

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

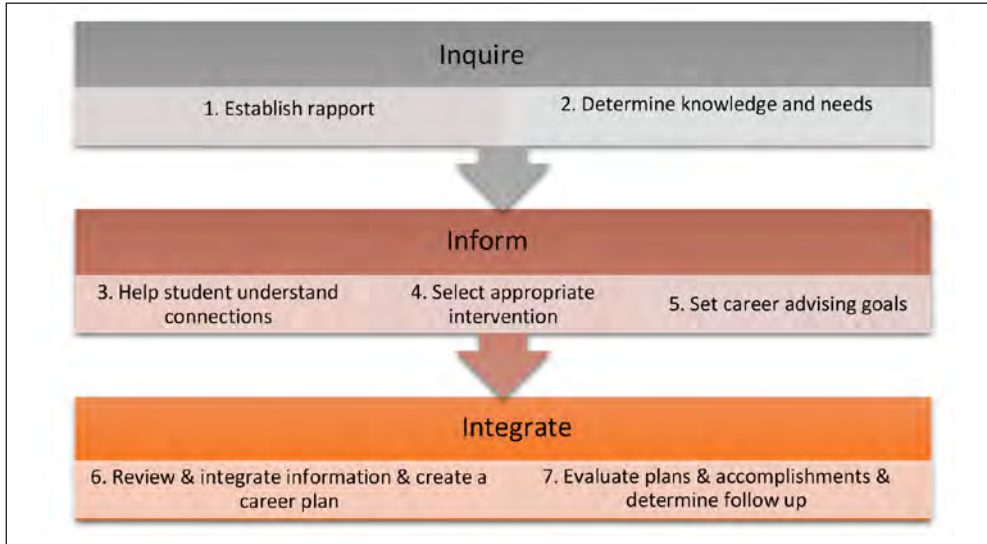
Although a few frameworks for the practical application of academic advice exist and are useful, they do not intentionally include career advice (Bloom et al., 2013; Cate & Miller, 2015; Egan, 2010; Hutson & He, 2011). Virginia Gordon (2006) presented a framework for such integration between academic 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.

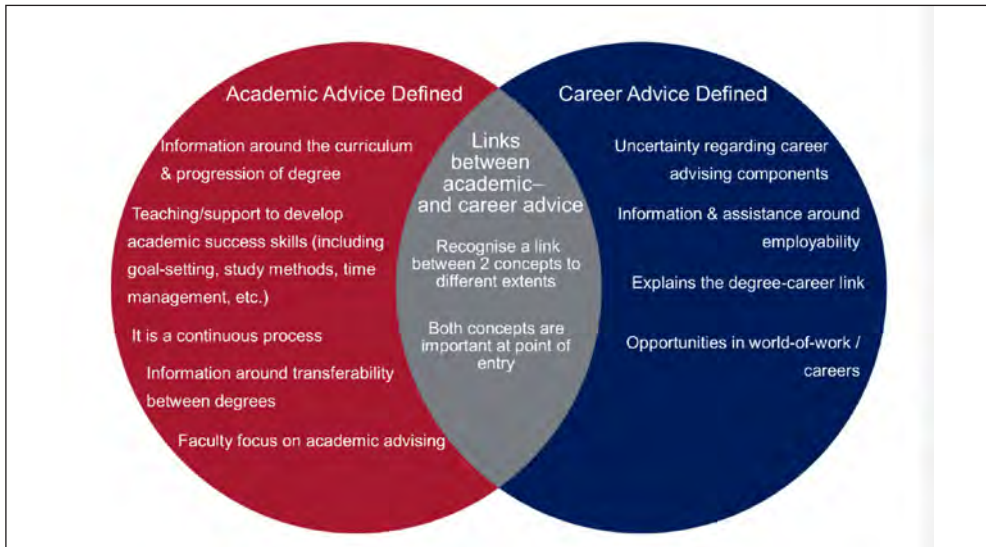
The data was analysed deductively and inductively in a two-cycle coding process. The first cycle in the coding process was done by deductively applying the themes of the 3-I Process to see whether and how the framework fits (Saldaña, 2009). A second cycle was then implemented in the coding process to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

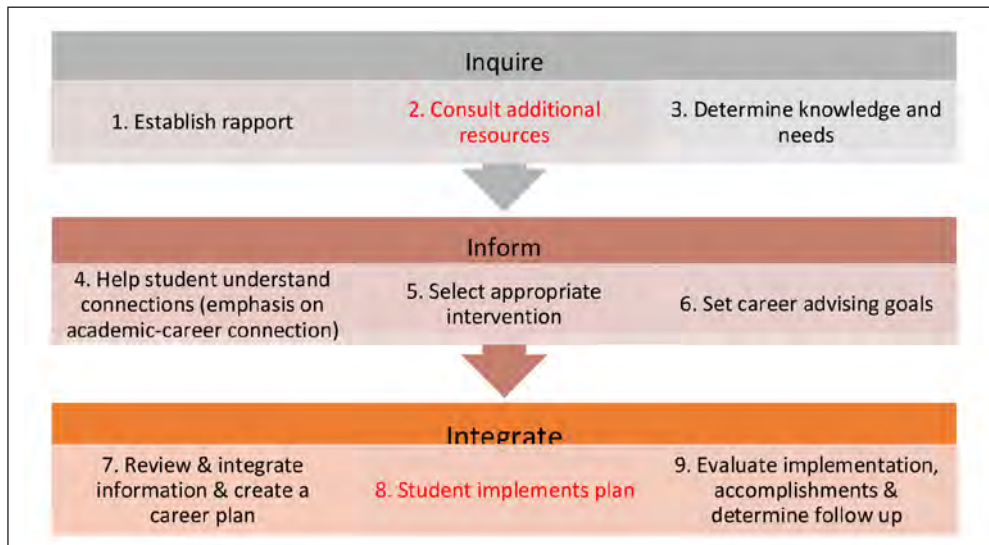
Another advisor agreed: "So, I think our jobs are purely academic advising, but yes, there's definitely a link to career advice as well".

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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