Research article

Demystifying the Work of South African Academic Advisors: An Exploration of Students' Structural and Material Constraints

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Abstract

The structural and material factors affecting the lived realities and prospects of tertiary success for South African students are complex and manifold. Inexorably, these lived realities impact the work of academic advisors who guide and support students throughout their higher education journeys. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the growing body of literature about academic advising in and for South African higher education contexts, and in particular the daily work of academic advisors in the country. This is achieved by first drawing on literature to elucidate the various structural and material constraints affecting the lives of many South African students, before reconciling what emerges from the literature with quantitative data collected by an academic advisor working at a South African university about his engagements with students over a three-year period. This phenomenological study is underpinned by social realist principles as proposed by Margaret Archer and draws in particular on the notion of structure to advance its argument. Additionally, the work of Boughey and McKenna on the decontextualized learner is incorporated to demonstrate why students in this country cannot be decontextualized from their lived realities. The article concludes by highlighting how the complex structural and material constraints that influence students' higher education experiences manifest in the day-to-day work of academic advisors. The authors propose that these insights be used to enhance responsiveness to student needs, while informing how the sector makes meaning of advising for the South African higher education context.

Keywords

academic advising, academic advisors, decontextualized learner, higher education, South Africa, social realism, socio-economic challenges, structure, student success

Introduction

Academic advising is an emerging profession and practice in South Africa (De Klerk, 2021; Obaje & Jeawon, 2021, p. 18). While decades of literature underpin advising

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work done in the global North and Australia (Bishop, 1987; Tuttle, 2000; Cuseo, 2003; Mann, 2020), evidence-informed contributions about advising within and for South African higher education has only recently begun to emerge. The country's past and its current-day socio-economic realities[1] mean that unique intricacies and complexities characterise its higher education landscape (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). These complex realities have tangible and far-reaching consequences for many students pursuing tertiary studies, significantly affecting the work of academic advisors working at South African higher education institutions (HEIs) (De Klerk, 2021; De Klerk, 2022). In this article we draw extensively on literature to contextualize these complex realities by focusing specifically on structural and material constraints, before comparing the findings in the literature with data collected by a practising academic advisor over a three-year period. This juxtaposition of literature and data highlights how the material and structural constraints experienced by students influence the day-to-day work of an advisor working at a South African HEI. These insights are crucial for making meaning of the work of South African advisors, as well as for creating a socially just tertiary study environment which addresses student alienation and marginalisation.

Background

The #FeesMustFall (FMF) movement of 2015 and 2016 placed a spotlight on the national funding crisis affecting the South African higher education sector (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Cloete, 2016; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017; Tjønneland, 2017). Ironically, while protests were happening across campuses nationally, students most in need of funding for essentials like food and shelter (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017) were still going hungry and/or sleeping in libraries and toilets on South African HEI campuses. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, these realities were further exacerbated for many South African higher education students (DHET, 2020a; Sifunda et al., 2021), immediate responses to which brought about emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) (Hodges et al., 2020) in 2020 and 2021. The funding crisis itself continues to pose severe challenges to students' ability to succeed at tertiary studies (Essop, 2021). The consequences and fallout of the crisis is experienced first-hand by academic advisors engaging with students on the ground, despite any transformative educational gains that may have resulted from the disruptions (Dison et al., 2022).

Academic advisors are often faced with requests for food, toiletries, stationery and clothing, enquiries about accommodation, information about funding opportunities, support with funding applications, and are asked for advice about working while studying. Funding within the South African higher education sector is usually channelled towards first-generation, first-year students from the lower income brackets in the

1 South Africa has an unemployment rate of more than 30% (Mulaudzi & Ajoodha, 2021, p. 420) and has one of the highest rates of inequality with regard to wealth distribution, globally (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

country[2], which leaves undergraduates from the so-called missing middle[3] (Cloete, 2016, p. 121; Garrod & Wildschut, 2021) and postgraduate students (Machika & Johnson, 2015) with limited to no funding opportunities. The problem is further compounded by the "hidden" costs of studying at a university, the pressures associated with *black tax* for many black African students, and warped perceptions by many individuals from the South African middle- and upper-income classes about the socio-economic realities of a large portion of students studying at HEIs in the country. The pressure on young people who must contend with these challenges, while having to fulfil academic requirements and perform satisfactorily is immense (Machika & Johnson, 2015; Case et al., 2018).

Many of these challenges emanate from external factors beyond these students' control, which exacerbate the difficulties they face while navigating unfamiliar social and educational expectations and spaces within their HEIs (Case et al., 2018; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Ultimately, these obstacles often bring about major barriers to equal and equitable (Czerniewicz, et al., 2020) epistemological access to HE knowledge bases. As such, the role played by advisors in helping students navigate these challenges is vital, both in terms of breaking down barriers that hinder students from gaining different forms of access and succeeding academically, as well as enabling meaningful epistemological access for students through their academic engagement (De Klerk, 2021, p. 117).

Literature and Context

Academic advising

Academic advising is a high-impact practice (Moodley & Singh, 2015, p. 95; Strydom & Loots, 2020) that can enhance student success and the overall student learning experience (Surr, 2019, p. 9). Much has been written about academic advising for global North and non-South African contexts over many decades (e.g. Bishop, 1987; Clark, 1989; Grites, 1979; Beatty, 1991; Tuttle, 2000; Cuseo, 2003; Drake, 2011; Zhang & Dinh, 2017; Mann, 2020). Conversely, the literature about advising in South Africa remains quite limited (Strydom, 2017, p. 104). Encouragingly though, meaningful and necessary shifts have begun to occur in the sector since 2017, with the launch of a multi-institutional project focused on formalising academic advising for South African higher education contexts (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021a, pp. 4-5). Tied to this project is a special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (Vol. 9 No. 2, published in 2021), which focuses on academic advising in South Africa (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021b). These shifts signal a significant step towards the laying of a rigorous and evidence-informed foundation (Surr, 2019) for advising in this country. However, a critical investigation of the available

2 To be eligible to apply for financial support from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in 2021, applicants may not have a combined gross family income of more than ZAR 350,000 per annum (DHET, 2021, p. 7).

3 This term is used to describe students from households where the annual income is too high for the student to qualify for funding support from NSFAS and many other sources of funding, but too low for the household to be able to cover the cost of tertiary studies.

literature has revealed a paucity of studies that document the factors that influence the day-to-day work of academic advisors in South Africa.

Studies like those by Naidoo and Lemmens (2015) and Kritzinger et al. (2018) discuss academic advising in relation to at-risk work and early-alert systems for identifying high-risk students. Others, like Emekako and Van der Westhuizen (2021), explore academic advising in a South African context in relation to students' academic performance, or investigate advising during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. De Klerk, 2022; Moosa, 2021). Additionally, much of the literature focuses on the adoption of global-North advising models in South African contexts (Obaje & Jeawon, 2021, pp. 24-25; Van Pletzen et al., 2021), which in itself warrants further investigation, although it goes beyond the scope of the current article. There is an absence, though, of literature about the daily practices of advisors in the country. Consequently, this article aims to contribute to the knowledge base about academic advising in South Africa by foregrounding the complex realities that affect their work. To achieve this goal, the authors first provide an overview of the structural and material constraints experienced by many South African higher education students, which is shown to have consequences for the day-to-day work of South African advisors.

Structural and material constraints

Funding limitations within the South African higher education sector

The demand for adequate funding by students within the South African higher education sector far outweighs its availability (Scott, 2016, p. 20) and is projected to remain problematic for many years to come[4] (Simkins & Task Team, 2016, p. 75). In a 2010 *Report of the Ministerial Committee on the Review of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)*, the committee observed that within the South African higher education sector:

> funding falls far short of demand. Current estimates are that NSFAS has less than half of the funds it needs to meet the demand for financial aid from qualifying applicants, even at current participation rates. The Committee concluded that the main impediment to NSFAS achieving its objectives is chronic underfunding. (DHET, 2010, p. xiii)

More than a decade later, and despite the FMF protests of 2015 and 2016, Ahmed Bhawa (chief executive officer of Universities South Africa (USAf)) reported that South Africa universities were facing a ZAR 14 billion shortfall for 2019 alone, owing to unpaid student debt (Paterson, 2021). Although there was no prospect of recovering this debt, Bhawa explained that universities could not afford to nullify it either (Paterson, 2021).

Most South African higher education bursaries and funding opportunities are directed toward first-year and undergraduate students, with those from previously

4 Simkins and Task Team (2016, p. 75) project a NSFAS shortfall of approximately ZAR 16,685 million in 2023, which is now likely to be even higher owing to the constraints and realities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the lowest annual household income more likely to be recipients[5] (Cloete, 2016; Garrod & Wildschut, 2021). As such, funding opportunities for undergraduate students from the missing middle (Cloete, 2016; Garrod & Wildschut, 2021), undergraduates who have been academically excluded and then readmitted (De Klerk et al., 2017, p. 6), and postgraduate students (Machika & Johnson, 2015) are extremely limited. Students in all these categories often approach academic advisors for guidance on how to source funding, which is seldom easily resolved. Ultimately, the crisis remains (Garrod & Wildschut, 2021; Paterson, 2021), as does the strain it places on students, on the advisors that work to guide and support them, and on these students' prospects of success.

The "hidden" costs of university study

The cost of university studies goes far beyond tuition and accommodation, which are the two funding areas most bursaries and funders are willing to cover. So-called "hidden" costs (i.e. expenditure not covered by bursaries or funders and that is seldom stipulated or outlined in cost breakdown documents) include: transport, stationery, textbooks and other learning materials, food and toiletries, clothing, other living expenses, medical expenses, and discipline-specific items. Van der Berg (2016, p. 182) points out that the cost of studying in South African higher education is a problem for most students, emphasising that for "the typical student, support of almost half a million Rand over the course of a degree may be required" (p. 182). Considering that this calculation was made in 2016, it is safe to deduce that the amount is now even higher. The maximum NSFAS funding cap was set at (i) ZAR 88,600 in 2019 (DHET, 2019a, p. 7); (ii) ZAR 93,400 in 2020 (DHET, 2020b); and (iii) ZAR 98,700 in 2021 (DHET, 2021, p. 9). This means that students who qualify for full funding through NSFAS annually during their studies (not all students are allocated the maximum amount), would receive in total ZAR 280,700 to cover a three-year degree programme.

However, considering Van der Berg's (2016, p. 182) estimate that a typical student would require approximately ZAR 500,000 over the course of their degree (including "hidden" costs), and that many students require more than three years to complete a three-year bachelor's degree[6] (DHET, 2019b[7]), the endless challenges students face with regard to food security, accommodation, transport, stationery, textbooks/learning materials, and a myriad other expenses should come as no surprise. These are all matters that are prone to arising during academic advising engagements between advisors

5 Although, as Masehela (2018, p. 166) points out, high Matric marks do not guarantee any form of financial support owing to competitive demand, while the awarding of bursaries or other forms of financial aid often do not take "account of any disadvantage an applicant may have faced" (p. 166).

6 Students funded through NSFAS and the DHET Bursary Scheme are only eligible for funding for the minimum period of study of a qualification (N) plus one additional year (N+1) (DHET, 2021, p.14).

7 The DHET (2019b, p. xvi) found that the completion rate of the 2012 cohort of South African higher education students enrolled for three-year bachelor's degrees was just over 29% after three years (N) and only about 63% after five years (N+2).

and students, therefore requiring advisors to be responsive to the lived realities of the students they work with.

Food (in)security on South African campuses

Food insecurity on university campuses is a global challenge. A national study of basic needs insecurity conducted in the United States found that 56% of the more than 33,000 participants from 70 community colleges were food insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). Another study conducted at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa more than a decade ago found that 21% of participants were food insecure and a further 24% were at risk of becoming food insecure (Chaparro et al., 2009). Many other US-based studies conducted in the last 10 years share similar findings.

Correspondingly, a South African study conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal between 2007 and 2010 found that more than 40% of participants experienced some degree of food insecurity (Munro et al., 2013), while a subsequent study at the same university conducted in 2015 found that more than 53% of participants reported some degree of vulnerability to food insecurity, despite the implementation of a Food Security Programme at the institution in 2012 (Sabi et al., 2020). Another study conducted at the University of the Free State in 2013 found that 60% of participants experienced food insecurity and reports emerged that this may be contributing to high attrition rates (Van den Berg & Raubenheimer, 2015). This aligns with the findings of a study by Payne-Sturges et al. (2018) that food insecurity might affect retention rates. Worth highlighting is that food insecurity at South African HEIs is tied to the national funding crisis (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017), and has been shown to have a negative impact on students' academic performance (Sabi et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2021). Academic advisors are often the first port of call for students who are food insecure and looking for advice on who to approach for support.

The South African student accommodation crisis

Access to student accommodation/housing has been directly linked to student success (DHET, 2011, pp. xvii, xx; Xulu-Gama, 2019, p. 15) and to students' integration at HEIs (Sikhwari et al., 2020, p. 9; Simpeh & Adisa, 2021, p. 471). The necessity for safe and secure shelter is a common and basic human need, yet a national study of basic needs insecurity conducted in the United States of America found that 51% of the more than 33,000 participants from 70 community colleges were housing insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). In South Africa, the higher education accommodation crisis (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019; Tshazi, 2021)) is not only tied to the massification of the sector (Mugume & Luescher, 2015, p. 3; Ackermann & Visser, 2016, p. 8; Tjønneland, 2017, p. 2), which has resulted in a shortage of student accommodation, but also to the country's apartheid past (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019), the legacies of which have contributed significantly to the broader historical student funding crisis.

Mzileni and Mkhize (2019) explain how, during apartheid, "South African universities came to be fixed as physical and cultural elements of towns and cities based

on the broader trajectory of settler-colonialism and apartheid urban development, segregation and the Group Areas logic of the apartheid state" (p. 104). The reality is that the physical/spatial location and layout of many South African HEIs remain inextricably tied to the country's apartheid past nearly three decades post democracy, which serves to perpetuate the student housing crisis experienced first-hand by many HEI students (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019), when they have to leave rural homesteads to access HEIs located in urban areas. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that accommodation-related challenges may arise during engagements between students and advisors. Apart from the spatial and associated cost implications for these students, there is a lack of adequate student housing, and living conditions can be substandard.

More than a decade ago, a review of the provision of student housing at South African universities (DHET, 2011) found that "the conditions under which students are being housed in some university-leased buildings can only be described as squalid" (p. xviii), that insufficient and inadequate "on-campus housing is resulting in overcrowding, jeopardising students' academic endeavours and creating significant health and safety risks" (p. xviii), and that "[p]rivate student housing in the country appears to be completely unregulated" (p. xviii). The same report estimated the shortage of residence beds in the country at the time to be in excess of 195,000, while the projected cost of addressing the shortage was said to amount to more than ZAR 82 billion over 10 years or in excess of ZAR 109 billion over 15 years (DHET, 2019, p. xviii). Regardless, the shortage of affordable student housing for South African higher education students (Mugume & Luescher, 2015; Paterson, 2021; Tshazi, 2021) remains a key element that impacts directly on students' ability to succeed at university (DHET, 2011, p. xvii, xx; Xulu-Gama, 2019, p. 15; Sikhwari et al., 2020, p.8).

Black tax

Black tax[8] is a sensitive and complex (Mhlongo, 2019, p. 1) cultural and economic phenomenon within the South African context. Mangoma and Wilson-Prangley (2019) define it as "the ways in which the emerging black middle class make financial contributions to their direct and indirect families in South Africa" (p. 443), while Carpenter and Phaswana (2021) describe it as the "financial burden [placed on black South Africans] of having to support direct and extended family" (p. 1). In turn, Fongwa (2019) explains that it is "the process through which a black individual (usually an employed recent graduate) uses a significant portion of their income and savings to support their immediate and extended family" (p. 2). The literature often associates

8 Here the authors acknowledge their positionality as white South Africans and accept that they are unlikely to ever fully comprehend the cultural complexities and realities of black South Africans or how they perceive black tax. Mhlongo (2019) in his book *Black Tax: Burden or Ubuntu?* aims to highlight some of the complexities of experience and perception about black tax through a series of essays by "young and old, urban and rural, and male and female contributors" (p.1), in an attempt to determine whether it is "a burden or a blessing" (p.1).

black tax with young people and professionals[9], but seemingly not with students (except when speaking of young working professionals paying tuition fees for siblings who are studying (Fongwa, 2019, pp. 7, 8, 10)).

In reality though, the pressures of black tax are felt by black African students studying at South African HEIs, who often feel obliged to send a portion (or all) of their monthly NSFAS or bursary stipend (or annual textbook allowance) home to assist family members on pension, single-parent households, and/or siblings in primary or secondary school. Consequently, students may go hungry or choose not to buy essential learning resources, which can have a devastating effect on their academic performance and chances of successful degree completion. This is an important dimension to highlight, as the influence of black tax on the lives of many South African students has a direct bearing on the work of academic advisors who must support and guide them.

While in the past the far-reaching impact of the aforementioned structural and material constraints could be silenced and (arguably) avoided, the momentous events of recent times mean that they can no longer be ignored (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). In the section that follows, Archer's (1995, 2005) work on Social Realism and Boughey and McKenna's (2016) critique of the decontextualized learner are introduced as mechanisms with which to understand the inter-relationship of the aforementioned structural and material constraints with the work of a South African academic advisor.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This article is underpinned by the work of social realist, Margaret Archer. Archer (1995, 2005) builds on the work of Bhaskar (1975), and theorises about the interplay of structure, culture, and agency (autonomously and interconnectedly) across a stratified social reality to make meaning of complex social systems. The focus in this article is on the non-academic contextual social realities and structural constraints that affect the lives of South African higher education students and by association, the work of academic advisors that guide and support them. Case (2015) provides a useful definition of structure in a social realist context. She explains that structure "has to do with material goods (unequally distributed across society)" (p. 843), tying back to the previous "Structural and material constraints" section of this article. Structure, therefore, has the potential both to enable and constrain. In this instance, the focus is on the effect structural (and material) constraints experienced by students have on the work of academic advisors. Correspondingly, Boughey and McKenna's (2016) work on the decontextualized learner aligns with Archer's (1995, 2005) social realist view of social reality and the discussion about structural and material constraints.

Boughey and McKenna (2016) introduce the notion of the decontextualized learner in relation to academic literacy. The authors describe one of the presumptions in higher education discourse as being that those students who make their way through the system

9 See, for example: Fongwa (2019, pp. 6, 8, 9 & 10); Mangoma and Wilson-Prangley (2019, pp. 443, 449, 452 & 457).

are detached from their "history, culture, and language" (Boughey & McKenna, 2016, p. 6). They further explain that through the decontextualization lens, success in higher education is attributed to qualities or abilities that lie within the individual (Boughey & McKenna, 2016, p. 1). This way of thinking feeds into deficit conceptions of students (Boughey & McKenna, 2021, pp. 59, 60, 80 and 115) who are disregarded as "holistic social beings who bring with them their own unique social realities – realities that have been constructed over time through numerous experiences, events, cultural stimuli, and structures" (De Klerk, 2021, p. 106). This article serves to underscore the premise that students cannot be decontextualized from the structural and material constraints that influence their social and educational realities, and highlights how these constraining factors impact on the work of the academic advisors.

Ultimately, structural and material factors have an incontrovertible and infinitely complex (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) effect on many South African higher education students' prospects of success at tertiary studies, despite these being beyond their personal control. Moreover, academic advisors work with students as holistic social beings, not decontextualized ones, *because* their engagement with students spans the breadth of those students' lived realities, whether academic in nature or not. In this article, a social realist lens is used to guide the analysis of the findings.

Methodology and Data

This quantitative study draws on phenomenological research design principles (Groenewald, 2004; Fisher & Stenner, 2011; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). The quantitative baseline data set that forms the basis of this article reflects the advising engagements of one academic advisor's encounters with students (from the University of the Witwatersrand) during a 46-month period between January 2015 and October 2018. The complete baseline data set contains 2,240 entries emanating from 1,023 consultations with 614 students. These data were categorised into seven overarching categories, consisting of 34 subsidiary categories. To analyse the data, we took advantage of the descriptive and explorative opportunities (Groenewald, 2004) afforded by adopting a phenomenological research design (Groenewald, 2004; Fisher & Stenner, 2011; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). This allowed for the data to be interpreted and disaggregated in several ways (see Tables 1 to 3), which enabled the authors to thoroughly interrogate the practice of academic advising and the work of advisors as practitioners. In this article, we focus on overarching category seven, which deals with socio-economic matters, thus providing a window into understanding students' structural and material constraints. To enhance holistic insights into the data, it is cross-referenced with students' race and gender information.

Findings

The present study has thus far used relevant literature to explicate the intricacies that influence the lives of students and the work of academic advisors in South Africa. Next, the authors introduce another layer of evidence to support and guide their argument.

The data are used to further elucidate the direct influence of students' structural and material constraints on advisors' daily work. Moreover, the data help to elucidate why students cannot be separated from these constraining factors and may begin to offer possibilities for addressing some of these factors through academic advising.

Overarching category "socio-economic matters"

Table 1 shows overarching category seven of the baseline data set. Titled "socio-economic matters", the overarching category consists of eight subsidiary categories that collectively account for 480 instances where students engaged with the advisor about socio-economic matters (i.e. structural and material constraints). Most frequently discussed were issues related to food security (31.2%), toiletries (19.3%), funding/funding applications (24.0%), and accommodation (12.3%). Entries about funding refer to both funding issues and concerns, and enquiries about bursaries and funding applications or opportunities. Other matters covered include clothing, stationery, textbooks, and transport. Students would not necessarily consult about each subsidiary category separately but would, for example, raise matters of food security, funding concerns, and accommodation challenges during a single advising engagement. This demonstrates vividly how the structural and material constraints affecting students are intrinsically part of the work of the academic advisors who support and guide them.

Table 1: Overarching category socio-economic matters and associated subsidiary categories

Overarching Category	Total Baseline Data Set Entries (%)	Subsidiary Category	No. of Entries in Subsidiary Category	Overarching Category (%)
Socio-economic Matters (Total Entries = 480)	21%	Accommodation	59	12.3%
		Clothing	25	5.2%
		Food	150	31.2%
		Funding	115	24.0%
		Stationery	29	6.0%
		Textbooks	4	1.0%
		Toiletries	93	19.3%
		Transport	5	1.0%

Student gender and race information

Table 2 below provides a basic breakdown of the race and gender information of students who sought advice from the advisor during the period under investigation (i.e. the complete baseline data set). In terms of race, more than 75% of students were black African with the remainder being Indian and Chinese (11.4%), white (9.1%), and coloured (3.1%), which roughly aligns with the university's demographics (Wits, 2021).

Table 2: Student race and gender information gleaned from the complete baseline data set

Race and Gender Information	Number of Students	Percentage
Female	326	53.1%
Male	288	46.9%
Black African	467	76.1%
Coloured	19	3.1%
Indian & Chinese	70	11.4%
Unknown (race information unavailable)	2	0.3%
White	56	9.1%

Table 3 provides a cross-referenced disaggregated view of overarching category seven (Table 1) and the race and gender information of students as gleaned from the complete baseline data set (Table 2). Two particularly notable observations are: (i) the fact that 478 of the 480 (99.6%) entries about specifically socio-economic matters were from black African students, which ties back to earlier assertions about how current day student realities are linked to the country's apartheid past (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019); and (ii) that the number of male students who consulted about socio-economic matters is double that of female students, which warrants further investigation in subsequent studies, seeing as the complete baseline data set contains more entries about female than male students.

Table 3: Overarching category "socio-economic matters" cross-referenced with gender and race information

Overarching Category	Subsidiary Category	Entries	Female	Male	Black African	Coloured	Indian & Chinese	Unknown	White
Socio-economic Matters	Accommodation	59	21	38	59	0	0	0	0
	Clothing	25	5	20	25	0	0	0	0
	Food	150	44	106	150	0	0	0	0
	Funding	115	50	65	113	1	0	0	1
	Stationery	29	11	18	29	0	0	0	0
	Textbooks	4	0	4	4	0	0	0	0
	Toiletries	93	27	66	93	0	0	0	0
	Transport	5	2	3	5	0	0	0	0
	Totals	**480**	**160**	**320**	**478**	**1**	**0**	**0**	**1**

Discussion

The constraining factors outlined in the "Structural and material constraints" section of this article can evidently not be divorced from the lived experiences of many South

African students, or from the work of academic advisors. The structural and material constraints captured in the overarching category "socio-economic matters" (Table 1) account for 21% of the baseline data informing this study. Accordingly, providing advice on navigating the effects these constraining factors have on students' tertiary study experiences denotes a significant dimension of the academic advisor's work. Matters of funding, accommodation, and food security, among others, remain interconnected; with one another, with the country's past, with the lived experiences of many students, and with the work of academic advisors working in this country.

A racial disaggregation of this overarching category shows that 99.6% of students who sought advice about socio-economic matters are black African. This compelling figure makes it nearly impossible to refute the systemically entrenched legacy of apartheid and its influence on the South African higher education sector to this day (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019). Important to remember, is how apartheid was used to differentiate among racial groups based on the colour of their skin (in addition to culture), with black Africans affected most severely. Bearing this in mind, the data suggests that nearly 30 years after apartheid was abolished, many black African students are still experiencing tangible socio-economic and related consequences of that era. By extension then, and as shown in the data, these lived realities of black African students also affect the work of South African academic advisors. This is another reason why students cannot be decontextualized (Boughey & McKenna, 2016) from their lived social realities upon entry into the South African higher education system, nor can one divorce these realities from the work of advisors. Although the data are representative of an individual advisor's work, based on existing views about the socio-economic factors affecting South African students (Scott, 2016), it can be inferred that these realities would be applicable to most academic advisors working in South African HEIs.

For academic advisors these structural and material realities can bring about perplexing complexities that often cannot be solved, adding an additional layer of intricacy to their work. Although not directly linked in the baseline data, the advisor whose engagements are captured here recalls numerous interactions with students who had forgone purchasing food (or other necessities like textbooks and stationery) for the month, to comply with the pressure to send money home. The consequences of forgoing NSFAS or other financial aid monies in this way can be catastrophic and must not be discounted when considering the complex social realities students bring to the advising engagement or the institution more broadly. Importantly, these data must be utilised to develop and implement responsive strategies for enabling student success and for improving the integration of academic advising with all other components of South African HEIs (Moosa, 2021), to ensure that students (especially those most affected by the complex realities of the South African higher education sector) reap the benefits.

Conclusion

The impact of structural and material constraints on the lives of South African students, and the academic advisors who support them, is evident. The COVID-19 pandemic has

once again shone the spotlight on the inequities that permeate the sector (Czerniewicz et al., 2020), and the social impact it has had on many South African students (Sifunda et al., 2021).

These structural and material factors can directly impact students' prospects of success, which is why they cannot be decontextualized (Boughey & McKenna, 2016) from their lived realities when they enter the South African higher education system. Although not necessarily in a position to resolve these matters for students, advisors have the potential to help students navigate these complexities, both for themselves and within their institutions or the sector. Moreover, academic advisors may be positioned to enact agency (Archer, 1995, 2005) in the professional spaces they occupy at their institutions, by raising greater awareness about the interconnected realities of the students with whom they work. This emphasises the necessity for coordinated structural efforts to address these challenges and, working collaboratively with academics and other institutional stakeholders, developing mitigation strategies. Yet the onus cannot rest solely on advisors. There is an urgent need for coordinated efforts to bring about structural transformation in the form of policies, funding and the like (at institutional and sectoral level), as well as to facilitate shifts towards holistic, integrated student support and student-focused pedagogies and approaches to learning and teaching.

Although academic advisors cannot resolve these infinitely complex challenges, an intrinsic part of their practice is awareness of their impact and an understanding of their interconnectedness (Archer, 1995, 2005). This is essential, as advisors are often tasked with helping students navigate these structural and material constraints by enabling agency on multiple fronts. For this to occur effectively, advisors must know to whom to refer students, must be able to devise workable solutions while managing student expectations, and must maintain close bonds with students. Ultimately, the aim is to support students in the best way possible without disempowering them, with the objective of helping students persist and complete their studies successfully.

As the South African higher education sector shifts beyond emergency modes of instruction towards a post-pandemic reality, the conditions for change may be in place: the inequities entrenched in the sector are known and cannot easily be ignored (Czerniewicz et al., 2020); academic advising has emerged as a previously undervalued practice that can bridge gaps between the student, the institution, and the lecturer (De Klerk, 2022; Moosa, 2021); and calls for intentional shifts towards student-focused pedagogies and holistic student support within the South African higher education sector are on the rise. Now is the time for the South African higher education sector and its institutions to draw on the wisdom of these insights beyond paying lip-service to student challenges. The essence of our argument is that it remains the responsibility of HEIs to extract implications and opportunities offered by academic advising for realizing meaningful and long-lasting changes, especially as new modes of teaching and learning continue to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances.

Research Ethics

The authors subscribe to the highest levels of ethics during their research. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained through the authors' institutional Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) (Protocol number: H20/04/06). All data are presented in aggregate form and no individual is identifiable from the data shared in this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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