Research Article

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

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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.

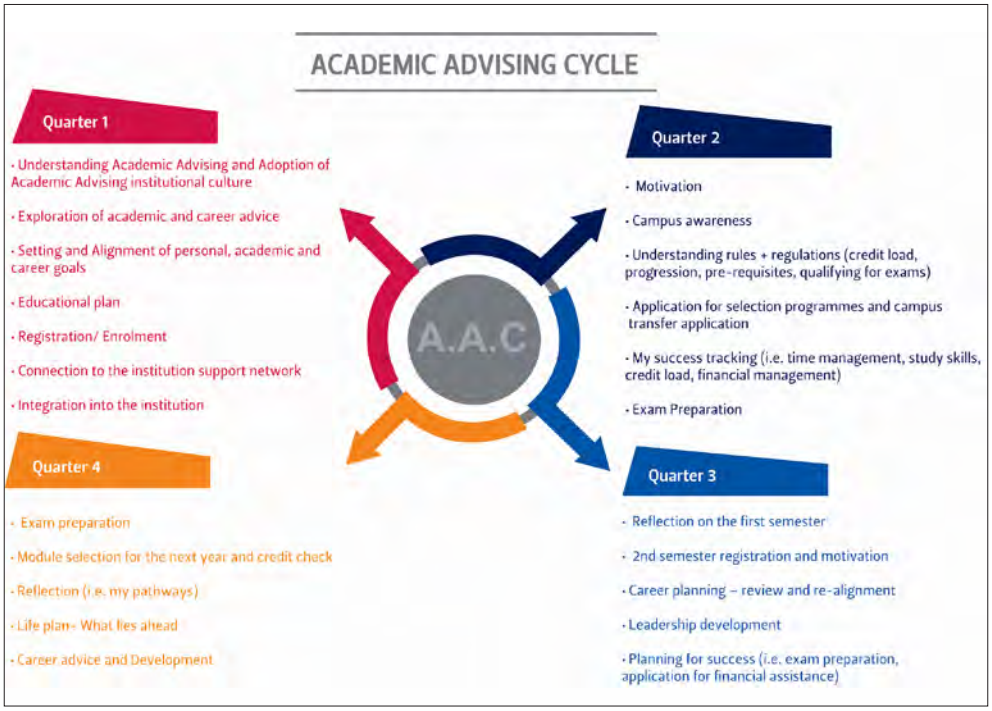
As mentioned, the UFS was the first institution in South Africa to join NACADA in 2010. Our collaboration with this global community helped us learn from the journeys of other countries. We were able to identify similar struggles, but also unique differences that would deeply influence the development 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

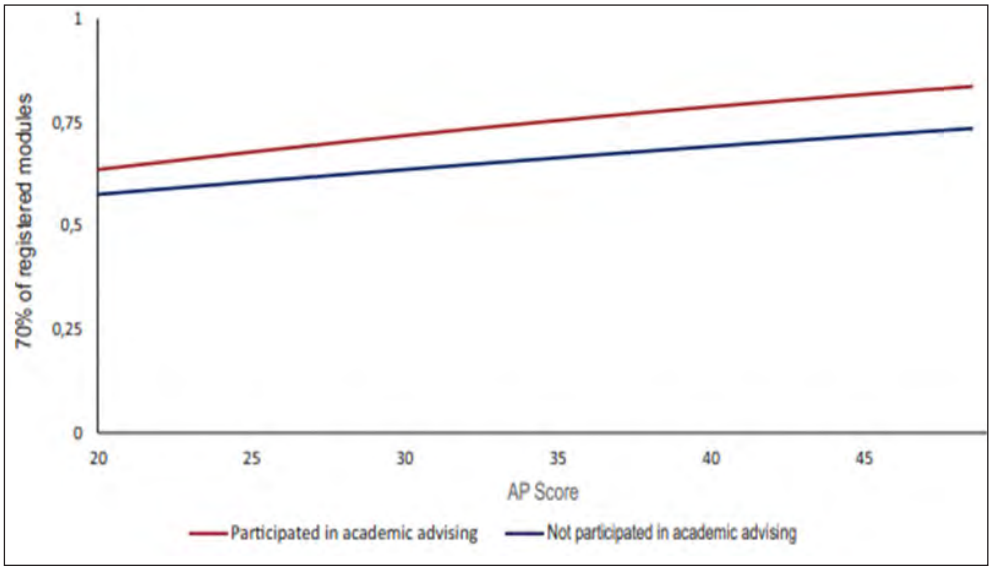
Kuh (2008, p. 79) noted that "every advising contact is a precious opportunity for a meaningful interaction with the student." Nel (2014) affirms the importance of advising by showing that academic (student) advising can go a long way in aiding students to cope with challenges that they experience. Academic 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

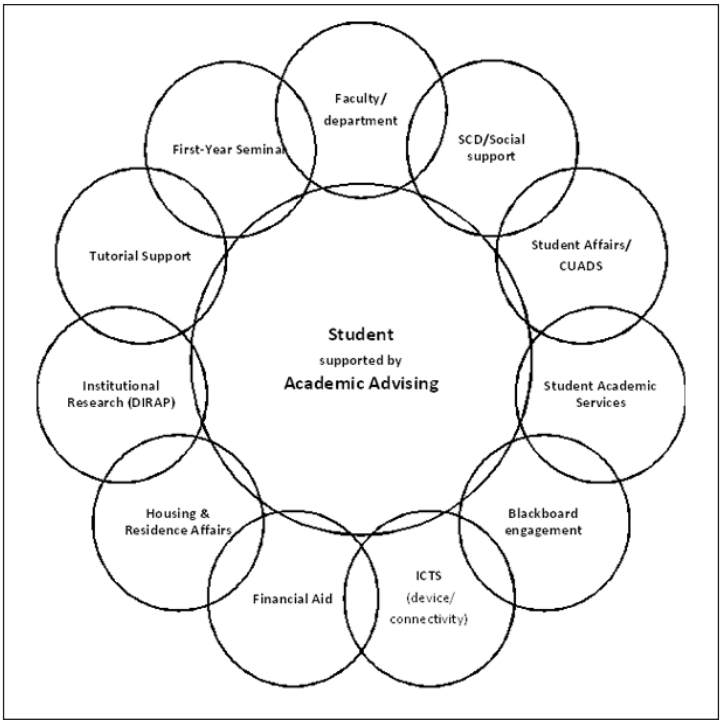
Leveraging Data to Support the Students

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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