Research Article

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

Keywords

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methodology

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

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

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

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

Results

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

Developing Conceptual Capacity and a Theory of Academic Advising

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

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

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

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

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

and recognition that advisers received.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Developing a Model Responsive to Institutional Context and Student Need

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

Figure 1

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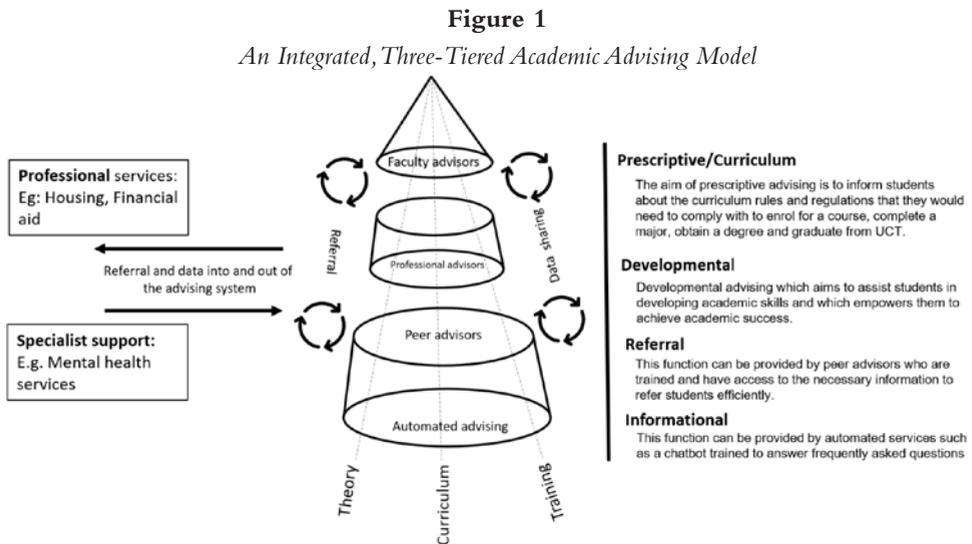
The model accommodates four basic advising functions: information sharing, referral, prescriptive advising, and developmental advising. It includes mechanisms that allow for referral to other parts of the system, as well as data sharing for a more seamless student experience.

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

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

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

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

Developing Structures, Tools and Resources to Implement a Coherent System

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion and Recommendations

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

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

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

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