

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

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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-Baldrige, 2020). Providing accurate information, referring students, and "being an honest resource to students" (Hart-Baldrige, 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-Baldrige, 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-Baldrige, 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-Baldrige, 2020). Institutional communication is also enhanced through advising interactions (Hart-Baldrige, 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-Baldrige, 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-Baldrige (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-Baldrige, 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-Baldrige, 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-Baldrige (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

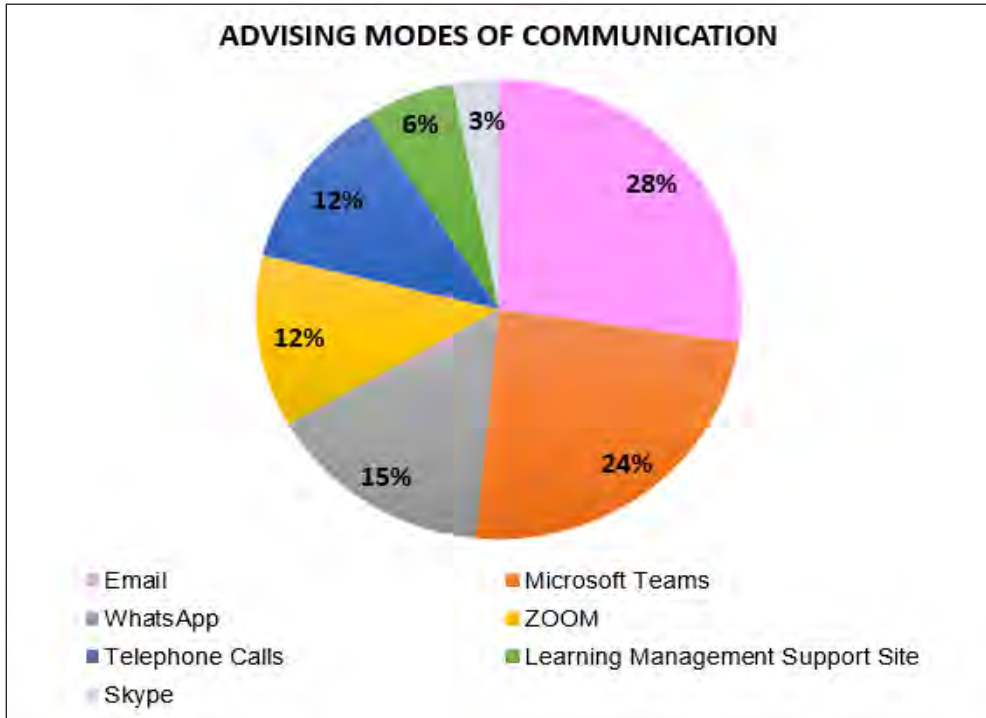
The context that shapes advising responsibilities has revealed the importance of the mode of communication, as well as an understanding of students' and advisors' backgrounds and context.

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 uhmm 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).

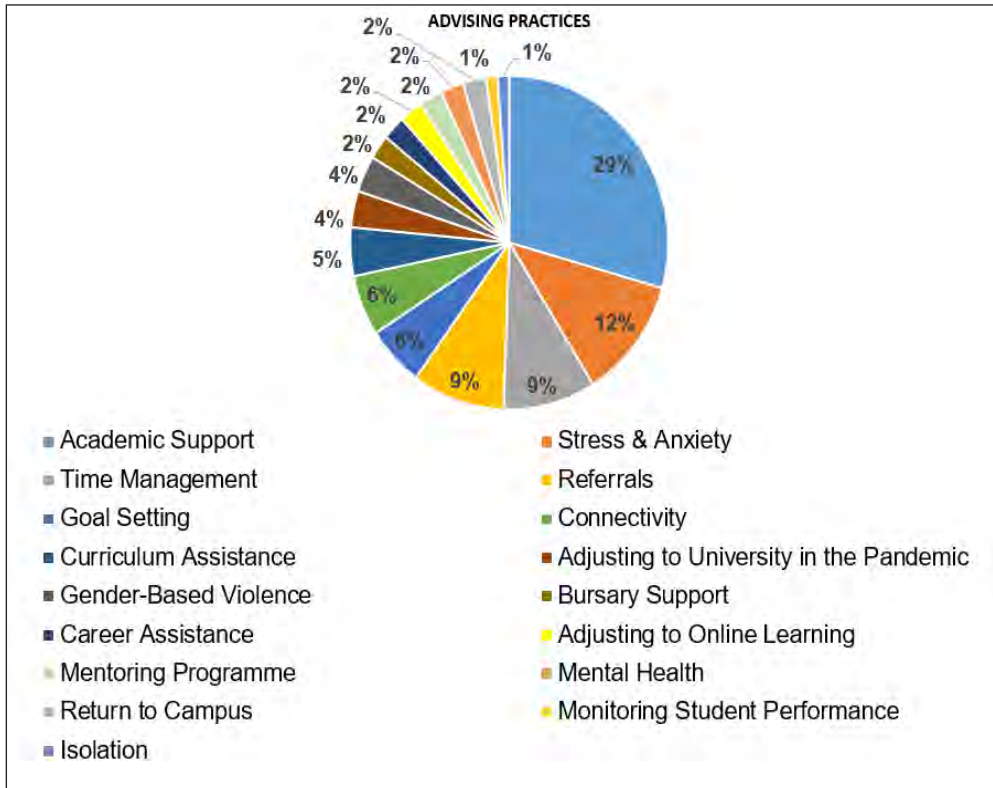
Transactional Information Dissemination

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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