.

Role of Counselling

Counselling services at institutions of higher learning represent a scientific domain that primarily assists prospective students who have to decide which qualification to pursue. The process consists of guidance, which entails the analysis of an individual's abilities, interests, and personality, to assist students in choosing the most relevant course of study to suit their capabilities. It is important to enable the visually impaired student to choose a career that is most suitable to their interests and talents, instead of having this choice mainly determined by the availability of support. For this reason, institutions of higher learning should accommodate and support students with disabilities. However, issues of disability, power, race, and class are traditionally seen as being outside the curriculum, which leads to the danger of separating knowledge from social issues (Mutanga, 2017). Also, while much emphasis is placed on the curriculum itself, the provision of counselling services is often left out of this debate.

Leyser (2008) asserts that the success of most students with disabilities in institutions of higher

learning depends not only on their actions and physical accessibility or service quality, but also on the expertise of the staff, their attitudes towards students with physical disabilities, and the willingness of the university to provide appropriate accommodation. This is corroborated by Ngubane-Mokiwa (2013) who highlights that the perceptions of blindness from the students' perspective illustrate that the academic community does not clearly understand the condition, or how students with visual impairments in particular, cope with being at an ODeL institution. There seems to be a gap between academic and counselling departments in working together to help the students with visual impairments to adjust in an ODeL context.

Student Support in ODeL

Counselling is viewed as a point of entry for students to adjust to institutions of higher learning. Student counselling aims to bridge the gap between high school and university, by giving guidance and support to students; linking students with their lecturers; and introducing them to services that will assist them in coping with their studies. Students with visual impairments are often excluded from this service, as they make up a small percentage of the student community and may not be visible in regional service centres.

In the ODeL context, students need to understand the challenges of studying on their own and from a distance before they register (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2017). To encounter a new environment in institutions of higher learning, where their autonomy and advocacy are paramount to their success, is daunting. Thus, the student with a visual impairment requires support services to facilitate their full integration into campus life, which consequently influences their transition into the employment setting.

Although student counsellors may have limited experience in dealing with students with visual impairments, through collaboration with lecturers and rehabilitation counsellors, the student counsellors can help students with disabilities to plan for careers that match their skills and abilities (Milsom & Hartley, 2005). Moreover, an individual's knowledge about their disability, as well as the strengths and limitations associated with it, increases their likelihood of achieving career success.

To answer this study's research question, the Critical Disability Theory (CDT) was employed to understand the concept of disability and visual impairment through the biopsychosocial model of disability. Furthermore, concepts from connectivism and affect ve theories were employed to analyse the provision of counselling and career-related services at an ODeL institution, while attending to the participants' affected domain.

Conceptual Framework

The connectivism theory asserts that learning occurs when knowledge is actuated through the

process of a learner connecting to, and feeding information into, a learning community (Kop & Hill, 2008). It further examines learning within technology, where counselling services can accommodate students with visual impairments through the use of technology to bridge the distance gap. Alves, Monteiro, Rabello, Gasparetto and Monteiro de Carvalho (2009) emphasise that information technology allows individuals with a visual impairment to overcome a significant part of the difficulties they experience in daily life and offers them independence and autonomy on information management and access to communication, just like their peers with normal vision. The connectivism theory also offers a platform for students with visual impairments to navigate their studies wherever they are with assistance from the university, without physically being present.

Learning in an open distance context is centred on the theory of connectivism, which asserts that knowledge is distributive; that is, it is not located in any given place (and therefore not 'transferred' or 'transacted' per se), but rather consists of a network of connections formed from experience and interactions within a knowing community (Downes, 2010). The starting point of connectivism is an individual who is receptive to knowledge and has the ability to navigate sites to acquire information. Connecting to nodes or technology allows students to remain current in their field through the connections they have formed. The intensity of learning, gaining knowledge, and understanding, through the extension of a personal network, is the personification of connectivism (Siemens, 2004).

Students visit counselling services to address issues relating to academic, career, and personal challenges, hence the incorporation of the affect theory is relevant, as it is focused on emotions. According to Massumi (1995), affect is a matter of autonomic responses that occur below the threshold of consciousness and cognition, rooted in the body. Affect increases with the capacity to act, and the start of being capable resonates with empathies of the body and the world being more open to life (Massumi, 2002). Affect can be described as feelings that produce a change or action in our body.

There is also no single, generalised theory of affect (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010); however, there are many ways in which affect can be viewed. Gregg and Seigworth (2010) define 'affect' as the persistent, repetitive practice of power that oppresses the body and provides it with the potential to realise there is a world outside of these practices of power. This relates to the oppression of certain groups in institutions where students with disabilities are expected to study and progress in the same way as their counterparts. The affective nature of common behaviour belonging to certain fields of study, and focusing on a specific mode of study, affect students with disabilities. Hence, Hughes, Corcoran and Slee (2016) assert that an emotional or psychological illness, rather than a physical, intellectual, or sensory one, is a possible precursor to difficulties in engaging with the university. This relates to the bodily experiences of students who are visually impaired, how they navigate their learning, and how studying from a distance affects them in their studies.

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2016) deemed disability as a growing phenomenon that needs to be addressed at all levels of society, including universities. According to the UN, disability results when there are barriers limiting full participation in society, rendering others unequal. This is a move from the clinical-pathological model, where those students with visual impairments were viewed as the minority, unable to perform a task, and needing assistance. It is from this stance that disability was then viewed as a socially constructed phenomenon due to limitations and barriers created by society (Possi, 2018).

The socio-cultural model, unlike the clinical-pathological model, emphasises social justice, decent living standards, fair access, equitable opportunities for services and benefits and a determination to meet the needs of all, with a focus on the needs of the most vulnerable people, including students with visual impairments. This approach is inspired by the principles of universality, inalienability, equality, and non-discrimination, and emphasises human rights in the design and implementation of policies and programmes. The PSET system in South Africa has adopted the human rights-based model (DHET, 2018), and Unisa has consequently incorporated this legal framework in the policy for students with disabilities (2012).

Scotland (2012) considers philosophical assumptions to be important as it shapes the formulation of the problem statement and establish knowledge of the research questions of the study. Therefore, this study followed a socially formed stance that is subjective and multiple in nature. Since reality is not fixed, it gave participants the freedom to share their worldview in terms of how they see it, based on their subjective learning experiences.

While ontology is linked to truth, epistemology is the perspective of knowledge and its acceptability (Creswell & Creswell, 2019; Ishtiaq, 2019). The subjectivist epistemological grounding of this study suggested that the participants constructed their knowledge based on their different experiences, despite having a similar categorised impairment; that is, visual.

Moreover, as the CDT provides a conceptual framework to understand the relationship between impairment, disability, and society, it injects disability interests into all policy arenas (Hosking, 2008). As an emerging theoretical framework, the CDT was used to approach literature and inform the methodological process for this study, while providing answers to the research question:

- What are students' counselling experiences of studying at an ODeL university while having a visual impairment?

Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach in soliciting the experiences of students with visual impairments studying at an ODeL university. The qualitative approach, unlike the quantitative, provides a means of gaining a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences (Ivankova

& Wingo, 2018). Consequently, the qualitative research approach was suitable for this study since it assumes the philosophical assumptions are a multi-layered, interactive, and shared social experience interpreted by the participants, based on the philosophy of qualitative research as a constructivist meaning (Creswell, 2015).

Population and sample frame

The population of the study consisted of students with visual impairments who were registered at the University of South Africa (Unisa). The sample frame, as guided by Au, Li and Wong (2018) and Creswell and Creswell (2019), consisted of all students who indicated that they are visually impaired. A purposive sampling technique was selected to recruit students with visual impairments registered in the College of Education, which has the highest enrolment of students at 116 234, which constitutes 31% of the overall registered student population at Unisa (2018).

Data collection techniques

Leedy and Ormond (2010) and De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport (2011) state that semi-structured interviews are a technique researchers use to obtain a detailed view that the participants hold about a phenomenon. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted telephonically to reach out to all participants since they were in different provinces in the country due to the nature of the ODeL environment.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 18 participants who responded with signed consent forms. Five participants were removed from the list after it was determined that they dropped out and were thus not appropriate for the study based on the inclusion criteria. Four participants experienced network connectivity challenges, and after several attempts were made to reconnect over a period of three weeks, their data were not integrated with those who remained in the study. Each interview lasted a minimum of 20 minutes. Ultimately, the data informing the findings of this study were from seven participants: three females and four males of different races, who satisfied the inclusion criterion of either being blind or having limited vision.

Data analysis

The raw data were transcribed verbatim and the thematic data analysis method was applied, as well as the guidelines provided by the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The full scope of personal interactions with participants was guided by the researchers creating a list of significant statements, scrutinising significant statements for repetition and similarity,

grouping significant statements into codes and themes, and explaining 'what' the participants encountered in terms of the phenomenon. The process included a textural description, presenting a conceptual explanation (Smith, 2004; Smith, 2011).

ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software was used to analyse data by segmenting transcribed data into codes, categories, themes, and sub-themes in conjunction with the research question. Although ATLAS.ti was employed to minimise data, the researchers further manually revised the coding to ensure consistency and to avoid repetition. Data were not forced to fit with the coding (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Cunningham, Weathington & Pittenger, 2013).

Ethical considerations

The study underwent a thorough ethical clearance process, and permission to conduct the research was granted by the College of Education. Furthermore, the research principles of beneficence and non-maleficence ensured that participants' risk of harm was minimised. Moreover, the researchers protected participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and rights, including that of withdrawing from the study without penalty (two participants withdrew while participating in the study).

The recruitment criteria involved sending emails to the sample that included information about the nature of the study and its objectives. This ethical consideration was in line with the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act (2013), as the sample is considered and classified as a vulnerable group.

Findings

The transcendental (descriptive) approach of IPA guided the data analysis process. It required the researchers to reflect on the aims and objectives of the study, which were to explore the experiences of students with visual impairments registered at an ODeL institution in South Africa. The transcribed data were coded, and the emerged themes were classified as counselling experiences, synergy between the departments, and accessibility of services.

Counselling experiences

The findings confirmed the ontological assumption that students with visual impairments do visit the counselling department for career counselling services and personal support. While a few did not use the career counselling services, the majority were aware of the range of services offered by the counselling department and used the services to choose their career path before they registered:

P1: *I first used counselling services because I did not know what to do and was not sure if I should do teaching or another degree because of my disability. I am blind, totally blind. After the sessions, I then decided that I will do the teaching.*

Some participants accessed the services after being referred by other departments when they needed personal support:

P5: *I have used counselling. I was stressed and frustrated after I received a lack of support from the student finance regarding the NSFAS bursary.*

Though students did not necessarily receive counselling when they first registered, most were later referred by other departments. The counselling services then provided a safe space where students with visual impairments were able to share their frustrations. As reflected, Participant 5 knew that her bursary was declined, yet she needed someone to share her disappointment and frustration with, and find out what options were available to ensure that she continued with her studies.

At times, the participants experienced the counselling department as their primary contact with the university. This department assisted them in connecting with other departments and followed up for them due to the transactional distance between the participants and the university:

P2: *The counselling staff helped me to contact NSFAS for my devices and also ARCSWiD sometimes because I use the electronic version, the voice material, MP3 so they have to convert for me at Pretoria while I am in KZN.*

One participant indicated that he had no counselling experience and had not accessed the services as he was unaware of it. He was under the impression that one had to access the services by being physically present at the campus. He specified that his visual impairment made it difficult for him to travel to the campus as and when he needed to:

P7: *I haven't needed to utilise the counselling services. I have managed thus far. Also, transport to Unisa has been a problem for me to arrange.*

Accessing and experiencing other student support units were emphasised, and this was one of the reasons participants ended up being referred to the counselling department.

P4: *I am disappointed with Unisa. Despite several communications, I never received a response. Hence I do not qualify to write my exams.*

This notion was confirmed by another participant:

P3: *I did not write all my first semester modules and I am frustrated.*

Although Unisa has policies in place with regard to reasonable accommodation, students who enrolled in the College of Education are expected to complete practical sessions according to the requirements of the streams they chose. For instance, in the foundation phase, they perform teaching practicals at primary schools, or in the intermediate phase, they perform them at a high school, and so forth.

It was determined that while teaching and learning seem to be accessible at Unisa, it is a

challenge at places where participants are expected to do practicals, negatively impacting their learning experience:

P6: *Teaching is accessible, and I like it, but it is difficult I don't want to lie. When I was doing my practical, they did not allow me to do them. I had to find a special school to do practical, can you imagine that?*

The participant further experienced additional financial costs due to hiring an assistant so that she could realise the learning outcomes.

The synergy between the departments

While sharing their experiences, it became evident that the student support departments at Unisa are not as interconnected as students were made to believe. Upon registration, participants indicated that they require counselling services and would like to be referred for further services support in their studies, as they are first-time students in an ODeL university. This was important to participants because it would assist them in adjusting after transitioning from high school to university, specifically with the distance mode, which they were unfamiliar with. They now had to study on their own, in their own space and time, without attending classes, as they used to in high school:

P3: *I was referred to one department after the other and could not be helped. I have a plan that, in future, I should familiarise myself with all the departments.*

This response shows that there is a disjuncture in this interconnection, which impacts negatively on the response time for students to acclimatise to the system. This participant, however, took it upon herself to acclimatise to the system and attend orientation services and events where possible.

While Unisa delivers services in a distance mode, it does have counselling services at all regional centres across the country, with convenient online services to those who cannot access the campuses and regional centres, including international students. Some participants raised concerns that when they needed counselling-related services, they were always referred to Pretoria, where the counselling Head Office is. This raises the question of whether Unisa's regional centres have sufficient resources to assist visually impaired students:

P4: *The counselling staff did not help me, but I was referred to other departments which also did not help me. I contacted the lecturers about the assignments, but they said they could not help me with that. As a result, I did not sit for this time's exams because I did not submit my assignments.*

Accessibility of services

Accessible study material in braille and electronic formats was a challenge for most participants. After they registered, they had to apply for their study material to be converted at the Pretoria

campus, and this took time.

P6: *The braille and MP3 come from Pretoria, so I could not do anything at all.*

The late arrival of study material has an impact on students submitting summative and formative assessments in time. The registration department receives the information that study material needs to be converted, and it is assumed that this request will reach the Advocacy and Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities (ARCSWiD), but in most instances, students must follow up to ensure this is the case.

Moreover, though the Unisa regional service centres across the country have computer labs that students use to complete assignments and study-related activities, students with visual impairments found them to be inaccessible in terms of programs that convert written information to voice:

P3: *There are computer labs with NVDA but there are only two computers and there are many of us so that is a challenge. I use NSFAS and they were unable to buy me assistive devices.*

The findings also suggest that a lack of technical abilities among staff in regional service centres to fix the specialised devices for visually impaired students, posed a challenge. Students must wait for assistance from Pretoria for such devices to be fixed, which delays students submitting their assignments timeously.

P7: *I approached the staff about the accessibility of the computer lab for students with disabilities but was told that people from Pretoria will come to help us and I have been waiting ever since.*

The students with visual impairments felt disgruntled and not supported in their study journey, due to the unavailability of resources, lack of support, and delayed responses from the university.

Discussion

The study was aimed at exploring the experiences of students with visual impairments studying at an ODeL institution in South Africa. Even though the university has a dedicated unit (ARCSWiD) and policy for students with disabilities in place, challenges continue to arise in accommodating students with visual impairments in one of its largest faculties, the College of Education.

This occurs despite a policy implementation plan being clear on how the services for students with disabilities will be managed and coordinated through ARCSWiD. The findings reveal that the responsibility is delegated to all relevant stakeholders at Unisa, who collectively need to ensure that equal access for students with disabilities is realised. The students with visual impairments are referred to the counselling department to intervene late in their year of study, when the students have already lost a significant amount of time in the current academic year. In addition, the intervention by counselling staff was deemed ineffective, and some participants indicated that they had to drop out, while considering registering in the following

semester. The evidence of a disjuncture between the departments confirms the absence of synergy between the departments, leaving no one to take accountability for services not being rendered, as indicated by the participants.

Moreover, students registered in this college not only experience institutional barriers, but also face challenges when doing practicals at assigned schools. The institutional policy does not take this into account in ensuring that its students are protected and continue to receive support services accordingly.

Although the findings of this study cannot be generalised due to the nature of the small sample size, the study has demonstrated research rigour and trustworthiness, and congruence between the findings and the reality at Unisa's counselling department. The researchers and participants engaged in an interactive process where research data were collected and analysed, and multiple realities were explored and realised meaningfully through interaction and engagement (Punch, 2005). It was determined that Unisa's counselling department at Pretoria (head office seems to be well resourced and inpire confidence among students with visual impairments from the College of Education, which might not be the case at some regional service centres across the country.

From the findings it was also noted that the strategies that were applied to ensure that the participants received information sheets and were requested to sign the consent form, binding themselves to share honest experiences, increased the credibility of the collected data. This suggests that the findings may be applied to other settings, and with a different sample frame of a similar population, to ensure transferability.

The findings further reiterated the view by Teferra and Altbach (2004) regarding this century being a knowledge era, because it has created an unstoppable demand for access to higher education in Africa, since higher education is recognised as a key force for modernisation and development. Nonetheless, this access seems to be lacking for students with visual impairments, as they struggle to access information at Unisa's regional centres near their homes. Students with visual impairments are accessing information and communications technology (ICT) services at the regional centres, only to find that the computer labs do not have enough computers installed with compatible software to reasonably accommodate the visually impaired, or there is a low turnout of skilled staff members to orientate the students.

Recommendations

The following recommendations flow from the findings of the study. The first recommendation responds to the actions to be undertaken by the institution of higher learning to address the synergy between departments. This should be approached by ensuring that the disability unit is linked to broader strategic priorities to enhance the access and participation of students with visual impairments in ODeL.

Secondly, the ODeL University should look into alternative methods for the conversion of material to braille and electronic formats. The impression was that this is a lengthy process, and by the time students receive study materials and prescribed textbooks in the requested formats, the semester is halfway through, thus creating pressure and causing some students to drop out in the current semester. This affects Unisa s overall progress and student success rate.

As a result, there should be alternative formative and summative assessments, since the conversion of study material takes time, thereby, disadvantaging the said population.

The ODeL University should also consider designing and implementing graduate and job readiness workshops specifically for students with visual impairments, to improve their chances of finding employment. The university may also empower this population of students by employing them as student workers or on fixed terms to gain work experience. This will address matters raised by the participants regarding transport costs and the challenges they experience when coming to campus, the financial costs associated with teaching practices when they are placed at schools, including payment for assistants should the need arise. This move will also enable the university to accelerate its employment equity plan should the assumption that they are lacking in that area be found to be true, as this is a national imperative.

Lastly, all staff employed at the computer labs should be trained in using and providing support for students with visual impairments on specialised computer programs like JAWS and NVDA, since Abner and Lahm (2002) believe that university training and professional development should address competence in teaching. It was established in the findings that where there are computer labs, either computers do not have the necessary software, or staff members are unable to assist.

It is envisaged that the presented findings will inform Unisa's strategies regarding students with disabilities, as well as other related student support services to accommodate students with visual impairments. by making counselling services central to student support.

Future Research

Future research should be conducted on retention strategies for students with visual impairments in ODeL institutions. The strategies may inform the attrition and retention rates for this population of students. Secondly, the College of Education should develop inclusive strategies to accommodate students with visual impairments in their teaching practice modules, and ensure reasonable accommodation where they are placed when conducting their teaching practicals.

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Research Article

Exploring the Role of the Student Affairs Office in Enhancing the Cultural and Social Experiences of International Students in China

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Abstract

Many universities are hosting and enrolling international students as an important aspect of their internationalisation mission of higher education. However, many international students experienced significant problems adjusting into a host culture and social milieu. Informing this qualitative study were 45 international students in a top-tier comprehensive research university in Southeast China. The study focuses on the experience of international students towards the role played by international Fu Da Yuans (Counsellors) in enhancing the students' cultural and social experiences at the university. The results indicate that the four most significant adjustment issues for international students are the language challenges, social interaction with Chinese students, cultural orientation programmes, and counselling services for international students. Building on the U-Curve adjustment theory (Oberg, 1960), the study revealed the importance of international Fu Da Yuans to provide cultural and social support to international students for easy adjustment into a new culture and social setting. The study bears practical implications to providing international Fu Da Yuans with important insights that can help to create an environment conducive to enhancing the cultural and social experiences of international students.

Keywords

Cultural experience, social experiences, Fu Dao Yuan, student affairs, international students

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Introduction: Background to International Students in China

Chinese Universities have recently experienced an increase in international students' enrollment from different parts of the world. During the establishment of the People's Republic of China from 1949 to the 1980s, only 50,000 foreign students studied in China, and most of them pursued short-term language studies. However, due to reform and the opening-up Policy in 1978, China has experienced a rapid process of transformation of its political, economic, educational, and social systems. The implementation of new policies and reforms in higher education has emphasised the international mobility of students, which opened the doors for many international students to study in China. The aim was to stress the importance of international educational collaboration, and advancing internationalisation to enhance the nation's global position, to influence competitiveness in the field of education, and to transform from a country categorised as being a source of international students, to a destination for many international students (Huang, 2016; Ying, Kamnuansilpa & Hirofumi, 2018; Kuroda, 2014).

By 2003, the Chinese government started various actions to attract foreign students to China. In 2003 alone, the number of international students in China reached 77 715 from 175 countries (Huang, 2007). Currently, the government of China, through the Ministry of Education (MOE) and other governmental institutions, offers scholarships to international students for both short-term and long-term studies at all levels (CSC, 2019). The expansion of governmental support for international student enrollment has influenced many universities in China to introduce an international education curriculum, which offers several bachelor and graduate programmes to foreign students; programmes that have attracted many foreign students to join Chinese universities. The latest statistics from China's Ministry of Education highlight the strong growth in China's foreign enrollment. In 2017, a total of 489 200 international students enrolled in Chinese Institutions, an increase of 10.5% from 2015. Another important step toward the country's long-term goal is to host 500 000 students by 2020 (ICEF Monitor, 2018; MOE, 2018; Li, 2015).

Overview of the Literature on Student Affairs in Chinese Universities

In Chinese universities there is a unique student affairs position, called "Fu Dao Yuan," which can be translated as the "counsellor". The system of having Fu Dao Yuans in Chinese universities was introduced in 1952 (Li & Fang, 2017; Lin & Peng, 2003). Fu Dao Yuans in China originally had nothing to do with student affairs; instead, they were supposed to provide ideological and political education to the students (Zoe, 2017). With the development of higher education in China, the duties of Fu Dao Yuans were reviewed by the revolutionary committee of Tsinghua University during the great cultural revolution in 1976, and was believed to be politically incorrect (Li & Fang, 2017; Lin & Peng, 2003). In 1978, after several reforms, the new system of

Chinese student affairs was applied in all Chinese universities, and the duties of Fu Dao Yuans (counsellors) gradually expanded to include consulting, moral education, cultural exchange, career advising, mental health, financial aid, student integration, recreation, day-to-day living, leadership, and so on (Li & Fang, 2017; Zoe, 2017).

In order to ensure professionalisation of student affairs and all matters concerning student's services within Chinese universities are well-considered, the Ministry of Education published the standards for core competencies of Fu Dao Yuans. According to the document, Fu Dao Yuans should have a bachelor's degree and above, with no limitation on the major (Zoe, 2017). Although many Fu Dao Yuans initially study a major called "ideological and political education", this major emphasises theories instead of practice to the occupation of student affairs administration. To get more practical skills, many Fu Dao Yuans are studying for a certificate of psychological consultants and career development mentors (Li & Fang, 2017; Lin & Peng, 2003; Zoe, 2017).

Approaches to International Student Services

Despite many transformations to the higher education system in China since the 1990s, many ideas of a centralised planned system, inspired by the Russian system in the early 1950s, still exists in contemporary Chinese university systems, for example, Chinese universities have a centralised model of administration where all international students are admitted into a single faculty of international education. Although international students take courses in different faculties of their academic specialisation, all their services are provided by staff at the faculty of international education (Liu & Lin, 2016).

Chinese universities have adopted a vertical network system to provide services to students called the "parental or nanny" approach to service provision (Liu & Lin, 2016). Upon admission of international students in every department, there is a Fu Dao Yuan for international students, who are in charge and responsible for a full spectrum of issues concerning international students. The international Fu Dao Yuan is a single stop shop of services for all international students; international students do not need to worry about students' visa applications, medical insurance purchases, contact with the migration office, moral education in their day-to-day living, and connecting with the hospitals in case of any emergency. International Fu Da Yuans also make sure international students are registered for the right courses, meet all requirements for graduation, and are comfortable living in student residences (Liu & Lin, 2016). If necessary, student financial aid office should also send the financial-aid policies to the international Fu Da Yuans, and the international Fu Da Yuans will help the needy students to apply. In addition, the cell phones of international Fu Dao Yuans are supposed to be available 24/7 for students under their care (Liu & Lin, 2016; Zoe, 2017). This is the reason why it is called a vertical network system or parental/ nanny approach to student services.

Cultural and Social Problems Encountered by International Students

Once international students encounter a problem or have any issue, they will report to the international Fu Dao Yuan of the department. If this issue was beyond the capacity of the international Fu Dao Yuan to resolve, the international Fu Dao Yuan had to report to the faculty administrator in charge of student affairs, and if the faculty administrator could not resolve the problem within the faculty, it was channelled to the Dean of students at an institutional level (Li & Fang, 2017; Lin & Peng, 2003). The duties of international Fu Dao Yuans include everything about international student life. It is a complicated duty because it is impossible for a single person to solve all the problems alone (Zoe, 2017). International Fu Dao Yuans only get assistance from faculty administrators or Deans of students at the institutional level when the issue is very serious. So, the system places much pressure on the shoulders of international Fu Dao Yuans, and it is challenging to distinguish serious cases from trivial ones (Liu & Lin, 2016; Zoe, 2017).

In spite of using the parental/nanny approach to provide services to international students in Chinese universities, research on international students in China reveal that although international students have high educational aspirations and positive attitudes toward their education, they still experienced significant problems in adjusting to the host culture and social milieu (Dervin et al, 2018; Li, 2015; Yang, 2018). The cultural difference, language barriers, lack of social interaction with host students, food incompatibilities, internet restrictions, and lack of counselling services for international students were widely recognised in many works of literature as the major problems for international students in China (Chen, 1999; Gaw, 2000; Wen, 2005; Yost & Lucas, 2002). Wen (2005) and Yost and Lucas (2002) noted that inadequate cultural experience and lack of social support mechanisms of international students created obstacles in social integration with host people. These obstacles led to international students starting to experience situations of uneasiness that were detrimental to their individual psychology, such as feelings of isolation, loneliness, and frustration (Yang, 2018; Zhai, 2002). These problems could be seen as culture shock: "a psychological disorientation experienced by people who suddenly enter radically different cultural environments to live or work" (Oberg, 1960). The roles and endeavours of international Fu Dao Yuans are inevitable to enhance the culture and social experiences of international students in China.

Theoretical Approach

The theoretical background of this paper hinges on the Oberg (1960) U-Curve adjustment theory (UCT). Specifically, it portrays the transition and adaptation process from old culture to new culture, as well as the social life. According to the UCT model, the transition and adaptation process goes through four stages. The honeymoon stage occurs during the first to third weeks

after arrival at the host country; individuals are fascinated by the new environment and different cultures. The initial cultural obsession is followed by the second stage of disillusionment and frustration, which is the culture shock stage. The newcomer starts to encounter frustration and irritation towards the host country and people after experiencing the culture on a daily basis. The third stage is the adjustment stage, in which the individual gradually adapts to the new norms and values of the host country after being exposed to cultural and social support mechanisms. At this stage, individuals can act more appropriately than before. Finally, the mastery stage is characterised by an additional increase in the individual's ability to function effectively in the new culture and social settings (Figure 1) (Black & Mendenha, 1990; Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960). As it was suggested in the third stage of U-Curve adjustment theory (Oberg, 1960), the model was appropriate for exploring how the international Fu Dao Yuans played an important role in enhancing the cultural and social experiences of international students in China.

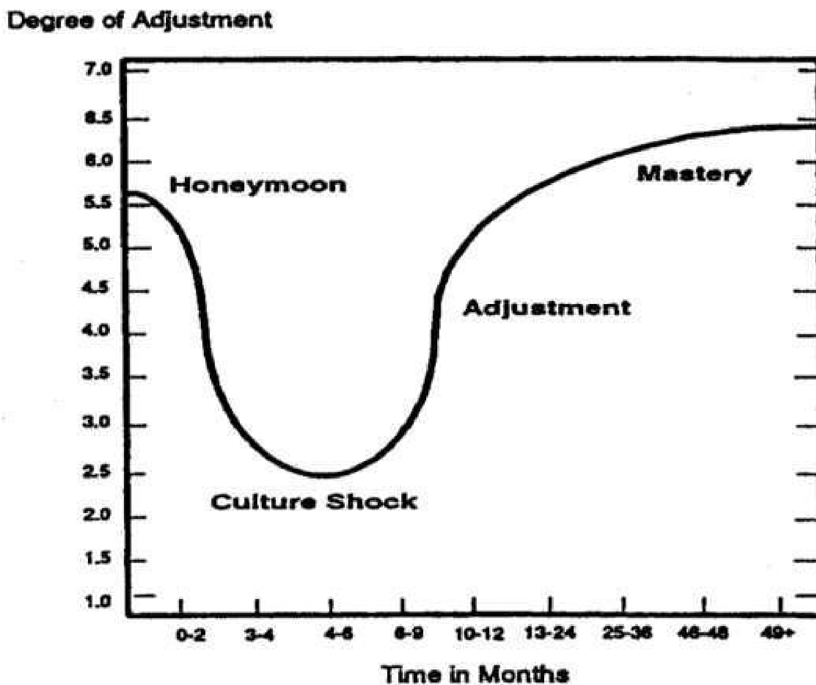

Figure 1. *The U-Curve adjustment pattern (Adapted from Oberg, 1960)*

Methods

The study employed a qualitative design, as it was an empirical study that aimed to reveal the experiences of international students in China beyond those that might already have

been predicted. To achieve the research aim, in-depth focus group interviews were employed as a relevant approach in accessing different categories of information, such as motivations, thoughts, and understandings of participants (Coles &Swami, 2012).

Research Design

The research design selected for the study was an embedded single-case approach (Yin, 2018), thus being helpful for showing a multifaceted picture of cultural and social experiences of international students in a chosen university. One top-tier comprehensive research university in Southeast China was selected as a site for the study because it promoted internalisation. The institutional site was a public university, ranked in the top twenty of over 2 000 Chinese universities. The institution had a total enrolment of approximately 40 000 students, including 3 500 international students from over 130 countries and regions (University Prospectus, 2019).

Participants

A convenient sample of 45 male and female international students participated in the study. The participation was voluntary, such that the students were willing and enthusiastic to share their insights about cultural and social experiences. Table 1 below describes characteristics of the participants.

Table1. *Characteristics of participants*

Country of Origin	Number of Participants	Age Range	Gender	Length of Stay in China
Indonesia	3	24-28	2: Male 1: Female	1-2 Years
Russia	3	26-31	3: Male	1-3 Years
Bangladesh	3	26-30	2: Male 1: Female	2-3 Years
USA	2	24-28	2: Male	1-2 Years
Zimbabwe	2	26-30	1: Male 1: Female	1-3 Years
Pakistan	4	27-32	3: Male 1: Female	2-4 Years
Tanzania	1	26-30	1: Male	1 year

Country of Origin	Number of Participants	Age Range	Gender	Length of Stay in China
UK	3	24-30	1: Male 2: Female	1-2 Years
South Africa	3	26-31	3: Female	2-3 Years
Rwanda	4	26-32	3: Male 1: Female	1-2 Years
Philippines	3	24-30	1: Male 2: Female	1-2 Years
Ghana	4	27-32	2: Male 2: Female	2-4 Years
France	2	24-28	1: Male 1: Female	1-2 Years
Nigeria	3	26-30	2: Male 1: Female	2-3 Years
Liberia	3	27-32	3: Male	1-3 Years
India	2	26-30	2: Male	1-2 Years

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the data collected attained the research aim, ethical considerations were significant in undertaking this study. The informed consent letter for participation was provided at the beginning of each focus group interview and all students were given enough time to read and understand it before the focus group discussions. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any time. The sample was 45 international students from 16 countries that were recruited for 9 focus groups, and each group contained no more than 5 participants.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

In spite of sharing their thoughts in a focus group, during data analysis, each participant was treated as a separate case. The pattern matching method was applied in an attempt to link an existing pattern that derived from theory, with the collected information (Alebeek & Wilson, 2019; Trochim, 1989), and compared to the revealed description of cultural and social experiences of international students with U-curve adjustment theory. Cases were analysed from the coded transcriptions of each participant and later categorised into themes by adopting inductive coding (Thomas, 2003). This helped to condense wide and varied raw data through constant comparison into a brief format to form a single theme. The whole set of data was

transcribed and coded by the interviewers (both authors). To ensure the trustworthiness of data, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was applied; the transcripts were sent back to the participants to prove that the respondents' experiences were represented as intended.

Findings

Global contact zone and Nanny style of service provision

In general, participants appreciated the opportunities and experiences of studying in China. The majority of participants described the university as a global educational contact zone. The students from around the world meet, interact, and learn from each other.

Chris, a student from Congo, noted that: "Coming to study in China has helped me to meet people from different parts of the World. China is like a mini globe…when you are in touch with people from other places, you learn a lot…. The more you spend time with different people from different countries, the more you discover things and experience different cultures." Other international students commented on how the Nanny style of service provisioning was helpful in their daily life. The international Fu Dao Yuan as a single stop shop of services for international students took all responsibility for international student life, while students only need to passively receive services.

Zak, a student from France, noted that: "The style of service provision used by Fu Dao Yuans is very proactive…I was very happy when I realized Fu Dao Yuans are responsible for such issues assigned up for the right courses, visa application, arranging student's residences, purchase of medical insurance and so on…this kind of system simplifies my life here in the university."

However, some participants also think critically about the risks involved in the Nanny style of service provisioning, which could prevent the students from being proactive in finding out how various services in Chinese universities work, and how to access them on their own.

Kate, a student from Canada explained: "The style of service provision used by Fu Dao Yuans is very good, but I think to some extent it limits us to manage our own school and life issues as independent adults…. It makes us have little experience on how things work because things that can be handled by students themselves such as to make sure we sign up for the right courses, meet all requirements for graduations and so on, are done by international Fu Dao Yuans."

Echoing the findings of Liu and Lin (2016) and Zoe (2017), most often the duties of international Fu Dao Yuans are complicated because it is impossible for a single person to solve all the problems encountered by students. The system exerts considerable pressure on the shoulders of international Fu Dao Yuans and it is a real challenge to differentiate special issues from trivial ones. This trend was reflected by many participants who believed that the

international Fu Dao Yuans, in charge of different departments, had a limited role in enhancing the cultural and social experience of international students because of its numerous duties. The system weaves all students and makes it difficult for international Fu Dao Yuans to focus on cultural and social programmes for international students. The findings revealed that the language challenges, social interaction with Chinese students, cultural orientation programmes, and counselling services for international students were the four most significant adjustment issues for international students.

Language challenges were the most often mentioned issue by respondents, as it limits the cultural and social experiences of international students. Participants revealed inadequate efforts taken by international Fu Dao Yuans to promote different programmes and activities in favour of language learning. Leonard from Nigeria illustrated: "Still there are limited efforts taken by international Fu Dao Yuans to create a conducive and alternative environment for us to master the language. For example, there is no active language exchange program to enable mutual learning with host students, where Chinese students could learn foreign languages and we could also learn Chinese language easily."

Cultural orientation for international students

Respondents reported that the international Fu DaoYuans had little focus on providing cultural orientation programmes to address cultural differences within the university. The orientation programmes were mainly focused on academics; for example, how to use the library, course selection, and other academic services. Most of the students usually consulted their fellow senior international students regarding their difficulties in adjusting to a new culture, although the senior students also had similar adjustment issues. Clara from the UK described how orientation programmes played a minor role in enhancing the culture and social experience of international students in the university: "Before I came to China, I had no idea how life could be in university, but I was expecting the orientation programs could easily help me to get familiar with the host culture and social life. But I think the orientation programs are not focused much on enhancing the cultural and social experiences of international students… They emphasize much on academic orientation."

Social interaction with Chinese students

The international students revealed that they felt very isolated from Chinese students and their culture. These kinds of experiences led to frustration, confusion, and emotional discomfort among the international students because they lack familiar signs and belonging. Responses show that there were few effective programmes to bridge international and Chinese students. For example, active extracurricular activities for international and Chinese students to help

them easily get to know each other. Some students admitted to having been involved in some programmes designed by international Fu Dao Yuans to bring international and Chinese students together for the purpose of sharing their culture, but most of those programmes lacked effectiveness and were not efficient Shab from India stated: "One time, I got information from Fu Dao Yuan of our department about the social program called the English-Chinese corner. In that program international and Chinese students could come together to learn the languages and cultures of each other by playing some interesting games while speaking both English and Chinese languages, also it could help students to make friends. Honestly, it was a nice program but it lacked effectiveness and seriousness which made many students lose interest in attending the program."

Counselling services for international students

Commenting on their experiences in the counselling programmes for international students with cultural differences, the majority of participants identified counselling as one of the most important factors in enhancing cultural and social experiences; therefore, designing counselling programmes to help international students who felt very isolated from Chinese students and culture, those who experience frustration, confusion, and emotional discomfort would help them easily adapt to the host culture and social settings. Angel from Ghana stated: "I really appreciate the services provided by international Fu Dao Yuans; they are really helpful. But they should also consider having counselling programs for international students just as what they have for Chinese students. It will easily facilitate adjustment into the new cultural and social life.

Other participants mentioned the lack of awareness of counselling services available for them. Abdul from Pakistan argued that: "Frankly speaking, I have no idea where I can seek professional counselling services in the University. The office which I frequently use is the office of international Fu Dao Yuan, for issues like course registration, visa application, and so on, but not for counselling services."

Discussion

This article examined the role played by the student affairs office in supporting international students to have successful cultural and social experiences based on their perceptions and experiences in China. Many studies about international students in China integrated the academic and cultural experience of international students. The study has differentiated them, considering how they are important in different ways. The U-Curve adjustment theory (Oberg, 1960) was employed particularly in its stage of adjustment, to examine the adjustment trajectory of international students in a new culture. The study discovered that

the international Fu Dao Yuans in Chinese universities are central in the enhancement of cultural and social experiences of international students; because it confirmed that there was a connection between international Fu Dao Yuans and international students. The office of international Fu Dao Yuans was the most used office by international students who sought services such as visa applications, course registration, travelling, legal problems, purchasing of health insurance, comfortable living standards in student residences, and so on.

Providing cultural and social support to international students to successfully enhance their status is vital and deserves further attention in many Chinese universities. The cultural and social support should not only be for the positive well-being of international students, but also for helping them to cope with the host culture and society. By placing great emphasis on language and communication programmes, cultural orientation for international students, social interaction and counselling services for international students, will help the international students from diverse backgrounds to easily adjust to the host culture and society. With a completely enhanced status, the international students will not only accept the host country's customs but will also begin to enjoy its social life and studies.

Practical Recommendations

Given the recent increase of international students in Chinese higher education coming from diverse backgrounds, the process of cultivating international Fu Dao Yuans in Chinese universities should be combined with the increasing level of international students in China, to ensure enough international Fu Dao Yuans with manageable duties. This will help them to put more focus on cultural and social programmes for international students. The practical recommendations developed from international students' experiences are essential for international Fu Dao Yuans interested in enhancing the culture and social experiences of international students in China.

Firstly, the international Fu Dao Yuans must ensure that the orientation programmes for international students are not primarily focused on academic programmes, but should also focus on enhancing the cultural and social experiences of the international students. Enhancing cultural experiences in universities can be achieved by designing orientation programmes that promote easy adjustment of international students into the host culture. Huntley (1993) stated that a well-organised orientation can also help international students become aware of aspects of university life and then adjust better. Furthermore, Pedersen (1991) stated that: "orientation is a continuous process requiring contact with students before they arrive and during their stay", therefore, the study suggested that the educational and cultural information about host universities must be made more readily available to prospective international students before they leave their home countries, so that they can be prepared or at least be aware of the differences before leaving.

Secondly, improving counselling services for international students; the study confirmed that many international students were not aware of counselling services that are available to them. Under these circumstances, it is important for international Fu Dao Yuans to create better connections with international students in terms of personal emotional issues, so that they can openly share their feelings and indicate if they need any help. Pedersen (1991) presented an alternative technique of providing counselling services to international students, which is beyond the formal counselling technique. He recommends a harmonising system of informal methods, for instance, going to where the students live or hanging out, whether at home, on campus benches, hallways, or street corners and taking part in social actions.

Thirdly, strengthening language support; many international students are still facing several difficulties in using the host language for communication. For instance, the study discovered that participants consider the Chinese language as the main challenge in coping with the host environment. International Fu Dao Yuans should go beyond the one-semester host language course and design continuing programmes such as mini communication workshops, which could help to reveal some commonly used words in the social and academic setting to international students. Furthermore, Robinson (1992) suggested making the implicit cultural knowledge explicit in their instruction. This is providing opportunities to develop essential knowledge of the host culture. Therefore, the integration of cultural and academic guidance while teaching is vital in enhancing international students' cultural competence.

Lastly, international Fu Dao Yuans should help to create interaction opportunities between host students and international students. Zhai (2002) argued that international students who spent more of their leisure time with host students are significantly better adapted than those who spent more leisure time with their fellow country mates. A variety of active and efficient programmes such as English-Chinese conversation programmes, culture clubs, and international festivals could be designed by international Fu Dao Yuans to enhance the cultural and social experiences of international students.

Limitations and Further Research

Practically, and within the constraints of research, the study recruited only international students in a single university to share their experiences. It is therefore suggested that future research could further investigate students' experiences and international Fu Dao Yuan activities in many Chinese universities. Participants' experiences might differ from those of students in other well-developed institutions, which are considered world-class universities. The study encourages future research by using various methods such as quantitative or mixed-methods research, which could provide a better understanding and richer data on the cultural and social experiences of international students in China.

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Research Article

Pathways of Electoral Clientelism in University Student Elections in Ghana: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Recent studies on student politics and governance have shown that electoral clientelism (EC) in university student elections is often facilitated by clientelist relations between student leaders and political parties. However, there is a dearth of empirical research investigating the various forms of electoral clientelism, as manifested through vote-buying practices in campus electoral politics in African universities. This article, therefore, investigates the multifaceted and changing dynamics of vote-buying in student electoral processes in Ghanaian universities. The study adopted a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with 15 student leaders, 4 university staff working with student leadership, and 4 focus group interviews involving students at the University of Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. From our finding, we argue that electoral clientelism takes place in five crucial ways in university student elections in Ghana. These include the provision of direct cash payments, exchanging electoral support for student government positions and appointments, provision of food and beverage consumables, award of student-related business contracts, and provision of educational materials and souvenirs.

Keywords

Electoral clientelism, student politics, vote-buying, campus elections, Ghanaian universities

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Introduction

Since the 2000s, a growing number of studies have pointed to the clientelist relationships between student leaders and political parties in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Africa (Abrefa Busia, 2019; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014; Mugume, 2015). This strand of literature on student politics has highlighted the increasing political influences and vote-buying in university student electoral politics that consequently feed into national politics. Student elections have gradually been infiltrated by national political parties, especially at the levels of students' guild and student representative council (SRC) elections across many African universities (Mugume, 2015; Oanda, 2016a; Oanda & Omanga, 2018).

Similar to national elections, periodic student elections take place each academic year for electing student representatives at various levels, ranging from departmental through to faculties and colleges to halls of residence. Thus, student electoral politics provides insight into mainstream national politics, due to the latent function of university campuses as 'political communities' beyond academic enterprise. The centrality of elections and democratic politics in student affairs and governance processes has, therefore, become crucial for understanding the linkages between campus and national politics (Mugume, 2015; Weinberg & Walker, 1969). As Paalo and Van Gyampo (2019) emphasise, the literature on electoral clientelism in Africa fails to engage with the growing contemporary phenomena regarding the dynamics of campus-based student politics and its relationship with national party politics.

At the university student political front, existing empirical studies on electoral clientelism in Africa have primarily studied the clientelist linkages between student leaders and political parties (Abrefa Busia, 2019; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014; Mugume, 2015; Mugume & Luescher, 2017a, 2017b). These studies focused exclusively on how political parties influence student leaders through resource exchanges for their external gains, subsequently infiltrating student politics. Other studies have also investigated student participation in university governance through campus elections and its association with patronage politics and vote-buying practices (Oanda, 2016b; Sarpong, 2018). However, very little is known in the scholarly literature on how vote-buying takes place in university student electoral processes in Africa. For example, Oanda's (2016b) study on the evolving nature of student participation in university governance only discussed manifestations of electoral clientelism as part of the historicity, broader trends, and emerging issues in student politics in Africa, notably Ghana, Uganda, and Kenya. As such, most of what is known about the methods of electoral clientelism in university elections primarily comes from media discourses rather than from academia. For instance, in their review of the complex vote-buying linkages between student politics, intra-party politics, and national politics in Ghana, Paalo and Van Gyampo (2019) relied on secondary sources such as print and electronic media discourses, existing literature, as well as personal observations.

In light of this knowledge gap, this article primarily investigated the multifaceted pathways

of electoral clientelism in university student elections in Ghana. It examines the various forms of vote-buying that occur before and during elections on the campuses of Ghanaian public universities. To the best of our knowledge, there has not been any detailed empirical research investigating how electoral clientelism takes place in university student elections in the Ghanaian context. While some methods of vote-buying such as direct cash payments by candidates to students seem commonplace, questions of when, where, and how such payments are made are not adequately discussed in the literature. Besides, other forms of electoral clientelism outside political party influences such as how some ordinary students fund student candidates' election campaigns in exchange for some material benefits is grossly understudied. Such methods of vote-buying in student elections may not necessarily be associated with political party influences but rather intra-campus dynamics, which offer mutual benefits between candidates and ordinary students. There is, therefore, the need to consider both the intra-campus and external party clientelist influences in student electoral politics. As emphasised by Paalo and Van Gyampo (2019), scholars and policymakers need to conduct further empirical studies to thoroughly investigate the reinforcing role of electoral clientelism in student politics, and how this bears semblance with intra-party and national elections. The rest of this article is structured in six sections. First, we provide a theoretical framework on EC. The second section discusses the phenomena of EC in student elections in Africa. This section shows how vote-buying in university student elections has become the new dimension of electoral clientelism in Africa. The third section details the methodology of the study, including the research design used and instruments of data collection. The fourth section presents the findings of the study, followed by the fifth section, which focuses on the discussions of the findings presented. The final section provides concluding remarks on the key findings of the study, as well as policy and practical implications for addressing EC in student democratic politics.

Theoretical Framework on Electoral Clientelism

The concept of electoral clientelism (EC) falls under the umbrella of clientelism and refers to the provision of goods or cash around Election Day or during electoral campaigns (Gadjanova, 2017; Kramon, 2016). EC, also known as vote-buying, is viewed as a transaction between candidates and voters, such that once citizens receive cash or private goods in exchange for political support, they have to comply and vote for the buyer (Gallego & Wantchekon, 2017). Generally, vote-buying involves a typical scenario where candidates, usually through intermediaries, intend to buy votes during election campaigns, compared to what happens over a longer period (Schaffe, 2007). EC has been highlighted as a pervasive feature of distributive politics in most developing countries around the world (Gallego & Wantchekon, 2017; Kramon, 2018; Schaffe, 2007).

As most studies on EC tend to focus on national-level politics relative to student politics,

a number of explanations have been put forth by various scholars. According to Kramon (2016), vote-buying during elections serves to signal the commitment to future redistribution by candidates, especially where there are uncertainty and lack of trust. As such, Kramon's informational theory of EC argues that by providing handouts to voters, politicians are signalling voters about their capacities to deliver developmental goods after elections. As such, EC in Africa occurs as a means of building reputation through the delivery of particularistic goods, primarily given out to enhance performance, reputations, and credibility rather than a clientelist exchange for votes (Kramon, 2016, 2018; Nathan, 2016). This is especially the case among voters with no clear long-term expectations of better service delivery from one party or the other, which makes short-term spending on particularistic goods appealing to them (Nathan, 2016). Also, EC is seen as an affirmation of status by political candidates through public displays of wealth. As Gadjanova (2017) argues, where elections are competitive, and voters expect gifts; one of the strategies used by candidates is the public distribution of cash and other inducements to affirm their own status.

Furthermore, other scholars also argue that EC, even if ineffective, is the result of political equilibrium, in which candidates cannot deviate because other parties are following similar strategies, thereby making the costs of defecting higher than the benefits (Chauchard, 2016; Gadjanova, 2017). As Gadjanova (2017) further argues, the provision of material rewards by politicians during competitive elections is made to undermine an opponent's rewards by matching inducements or encouraging voters to break reciprocity norms. Under such circumstances, EC ensures that neither parties nor politicians' gifts are sufficient for a win, consequently forcing them to pursue different linkage mechanisms to voters (Gadjanova, 2017; Gallego & Wantchekon, 2017). Over time, providing material inducements in what Gadjanova (2017) calls 'patronage democracies' has become a normalised strategy for securing votes and mobilising the masses, especially in Africa. As Bratton (2008) emphasises, (African) electoral campaigns provide moments for politicians to engage in mass mobilisation and electoral manipulations through vote-buying rather than providing an opportunity for public deliberation.

Concerning the explanations for EC, a wide range of electoral handouts has been identified in the literature. EC has been noted to occur in various forms such as cash payments, food, and the award of contracts, employment offers, alcohol, medicine, clothing, and other gifts to voters (Gallego & Wantchekon, 2017; Lindberg, 2003; Wantchekon, 2003). These pathways of electoral clientelism have been given considerable attention to ascertain how vote-buying manifests before and during elections. For instance, direct cash payments to voters have been highlighted as a pervasive method of vote-buying across various developing countries, often distributed through party intermediaries and brokers (Gadjanova, 2017; Kramon, 2018; Schaffe, 2007). The provision of cash payments during election campaigns is usually attributed to the widespread poverty in most of the developing world, which makes it easier to manipulate most

voters with handouts in return for votes (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Notwithstanding what is known concerning EC in national politics, not much has been researched concerning the strategies of vote-buying in university student politics. The next section provides an overview of EC in African student elections and its association with national politics.

Campus Electoral Clientelism in Africa and its Linkages with National Politics

The broader discourse of EC in mainstream politics in Africa emphasises the prevalent and persistent vote-buying practices during elections (Bratton, 2008; Lindberg, 2003; Wantchekon, 2003). Considerable studies have investigated the reasons for EC as a form of clientelism in African elections, mainly from the perspective of comparative politics between democratisation in both the developed and developing democracies (Medina & Stokes, 2002). Clientelism broadly refers to transactions between politicians and citizens, whereby material favours are given in exchange for political support (Wantchekon, 2003). What distinguishes EC as a type of clientelism is that it occurs before and during elections with the main motive of buying votes and ensuring higher voter turnout (Nichter, 2008; Schaffe, 2007) compared to other forms like patronage and prebendalism, which tend to consolidate as political systems, for instance through deeper distortions in public service delivery (Gallego & Wantchekon, 2017). As Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007) assert, patronage involves the allocation of public resources like jobs in return for political support which may create distortions in the economy. Thus, patronage differs from EC in that it takes a longer period, is not limited to the election campaigns, and offers more attractive resources for clients beyond the short-run (Gallego & Wantchekon, 2017). Prebendalism exists as an extreme form of patronage, where clients only extract public resources for their own benefit without any control of the patron (Gallego & Wantchekon, 2017; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007).

At present, the literature on EC in Africa shows various ways through which candidates engage in vote-buying before and during elections. Across various African countries, the persistence of vote-buying has been attributed to weak political economy (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007), clientelist political culture revealing the patrimonialism (Chabal & Daloz, 1999), weak political institutions and party structures (van de Walle, 2007), strategy for mass mobilisation (Chauchard, 2016), low educational levels and civic awareness (Nathan, 2016), as well as building reputation and affirming status (Gadjanova, 2017; Kramon, 2018). Consequently, various methods of EC in Africa, and Ghana in particular, include monetary payments to voters, (public) donations of items (such as food, household electronic appliances), employment offers, and awarding of contracts (Lindberg, 2003; Nathan, 2016; van de Walle, 2007).

Despite the contributions of the existing literature, it tends to focus on national-level electoral politics, including intra-political party elections. As such, newer forms of EC in

student politics which is becoming a growing practice across various university campuses in Africa have received far less attention. As argued by Paalo and Van Gyampo (2019), current scholarly discussions on EC fail to engage some growing contemporary trends that contribute significantly to sustaining the culture of vote-buying. Research on EC in university student elections exists in a few universities in Africa. For instance, since 2015, a growing literature has studied the associations between campus-based student politics and national political parties through the influence of student leadership by parties (Abrefa Busia, 2019; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014; Mugume, 2015). For example, existing empirical studies have investigated the clientelist association between student leaders and political parties, notably in Uganda (Mugume, 2015; Mugume & Luescher, 2017b) and Kenya (Oanda, 2016b). Thus, there is a need for more empirical research on campus-based vote-buying practices in other African countries to facilitate broader discussions of the phenomena on EC.

EC at the student politics level is therefore an emerging strand in the clientelism literature in Africa. As argued by Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume (2014), electoral clientelism in student elections is associated with multiparty democracy in Africa. A few scholars have highlighted the clientelist relationships between student leaders and political parties in student electoral politics in various African HEIs (Abrefa Busia, 2019; Mugume, 2015; Mugume & Luescher, 2017b). For instance, Oanda (2016b) argues that the partisan influences by politicians have contributed to the competitive nature of student political activities and the 'massive monetisation' of student elections across various HEI campuses in Africa. As Oanda and Omanga (2018) emphasise, university student elections have been associated with patron-client politics and political influences Thus, national politics has been implicated in campus politics as politicians seek to build political clients in African universities using students (Oanda, 2016b; Oanda & Omanga, 2018; Paalo & Van Gyampo, 2019) who have historically been the 'mouthpiece' of the youth and society in general (Van Gyampo, 2013). These dynamics capture the new forms of politicisation and campus-partisan linkages in student politics in Africa, notably Uganda, Kenya, and Ghana (Mugume & Luescher; Oanda, 2016a; Paalo & Van Gyampo, 2019).

In the literature, the most crucial factor for the involvement of political parties in student politics is the recruitment of student cadres, while student leaders in turn gain goods and services such as providing funds for their campaigns (Abrefa Busia, 2019; Mugume, 2015; Mugume & Luescher, 2017b; Weinberg & Walker, 1969). Building on the existing works on student politics, Abrefa Busia (2019) explains that the cause of electoral clientelism in student elections is a result of the failures of elected student leaders to fulfil their campaign policies over time. Precedents of past student leaders who fail to address the academic and socio-economic concerns of students, and the desire to amass wealth using their positions in student government, had culminated in a campus culture of clientelism and patronage. Thus, most student voters demand direct material benefits and in some cases, post-electoral appointments before giving candidates their votes and other electoral support (Abrefa Busia, 2019). Again,

the student-voter apathy resulting from unfulfilled promises and corrupt practices by student leaders also makes electoral clientelism a means of popular mobilising in campus elections (Abrefa Busia, 2019; Nyarko, 2016).

Concerning the forms of EC in student electoral politics, the literature on vote-buying shows that student political candidates provide direct cash payments to voters in the build-up to and during elections (Nyarko, 2016; Oanda, 2016b). These monetary payments have often occurred as a result of partisan interests in campus politics in many African universities. For instance, in Kenyan universities, student election campaigns are usually funded by national political parties with interests that sometimes have negative ethnic and tribal agendas (Oanda, 2016b). This ultimately affects student leadership and representation. Similarly, student campaigns for guild elections in Ugandan universities, notably Makerere University, have political party undertones which tend to control campus politics (Natamba, 2012 cited in Oanda, 2016b: 78). As Sarpong (2018) asserts, some student politicians have often been endorsed and funded by Ghana's two main political parties, National Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP), through their active campus networks. Thus, across many African universities, partisan influences have heavily monetised student elections with student political candidates distributing direct cash to students and influential student groups to ensure electoral success (Mugume, 2015; Oanda, 2016b). In Ghana, for instance, Nyarko (2016) reports how an SRC presidential candidate gave money up to GH¢ 5000 to students in various halls of residence to share before an election.

Apart from direct monetary payments, student leaders have also been noted for distributing consumables such as food, beverages, and branded souvenirs. Based on Nyarko's (2016) journalistic report, student politicians in Ghanaian universities distribute branded T-shirts, sponsor birthday parties and entertainment programmes and also provide porridge breakfast to student voters in the build-up to elections. Such forms of vote-buying have continued in contemporary student politics and are often fuelled by political parties that provide clientelist goods to their favourite candidates for onward distribution to student voters (Paalo & Van Gyampo, 2019). In Uganda, for example, student guild candidates at Makerere University are expected to provide music at campus events and also beverages and alcohol to their supporters, usually through the financial support of some politicians (Mugume, 2015; Oanda, 2016b). As some scholars emphasise, the primary 'non-partisan' responsibility of student leaders to promote the welfare of students has become heavily 'politicised' by partisan politics across various universities in Africa (Abrefa Busia, 2019; Van Gyampo, 2013). This situation however, affects student governance as students with good leadership potential but lacking party affiliation refrain from student electoral politics because of the increasing monetisation of university student elections in Africa (Oanda, 2016b).

Methodology

This research forms part of a broader study on "Student Politics and Clientelism in West African Universities: A Case Study of Ghana" conducted in April 2019. A qualitative research methodology with an interpretive approach was employed for this study. The interpretive approach recognises the complexity of social life and seeks to provide a better understanding of people's experiences within a complex social context (Krauss, 2005). Moreover, the interpretive paradigm optimises focus group discussions (FGDs) and personal interviews (Yin, 2003) to explore phenomena as a means of understanding the multiple realities of social life and the deeper meanings of the phenomena. The qualitative approach was therefore more applicable as interviews, and FGDs allowed students and student leaders to 'voice out' their experiences and perspectives on clientelism in a university setting.

The research design for this study was an exploratory multiple case study that helped to explore the socio-political context of electoral clientelism in Ghanaian universities. As Bleijenberg (2010) points out, explorative case studies focus on explaining social phenomena within a particular social context. Case studies are also useful for including different approaches and methods to the phenomena being studied (Yin, 2003, p.8). As such, the University of Ghana (UG) and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) were selected, given their historical association with active student politics in Ghana and its relation to national politics (Van Gyampo, 2013). The two universities stand out as Ghana's flagship and oldest universities with the largest student populations that have a growing feature of electoral clientelism in Ghana. This informed the selection of the two universities as cases for the study out of ten public universities, six technical universities, and five chartered private universities based on the Ghana National Accreditation Board data as of June 2018.

The study adopted purposive, snowballing, and convenience sampling techniques to elicit in-depth data from students and student leaders. The first author hired two research assistants who helped him to recruit undergraduate and postgraduate students to participate in the study. Both the undergraduate and postgraduate students were conveniently selected based on their availability and rich experiences and knowledge of vote-buying in student elections. Subsequently, 27 students at both UG and KNUST were sampled and clustered into four groups for the FGDs. Thus, 3 of the groups had seven members and the other one had six members. Also, past and current student leadership candidates were purposively selected and made referrals of other student leaders who were subsequently contacted and recruited for the study. Student leaders were drawn from the faculty and students representative council (SRC) levels where electoral clientelism is pervasive. Altogether, 15 past and current student leaders of UG and KNUST, comprising nine males and six females, agreed to participate in the study. Furthermore, 4 university staff members (2 each from UG and KNUST) who work with student leaders were also recruited for their views on vote-buying in student elections on campus.

The study employed semi-structured interviews and FGDs with student leaders and students to collect empirical data on the pathways of electoral clientelism in university student elections in Ghana. The data collection lasted for three weeks, from 4 to 19 April 2019. Interviews with student leaders took place at centrally agreed locations in Accra, Kumasi, and Tarkwa. Interview guides were used to obtain relevant data from student leaders. Permission was obtained from interviewees before taking field notes and tape-recording the interviews. Moreover, FGDs were also conducted on the campuses of UG in Accra and KNUST in Kumasi. As Denscombe (2007) argues, FGDs have the advantage of capturing the dimensions and nuances of a topic which may be limited by personal interviews. At KNUST, FGDs were done in the discussion area of the main library. At the UG, the TV Room space at the Mensah Sarbah Hall hosted the discussions. On average, FGDs took 30-50 minutes. Members of each FGD comprised males and females with an age cohort of 20-27 years. This research was approved in March 2019 by the Graduate Education Committee of the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge, UK. As part of this research, ethical considerations including oral consent and written informed consent forms were sought from participants before interviews and FGDs. The purpose of the study was also explained to participants, and they were assured of confidentiality and their ano ymity for the information provided.

Finally, data analysis for the study was concurrently done throughout the data collection process through an inductive data analysis strategy. Qualitative data were coded with the aid of the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. to generate descriptive codes and later analytical codes. The data were then analysed thematically and cross-checked with responses from participants to bring out emerging themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

At the student politics level, very little is known about how clientelism occurs and the forms it takes. Based on field interviews and FGDs, participants indicated fi e main ways through which electoral clientelism is evident in campus electoral politics. These pathways include the provision of direct cash payments, provision of food and beverage consumables, provision of educational materials and souvenirs, exchanging electoral support for student government positions and appointments, and award of student-related business contracts.

Provision of direct cash payments to students

The provision of direct monetary payments is the most common form of electoral clientelism in university student elections. During electioneering campaigns, findings showed that some students usually demanded money from student candidates in exchange for giving their electoral support. This situation occurred as a result of the disappointment of student leaders in

fulfilling students' interests over time. Thus, some students felt better off getting 'direct benefits from candidates before voting in elections, due to past precedents of candidates neglecting their needs and failing to negotiate with university management and national educational agencies on issues affecting university students. Similarly, student leaders provided cash payments to electorates to persuade student voters and to convince them to vote massively for them due to general apathy in campus elections. As explained by a past SRC candidate of KNUST:

> *On elections days, in particular, you need people to pull students to vote due to voter apathy. Some people will genuinely do that for you, but others put a price tag on it. Give me this amount of money, and I will 'sweep' [mobilise] people for you. In some instances, students will come and tell you, give me this amount of money as lunch or transportation fare to campus before I vote for you. Afterwards, I will take a picture for you to see. That is direct vote-buying right there.*

Candidates also offered monetary payments to influential student groups as a precondition for canvassing votes from students on their behalf, and sometimes as an appreciation for campaigning for them during elections. As emphasised by a current student leader at UG:

> *There are student groups that act as political entrepreneurs. They only look at the financial opportunities provided by the politics of the day. They are all about, how can I benefit from what is happening? They come with the idea that if you need me to convince people to massively vote for you, they tie it to an economic benefit They can charge, say GH¢ 500 and then go with candidates for campaigns.*

Direct cash payments through campus representatives during national students' union elections were also mentioned by study participants. At the National Union of Ghana Students' (NUGS) congress, student government representatives from various universities usually received financial inducements from NUGS candidates in the form of transportation and payment of capitation fees. For instance, the capitation fee, which catered for student delegate accommodation, food, transport, and other expenses at the congress to elect national student leaders, was reported to be sometimes funded by some candidates. As such, financing congress-related expenses and the annual NUGS dues, which were to be settled by local university representatives, was paid by some NUGS candidates. Such payments were noted by participants as a common practice by candidates with partisan associations, in exchange for votes. According to a local campus representative:

> *Sometimes, candidates could pay the capitation fee of about ¢300 per delegate at NUGS congress. Most tertiary institutions have about 20-30 delegates. For some schools, they only vote for [national] candidates because they have paid for their delegates' capitation fee.*

Provision of food and beverage consumables

From the interviews and FGDs, the provision of food and beverage consumables by candidates to students for electoral support was another form of clientelism at UG and KNUST. This form of vote-buying comprised the distribution of soft drinks, and the provision of lunch for voters in the form of food packs with snacks. Candidates sometimes did this with the hope of capturing swing voters, undecided in the election week to pull last-minute votes. As these discussants mentioned:

> *On election days at Legon [UG], some candidates have cars parked at vantage points on campus distributing food packs and soft drinks to influence people to vote. I don't know how it works, but that is what it is.*

> *In typical male halls like Unity Hall, you will have candidates who before or during the election day, provide breakfast like porridge and snacks for students. Some students based on that to vote and decide not to vote for others because they did not provide such food items.*

From these statements by some students in FGDs, the provision of food items before and during elections was a primary strategy used by candidates in exchange for electoral support. These were provided to 'ordinary' students and also to various influential student groups as a mobilisation strategy. Candidates relied on food and beverage distribution because they felt students are not interested in policies, thereby using material inducements to beat competition from other candidates.

Provision of educational materials and souvenirs

The study found that candidates also provided educational material and branded election products to students for electoral support. Such educational material included academic handouts, branded exercise books, pens and past examination questions, while election souvenirs provided to students included stickers, wristbands, and calendars. These items were usually provided by candidates to advertise their campaigns and make their political intentions known to electorates. However, this approach enhanced a candidate's popularity and electoral visibility on campus, which could translate to getting more votes over their opponents. A past faculty president at KNUST admitted that:

> *Vote-buying takes the form of souvenirs like branded wristbands and giving out branded exercise books. I did that during my campaigns. For exercise books, are useful for advertising a candidate and also for students' academic work. So, that is more like a dual exchange that benefits both parties.*

Concerning the provision of candidate branded products to students during elections; a university staff member involved in student leadership at KNUST explained that:

> *During campaign periods on campus, it is not very hard to see some candidates giving out various items such as stationery to students. Our universities seem to have left the student politics space unregulated, hence lacking any stringent framework guiding elections. The idea is that it is students' matters; let us leave it for them. Moving forward, there should be explicit rules on the conduct of campus elections.*

Exchanging electoral support for student government positions and appointments

Another form of clientelism the study found was the exchange of electoral support for post-electoral student government positions and appointments. The study identified patronage politics implicit with the giving of positions and appointments by candidates to their political supporters and cronies from their high schools, religious groups, halls of residences, and faculties. Besides, some students, as a result of previous cases of candidates neglecting their needs after elections and financial embezzlement of student funds by successful candidates, 'out rightly' demand positions before giving their electoral support. As indicated by a postgraduate student at UG:

> *In 2014/15, I was on the same floor with a candidate popularly called Palenxy. During his campaign for JCR president, most of his high school friends supported him. Eventually, he won massively and put most of his colleagues on hall committees. Besides, he appointed some of them as floor representatives and then gave them 'inner rooms' with extra privacy, which are a 'hot cake' on campus.*

In other instances, successful candidates returned electoral support with appointments such as senator (speaker of student parliament), judicial chair, and electoral commissioner.

Award of student-related business contracts

The award of student-related business contracts was also found to be another pathway of electoral clientelism. From our findings there is a prevalent exchange where some students negotiated with candidates to fund their campaigns, and also to help mobilise students to win campus elections. In return, successful candidates who won student elections were expected to provide assurances of business contracts related to student events and souvenirs to such 'student political financiers'. While some student leaders mentioned that they did not succumb to such proposals, they emphasised that such clientelist practices were common in student elections.

According to a former student-faculty president at KNUST:

> *There are instances where students who have business exchange their support and sometimes monetary support for a candidate in exchange for business contracts. When I was vying for faculty president, a student approached me for a brief meeting. At the meeting, he proposed helping my campaign finance and in return wanted all student-related printing used for the Faculty Week Celebration to be given to him, since he owned a printing press.*

Similarly, a past student leader at UG noted that:

> *The deal in UG now is that it is either you give me a position or a contract, providing souvenirs are fading in recent times. Some students will tell you that when you win, every single exercise book produced for freshers, approximately 38000 copies, should be awarded to them. Hence, when the standard price is GH¢1.50, such student financiers awarded such contracts negotiate with printing presses and get them subsidised at 70 pesewas because of bulk printing. That is how those who sponsor candidates get their money back after elections.*

Discussion

Our study has shown that the pathways of EC in campus elections in Ghana are multifaceted and interconnected. Candidates often used different strategies to directly influence votes before and during elections. These involve direct cash payments by candidates and sometimes through influential intermediaries to student-voters, distribution of stationery and branded souvenirs, and provision of food items. These methods of vote-buying were usually found to be important for pulling voters to campus on election days at both UG and KNUST, and to also rival opponents' provision of material incentives in the build-up to elections. Concerning using EC to enhance voter turnout, the strategy to use material inducements like food items and cash payments was a result of student-voter apathy following years of unfulfilled promises by candidates. As such, unlike the dominant narrative of candidates providing handouts to influence votes, most student-voters (especially those in their later years) instead demanded 'direct benefits from candidates before voting. Records of successful student leaders failing to address students' welfare have created a political culture of vote-buying in university student elections (Abrefa Busia, 2019).

Consequently, the competitive nature of campus elections to engage influential student groups to 'sweep' voters, especially on election days, has made most candidates (notably at the SRC and faculty levels) resort to vote-buying. This practice resonates with vote-buying at the national level, where politicians undermine opponents' material rewards by matching such inducements or breaking reciprocity norms to ensure political equilibrium (Chauchard, 2016;

Gadjanova, 2017). Though some candidates did not engage in vote-buying, they admitted that EC was a common practice on campus at both KNUST and UG. For such candidates and former student leaders, their reasons included not wanting to be controlled by political parties who usually funded SRC candidates, financial constraints, and also based on their past service which endeared them to fellow students, in previous leadership roles such as hall presidents, class representatives, and departmental executives.

Furthermore, it also became clear that vote-buying strategies such as the provision of student government positions and appointments, as well as business contracts are mainly reserved for influential agents who canvassed votes for candidates, primarily through door-to-door campaigns in student hostels and halls of residences. More importantly, while these two methods relate more to patronage in the mainstream literature, we argue that under student electoral politics, the award of contracts and provision of positions by successful candidates are backed into EC due to the relatively short period (typically 7-11 months) of student leadership office per academic year. Thus, even though patronage politics at the national level takes a longer time compared to vote-buying, which tend to be around elections (Gallego & Wantchekon, 2017), the award of student positions takes a shorter time, sometimes taking effect the moment candidates win elections. These appointments are usually decided among candidates and influential student groups or 'brokers' as a guarantee before even offering their electoral support. In UG, for instance, this was made evident, as the award of business contracts and appointments was preferred by most students involved in campus elections compared to cash payments, electoral souvenirs, and food items.

Moreover, our findings point to some remarkable differences between UG and KNUST regarding EC. At UG, the scale of vote-buying was more pronounced due to the intense political party influences in student elections, especially at the SRC level. Hence, most SRC candidates were usually endorsed and funded by campus party branches, often with the direct backing of party official who by the proximity of the campus, came around during elections. This situation stems from the fact that the UG campus is strategically located in the Ayawaso West Wuogon Constituency where university students of UG constitute an overwhelming voter population, which of itself can secure a member of parliament (MPs) outright victory in national elections. Besides, as Ghana's premier university based in the national capital, UG is close to important government office and political party official who turn to campuses to recruit and mentor their next crop of party leadership and mobilise grassroots support during national elections. As highlighted by Oanda and Omanga (2018), African politicians still see universities as critical bases for building political clients; rendering more student activities along political party lines. Consequently, this has made student elections in UG more politicised and highly monetised compared to KNUST. At KNUST, though politicisation of student elections exists, it was uncommon to witness party youth organisers or other official coming to campus during elections as was the case with UG. Instead, the campus branches of Ghana's two main

parties, New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC), were much more involved than party officials themselves.

Out of the five pathways emphasised through our findings the most effective were cash payments to ordinary students and influential student groups to influence votes together with the award of contracts after winning elections. Due to the situation of student-voter apathy resulting from unfulfilled campaign promises and policies of candidates over time, monetary incentives has become an effective strategy to get students to vote on election days or paying influential agents to campaign massively for candidates in the build-up to elections. This is especially so for off-campus students who, if not for lectures on election day, see no reason to come to campus for the sake of voting, given the common shared experiences that candidates fail to address their needs when voted into power (Abrefa Busia, 2019). For such students, offering cash payments during elections provides an intrinsic motivation to vote for a candidate. While cash payment is well emphasised in the dominant EC literature, its practice during student elections is not well articulated, especially given the fact that unlike national elections, student elections are not 'primarily' organised along with political party representation, despite instances of partisanship. Thus, though cash payments are involved in EC at both levels, the reasons and motivations may be different, as our finding suggests. Also, the award of contracts provides an effective method of EC in student elections. This is because for students with businesses or links with some enterprises, voting for a candidate, campaigning, and sponsoring them, came with a surety that upon winning the election, they were awarded contracts to supply student-related products such as stationery and T-shirts. This way, these students were also able to recoup their sponsorship monies through such contracts and where possible, make profits due to the discounted prices from bulk purchases. In such instances, such 'student political entrepreneurs' do not necessarily have any political party ties, but only decide to sponsor candidates because of the personal benefits Thus, EC in student elections does not only speak to political party associations, but also intra-campus dynamics outside partisan influences. Besides, because some candidates have been noted to disappoint students concerning positions and appointments after winning elections, most students preferred getting contracts or direct cash payments, especially at UG.

As earlier indicated, despite the promise of student government positions being an effective method of EC, previous instances of successful candidates not granting student such appointments made it less effective for candidates compared to cash payments and award of contracts. Student positions were, however, more effective among some students compared to the distribution of food items, as such positions could be used on their curriculum vitae to demonstrate their leadership and extra-curricular abilities. Again, we argue that the distribution of branded products like exercise books during elections are basic educational needs of students, which candidates capitalise on to influence votes just as most students require them for their studies. However, since this was one of the most used strategies by candidates

during elections on campus, it is least effective as a principal means of vote-buying in Ghanaian public universities. The distribution of food and beverage consumables is the least effective of the pathways of EC, as it was the most typical method used by candidates. These were usually provided on election days and also during the week of elections at both UG and KNUST. This tie in with existing media reports and studies, which show that the practice of student leaders sponsoring morning porridge breakfast and other food items during elections is pervasive in Ghanaian universities (Nyarko, 2016; Sarpong, 2018). Also, our study finds similar observations in other African universities, particularly in Uganda and Kenya, where student guild candidates engage in vote-buying practices such as providing beverages and alcohol to students during campaigns, often sponsored by leading political parties (Mugume, 2015; Oanda, 2016b).

The pathways of EC in university student elections identified in this study are consistent with the general political culture in Ghana, where national elections have been associated with widespread vote-buying (Paalo & Van Gyampo, 2019). Though different reasons account for the practice at both the student politics and national politics levels as earlier discussed, the strategies appeared similar, particularly due to the infiltration of political party influences in student elections. Consequently, the competitive nature of Ghana's two-party (NPP and NDC) dominated political landscape is becoming implicated in the 'non-partisan' responsibility of student leadership primarily responsible for addressing the welfare needs of students. Under such circumstances, as noted in our findings student leadership and governance is compromised, as the loyalty of successful candidates lies with their 'political godfathers' who fund their elections at the expense of student welfare. For instance, at the national students union elections, cash payments, which were heavily monetised by political parties, have resulted in the polarisation of the NUGS with ruling governments preferring a NUGS president in their political camp. This has led to the division of the NUGS into two factions with political loyalties to both the NPP and NDC. Ultimately, the pathways of EC in student elections, partly fuelled by political party influences and intra-campus dynamics, point to the enduring practice of vote-buying in Ghana's electoral democracy which is 'nurtured from below'. This is worth mentioning, given that most politicians in Ghana have been through the ranks of university student leadership.

Conclusion

Our research explored an understudied phenomenon in student electoral politics in Africa, by investigating how electoral clientelism takes place in student elections in Ghana. We have shown that vote-buying in Ghanaian university student elections occur in five crucial ways. These included providing cash payments, giving student government positions to supporters, distributing food and beverages, awarding student-related business contracts to student electoral financiers by elected leaders, and providing educational materials and souvenirs to student-voters. The significant contribution of the study is that it provides rich empirical data on the

complex forms of electoral clientelism in student elections in relation to national elections in Ghana. This is mainly due to the infiltration of political party influences in university student politics. We, therefore, recommend that universities must develop a coherent, participatory framework and stringent regulations to guide campus electoral politics, particularly concerning student political financing partisan influences from political parties, student electoral campaigning, and ethical considerations in conducting campus elections.

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Research Article

Significance of Proficient Communication on Career Choice Among First Years in Rural South Africa

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Abstract

Career choice involves the selection of one occupation over another. It is very important as it gives people focus on what career to follow. However, a lack of adequate information on career choice is capable of negatively influencing career choices. Hence, this study examines the significance of the adequate information on career choice among first year students using a selected rural South African university. A quantitative research method was employed for data collection. Purposive and random sampling was used to select the institution and sample respectively. Questionnaires were administered to 375 randomly selected first year students studying in the selected rural South African university. The findings of the study show that career choice is important and can contribute to the success of students. Attempts are made to communicate about career pathways with students while in high schools through the provision in the curriculum. Various factors ranging from parental influence, teachers, presence or absence of career counsellors, amongst others affect the career choice of students. The study recommends that education stakeholders, inclusive of parents, should be informed on the need to guide students in making informed career choices. Career information centres should be made available to students in various locations in the country.

Keywords

Career choice, career guidance, first year students, proficient communication, rural South Africa

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Introduction

Adequate information is an important part of educating students on making meaningful career choices. Keyton (2011) defines communication as the means of transmitting or conveying information from one person to another. Communication is being used in every facet of life including career choice. The term career choice involves the selection of one occupation over another. Greenhaus (2003) explains that career choice involves making career decisions to pursue a particular job or career, which is expected and desired to bring changes to occupational fields Özbilgin, Küskü and Erdoğmuş (2005) argue that for career choice to take place, two conditions are required which include: availability of alternative career options, and an individual's/personal preference between the available career options.

Sauermann (2005) and Krieshok, Black and McKay (2009) are of the view that there are various factors that contribute to the difficulties involved in making career decisions which are: work environment, length of training, and using or avoiding using numerical ability, amongst others. Whiston and Keller (2004) indicate that the family, most especially parents, seem to have a pronounced impact on the career choice of people, and in this regard, the students. The study of Illouz (2008) reveals that students often find themselves overwhelmed in this kind of situation, and as a result, they struggle to plan their professional future, therefore need to seek help from career counsellors in deciding on career paths most suitable for them. Conversely, Boo and Kim (2020) opine that career indecision might pose difficulties for students and might eventually affect them negatively. Thus, the role of career counsellors is needed to help students make this important decisions with the assistance of professional help. Gati, Osipow, Krausz and Zaka (2000) are of the opinion that career counsellors may do well to first discover the cause of students' difficulties in making career choices, thereafter look for ways to empower them to deal with this. Exploring the difficulties faced by students in making career choices, Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk (2000) state that sourcing information regarding a career is the first and one of the most crucial stages in students' career decision making. Meanwhile, a review of the work of Boo and Kim (2020) indicates that poor or lack of career information is a major cause of poor career decision making and can have adverse effects on students. This implies that students tend to encounter conflicts and might make mistakes due to a low career information. Conversely, rural based students are considered as experiencing more challenges compared to their counterparts in urban centres (Uleanya et al., 2020). Inclusive of the challenges is the lack of adequate information. Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) suggest that rural based students lack help and adequate information. This seems to have put rural-based students at a disadvantage. Information is crucial, and how it is communicated is more important. Hence, in view of the foregoing, the study investigates the significance of proficient information on career choice using a selected rural university in South Africa as a case study.

Conceptualisation of Terms and Adopted Model

Proficient: This implies competence or skilful in the use of a thing (Vijayakumar, 2014). In this study, proficient means skilfulness or competence in transmitting necessary and useful information, especially as it concerns students and their career choices.

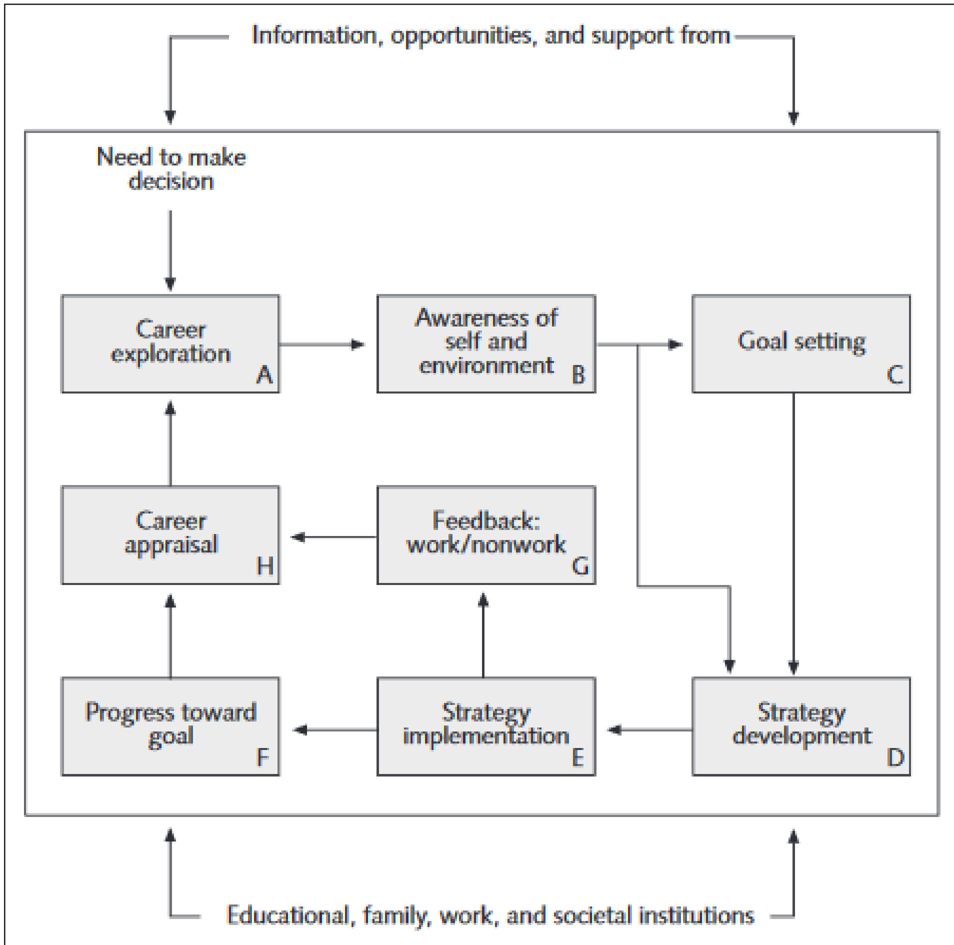
Communication: According to Pearson and Nelson (2000), communication is defined as the process of transferring information and understanding its meaning or what it entails from one place to another. They state further that before communication can take place, seven elements are involved which are: sender, message, receiver, feedback, channel, context or setting, and noise or interference. Dwyer (2005) emphasises that these seven elements are equally important in the process of communication and if one is missing, there will be a gap or break in the communication process, and the process will be incomplete. Keyton (2011) asserts that the elements involved in the communication process are important, because it determines the quality and effectiveness of communication. In this study, communication is used to mean transfer of career related information from one person to another.

Communiqué: A review of the work of Vijayakumar (2014) shows communiqué as a device used in the transmission of information or a message from one point to another. According to Dhami and Sharma (2017), communiqué is a mode of transmitting information from one person to another. Dhami and Sharma (2017) further state that communiqué can be done using social media or face-to-face. However, they opine that communiqué is most proficient when it is done using a face-to-face mode. This implies that communiqué can be carried out through devices or a face-to-face mode.

The Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk's Model of Career Management

In this study, the Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk's (2000) model of career management was adopted. This model offers insights into the processes involved and undertaken by students when attempting to make career choices. Figure 1 below, which is the Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk's (2000) model of career management, indicates the flow chart of different stages involved for students when reaching a career decision and strategizing to succeed in the chosen field.

Figure 1: *The Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk's model of career management (2000)*



Source: Greenhaus, Callanan and Godshalk (2000)

The Greenhaus et al. (2000) model concentrates on people, and in the context of this study, students who can be described as the decision makers. Following this model, students preparing to make career choices are expected to firstly realise that they have a need to make career decisions. This leads the students exploring various career options via critical thinking, asking relevant questions from different sources, and reading, amongst others. Hewitt (2010) opines that as students explore various career options, different groups of people, such as parents are consulted. Davies, Telhaj, Hutton, Adnett and Coe (2004) state that peers also have influence in the exploration stage. Levon (2007) states that lack or low

level of exploration is associated with career indecision. This implies that lack of adequate career information causes indecision in students, which might be affecting them negatively (Boo & Kim, 2020).

The next stage to be considered by students wanting to make career choices is to understand them. This is described as self-awareness. In considering themselves, students need to evaluate their abilities, strengths, and weaknesses (Bell, 2013; Sham, 2012). They also need to understand their environment before reaching a decision. After the decision has been reached, students are expected to set realistic goals. In order to achieve the set goals, students are expected to develop possible strategies. The next stage is the implementation of the developed strategy. This enables students to make progress by working towards the achievement of their set goals. At the point of implementing the developed strategies, students are expected to evaluate themselves to get feedback on what has been, or should still be done. Such evaluations are envisaged to enable the students to make progress towards achieving their set goals as adjustments can be made in all necessary areas. The final stage is career appraisal. At this point, the students evaluate their career choices to ensure that the decisions made are worthwhile, otherwise, there may be a need to begin the process all over again by considering the most suitable career choice.

Having considered the Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk's (2000) model of career management with regards to the present study, the need arises to explore the research site where the research was conducted. The study was conducted in a rural university in South Africa. Thus, the next section gives a brief about rural South Africa and its institution of learning.

Rural South Africa and Institution of Learning

Rurality varies from one country to another, especially with the discrepancies existing among developed, developing, and underdeveloped nations. Flora and Flora (2013), as well as Uleanya, Gamede and Kutame (2020) opine that rural nations in developed countries are characterised by the lack of rail transport systems, and airports, amongst others. Conversely, review of the works of Uleanya and Yu (2019) together with Uleanya, Gamede and Kutame (2020) indicate that rural environments in underdeveloped and developing countries are usually characterised by high levels of illiteracy, high rate of unemployment, poor infrastructures, and poor road network systems, amongst others. These suggest some of the reasons for rural-urban migration. The rural environment in South Africa is characterised by a high rate of illiteracy, poor road networks, and high rates of unemployment, amongst others (Uleanya et al., 2020). They further suggest that to enhance development in rural South Africa, institutions of learning are established. This concurs with the view of Dani and Shah (2016), who opine that institutions of learning are strategically situated in selected rural environments to aid development of such areas. However, according to Uleanya, Gamede and Kutame (2020), the quality of education provided in such institutions of learning is worth reviewing if the reason

for their establishment is to be achieved. Meanwhile, one of the reasons for the establishment of such institutions of learning is to help young people in succeeding in their career choice and path like their counterparts in urban based institutions of learning. However, the way career related information is passed across to young people appears questionable. Thus, the need for this study is aimed to investigate proficient communication on career choice, using first year students in a selected rural South African university. Meanwhile, there is a need to understand first year students in rural South Africa.

First Year Students in Rural South Africa

Rural South African students, like their counterparts in urban areas, are given the opportunity to apply to various universities of their choice, during and after completing their matric, which is done in Grade 12. This takes place after they have spent twelve years to complete primary and secondary school grades. However, some students who choose to acquire a university education. First year students, regardless of their location being rural or urban, encounter challenges trying to acclimatise with their new environment due to varying factors (Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020). Amongst the challenges faced by first year students are: time management (Mukwevho, 2018), access to higher education, coping with coursework, work overload, lack of effective and efficient self- and work-load and time-management, poor learning environments not conducive to academic engagement, challenges associated with reading and writing ability, class unpreparedness, poor study skills, poor or no academic support, and shortage of skills (Jordaan, 2016). Other challenges faced by first year students in South African universities include problems of writing, plagiarism, referencing, poor socio-economic backgrounds, and the low level of pre-univeristy education (Tanga & Maphosa, 2019). However, in addition to the challenges experienced by first year students in general in South Africa, some challenges are peculiar to first year students in rural South Africa. These challenges include: absence of mentors and supervisors such as parents, family, and teachers (Mukwevho, 2018), distance from home to campus, lack of transportation (Uleanya et al., 2019), language barriers (Uleanya et al., 2019), little or no knowledge and access to information and communication technology (ICT) (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014), teaching and learning in English as a medium of instruction, lack of computer knowledge and skills, poor social relationships, and poor access to support services are other challenges experienced by first year students in rural South African universities (Ajani & Gamede, 2020). The foregoing suggests that there is a difference between first year students' experiences in rural South African universities and urban. However, the students are expected to have been guided by the same curriculum while in high school. The curriculum is envisaged to possibly affect their experiences in their first year at university. Hence, the need to briefly examine the curriculum guiding South African high schools.

South African High School Curriculum

Education in South Africa is one of the sectors that have been restructured since the democratic dispensation in 1994. Chisholm (2005) explains that after South Africa became a Democratic Nation in 1994, a new constitution was adopted to promote social justice and this initiated the beginning of development and curriculum change in the country. According to Maher (2009), with the goal of promoting educational equality in South Africa, the former 19 different departments during the apartheid era were replaced by one National Department of Education. De Villiers (2011) and Van Deventer (2009) observe that the main aim of the curriculum change was to cleanse the syllabi from out-dated content and racist language to the implementation of the Outcomes Based Education (OBE) Curriculum. Horn (2005) points out that OBE encompasses purposeful goals which were envisaged to bring commendable ideas to the development of Educational Systems. Chisholm (2005) states that OBE was followed by the introduction of Curriculum 2005 in 1998, which later became a policy in 2002 and was revised to National Curriculum Statement (NCS). The National Curriculum Statement contains the following areas of human endeavour: Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Technology, Social Sciences, Arts and Culture, Life Orientation, Economics, and Management Sciences (Department of Education, 2003).

Life Orientation is one of the four fundamental subjects required for the National Senior Certificate, which means that it is compulsory for all learners in Grades 10, 11, and 12, which incorporate subjects such as Health Education, Life Skills, Career Guidance, Physical Education, Human Rights Education, and Religious Education (Department of Education, 2003). Maree and Ebersohn (2002) describe the word Life as the combination of spiritual, physical, psychological, vocational, and health beliefs of a living being, while Orientation refers to an ability to adjust to any situation people find themselves in. Maree and Ebersohn (2002) further state that Life Orientation (LO) refers to a subject area that involves both learners' insight about an understanding of life, and skills needed to prepare and guide them to encourage a successful life. The motive of this subject is to engage learners in personal, psychological, neuro-cognitive, motor, physical, moral, spiritual, cultural, and socio-economic areas to help them develop and achieve in the new democracy of South Africa (Department of Education, 2003). Prinsloo (2007) affirms that Life Orientation is meant to help learners understand and accept themselves as being unique and special; by using the skills and ideas they have obtained through the programme to showcase their values, understanding, and an attitudinal disposition to improve their families, community, and the country at large. However, in the subject of career decision making, various factors in addition to the curriculum of high schools affect the career choices of students. Some of the identified factors are presented and discussed in the next section.

Factors Influencing Career Choices

Career choice has been defined as the total pattern of one's activities held during a person's life-time (Natalie, 2006). Issa and Nwalo (2008) reveal that in many cases, the choice of careers, course of study, and the subsequent career paths to follow are challenges for prospective undergraduate students. Ackermann, Alberts and Mbalo (2003) attest to the fact that career choice is one of the major areas of concern for young people nearing the end of their high school education. This implies that for young people who are about to complete their high school education or begin their tertiary education, career choice is crucial.

Additionally, Kerka (2000) suggests that career choice is influenced by multiple factors which include personality, interests, self-concept, identity, globalisation, socialisation, role model, social support, and available resources such as information and finance among others. However, this study focuses on the issue revolving around information and how it is communicated. In the case of Bandura, Barbaranelli, Vittorio and Pastorelli (2001), each individual who undertakes the process is influenced by several factors including the context in which they live, their personal aptitudes, social contacts, and educational attainment. According to McQuaid and Bond (2003) students' perception of being suitable for a particular course of study has been found to be influenced by a number of factors which include ethnic background, year in school, and level of achievement, choice of science subjects, attitudes, and differences in job characteristics. Ferry (2006) suggests that a variety of influences such as family, school, community, and social and economic factors are likely to manipulate one's ultimate career decision. However, for the purpose of this study, only selected factors, especially those related to communication that influence career choice, shall be identified and discussed. Meanwhile, factors around communication are emphasised in this study following the aim of the study, which is to explore the significance of proficient communication on career choice. The identified factors are as presented and explained below.

Parental Influence

Gostein (2000) explains that the influence parents have on the career choices of their children can be in diverse forms such as direct inheritance, the provision of apprenticeship, and role models. He further stressed that parents cultivate certain career interests in their children from an early age, which is done through encouragement or discouragement of hobbies and interests, and by the activities they encourage their children to participate in. Hewitt (2010) notes that one reason many young people select careers that are favoured by their parents might be to avoid conflict in the home. Taylor, Harris and Taylor (2004) emphasise that due to parental support and encouragement, children's career choices are influenced because some might tend to choose what their parents desire in order to please them. Beyer (2008) states that parental

aspirations and expectations tend to affect the self-efficacy of their children, because they serve as important role models in their lives. Ahmad, Benjamin and Ang (2004) undertook a study in Asia and assert, following their findings that expectations and advice from parents are deemed important in influencing children's career decision-making.

However, this is sometimes identified as a complex factor in that children might choose careers that mismatch their personality. Also, the study carried out on college students and adults by Mau and Bikos (2000) reveals that parents have a greater influence on an individual's choice of career. This implies that parents tend to have influence over the career choice of their children. Hence, parents who influence their children to choose careers which might not suit them may lead to certain challenges for them. For instance, such children may be less enthusiastic about their chosen career paths.

According to Oyamo and Amoth (2008), studies in Kenya show that rural students tend to seek help from parents, more so than urban students. Also, it was discovered that parents more than teachers play a major role in the career choice of students (Oyamo et al., 2008). Meanwhile, Rathunde, Carroll and Huang (2000) explain that parents help to create challenging and supportive environments where they allow their children to explore their own interests and listen to their ideas in a non-judgmental manner.

Academic Ability

Many students choose their careers based on their academic ability (Beggs at el., 2008). Bell (2013) and Sham (2012) points out that for success to be achieved in the educational institution, it has to be measured by the academic performance of students, which generally refers to how well they succeed in their studies or meet the standard set by the institutions of learning. Abiola (2012) states that academic performance reflects students' ability through consistency, determination, and focus; this serves as the best indicator for success in life. This means that the students' academic performances contribute to determining their career choice in life.

Peer Pressure

Ryan and Deci (2000) define peer pressure as a situation where people are encouraged by those of their age range to do something which they intend to do, or otherwise. According to Blank (2002), peer pressure provides a forum where teens construct and reconstruct their identities. Burns and Darling (2002) concur that self-consciousness of whether others will react or ridicule one's future action is one of the ways that adolescents are influenced by peers. Davies, Telhaj, Hutton, Adnett and Coe (2004) explain that students' choice of subjects can also be influenced by the aspirations or expectations of the peer groups. This implies that students sometimes make certain career choices following pressures or influence from their peers. Peers may be proficient in communicating career choices to one another using various means.

Indecision

While various factors affect the career choice of students, indecision also has an effect in this regard. It is an integral area that needs the attention of professionals such as career counsellors (Xu & Bhang, 2019). Indecision is usually caused by a lack or low level of exploration (Levon, 2007). However, according to Fabio, Palazzeschi, Asulin-Peretz and Gati (2013), career indecision is mainly associated with emotional intelligence. Marcionetti (2014) states that it is caused by students' level of self-esteem and neuroticism. This might have negative effects on students. The finding of the study of Bullock-Yowell, McConnell and Schedin (2014) suggest that academic advising is one of the remedies to helping students struggling with career indecision. Boo and Kim (2020) state that indecision in the choice of career of students is often caused by lack of adequate career information, and it might hampers the academic success of students.

Lack of Proper Career Information

Mbetse (2002) indicates that there is evidence that shows a misconception about the lack of career information amongst learners, parents, and teachers. Sequel to the findings of research conducted in South Africa, Stead and Watson (2006) state that high school leavers often have limited career knowledge and this has a negative impact on effective career decision making. Following the Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk model of career management and according to Stead and Watson (2006), access to career information and the usage is often an integral part of the decision-making process. Webber and Zhu (2007) declare that research has shown that before decisions are taken, most students do not endeavour to seek information about job and career choices. To corroborate this assertion, Zhou and Santos (2007) suggest that one of the major factors that affect or influence career decision-making deals with lack of proper career information about steps involved in the career decision making, lack of proper information about the various occupations, and ways of obtaining additional information about those occupations or professions.

Additionally, Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006) state that lack of finance, lack of proper career information, poor academic performance, and unsatisfactory career counselling services negatively influence the career choice of tertiary students from disadvantaged institutions of learning, in the context of this study: rural South African universities. According to Koricich (2014) and Uleanya, Uleanya and Oluyemi (2019), lack of career counsellor and counselling for young people such as first year university students constitute challenges in career choice decision making. On the other hand, Ngesi (2003) states that poor financial abilities of students coming from disadvantaged communities, might affect their choice of educational programmes and careers. For instance, as a result of financial constraints, many students tend to avoid careers that require a longer period of training which their finance cannot support (Ngesi, 2003).

However, the lack of information about career choices tends to have an effect on students, and the mode of transmitting such information matters. Hence, this study examines the significance of proficient communication on career choice. In order to achieve the objectives of this study, an attempt is made to seek answers to the following research questions guiding the study: Are career guidance programmes included in the South African high school curriculum? What are the factors influencing the career choice of first-year students in the selected rural South African university?

Research Methodology

A quantitative method was adopted for this study to allow the collection of large data which aids generalisation of results. Kumar (2019) suggests that the use of a quantitative method in a study aids the collection of large amounts of data, which can consequently allow the generalisation of the results. A survey method, which adopted the use of a structured questionnaire for data collection was employed in this study to identify the significance of proficient communication on career choice of first year students in a selected rural South African university. Purposive and random sampling techniques were respectively used to select the university and first year students who formed the respondents in the study. First year students were selected for this study because they are considered to be more prone to facing challenges with regards to career choices, compared to other levels, following the works of Koricich (2014), Uleanya, Uleanya and Oluyemi (2019), and especially Ackermann, Alberts and Mbalo (2003) who hold the view that career choice is one of the major areas of concern for young people nearing the end of their high school education and in search for tertiary qualifications to build their careers. The target population for this study comprised first year students of a selected rural South African university. According to the Information Communication and Technology unit (ICT) of the selected university, the number of first year students of all the faculties namely Arts, Commerce, Law, Education, and Science was 4,283 at the time of this study. Using simple random sampling, 375 students were selected as respondents for the study.

Additionally, a self-designed questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire contained two sections. Section A contained questions which sought information on the demographic profile of respondents and included gender and year of study. Section B examined the significance of proficient communication on career choices. The questions were developed following the objective of the study. The questions sought to establish whether career choice was well communicated to learners, and the factors that influence their choice of study. Each questionnaire was attached with the information sheet and consent form. This was done to ensure that respondents voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Both the researchers and the respondents signed the consent form. The information sheet contained guidelines on how the questionnaire was to be completed. This was done to clarify to the respondents the rationale

behind the questionnaire. Meanwhile, a pilot study was conducted using 10 first-year students in the selected university to provide dependable and valuable information when gathering data from the questionnaire. The researchers ensured that the students who participated in the pilot study were not selected for the actual research. The collected data from the questionnaire were analysed using frequencies and percentages by means of MoonStats software.

Results

The demographics of respondents are presented below followed by the results of the analysed data.

Demography of Respondents

The demography of respondents is as presented in tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1: *Gender Distribution of Participants*

Value	N	%	Cum. %
Male	157	43.98	43. 98
Female	200	56.02	100.00
TOTAL	**357**	**100.00**	

Table 1 shows that 157 (43.98%) of the respondents were male, while 200 (56.02%) were females. The results of the collected data are presented, following the identified research questions guiding the study.

Research Question 1: Are career guidance programmes included in the South African high school Curriculum?

Table 2: *There are Guidance Counsellors in High Schools Value*

Value	N	%	Cum. %
Yes	240	67.23	67. 23
No	95	26.61	93. 84
Not sure	22	6.16	100. 00
TOTAL	**357**	**100.00**	

Table 2 shows that 240 (67.23%) of the respondents agreed that there was a special subject on Guidance and Counselling where they were given advice on career choice in the school. However, 95 (26.61%) of the respondents disagreed, and 22 (6.16%) were unsure. This finding shows that career choice is part of the high school curriculum. This corroborates the works of Ackermann, Alberts and Mbalo (2003), Koricich (2014), as well as Uleanya, Uleanya and Oluyemi (2019) who advocate for this need for young people especially those completing high schools and first year university students.

Table 3: *There are Special Subjects in High School on Career choice*

Value	N	%	Cum. %
Yes	226	63.31	63.31
No	86	24.09	87.39
Not sure	45	12.61	100.00
TOTAL	**357**	**100.00**	

Table 3 shows that 226, representing 63.31% of the respondents, agree that there were special subjects on career choice in the high school. Conversely, 86 (24.09%) of the respondents disagreed that there were no special subjects on career choice in the high school, while 45 (12.61%) were unsure. The finding implies that there are likely to be special subjects on career choice in the high schools but that this might not be delivered consistently across the schools that the participants attended. Following the Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk model of career management, the inclusion of a special subject on Guidance and Counselling will assist students in the exploration stage of exploring career options in order to make fitting decisions.

Table 4: *Career Choice is a Problem in High School*

Value	N	%	Cum. %
Yes	219	61.34	61. 34
No	86	24.09	85. 43
Not sure	52	14.57	100. 00
TOTAL	**357**	**100.00**	

Table 4 shows that 219 (61.34%) of the respondents agreed that career choice was a problem for high school learners, 86 (24.09%) disagreed, while, 52 (14.57%) were unsure. Following this result, it can be implied that career choice is a problem for high school learners. This finding agrees with the work of Issa and Nwalo (2008) who state that in most cases, the choice of career, course of study, and the subsequent career paths to follow are a nightmare for prospective students. The work of Uleanya, Uleanya and Oluyemi (2019) also corroborates the finding that career choice is problematic for students and guidance is needed. Sequel to the Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk model of career management, career choice is problematic, hence, the various stages involved in the model suitable for guiding students towards making career choices. This finding implies that students can possibly experience challenges in making the most appropriate career choices, however, if guided to follow due process, such challenges can be overcome.

Table 5: *The Department of Education sends Counsellors to Schools for Career Talks 2 or 3 times a year*

Value	N	%	Cum. %
yes	115	32.21	32. 21
No	146	40.90	73. 11
Not sure	96	26.89	100. 00
TOTAL	**357**	**100.00**	

Table 5 shows that 115 (32.21%) of the respondents agreed that the Department of Education sends Career Guidance Counsellors to schools twice or thrice a year. On the contrary, 146 (40.90%) of the respondents disagreed, while 96 (26.89%) were unsure. The result shows that the majority of the respondents disagreed; however, because the number is not significant the findings may not be accepted. Meanwhile, Uleanya, Uleanya and Oluyemi (2019) hold the

view that career counsellors should be recruited permanently to provide counselling assistance and guidance to students.

Research Question 2: What are the factors influencing the career choice of first-year students in the selected rural South African university?

The results of the analysed data from the second research question are presented below.

Figure 1: *Effective Communication on Career Choice at School*

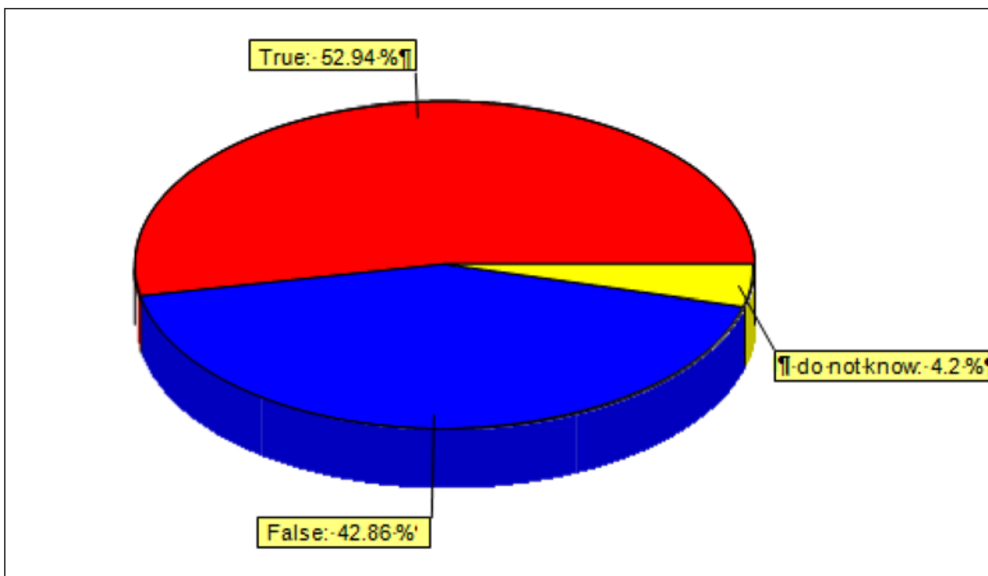


Figure 1 shows that 189 (52.94%) of the respondents agreed that there was effective communication on career choice in school. However, while 153 (42.86%) of the respondents disagreed, 15 (4.20%) were unsure. The above analysed result indicates that just more than half of the respondents subjectively reflect that they received what they describe as effective communication on career choice in school. The findings contrasts the work of Stead and Watson (2006), who suggest that high school leavers often have limited career knowledge and this brings a negative effect on effective career decision making. Conversely, the finding corroborates the works of Mbetse (2002) and Christiaans (2006) that high school teachers have roles to play in the career choice of their learners. Meanwhile, the work of Uleanya, Uleanya and Oluyemi (2019) supports this finding stating that the success of students, among many other factors, also dependents on the curriculum of high school teachers. This implies

that if the curriculum of high school teachers is designed to assist and caters for issues around career choice, then students can be helped on these issues. On the other hand, sequel to the Greenhaus, Callanan and Godschalk model of career management, as well as Boo and Kim (2020), effective communication on career choice contributes toward guiding students in making good career choices. This means that students will make good career decisions if career related information is effectively communicated.

Figure 2: *Effective Communication on Career Choice from Parents*

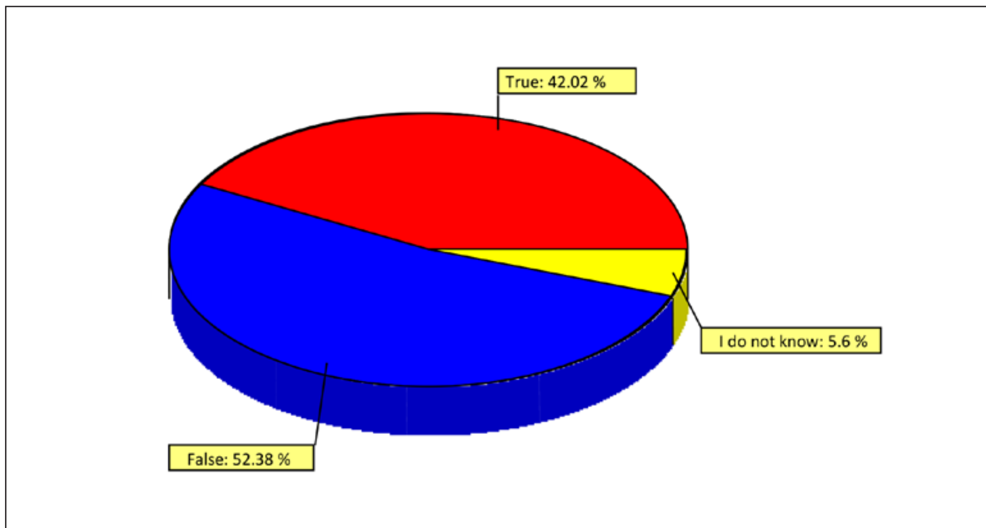


Figure 2 shows that 150 (42.02%) of the respondents agreed that they received effective communication from their parents on career choice, while 187 (52.38%) disagreed, and 20 (5.60%) were unsure. This finding contrast the work of Mau and Bikos (2000) who opine that parents have a greater influence on students' career choices. Meanwhile, Beyer (2008) argues that parental aspirations and expectations tend to affect the self-efficacy of their children because they serve as important role models in their lives. Taylor, Harris and Taylor (2004) and Oyamo and Amoth (2008) agree that due to parental support and encouragement, children's career choices are influenced as they choose what their parents desire to please them. This finding contrasts the finding of the works of Bell (2013) and Sham (2012) who argues that it is issues like the academic performances of students that influence their career choice, not parental influence. This implies that proficient communication from parents with regard to career choices can have a significant impact on students. Thus, parents play significant roles in communicating proficiently on career choices to their children.

Figure 3: *No Communication on Career Choice was received from anyone*

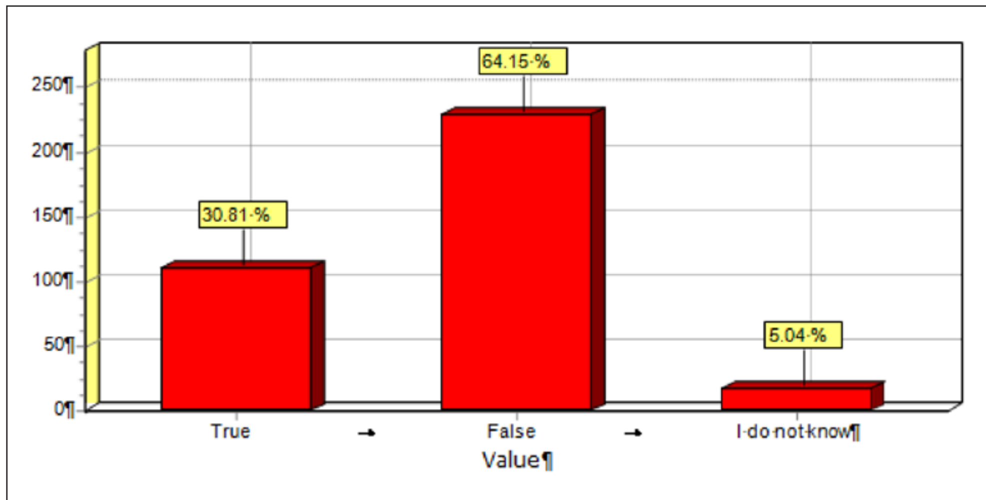


Figure 3 shows that 110 (30.81%) respondents agreed that nobody communicated career choice to them, 229 (64.15%) disagreed, while 18 (5.04%) were unsure. This result shows that the majority of the respondents disagreed that they received communication on career choice. The result indicates that the majority of the students received information on career choice from one person or the other. This finding agrees with the works of the Department of Education, Mbetse (2002), Christiaans (2006) as well as Uleanya, Uleanya and Oluyemi (2019) who opine that various people has an influence on the career choice of students and play different roles, such as communicating information to the students to enable them in their choice of career. The finding also corroborates the Greenhaus et al. model (2000) which suggests the need for students to explore when attempting to make career decisions, which is done by gathering adequate information. The findings of the works of Bullock-Yowell, McConnell and Schedin (2014) and Boo and Kim (2020) agree with the finding of this study and the Greenhaus et al. model that information is vital in career decision making, hence, the lack of such causes indecisions for students. This finding further implies that proficient communication on career choices for students can be performed by people other than their parents or guardians, as long as they are well equipped and versed in the subject matter.

Figure 4: *Available Career Choice*

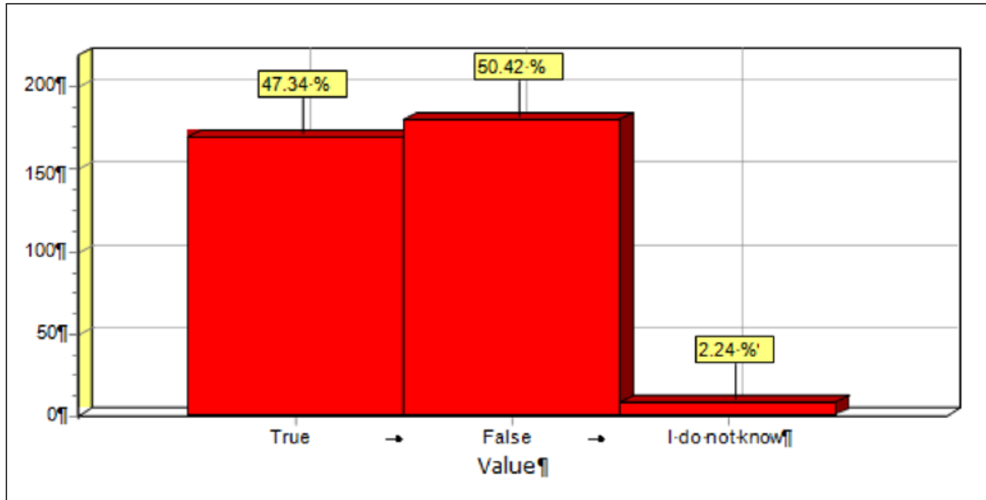


Figure 4 shows that 169 (47.34%) of the respondents agreed that they made a career choice based on what was available when they came to the university, 180 (50.42%) disagreed, while 8 (2.24%) was unsure. This result shows that those who did not make a career choice based on what was available when they came to the university were in the majority. This implies that some students met the requirement of the university and chose according to their career choice. However, some only chose what was available to them, possibly due to the result they had from their matric exams. This finding agrees with the work of Stephen (2003) who opines that poor academic performance influences the career choice of students. The finding further suggests that career choices are made on the basis of what is made available to students, not necessarily what they would have preferred. In other words, students tend to change their career choices following what the university has to offer. Hence, universities are obliged to ensure that a wide range of courses are made available to students, rather than restricting them in following a certain course of study or programme. Meanwhile, Greenhaus et al. model, Bullock, Yowell, McConnell and Schedin (2014) as well as Boo and Kim (2020) suggest that adequate information of what is made available needs to be provided, otherwise, this might be limiting to students. This finding implies that while universities make various career options available for students in order not to limit them, there is a need to also make adequate information available about the offerings to the students.

Figure 5: *Satisfied with One's Career Choice*

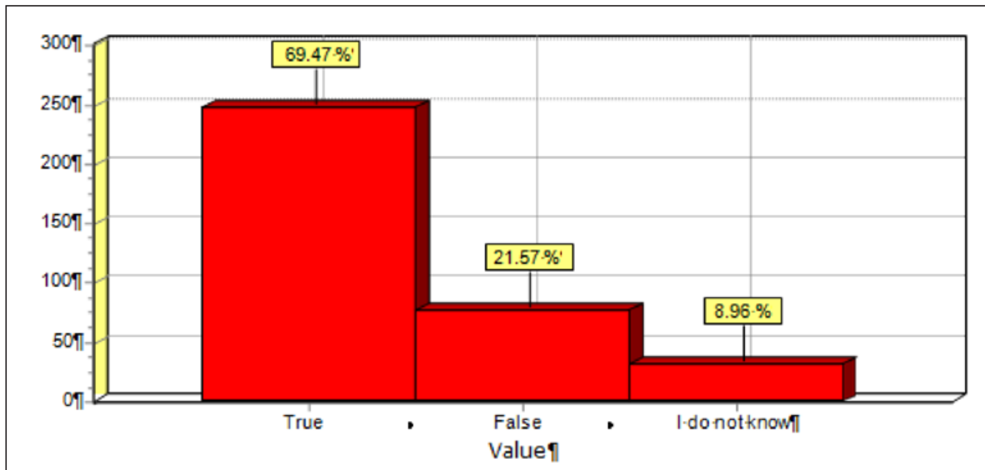


Figure 5 shows that while 248 participants (69.47%) were satisfied with their career choice, 77 (21.57%) were unsatisfied and 32 (8.96%) indifferent. As illustrated in the figure, those who are satisfied with their career choice are more than those who are unsatisfied This result suggests that the respondents know what they want in the university. This could be as a result of the previous information on career choices that they have received from someone. This finding corroborates the works of Koricich (2014), Bullock, Yowell, McConnell and Schedin (2014) as well as Boo and Kim (2020) who opine that the information received by students on career choice puts them in advantageous positions for success. The finding also concurs with the Greenhaus et al. model, which suggests the need for exploration in the form of seeking adequate information from various sources. Suffice to state that proficient communication on career choices aids success and satisfaction for students.

Figure 6: *Satisfied with the Way Career Choice was Communicated to them*

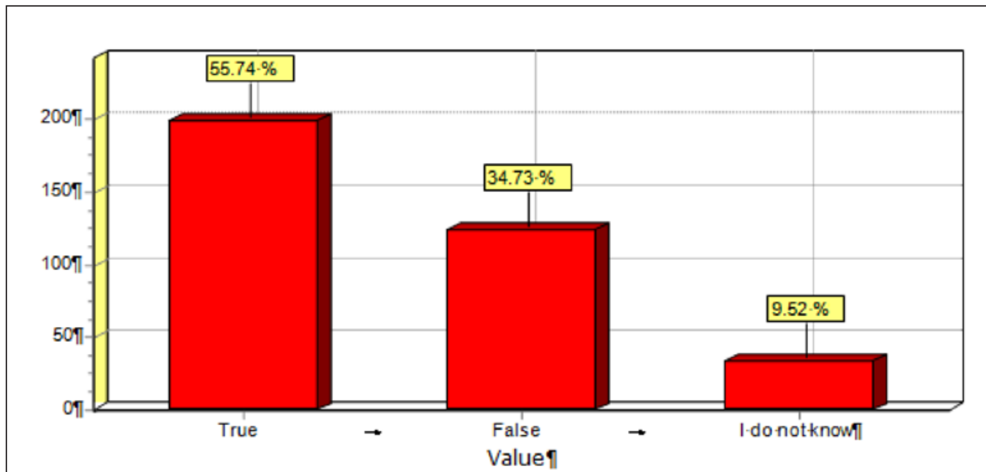


Figure 6 shows that 199 (55.74%) of the respondents agreed that they were very satisfied following the way career choice was communicated to them. However, 124 (34.73%) disagreed, while 34 (9.52%) were indifferent. This result indicates that the majority were very satisfied with the way career choice was communicated to them. This implies that adequately and appropriately communicating issues of career choice to students is important, and determines their level of success in some instances. Hence, Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) explain the need for orientation and other activities, channelled towards helping students in their life decisions and goals.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined the significance of the proficient communication on career choice among first year students using a selected rural South African university. The findings show that issues of career choice are catered for to an extent in the curriculum guiding high school teaching and learning activities. Provisions of issues on career choice are provided in the curriculum through compulsory subjects for students. Also, programmes where career counsellors are made available to speak to learners are included in the curriculum. Additionally, the findings of the study indicate that career choice is an important decision that must be made by students; however, it is influenced by various factors. These factors include parental influence, guidance of teachers, academic performance, and exposure to information on career choice.

Subsequent to the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Career guidance should be given to high school learners at an early stage from grade 8 to grade 12, because this will help them in choosing correctly. This can be done by ensuring that career counsellors are recruited permanently in schools. Also, a subject specifically for career choice can be designed and made compulsory for all students.
- Parents and other education stakeholders should be informed on the need to guide students properly in making the right career choice. This can be done by organising seminars, conferences, and workshops periodically where students, parents, and other education stakeholders will be exposed to issues on career choice and taught how to guide students in making the most suitable career choice.
- Most youths appeared to have limited knowledge of occupations, so their choices might be limited, especially for those in rural areas. Hence, career information centres should offer information to assist youths in rural areas in avoiding mistakes in career choices. These information centres can be structures where career counsellors who are recruited by the government will be situated.
- Universities should ensure the availability of a wide range of courses. This will enable students to make choices in accordance to their chosen career path.

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Research Article

Developing Mindsets: A Qualitative Study Among First-Year South African University Students

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Abstract

This article reports on a qualitative study that evaluated first-year students' lived experiences of attending a 12-week student support programme focused on fostering mindsets. Participants included 545 first year Engineering students enrolled for academic studies at a South African university. All participants completed qualitative narrative sketches depicting their experiences. A random sample of 300 students' narrative sketches was included as data in the qualitative study. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, and Dweck's theory on mindsets served as the theoretical lens through which the data were interpreted. The results indicate that the majority of students experienced significant personal growth from attending the student support programme. Additionally, the findings point to the relevance and importance of offering student support programmes focused on exploring mindsets to first-year students. The results of this exploratory study suggest that mindset theory should be considered as an essential component when advising first-year South African Engineering students. Furthermore, we make a case for the relevance of positive psychology-based development programmes for first-year students.

Keywords

Engineering students, mindset, positive psychology, qualitative research, student support

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Introduction

What good are positive emotions in an educational context? Positive psychologists claim that positive emotions can broaden and build students' thought and skill repertoires, improve resilience, and enhance academic performance (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Fredrickson, 2001; Mokgele & Rothmann, 2014). It is against this backdrop that positive psychologists further argue that the three traditional "r's" of education, namely reading, (w)riting and (a) rithmitic, should be augmented with three equally important "r's", namely reasoning, resilience, and responsibility (Gardner, 1999; Seligman & Adler, 2018).

Seligman and others contend that students should be supported in pursuing holistic academic wellbeing (Nelson & Low, 2011; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). In other words, students should be supported to attain academic success to become fully functioning human beings (Seligman et al., 2009). Accordingly, researchers have called for a more holistic conception of student success that encompasses not only academic achievement but also the cultivation of non-cognitive factors such as social intelligence, flourishing, and positivity (Anderson, 2016; Sinclair, 2019). Dweck (2006) supports this view and contends that the mindset a person adopts is crucial in the pursuit of academic success and wellbeing.

Dweck's view is supported by seminal researchers, such as Chickering and colleagues who pointed to the importance of students' psychosocial development in relation to identity formation during the university experience (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Chickering & Gamzon, 1991). Likewise, Astin (1984, 1999) referred to the concept of student involvement and emphasised the importance of physical and psychological energy that students devote to academic practice. However, Tinto (1993) explained that student retention results from the student's longitudinal engagement with the formal and informal components of the university setting. Thus, from the perspectives of Chickering (1969), Astin (1984, 1999) and Tinto (1993), students and the university structures share a responsibility to ensure optimal engagement and holistic development.

Although previous studies have accumulated critical knowledge on the importance of students' individual attributes and the features of the university setting concerning the academic success and wellbeing of students, some issues remain underexplored (Adler, Seligman, Tetlock, & Duckworth, 2016; Anderson, 2016; Bowers & Lopez, 2010). For example, the operationalisation of mindset within the student support context has received little attention, especially within a South African setting (Mason, 2019; Van den Bergh, 2018). Assisting students in developing growth mindsets could not only help them in enhancing academic performance, but also aid in improving the capacity to deal effectively with a range of life challenges (Anderson, 2019). Hence, the promotion and subsequent empirical study of mindset within the context of student support is an area worthy of further investigation (De Villiers, 2014; Van den Bergh, 2018).

In light of these arguments, we report on a study that explored students' lived experiences of attending a 12-week interactive student support programme focused on operationalising the notion of growth mindsets within the context of higher education. The article has been organised in the following way: first, the study is framed concerning relevant literature, then the qualitative methodology that guided the empirical study is presented, and next the findings from the qualitative study are discussed. The article is concluded by summarising the main findings discussing limitations, and proposing avenues for future research.

Mindset: Theoretical Conceptualisation

Intelligence, specifically general intelligence, refers to an abstract combination of cognitive abilities that conveys strong evaluative associations with a variety of positive life outcomes, such as employment, income status, and overall life success (Sternberg, Grigorenko, & Bundy, 2001). When measured using IQ tests, the construct of intelligence has traditionally been viewed as a significant predictor of academic performance (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997). However, recent research has indicated that certain collateral factors such as motivation and test fitness strongly influence IQ test scores (Foxcroft & Roodt, 2013). Furthermore, research by Duckworth and Seligman (2005, 2006) has indicated that grit, which refers to the passionate and dedicated pursuit of meaningful goals, is a better predictor of positive life outcomes, including academic achievement, than traditional IQ measures. In this regard, Dweck and Leggett (1988) argue that a person's implicit theory of intelligence – the foundational beliefs about intelligence – is a significant predictor of positive life outcomes. Dweck and colleagues built on these ideas and proposed the theory of mindset (Diener & Dweck, 1978; Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

The theory of mindset proposes that people hold certain assumptions or implicit theories about aspects such as intelligence and personality (Yeager & Walton, 2011). These assumptions point to people's perceptions of, amongst other things, their capacity to change, their engagement in learning, and their motivation (Yeager, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2013). Thus, the concept of a mindset refers to a mental model of one's perspective of the self, the malleability of personal attributes and the relationship with the world (Anderson, 2019; Yeager et al., 2013).

Dweck (2006) differentiates between two classifications of mindset, namely fixed mindset and growth mindset. A fixed mindset, also referred to as an entity theory of intelligence, and refers to the personally held belief that a person has a pre-established and set range of skills, talents, and abilities. Individuals who hold fixed mindsets may erroneously interpret learning encounters as threatening to their psychological wellbeing because they regard themselves to be limited in terms of skills, talents, and abilities. Moreover, those who hold a fixed mindset tend to personalise failure as indicative of personal shortcomings. Hence, students who adopt a fixed mindset tend to avoid challenging learning experiences and are likely to be disengaged (Dweck, 2006).

In contrast, the growth mindset, which is also referred to as the incremental theory of intelligence, suggests that people can develop the skills required for, amongst other things, academic success through purposeful effort (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). Compared to the fixed mindset, a growth mindset can be regarded as a more empowering stance that students can adopt concerning academic-related tasks. Students who develop growth mindsets tend not to personalise failure, but consider it as a vital element of the learning journey (Dweck, 2006).

Research by Blackwell et al. (2007) and Dweck (2012) found that students who adopted growth mindsets were more motivated and less anxious, and performed better academically. Dweck (2006) proposes that students' mindsets can be changed from rigid and inflexible to open and flexible by shifting the focus from a results orientation to a process orientation. Thus, a focus on meaningful engagement versus an exaggerated emphasis on the outcome could promote a growth orientation. The transformation from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset can be facilitated via student support programmes that encourage greater self-awareness and optimism, emphasise a process-based focus, and highlight the significance of psychological flexibility in the face of challenges (Anderson, 2019; Meevissen, Peters, & Alberts, 2011; Van Lingen, George, & Persence, 2019). Additionally, addressing the basic psychological needs of autonomy (experiencing a sense of self-directedness); competence (mastery experiences) and relatedness (social connectedness) could promote positivity and motivate students to engage proactively in the academic process (Ryan & Deci, 2017). More research is needed to explore the value of mindset-based support programmes offered to students (Anderson, 2019; Dweck, 2006), especially within a South African context (De Villiers, 2014; Van den Bergh, 2018; Van Lingen et al., 2019).

Goal of the study

This article reports on a study that explored qualitatively the experiences of first-year students who attended a 12-week support programme (hereafter referred to as 'the Programme'). The Programme focused on facilitating the development of growth mindsets among participants. The study was guided by the following research question: What are students' lived experiences of attending the Programme?

The Programme

The Programme sought to involve students in reflective and experiential learning focused on facilitating a smooth transition from the school environment to the university context. Thus, the Programme fell into the ambit of the first-year experience (FYE) initiative, which is focused on supporting students in navigating the transition from secondary and tertiary education (Nyar, 2018).

Furthermore, the Programme aimed to assist students in reframing the FYE as an opportunity for growth, development, and self-discovery. Thus, the Programme adopted a process-based focus and emphasised the importance of self-directedness, mastery experiences, and social engagement.

The Programme was presented over a 12-week timeframe comprising one 90-minute contact session per week that was scheduled in students' timetables. The main topics addressed during the Programme were self-awareness, motivation, and problem-solving. Each contact session started with reflective exercises and short videos relevant to the topic that was used with permission from LifeXchangeTM (https://lifexchangesolutions.com/). The contact sessions consisted of individual self-assessment and interactive small group and class discussions, presentations by the facilitator and self-development homework exercises. The participants completed the narrative sketches, indicating their experiences of the Programme, in week 12.

Since the Programme was not part of the students' curriculum and therefore not credit-bearing, the participants were not obligated to attend the sessions. However, because the Programme was scheduled in students' timetables, and the faculty supported the initiative, attendance was strongly encouraged.

Research Method

Research design

A qualitative design, positioned within a phenomenological approach, was adopted to conduct the study (Creswell, 2014; Giorgi, 2009). The phenomenological approach focuses on understanding, interpreting and reporting on the lived experiences of participants. A phenomenological approach was regarded as appropriate for the research focused on developing an empathetic understanding of the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (the experience of attending the Programme) among a sample of first-year university students (Creswell, 2014; Giorgi, 2009).

Research context

The study was conducted at a large South African residential university that boasts a total population of approximately 60 000 enrolled students. The student population is diverse in terms of sex, race, and language and accurately resembles the broader South African demographics (Statistics South Africa, 2016). Data for this study were collected from students enrolled for studies in Engineering due to the authors' work-related affiliation within the specific faculty.

Sample

Data for this study were collected using narrative sketches from a total of 545 first-year Engineering students who participated in the Programme. No biographical data were collected from students as the focus of the study was on the Programme and not on assessing age, sex or other variables in relation to students' experiences.

Unlike qualitative interviewing, narrative sketches are limited because researchers cannot pose follow-up questions or use probes to explore participants' responses in-depth (Giorgi, 1985). In light of this limitation, and to ensure that an adequate number of participants' points of view were considered, it was decided to include a random sample of 300 students' narrative sketches as data in the study. Data saturation was achieved after reviewing approximately 220 narrative sketches. However, to ensure that no new themes emerged, it was decided to analyse the full complement of 300 narrative sketches.

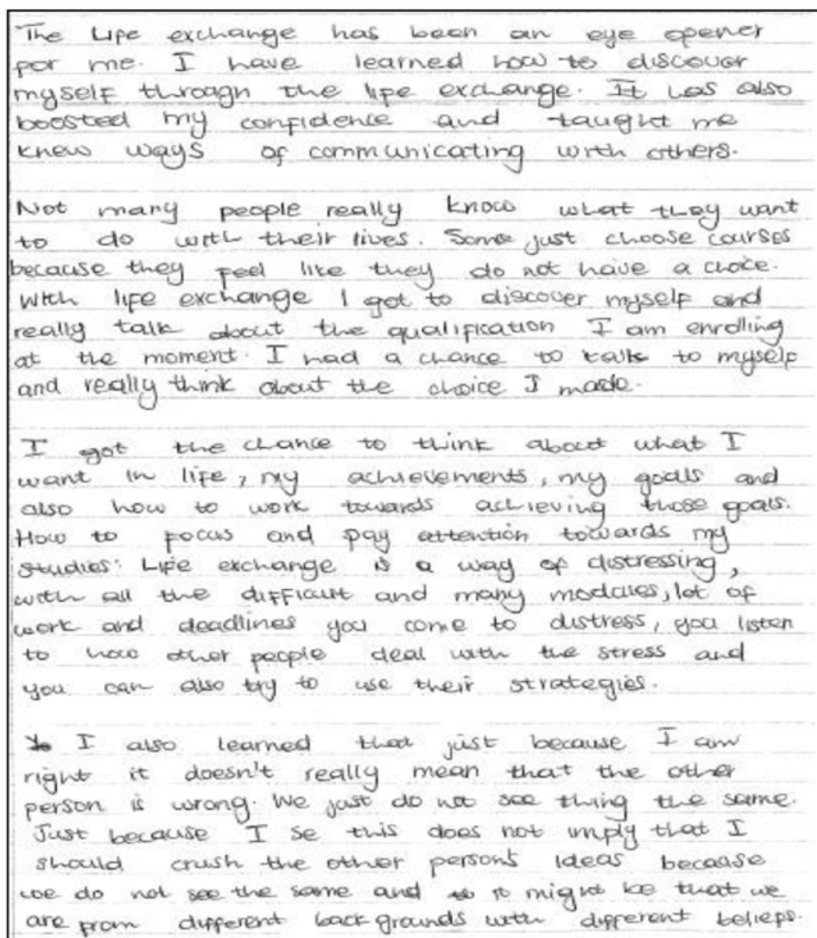
The random sample was selected using the 'RANDBETWEEN' function in Excel. First, numbers were allocated to all narrative sketches and the sampling frame was created in Excel. Then, the 'RANDBETWEEN' function was used to select a random sample comprising 300 numbers. The final sample was double-checked to ensure that no duplicates were included in the sample.

Data collection and procedure

Data were collected using narrative sketches, which are described as documents written by participants to depict their stories and perspectives about a specific qualitative phenomenon being investigated (Giorgi, 1985). In the study, participants were requested to write about their experiences of attending the 12-week student support programme. Specifically, students were invited to share their experiences of attending the Programme in a narrative format.

The 300 Narrative sketches varied in length from one to three handwritten pages. An example of an anonymised narrative sketch is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Example of a narrative sketch*



The life exchange has been an eye opener for me. I have learned how to discover myself through the life exchange. It has also boosted my confidence and taught me knew ways of communicating with others.

Not many people really know what they want to do with their lives. Some just choose courses because they feel like they do not have a choce. With life exchange I got to discover myself and really talk about the qualification I am enrolling at the moment. I had a chance to talk to myself and really think about the choice I made.

I got the chance to think about what I want in life, my achievements, my goals and also how to work towards achieving those goals. How to focus and pay attention towards my studies. Life exchange is a way of distressing, with all the difficult and many modules, lot of work and deadlines you come to distress, you listen to how other people deal with the stress and you can also try to use their strategies.

I also learned that just because I am right it doesn't really mean that the other person is wrong. We just do not see thing the same. Just because I se this does not imply that I should crush the other persons ideas because we do not see the same and to might be that we are from different back grounds with different beliefs.

Data analysis

Data were analysed by following five interrelated and iterative steps (Giorgi, 2009; Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2011). First, the researchers engaged in the process of familiarisation by reading the narrative sketches multiple times. At this stage of the analysis, a deliberate attempt was made to bracket personal experiences through qualitative memo writing. Second,

a process of coding commenced at a granular level by attaching labels to words, phrases, and sentences. During the second phase, the researchers engaged in ongoing reflective discussions that allowed them to reach a consensus on the coding framework. Third, codes were combined into meaningful units. Fourth, the meaning units were transformed into psychologically sensitive descriptive expressions. This step also included classifying meaning units into broad themes and subthemes. Fifth, the synthesis of a general structure of the individual psychological elements of participants' experiences of attending the Programme was conducted (Giorgi, 2009; Henning et al., 2011).

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines for qualitative research were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The following measures were implemented to strengthen the trustworthiness of the qualitative interpretation: collecting rich data through narrative sketches; participant verification fully describing the research method and procedure; and ongoing reflective practice through qualitative memo writing.

Research ethics

The university where data were collected granted permission to conduct the study (Ref. number: REC/2019/11/003). All identifying information (e.g., surnames, names, and student numbers) was treated confidentially and removed before the data analysis. No course credit or financial benefits were offered for participation. All participants gave individual written informed consent.

Findings and Discussion

The qualitative analysis revealed four central themes, namely (1) From resistance to buy-in, (2) Awareness, (3) Insight, and (4) Learning and growing. Collectively these themes point to a journey of transformation where students entered the university context in a state of uncertainty characterised primarily by a fixed mindset. The transformation process was facilitated through participation in the Programme. The end-state contrasted with students' initial experiences and was characterised by a sense of realistic optimism, confidence, and trust in their abilities to deal with the challenges entrenched in the university context.

In the next section, the four qualitative themes are discussed, followed by a discussion of the underlying principles and inferences that emerged after the analysis. The referencing system in parenthesis denotes participant numbers (e.g., P#1 for Participant 1).

From resistance to buy-in

The qualitative analysis revealed that participants initially presented with low buy-in and

resistance towards the Programme. Amongst others, Participant 151 explained that the contact sessions appeared "useless at first". Other participants also expressed this sense of resistance; for example, Participant 207 indicated that he/she initially "felt offended … when making us reflect on ourselves". Participant 285 agreed: "At first I didn't want to do these classes."

Mason and Nel (2011) reported similar findings concerning initial low buy-in and resistance from a sample of first-year students who attended a psychosocial student support programme. From Astin's (1984) student involvement perspective, the data suggested students invested limited psychological energy during the initial stages of the Programme. Similarly, through the lens of Tinto's (1993) conceptualisation, there was a limited engagement between students' pre-existing attributes and the features contained within the Programme. However, following the initial resistance, students in the particular study reported significant personal growth (Mason & Nel, 2011). This led the authors to speculate that future programmes could do well to ensure proper buy-in from students and faculty in an attempt to manage resistance and promote psychosocial development (Chickering, 1969; Mason & Nel, 2011).

Similar to the students in the Mason and Nel (2011) study, participants' initial resistance and negative orientations ("At the beginning of the course I had a fixed mindset and was always negative" P#162) were replaced by reports of finding significant value from attending the Programme. For example, Participant 151, who had initially expressed strong opposition, explained that "as useless as these classes seemed at first, I kept attending … it made me more independent and helped to take charge of the future." Other participants exclaimed that the Programme "should be compulsory for all students" (P#208), and "Life skills (the Programme) is the best … it was perfect" (P#207).

The similarities between the study reported here and the Mason and Nel (2011) study were that the support initiatives were compulsory add-on programmes that did not offer clear initial tangible benefits such as academic credit to students. Thus, it seems that students may consider add-on programmes as onerous when the benefits are not directly evident. In this regard, one participant noted that initially, the Programme was "boring and time-consuming…academically it did not help that much" (P#38).

However, when the benefits such as holistic development and personal growth, became palpable, participants appeared more motivated to participate. Moreover, the fact that the Programme addressed students' basic psychological needs of autonomy ("the classes helped me become more independent" P#286), competence ("I learned so many new things … I grew as a person" P#223) and relatedness ("We had fun in this programme and got to know each other better" P#217), appears to have resulted in favourable experiences and greater awareness. The importance of buy-in and support from faculty could also not be overstated, as participant 293 attested: "Thank you so much to our dean for this opportunity."

This theme indicates that the low initial buy-in and resistance to participating in the Programme was replaced by higher levels of motivation and indications of significant personal growth. We speculate that a combination of becoming aware of the benefits addressing basic psychological needs, and the support from faculty played vital roles in creating buy-in from students.

Awareness

Participants' qualitative accounts shared a common thread around the stressful reality of the FYE. Amongst others, one participant explained: "[S]ince this is my first year, I found it overwhelming" (P#145). The sense of being overwhelmed during the FYE highlighted the need for the Programme, as another participant explained: "Before this programme I struggled a lot…my life was not good…the classes [Programme] changed everything" (P#158). Participants agreed that the Programme assisted them in developing the capacity to address numerous stressors associated with the FYE. These stressors included academic concerns ("The Engineering course, the academic work is not easy…" P#9), intrapersonal challenges ("I never had self-confidence … I never had positive thoughts …" P#12), interpersonal relationships ("Before the programme I had insufficient confidence to speak to others" P#147), and personal doubts ("I came to see that I can pass this course…I used to believe that I don't belong and that I'm not good enough" P#144).

The stressful reality of the FYE has been well documented in the literature (Grøtan, Sund & Bjerkeset, 2019; Mason, 2017) and participants' perspectives suggest that awareness of the challenges and finding support are critical components of addressing stressors. Explicitly, participants explained that they had developed an understanding that stressors can be managed ("The course enhance my self-belief. I now know that I can go for the things that I want. It's not just about winning" P#44). Moreover, participants noted that attending the Programme had a significant effect on their awareness that stressors within the university are normative experiences and that they can adopt strategies in dealing with demands in constructive ways. This level of understanding is consistent with the mindset theory, which suggests that persons who adopt a growth mindset are more likely to embrace change and stressors as opportunities for growth (Blackwell et al., 2007).

Insight

Due to the ubiquitous nature of stress during the FYE (Grøtan, Sund, & Bjerkeset, 2019; Mason, 2017), students must develop, amongst other things, the mindsets required for success (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). From participants' narrative sketches, it became apparent that they had gained insight into the dynamics of mindsets by partaking in the Programme. Amongst other things, participants shared personal insights into how they reframed negative interpretations and experiences to opportunities for growth. In this regard, Participant 10 explained that "it

was at first that everything was seen as impossible … since I started attending the lesson [the Programme], things started to change … it all started with a mindset and an attitude change …" Participant 14 agreed and explained: "I did some introspection and came to understand that there is an underlying philosophy … it's about how I make decisions." This thematic idea was crystalised by Participant 120, who shared that "in life there will always be hurdles … you have to challenge yourself and step out of your comfort zone …."

Gaining personal insight into the self in relation to the world is a critical feature in psychological and mindset literature (Anderson, 2019). From a psychological perspective, the concept of insight refers to the process of understanding a specific phenomenon, such as the demanding FYE, in a new or novel way (Hill & Kemp, 2016). Mindset theory emphasises a person's intrinsic motivation to learn and draw inferences about the self, the world, and the self in relation to the world (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Furthermore, a growth mindset encompasses the belief that intelligence, including psychological flexibility and problem-solving skills, can be developed through learning and effort (Yeager et al., 2013). What emerged from participants' feedback was that participation in the Programme helped to establish the insight that they could be active agents in deciding how to interpret the challenges associated with the FYE. The following quote, by Participant 149, illustrates this interpretation: "What inspired me to study Engineering was that I loved fixing things…I now know if things don't go my way that I shouldn't just change my goals, but I can find different ways of achieving my goals" (P#149).

The quote by Participant 149 points to a new or novel way of understanding that he/she can reason and decide on a course of action when confronted by life challenges. Moreover, it illustrates the understanding that the ability to make choices can influence participants' essential life goals "I came to understand myself as a power that can influence the story of my life" (P#150).

Learning and growing

The qualitative analysis revealed that participants had gained numerous benefits from attending the Programme. Amongst other things, participants pointed to significant personal development and growth. According to Participant 142, the Programme had played a crucial role in "widening my views. I came to understand that we are all unique, so we see things differently … you have to put in the work to make you better."

Furthermore, the data indicated that participants had been assisted in developing meaningful visions of the future "… want to achieve a doctorate degree in engineering" (P#143) that boosted motivation "I have set my goals higher and I am more determined than ever" (P#213), promoted goal-directedness "I have set my goals higher and I am more determined than ever" (P#113), and encouraged engagement in their academic studies "The values, principles and knowledge that I gained have a direct on my academic

studies" (P#229). According to some participants, the Programme had direct benefits concerning success during the university experience. Participant 149 explained that the Programme "encouraged me not to drop out". Others commented on the development of academic skills "I acquired so many skills … learning and study skills that helped me to develop an academic plan that resulted in better grades" (P#154).

The qualitative analysis further revealed that certain benefits extended beyond the classroom setting. Specifically, participants pointed to developing a sense of humour "The programme helped me develop a sense of humour … can laugh at things now" (P#233) and the relevance of values in guiding life decisions "I learned humility – giving credit where it is due… interdependence – relying on others and working together … vulnerability – asking for help when I don't know" (P#45). The notion of mindset cuts across various life domains. Hence, the cultivation of a growth mindset can benefit students beyond the immediate academic demands and assist in developing responsible citizens who are focused on contributing to the greater good (Duckworth, 2016; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

The benefits associated with attending the Programme could be summarised as a journey from predominantly fixed mindsets "I was always afraid of making mistakes" (P#287) to a growth orientation "I learned that I can make choices and work hard to achieve what I want" (P#39). According to Dweck (2006), the schooling system often entrenches a fixed mindset in students due to several factors. Therefore, the provision of support mechanisms, such as the Programme, seems vital in developing the non-intellective skills that could augment academic-related skills.

Qualitative themes: Discussion

This study has indicated that the Programme had a meaningful qualitative effect on students' mindsets. Additionally, the study supported the arguments from, inter alia, Chickering (1969), Astin (1984, 1999) and Tinto (1993), that students and the university share a responsibility to promote student involvement and holistic development. However, the findings are only valid for students' data at a single South African university within a specific faculty and year of study. As a result, the generalisability of the findings is limited. However, from the qualitative analysis we drew five specific inferences that may be relevant and transferable to other contexts.

First, the findings suggest that academic content ought to be augmented with student support programmes that focus on non-intellective factors, such as mindset. Amongst other things, the inclusion of factors that promote reasoning, resilience, and responsibility could not only enhance the core academic curriculum but also holds promise for the holistic development of students (Seligman et al., 2009; Sinclair, 2019). Consequently, the findings reported here support the existing literature that calls for greater emphasis on non-intellective factors as avenues to support students during the FYE and other initiatives (Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2006; Mason, 2019).

Second, student support programmes that focus on mindset expose students to non-intellective factors that they may otherwise not have experienced in other contexts. In this regard, Participant 151 mused that the Programme "taught me what I wouldn't have learned anywhere else in the world … I started to understand myself … I started to grow up." Although the self-help and science-help literature have become thriving industries (Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2006; Kucharski, 2018), very few of these programmes are directed explicitly at the needs of first-year students in a South African context (Van Heerden, 2015). One of the significant contributions of this paper is that it highlights the importance of operationalising findings from empirical studies, such as mindset, into easily digestible support programmes for first-year students.

Third, student support initiatives – such as the Programme – that focus on enhancing students' sense of positivity can broaden perspective and build skillsets. In this respect, Fredrickson (2004) postulates that positive emotions do not only widen one's view of the world, but also allow persons to enter states that are conducive to more significant learning, critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. When considering the stressful nature of the FYE (Grøtan et al., 2019; Mason, 2017; Nyar, 2018), the cultivation of positivity seems non-negotiable, as is evidenced in a plethora of international studies (Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2006).

Fourth, although we argue that student support programmes are critical developmental initiatives, they are often viewed as add-on activities existing on the periphery of the academic project (Van den Bergh, 2018; Van Heerden, 2009). Consequently, low buy-in from faculty and students alike may serve as barriers towards the implementation and effectiveness of such support initiatives (Mason & Nel, 2011). Hence, high-level support from faculty seems vital in ensuring that support programmes are implemented and prioritised in the context of the curriculum. Furthermore, buy-in from students is a critical component in ensuring that support programmes have an effect.

Fifth, generating evidence for the efficiency of support programmes has become a critical aspect in the higher education context (Mason, 2019; Van den Bergh, 2018). Specifically, this study has highlighted the importance of engaging in scholarly practice by empirically studying students' experiences of support programmes, amongst other things. It is suggested that staff involved in student support should also consider embracing the principles of programme monitoring and evaluation when offering programmes to students. The benefits of adopting a monitoring and evaluation approach in student support, such as obtaining qualitative evidence depicting students' lived experiences, can assist in ensuring that support initiatives move from the periphery of the academic project to the heart of access and success (Mason, 2019; Van den Bergh, 2018; Van Lingen et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This article reported on a qualitative study that explored first-year students' experiences of attending a student support programme ('the Programme'). The findings indicate that participants experienced significant growth and development from attending the Programme. Furthermore, the data analysis revealed that participants' initial experiences were transformed from low buy-in, resistance and a fixed mindset to embracing positivity and a growth-orientated mindset. The findings also suggested that the cultivation of positivity, which is not necessarily an element of the traditional academic curriculum, can be introduced by developing and offering students support programmes based on mindset theory.

The study presented certain limitations. In the first place, the study was conducted at a single South Africa university at a specific point in time. Therefore, the possibility of gaining a different qualitative picture within a different context or at another point in time cannot be excluded. Second, data were collected using narrative sketches. Even though the sample size was relatively large, narrative sketches do not provide the mechanisms to explore participants' perspectives in greater depth. However, if we collected data using interviews, it would have been possible to examine additional aspects of participants' experiences further. Such an approach would have allowed for a more holistic and nuanced understanding of, amongst other things, outlier voices within the sample. Third, we did not collect biographical information, which prevented us from reporting on the age, sex and other specifics of the sample. Fourth, the study did not account for the influence of various collateral factors that influence the FYE. These factors include students' pre-university and schooling experiences, socio-economic status, motivation to study Engineering, and social circumstances while studying, for example, living on campus and maturity. Such factors could have influenced some participants' perspectives concerning the value of the Programme. Fifth, the study's theoretical framework did not account for students' openness towards learning and personal growth. Students' understanding of self is subject to, among other things, openness to learning and personal growth. Hence, the assumptions that students were equally open to learning and personal growth, could have introduced subjective bias in the study design.

Researchers should consider the findings and limitations reported here to advance understanding by investigating the role of mindset and related positive psychology-based support programmes in promoting holistic student success. Further data collection is also required to determine precisely how positive psychology-based student support programmes affect the academic success of first-year students. Even though there is evidence that positive psychology programmes show encouraging effects on students' levels of reported wellbeing, the reference to the impact of such programmes on academic performance remains scant. Lastly, the wide-scale availability of positive psychology-based support programmes for students via online platforms is an area that seems relatively underexplored. Researchers

are advised to include measures of students' openness towards learning and self-growth in future studies to develop a more in-depth understanding of different conceptions between students.

This article bears testament to the relevance of focusing on the holistic development of students. In this regard, student development and support units, academia and faculty have critical roles to play in developing reasoning, resilient, and responsible students. When we set out conceptualising and presenting the Programme to students, the guiding vision was to provide support in managing the transition from secondary school to university and making the FYE meaningful. The qualitative findings suggest that this vision was realised, as Participant 238 explained: "2019 was the most difficult year of my life … this programme taught me that life is about choices … it has given me hope" (P#238).

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Research Article

Proactive Student Psychosocial Support Intervention Through Life Coaching: A Case Study of a First-Year Chemical Engineering Extended Curriculum Programme

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions in South Africa continue to experience considerable dropout rates of students during the first year, especially those from previously marginalised population groups. The aim of this research was to evaluate how the use of life coaching interventions providing first year students with psychosocial support, influenced their first-year experience. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected through a questionnaire at the end of the academic year, approximately four months after the intervention, to evaluate students' experiences of the intervention. Results indicate that students felt that the intervention helped them avoid dropping out of university prematurely, respond better to failure during the year, and improve their self-awareness and academic performance. In conclusion, the results suggest that the use of life coaching intervention as a proactive means of harnessing student agency, may be beneficial to their academic performance, and in improving their lives in general. The study recommends that further research be conducted to explore the use of small group life coaching for providing students with psychosocial support, and also exoplore this intervention's cost-effectiveness in different context.

Keywords

Life coaching, first-year experience, student agency, student success, psychosocial support, engineering education

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa continue to be marred with the discrepancies between students' access and success. Progress has been made concerning widening access since 1994; the recent Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) report shows that in 2016 the participation rate of the 18 to 23-year olds stood at 19.1% (DHET, 2019) and Black Africans made up about 72% of entries to HEIs. In 2016, the global tertiary participation rate was 41% (Euromonitor International, 2018). The participation rate in South Africa is lower compared to the global figure. The pressing challenge in South Africa is that of improving the success of students that have been granted access. In his recent paper, Scott (2018) argues that higher education in South Africa has not reimagined itself to serve the students to which it has provided access. Scott (2018) argues that while equity of access has been predominant in the last three decades, it is no longer enough that students have access to a university; it is upon universities to prioritise equity of outcomes. For this to happen, Scott calls for all stakeholders, including the state and HEIs, to provide a way forward. The persistently high dropout rate is a concern in South Africa, considering that employment opportunities and improved quality of life still favours graduates (Case et al., 2018). Moreover, as Netanda et al. (2017) argue, student success is for the long-term sustainability of the universities. As such, innovative support interventions that harness students' agency in the first year and subsequent years are crucial in improving throughput rates.

Factors that Affect Student Success and Associated Interventions

Factors that influence student success and attrition in South Africa are widely documented; these include issues such as poor choice of programme of study, articulation gaps, financial difficulties challenges of socioeconomic status, and issues of non-aligned cultural capital (Lekena & Bayaga, 2018; Letseka et al., 2009; Mason, 2017; Mogashana et al., 2012; Pather et al., 2017; Van Zyl, 2016). The approaches and interventions to address some of these factors also vary in nature; they include the offering of academic support interventions such as foundational courses and academic literacies (Conana et al., 2016; Basitere & Ivala, 2015; Davidowitz & Schreiber, 2008) through counselling intervention programmes to improve students' sense of belonging to the university (Mason, 2019), and through a shift towards institution-wide interventions at different levels to devise ways to improve student success (Nyar & Meyers, 2018).

Issues of mental health also appear to be having an adverse effect on students. Bantjes et al. (2016) found that students in South Africa had a higher rate of suicidal ideation compared to the general population, and that this correlates with poor health outcomes. Another study found a high prevalence of common mental disorders among first year students at two

prominent South African universities. Bantjes et al. (2019) argue that more attention needs to be paid to supporting students' psychological well-being as they transition into tertiary institutions. However, Blockland (2019) cautions against universities 'pathologising' student issues, stating that issues such as exam stress, loneliness, and social context from which students come (including poverty and educational disadvantage) may predispose some students to mental illness. She argues that "simply extending conventional healthcare services may not be the most effective way to manage the challenges that universities are facing" (Blockland, 2019, p.1). Furthermore, Blockland (2019) calls for intervention programmes that integrate valuable life skills for students by stating: "much can be achieved through resilience building" and by "helping students to discover, mobilise and develop their inner resources" (Blockland, 2019, p.1). The present study focuses on precisely those forms of interventions that Blockland refers to; it uses small group life coaching to provide psychosocial support to students through harnessing their agency in an Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP).

Psychosocial Support and Life Coaching

The term 'psychosocial', according to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, refers to "the inter-connection between psychological and social processes and the fact that each continually interacts with and influences the other" (ISAC 2010, p.1). From this definition psychosocial support in this study entails offering students support in areas that are both social and individual during the first year, as many are still dealing with adjustment to university, increased academic demands, and some dealing with academic failure. Aspects of this support involve helping students become self-aware and be conscious of how their thoughts about themselves, their emotions, and their behaviour influence how they see themselves and make choices in relation to their social circumstances. To achieve this, this study uses a group life coaching intervention.

Life coaching is a professional practice, rooted in positive psychology, whose history can be traced back to England in the 19th Century (Garvey, 2011). Distinct from counselling and therapy, life coaching focuses on individual's non-clinical strengths, harnesses these strengths, assists them to set goals, and empowers them with a process of achieving the goals. It enhances life experiences and personal development of individuals (Grant, 2003). The role of the life coach is to encourage, motivate, and help the individual to overcome potential limitations that may inhibit progress. Life coaching has been found not only to help individuals achieve their goals, but also to have a positive impact on their quality of life (Griffith 2005).

Some colleges in the United States use life coaching to support students on a range of challenges such as dealing with stress, academic stressors, relationship issues, and financial difficulties (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018). These challenges are found to have an

adverse effect on making students susceptible to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Short et al., 2010). Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018) found that life coaching benefited students with overcoming obstacles, improved self-awareness, attainment of goals, improved well-being, and successfully managing transitions into college.

Considering the reported benefits of life coaching interventions, this study explored the use of a life coaching intervention as a means of providing students with psychosocial support and harnessing their agency, in the context of an ECP with first year engineering students. There are three noteworthy aspects of the intervention. Firstly, it is proactive in that it prepares students for challenges that they may encounter during their studies. Secondly, the intervention is conducted with a small group of about six to ten students – this allows for the benefits of life coaching to be maximised, while optimising the use of resources. This approach may be more cost-effective in maximising student support resources. Lastly, the small group coaching happens over a weekend, a Saturday and a Sunday, outside the teaching time to not interfere with the academic programme. During the weekend programme, students are empowered with the knowledge, skills, and techniques that may help them address their psychosocial issues, and this hopefully minimises their chances of dropping out, and improving their academic performance. The central question is: how has students' participation in the life coaching intervention influenced where they find themselves at the end of the first year? In other words, how has having participated in the life coaching intervention influenced students agency?

Conceptual Framework – Human Agency

The understanding of the term 'agency' in this study comes from Margaret Archer's (1995) realist social theory – the morphogenetic approach. As a theoretical and analytical approach, the morphogenetic approach allows for temporary separation between social structure and the human agency, to examine the result of the interaction on each. The focus of this paper is on how a life coaching intervention has influenced students, and as such, the relevant concepts are briefly outlined.

Archer (1995) refers to agency as the action taken by social agents. This action, taken individually and collectively, emanates from what she refers to as personal emergent properties (PEPs) of agents when they interact with the conditioning effects of the structural emergent properties (SEPs). The ECP, with its positioning within the university and all its associated material resources, is an example of the SEP. It conditions the situations into which agents, the students in this case, find themselves when they arrived at university in the first year. According to Archer (2003), students as agents have the things they care about the most, for example pursuing a degree while avoiding dropping out. They then formulate plans of action, their personal projects, and it is in pursuing these projects that they exercise their PEPs to deal with the conditioning effects of SEPs.

One of the students' PEPs is reflexivity, which entails their ability to hold internal conversations about themselves in relation to their social circumstances, and to make a choice on how to act (Archer, 2003). It is in the moment of choosing that students operationalise their inherent PEPs and act in particular ways. This study evaluates how students' agency was shaped by having participated in the life coaching intervention while pursuing their projects in the first year.

Methodology

The study employs a case study methodology, which allows for in-depth investigation into a particular case. Yin (2003) indicates that a case study allows the researcher to explore the "how" and "why" questions within a real-life context, and pertinent to this study sought to investigate how having participated in the life coaching programme influenced students. The use of a case study has often been criticised, among other things, for being biased towards verification of the researcher's preconceived ideas. As such, the researcher needs to provide all the information that increases transferability of a single case.

Context of the study and participants

As part of seeking solutions to support students with psychosocial issues that often result in them dropping out, the Department of Chemical Engineering's ECP at a University of Technology sought and piloted a life coaching intervention for a cohort of first-year students. The pilot study entailed five life coaching weekend sessions that were conducted with different groups, comprising six to ten students over five months during the academic year. The selection criteria for each session were based on responses to a background information questionnaire completed by 25 students at the start of the year, together with their performance in the first Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry tests.

The background information questionnaire requested information on each student's Mathematics and Physical Science high school marks, current residential status, schooling background, information about how they decided to study at the current university, information on how they decided to study chemical engineering and whether it was their first choice, goals, vision, and self-awareness. Sample questions from the background questionnaire are provided as an appendix.

Participants were selected according to the highest risk of failure. The criteria for highest risk entailed whether: (a) the participant lived at a student residence or off campus; a long commute to campus was considered to increase the risk, (b) the university and the programme of study were the participant's first choices, a participant who was not in their preferred university and to whom chemical engineering was not their first choice was considered at risk, and (c) there was uncertainly on funding, fees, and living costs; a

participant who was uncertain about sources of funding was considered at risk. Marks of the first assessments were the final criterion to identify the risk. Participation in these coaching weekends was voluntary for all students; however, those who were at highest risk were strongly encouraged to participate.

At each coaching weekend, participants completed a disclosure and agreement form in which they agreed to participate fully for the two days. The programme introduced students to concepts of the mind, body, thoughts, emotions, and how all these relate to actions that they take, in line with achieving their goals. Following the self-awareness section, participants were introduced to various life coaching techniques. They were individually seated at privately set up sections of the room, where they used the techniques under the guidance of the coach. Other parts of the coaching session entailed improving self-image, personal finance, and creating life visions. After each coaching weekend, the coach set up WhatsApp groups for each group and offered monthly ongoing mentoring for the rest of the academic year. Students could contact the coach privately through WhatsApp when the need arose.

Data gathering and analysis

At the end of the academic year, approximately four months after the last coaching weekend, students were asked to complete a reflective questionnaire developed for this study that evaluated their first-year experiences in relation to the life coaching intervention; the questionnaire is included as an appendix for reference. The 43-item questionnaire consisted of 31 five-point Likert scale items and 12 open-ended items, with 20 out of 35 (57%) students who had been coached, completing the year-end questionnaire anonymously. Critical items evaluated for this study: (a) how the programme facilitated students' adjustment to university, and (b) students' reflections about how they thought their lives might have been different had they not been coached. Data were analysed using content analysis, guided by Archer's (1995) conception of human agency.

Transferability and credibility

The case study intended to provide some in-depth understanding of possible ways of supporting students (Yin, 2003). As this was still a pilot programme, the measure of rigour could be looked at in terms of transferability and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To increase transferability of this single case to similar contexts, the sample questions from the questionnaires and the 43-items evaluation questionnaires are also provided as an appendix. To ensure credibility, the researchers ascertained that detailed descriptions of students' responses were represented as they appeared during data gathering.

Ethical clearance and researcher positioning

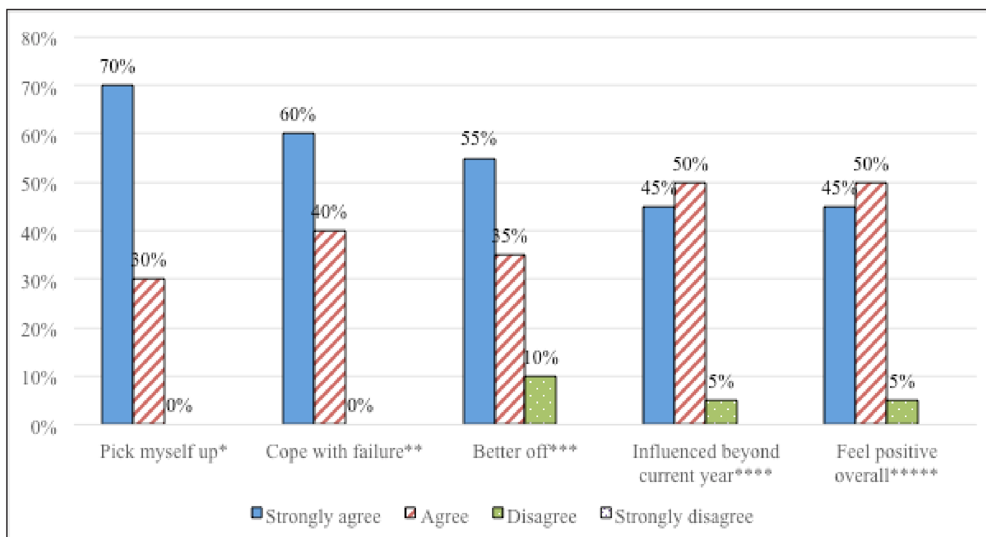
The larger study from which this paper resulted was granted ethical clearance by the Faculty of Engineering at the same institution. All participants in this study consented to participate, and the nature of the questionnaire ensured that they remained anonymous. It is noteworthy that the first author, a chemical engineering graduate, is the life coach who facilitated the coaching groups and developed the questionnaire together with the co-author.

Results

The purpose of the life coaching intervention was to support students; to harness their agency as they made their way through the first year. This paper reports on the year-end evaluation of students' reflection The results of students' reflections indicate that the weekend life coaching sessions, and the ongoing support that the coach provided to students through WhatsApp social medium, had an overall positive influence on students first-year experience.

Figure 1 shows a summary of the quantitative results. It indicates that apart from one participant in each category, all students felt positive about their academic performance compared to when the year started. Students believed the coaching would influence them beyond the first year, with 18 out of the 20 participants believing that they were better off compared to other first-year students who had not participated in the psychosocial support intervention. More importantly, all participants indicated that having been coached, helped them cope better with failure, and know how to pick themselves up from unsatisfactory performance in their courses.

Figure 1: *Students' reflections on their experience with the life coaching intervention*



- * Coaching helped me know how to pick myself up better after unsatisfactory performance in my assessments.
- ** Coaching helped me learn to cope better with failure and life.
- *** I believe that I am better off overall compared to another first-year students who have not been coached.
- **** I believe that coaching will influence me beyond this year, no matter what I decided to do with my life.
- ***** Overall, I feel positive about my performance compared to when the year started, before I was coached.

Overall, data presented in Figure 1 suggest that the life coaching intervention had a positive aggregated effect on the students' first-year experiences; however, to elucidate nuances of the positive effect qualitative data that focuses on participants' reflexive deliberations is presented. Two critical questions that they were asked to reflect on were: 1) how has participating in the life coaching support programme influenced your transition to university life? and, 2) had you not been coached at all this year, how do you think your experience might have been different?

Deliberation on the role of life coaching in their adjustment to university life

Students reflected on how the intervention assisted their transition from high school into university in three categories. The first category included a group of students for whom the intervention assisted in dealing with factors outside of the classroom context, which might have impacted negatively on their academic performance. Referring to his well-being, one student indicated that being coached showed him that 'it is possible to achieve everything when external factors are taken into consideration.' Another student indicated that coaching helped him feel 'emotionally stable' and thus empowered him to approach his studies effectively, knowing that he can always talk to the coach on WhatsApp if he encountered a problem. For another student, having been coached helped him 'have inner peace and make peace with everything' that he could not change about his life; this in relation to dealing with some of 'the negative emotions' that might have affected his studies.

The second category included a group of students to whom the intervention fostered their ability to interact with their peers, and to build a sense of belonging in the group. For one student, having been able to work with her peers in a small group helped her with building confidence and communicating:

> **Student 6:** *I've worked in a group when I was told to do so in the coaching programme, I gained a lot of confidence and communication skills which makes me to want to be in working group members even in coming years.*

First year students often feel alone and do not know how to begin relating to their peers; leaving some feeling alienated. Although the life coaching programme does not involve many group interaction activities, the students' reflections indicate that some of them benefited from the few moments in which they were asked to interact with others, and this helped them break barriers to communicate and encourage them to work with their peers beyond the coaching programme. One student indicated that being coached helped her to allow herself to 'blend in without feeling pressure to change' who she was. Another student indicated that not only did coaching help him interact with his peers, but it helped him adapt his way of interacting with lecturers. For another student, having interacted with someone who had studied chemical engineering (the life coach) 'inspired' her to know that she could overcome her obstacles and make it through the first year and beyond.

The third category included students that referred to 'failure' and how coaching addressed it. Four students indicated that having been coached helped them deal with failure in their courses, especially at the beginning of the year while they are finding their feet in the university: Student 14 captured this sentiment:

> **Student 14:** *It has helped me to deal with pressure and able to accept that failing is part of our lives but I must learn to pick up myself and do better next time.*

In dealing with failure, some students indicated that being coached helped them deal with the fear of failure in general, and to understand that failure is temporary. The experience of feeling like a failure, and feeling alone away from support systems in their home environments, is common among first-year students. One student reflected how life coaching helped in this regard:

> **Student 18:** *It (psychosocial support through life coaching) has made me realise that I am not alone. Even though I am (away) from home, I can still create a homely environment for myself here. It made me realise that it is okay to fall but it's very much important to rise up and dust yourself and move on. I failed my first tests but I was amongst the top 5 students who are top achievers in my class at the end of the year. That is because I didn't dwell much on what had happened at the beginning of the year, instead I used it as motivation.*

This knowledge and self-awareness that students gained through life coaching, as suggested by the student 18 above, helped them to reflect positively on themselves in relation to the potential constraints that they encountered during the year.

Deliberation on how they think their lives might have been different without the coaching

Table 1 presents the verbatim students' deliberations concerning how they believe their lives might have been.

Table 1: *Students' responses to how without coaching their lives might have been*

	How your life might have been different without life coaching
Student 1*	I would have failed or even dropped out.
Student 3*	battle with my emotions and possible failed the year.
Student 4*	I would have gave up in my failures this year.
Student 5*	Be a drop out because my emotional well-being.
Student 6	No improvement in my confidence and communication skills.
Student 7	I would not have enjoyed university so much.
Student 8*	I would have changed courses or dropped out.
Student 9	Marks would be just average.
Student 10*	I would have drowned.
Student 11	I would not have learned a lot.
Student 13*	I would've given up, probably left school.
Student 14*	I think I would've dropped out.
Student 16	Not seen the importance of working with other people.
Student 17	I would not able to manage some university challenges.
Student 18*	I don't think I would have finished the year.
Student 19*	I might have given up.
Student 20*	I think I would have given up in everything.

* *Students who would have dropped out*

Data presented in Table 1 can be classified into two main themes. The first theme, comprising of 11 of the 17 (65%) respondents (those marked with *), included those who indicated that they would have dropped out. Students used different words to mark 'drop out'. While some students used the words 'drop out', 'dropped out' (for example students 5, 8, and 14), other students such as students 13, 19, and 20 used the word 'given up'. Another student (10)

went as far as using the word 'drowned' to suggest that he would not have made it through the academic year, sharing the sentiment of student 18 who stated that 'I do not think I would have managed the year.' Students' reflexive deliberations indicate that they were aware that they would have been worse off had they not been coached. An essential aspect of the intervention, as reflected on by student 5, was that to be proactive in supporting students improved their 'emotional well-being' so that it did not impact negatively on their academic performance.

The second theme included students who indicated that their overall first-year experience would not have been as positive as it turned out to be, had they not been coached. Students in this category mentioned things such as 'battled with my emotions' (student 3), that there would be 'no improvement in my confidence and communication skills' (student 6) and 'not seen the importance of working with other people' (student 16). The improved self-awareness and skills such as understanding one's emotions, improving confidence in communication, and learning to work with others are not only crucial in the first year, but may be useful in students' experiences in subsequent years.

Discussion

The transition of students from high school into university is often marred with non-academic challenges that impact on students' academic performance. The aim of the study from which this paper resulted, was to explore the use of a life coaching intervention in harnessing students' agency. This paper reported on students' reflections about how, having participated in the intervention, influenced their first-year experience. In general, the results indicate that life coaching intervention harnessed the students' agency in several ways. The life coaching weekend, together with the ongoing mentoring through WhatsApp social medium helped the students adjust better to the university, by empowering them to mitigate the potential constraints of SEPs that might have hindered their academic progress. It helped some to improve their well-being, and helped others feel emotionally stable. It helped others address some of their existing negative emotions. These findings resonate with the findings by Grant (2003) and Griffith (2005) that life coaching may be beneficial to assist non-clinical populations to improve their self-awareness, enhance their mental health, and quality of life.

The results further indicate that the life coaching intervention helped students build a sense of belonging in the university, by encouraging them to develop communication skills, interact with their peers, and interact with their lecturers. This aligns with the findings by Lefdahi-Davids et al. (2018) that this kind of support makes it easier for the student to make the transition more manageable during the challenging phases of life. Lastly, the results show that having participated in the life coaching intervention empowered students to deal with failure in their courses, or helped them know how to pick themselves up after failing. In some cases, as reported by some students, it prevented them from dropping out. The

ability of a student to take on failure, reflect upon it, pick themselves up and move on, signifies the fostering and maturing of students' agency. As Archer (2003) suggests, the ability of students to reflect positively on themselves, and choose particular beneficial actions, are vital for achieving personal projects. Significant to the life coaching approach is that it is proactive; it prepares the students upfront so that they are able to deal with challenges that they face during the year and beyond. Such non-clinical interventions are, as argued by Blockland (2019), needed in the South African context to build resilience in students.

Conclusion

This paper reported on how, having participated in the life coaching intervention, fostered students' agency as they made their transition from high school through the first year at university. Overall, the results indicate that the intervention played a significant role in improving students' experiences in the first year, and ultimately, in reducing their chances of dropping out, with 65% of the participants indicating that they would have dropped out at the end of the first year, had there been no intervention. This finding signified the extent to which students' retention and success is influenced by psychosocial factors, and alluded to the need for proactive interventions that address this challenge.

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, only 20 of the 35 students (57%) of those who participated in the intervention completed the year-end evaluation questionnaire, and this might be attributed to some of the students not having access to free internet once they leave the university to go home. Sending the evaluation questionnaire to students on the day they write their final examination for the year could rectify this. Secondly, there may be value in conducting interview-type data collection in the future; this may facilitate more probing in students' open-ended responses that were not followed up. Thirdly, for the wider intervention, 35 students out of a cohort of 48 (73%) participated in the psychosocial support programme. Although students are not forced to participate, they can be better encouraged to take such interventions seriously, as this may help them. Improved participation in a cohort may result in better overall cohort progression and fewer dropouts.

For the broader higher education researchers, the study recommends further research into the use of small group life coaching that may facilitate the transition of students from high school into university. This approach may develop their self-awareness, assist them to deal with some negative emotions, improve their mental health and quality of life, help them deal with failure, and minimises their chances of dropping out. Moreover, the provision of this intervention may best be suitable within faculties and departments in which students are registered and as such, their cost-effectiveness needs to be explored through further research. It is noteworthy that exploring the use of life coaching does not replace student wellness services, but it could complement available support structures within the universities

that are often resource-constrained. If 'equity of outcomes' is to be prioritised in South Africa, as Scott (2018) suggested it should, then matters of student psychosocial support should be approached proactively.

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