

Research Article

Making Known the Real: An Exploration of Academic Advising Practices in a South African Higher Education Context

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Abstract

This is the first in a series of papers that emanate from the author's doctoral research. This research explores academic advising as a profession and academic advisors as practitioners in the South African Higher Education sector; it focuses on advising within the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management (FCLM) at a research-intensive public university in South Africa. During the period of investigation, academic advising engagements between students and the author were logged, thus forming a baseline dataset for the doctoral study. In phase one of the data analysis, baseline data were coded and clustered into overarching and subsidiary categories. The baseline dataset consists of 34 subsidiary categories, which form part of 7 overarching categories; it contains 2240 entries based on 1023 consultations with 614 individual students during the three-year period under investigation. Using Archer's (1995, 2000, 2005) notions about Social Realism as a theoretical framework, the author critically scrutinises the complex nature of the work that academic advisors do in a layered analysis of the baseline data. The author posits that it is through these layers of interpretation that one moves from the layer of the Empirical (experiences), through the layer of the Actual (events), to what Archer calls "the Real", that is, the layer of mechanisms or underlying driving forces that brings about what happens in the layers of the Empirical and the Actual. This paper focuses specifically on the role of the academic advisor; it postulates inferential observations about academic advising by using the baseline dataset as a way in while keeping the academic advisor central to the discussion.

Keywords

Academic advising, higher education, holistic supports, social realism, student advising, student success, student support, structure, culture, agency

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Introduction

It is undisputed that the South African (SA) higher education (HE) sector is in crisis. Matriculants who enter the system are severely underprepared for tertiary studies (Scott et al., 2007) with literacy (McKenna, 2010), transition (Schreiber et al., 2018), and social integration (Karp, 2011; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Walsh et al., 2009) posing serious challenges. These are compounded by the country's political, economic, and social complexities, and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic, which results in large groups of severely underprepared students who are trying to make their way through university. For this reason, academic advising is crucial to the success of 21st century university students who have to navigate the complexities of SA HE studies, and who will find themselves working in an ever-changing and uncertain world (Hodges, 2018). However, reliable, peer-reviewed literature about advising practices in SA remains limited. There is often anecdotal evidence and a resounding push for additional support services by those working in the sector, but advising requires a rigorous, evidence-based foundation (Surr, 2019) that will lend *gravitas* to SA advising practices. Tinto (2014, p. 6) reiterates this when stating that student-success work "require[s] an intentional, structured and coherent set of policies and actions" that are sustained over time. Accordingly, the objective of this paper is to add to the growing body of literature about academic advising as a practice, and about academic advisors as practitioners in SA HE, by critically exploring and investigating advising practices within the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management (FCLM) at a research-intensive public university in South Africa.

Background and Literature

WHY Academic advising?

Academic advisors can play a major part in students' social integration at an institution. Feelings of isolation and/or inadequate social support may cause students to drop out (Walsh et al., 2009), which are more likely to occur in instances where students are studying away from home and/or are first-generation students (Lotkowski et al., 2004). These are common characteristics of students studying at SA universities. Lee (2018, p. 77) speaks about the unique challenges experienced by historically marginalised students studying at HE institutions, which characterises many SA HE students. The author emphasises that academic advisors should understand the daily experiences of the students with whom they work (Lee, 2018, p. 77). Accordingly, students have been found to persevere, regardless of academic challenges, once they have managed adequate social integration (Karp, 2011; Lotkowski et al., 2004), which highlights the social nature of learning (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011; Wilmer, 2008) and its impact on student success. Hence,

there is merit in linking students with an individual (e.g. an academic advisor) who is interested in them, in their well-being, and in their progress (Hill, 1995; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Rendon, 1994). Correspondingly, it has been proven that non-academic interactions between students and educators (academic advisors are educators too) beyond the confines of a classroom have a positive impact on the students' development, social integration, and performance (Karp, 2011; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Rendon, 1994). Thus, Jacklin and Robinson's (2007) claim about personal support is crucial to the success of university students is substantiated. As Surr (2019, p. 6) points out, the evidence in support of academic advising as a practice that helps increase students' likelihood of succeeding in tertiary studies, especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds, continues to grow. However, advising in the SA context is still in its infancy; academic advising for SA HE is still being investigated and defined.

International Literature on Academic Advising

Academic advising as a profession has existed for many years in the global north and in Australia (Clark, 1989; Mann, 2020). The United States of America (USA) has produced a wealth of literature about advising models, practices, challenges and more (Aune, 2000; Donnelly, 2009; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Pizzolato, 2008; Steingass & Sykes, 2008; Tuttle, 2000; Zhang & Dinh, 2017). Beatty (1991) for example, provides a brief but comprehensive narrative overview of the USA's National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), which was established in the late 1970s and is the official body concerned with academic advising in North America. This association boasts a rich history, including an established annual conference and a peer-reviewed journal, which is well known within the American HE sector and globally. The work done by NACADA is ongoing, as Larson et al. (2018) have recently been grappling with the development of a reflective non-colloquial definition of academic advising for the US context. The available literature from global north contexts highlights academic advising as a profession that covers numerous matters such as curriculum advising, degree choice guidance, integration into the institution, orientation, liaising with other support services, engagement with academics and administrators, psychosocial support, and components of mentoring. It is about providing a comprehensive institutional contact point for students, where they can form a relationship with someone in the institution and find information on a range of university-related matters to enable them to successfully navigate academic and non-academic spaces within the institution. This stands in sharp contrast to the availability of reliable SA literature on academic advising, which is virtually non-existent.

South African Literature on Academic Advising

As mentioned earlier, there are a few SA papers published in confirmed predatory journals

and in non-accredited journals that discuss academic advising in SA HE. These are not reliable as per Mouton and Valentine (2017); they are not identifiable as credible contributions to the field. The limited contributions in accredited, peer-reviewed sources that refer to academic advising in SA contexts mostly do so briefly, in passing, and/or without sufficient depth.

Bitzer (2009) fleetingly mentions academic advising as something that could be funded through teaching development grants. It was exactly such a grant that formed the foundation for academic advising in FCLM (De Klerk, Spark, Jones, & Maleswena, 2017), where four permanent academic advisors are currently employed. Yet, little is said about academic advising as a profession in South African HE. Moodley and Singh (2015, p. 95) highlight academic advising as a “proven high-impact practice” in their paper about student dropout rates at SA universities, but they make no further mention of this. Petersen et al. (2009) mention help-seeking behaviour in their paper about disadvantaged SA students, their adjustment to university, and to academic performance, but they do not connect this behaviour to academic advising as a conduit for addressing these challenges. Naidoo and Lemmens (2015) and Kritzinger et al. (2018) mention the referral of at-risk students to student advisors at their institution, but they provide little further detail about how these posts are conceptualised or about what these advisors do. Lastly, Mayet (2016, p. 4) cites the referral of first-year students to advisory staff for mentoring and monitoring, but she fails to elaborate on the role or profile of advisory staff.

Possibly the most influential relevant, and significant contributions to the literature about academic advising as a profession within the South African HE context are by Francois Strydom: Senior Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of the Free State (UFS) (see for example: Strydom, 2017; Strydom & Loots, 2020). Strydom and Loots (2020) highlight academic advising in the SA context as a high-impact practice, which links faculties and student support services at the UFS and which explicates this link to students through advising. Moreover, Strydom and Loots (2020, p. 30) explain that the UFS has made a connection “between academic advising, student engagement and students’ academic success.” However, Strydom’s (2017, p. 104) assertion about academic advising as a means of promoting “student persistence, development, support, and success” having seen “very few literature contribution[s]” in South Africa, still holds true today.

Nevertheless, accredited and reliable literature that addresses academic advising as a SA HE profession, academic advising practices within the SA HE sector, and equity of access as well as barriers to epistemological access, remain extremely limited. This is the case, despite the wealth of literature that exists about underprepared students entering South African universities (McKenna, 2010; Schreiber et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2007), work done to mitigate it, and initiatives/interventions to enhance student throughput, persistence, and success (Case et al., 2018; De Klerk et al., 2017; Spark et al., 2017). In conclusion, while the problem to date has been that South Africa does not have a formal advising framework for HE, such a framework is being developed and funded in a collaborative, multi-institutional

DHET-UCDG project. This special edition of the *JSAA* forms part of the project which should, in time, see more evidence-based contributions on academic advising in SA HE.

Theoretical Framework

During the late 1980s, and throughout the 1990s, and into the early 2000s, Margaret Archer made significant and original contributions to the theory of Social Realism. Her most prominent texts were *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (1995)¹ and *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (2000).² As a sociologist, her focus is on the many layers (or strata) of social reality; on the way in which that stratified social reality is constructed through structures and cultures;³ on humans as (change) agents within the stated social reality, and on the autonomous, yet interconnected, relationships that exist between and among these cultures, structures, and agents. Archer builds on the work of Roy Bhaskar (1975) who first posited the idea of a layered social reality. Layer one is called “the Empirical”; it is concerned with the experiences and observations made by human agents at this layer. These experiences and observations are relative to individual world views and histories; any given social incident can be experienced and observed differently by numerous individuals. Layer two is called “the Actual”; it represents events that occur in the real world, some of which we may be acutely or peripherally aware of, and some of which we may not be aware of at all. This layer encompasses layer one; an event that occurs in the Actual can be observed and experienced in unique ways by individuals at the layer of the Empirical. Collectively, these two layers represent our daily social reality. The third and final layer is termed “the Real”, which encompasses everything in layers one and two as well as what Bhaskar (1975) refers to as “mechanisms”. The mechanisms at the layer of the Actual can be described as the underlying interconnected driving forces (whether physical or social) that result in experiences and events at the layer of the Empirical and the Actual. Ultimately, these stratified layers of reality manifest at a micro (individual), meso (institutional), and macro (national) level.

Accordingly, Social Realism concerns itself with the ontological; its tenets assert that stratified layers of social reality at micro, meso, and macro level exist independently from the human

- 1 In subsequent papers the author will begin to explore and incorporate Archer’s (1995, 2000, 2005) morphogenetic approach as part of the investigation of academic advising within SA HE contexts, and of the analysis of both quantitative baseline data and qualitative interview data.
- 2 Although by no means her only meaningful contributions, if one considers other publications like *Culture and agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (1996), *Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation* (2003), *Social Origins of Educational Systems* (2013), and the chapter titled *Structure, Culture and Agency* in *The Blackwell companion to the sociology of culture* (2005), among many others.
- 3 Here mention must be made of Archer’s extensive theorising about the nature of the relationship between structure and culture, and her contributions about fallacies of conflation in anthropological and sociological discussions about culture over many decades.

change agents within this reality. Yet, it cannot be separated from these change agents because of the way in which social reality is constructed through the actions of humans. Similarly, humans find their doing and being influenced by the societies within which they live and which they often attempt to transmute. Ultimately, Archer is concerned with making explicit the Real, while accounting for the complex dimensions of and interplay within that realism. This theory is relevant for two reasons. First, because academic advising is a social practice that deals with students 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, which implicitly or explicitly influence their (in)ability to enact agency in their own lives and realities. Second, because academic advisors as practitioners do not only engage with these students and their lived social realities, but they also have to do so within the highly complex stratified social reality of their institutions, which form part of the larger SA HE sector.

Therefore, adopting Archer's (1995, 2000) ideas about Social Realism and, more importantly, about the concepts of structure, culture, and agency (Archer, 2005) across stratified layers of social reality, to analyse academic advising within the complex realities of SA HE,⁴ affords one a set of lenses with which to critically interrogate the complex dimensions of the work that SA academic advisors do. Archer provides a triangulated framework that informs the exploration of how academic advising is positioned within the SA HE sector. Winberg (2016, p.174) posits that the interconnected relationship of culture, structure, and agency "is an important concept for understanding university teaching" as both structures (i.e. funding, matters of policy, management and leadership, and human and physical resources) and cultures (i.e. dynamics and values in a division, school or faculty, as well as in an institutional and national climate) affect university teaching and, by association, the (in)ability of university teachers to enact agency. Academic advising as a profession, and academic advisors as practitioners, are subject to the same structural, cultural, and agential forces as university teaching and teachers. In fact, academic advising as a HE practice is a form of university teaching. Moreover, academic advisors tend to be at the coalface of the student experience, which renders them particularly susceptible to structural and cultural enabling factors and constraints (Winberg, 2016) and which, by extent, influences their (in)ability to enact agency within advising space.

Methodology

Creating the baseline dataset

The phenomenological approach (Groenewald, 2004; Fisher & Stenner, 2011; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015) adopted for this study was chosen because of the explorative opportunities

4 In their book *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives*, Boughey and McKenna (2021) provides a detailed and in-depth example of the application of critical and social realism to analyse the complexities of the South African higher education system.

(Groenewald, 2004) it afforded the researcher. The author collected the baseline data between January 2015 and October 2018 while working as an academic advisor at the FCLM. During this period, the author captured information about the nature of his engagements with students by briefly noting the reasons why students sought advice and/or by coding their reasons according to categories. These categories were created organically as new matters arose; their number increased from approximately five in the first half of 2015 to more than thirty by the second half of 2018. The nature of advising engagements meant that during times of high volume, only brief notes could be taken about any given engagement, or else the engagement would be coded immediately (without additional notes) against all applicable categories in the spreadsheet. The author estimates that there could have been up to twice as many engagements and/or advising sessions with students during this period than what has been captured in the baseline dataset. However, time pressures and high volumes of students during certain peak periods meant that information about student engagements could not always be captured.⁵ Moreover, student engagements via email, telephone, and face-to-face outside the office were not accounted for. For this reason, the baseline dataset does not provide a complete record of the author's engagements with students during the period. Nevertheless, 2240 entries based on 1023 consultations with 614 individual students during the period January 2015 to October 2018 are deemed sufficient to identify common trends and to extrapolate accurate information about student engagements during this period. In addition, inferential observations were made about the stratified structural and cultural complexities that influence academic advising as a profession, and academic advisors as practitioners within the SA HE sector.

Clustering and categorising overarching and subsidiary categories in the baseline dataset

For the purpose of this study, the term “subsidiary category” denotes one of the existing categories against which coding was done in the baseline dataset. The baseline dataset contains 34 subsidiary categories. An overarching category denotes an umbrella categorisation of a set or cluster of subsidiary categories. For example, the subsidiary categories *funding*, *accommodation*, and *food* form part of the overarching category *socio-economic matters*. The baseline dataset contains seven overarching categories. First, all subsidiary

5 The NACADA 2011 National Survey of Academic advising (Carlstrom, 2013) determined that the ratio of academic advisor to advisee ranges between 1:233 and 1:600 (Robbins, 2013), depending on the size of the institution. At the time when the baseline data for this study was collected, the ratio of academic advisor to undergraduate (UG) student in FCLM was approximately 1:2500. Today, the academic advisor capacity in FCLM has increased to four full-time academic advisors (as mentioned earlier); their focus now includes UG and postgraduate (PG) student support. As such, the ratio of academic advisor to FCLM UG and PG students collectively is approximately 1:2375, although if one factors in the peer advisors (still referred to as ‘Success Tutors’ in Spark et al. (2017)) who only work with UG students, the ratio of academic/peer advisor to UG student is approximately 1:240, while the ratio of academic advisor to PG student is 1:1125.

categories were clustered by reviewing each category and by assigning it to an overarching category. Second, once the subsidiary categories were clustered, the author colour-coded the overarching categories by assigning a unique colour to each one. Third, each subsidiary category was highlighted according to the colour assigned to its overarching category. This was done to make it easier to move subsidiary categories around on the spreadsheet and to avoid unnecessary confusion during the clustering process. Finally, once each subsidiary category column had been highlighted in the colour of its overarching category, the subsidiary categories could be reorganised with ease by clustering those highlighted in the same colour; the process of analysing baseline data was thus refined. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the overarching and subsidiary category data captured in the baseline dataset.

Table 1

Overarching and Subsidiary Category Data gleaned from the Baseline Dataset

Overarching Category	Percentage of Total Number of Entries	Subsidiary Category	Number of Entries in Subsidiary Category	Percentage of Overarching Category
1. Academic Matters (Total Entries = 561)	25%	1. Academic Advising and Curriculum Planning	351	63%
		2. Course Content and Results	93	17%
		3. Career Planning and Advising	36	6%
		4. Degree Change and Degree Fit	78	14%
		5. Deregistration	3	1%
2. Follow- Up Sessions (Total Entries = 184)	8%	6. Follow-Up Meeting	120	65%
		7. Mentoring Meeting with Success Tutor	11	6%
		8. Readmitted Student Consultation	53	29%

Overarching Category	Percentage of Total Number of Entries	Subsidiary Category	Number of Entries in Subsidiary Category	Percentage of Overarching Category
3. Other Matters (Total Entries = 161)	7%	9. Calculator	19	12%
		10. Miscellaneous	131	81%
		11. Physical Health	11	7%
4. Psychosocial Matters (Total Entries = 193)	9%	12. Mental Health	30	16%
		13. Personal and Emotional Matters	122	63%
		14. Stress and Anxiety	41	21%
5. Referrals (Total Entries = 283)	13%	15. Referred to Academic Tutor	9	3%
6. Skills (Total Entries = 378)	17%	23. Excellence Skills	107	28%
		24. General Life Skills	43	11%
		25. Time Management	147	39%
		26. University Life/ Work-Life Balance	81	21%
7. Socio-economic Matters (Total Entries = 480)	21%	27. Accommodation	59	12%
		28. Clothing	25	5%
		29. Food	150	31%
		30. Funding	115	24%
		31. Stationery	29	6%
		32. Textbooks	4	1%
		33. Toiletries	93	19%
34. Transport	5	1%		

The findings below are described according to the categories presented in Table 1.

Findings

Overarching Category 1: Academic Matters

The first overarching category constitutes a quarter of all the entries captured; it has five subsidiary categories. *Subsidiary Category 1: Academic Advising and Curriculum Planning* includes matters such as discipline/subject choice discussions; discussions about degree structure; queries about pre-requisite and progression rules; discussions about credits accrued and credit requirements; academic exclusion processes, appeals and readmission processes; student registration status; queries about results outcome codes; curriculum planning and advising on possible paths to graduation; and an exploration of student interests in line with disciplines offered in the faculty, among other things. *Subsidiary Category 2: Course Content and Results* covers matters such as: queries about results and student concerns about results; updates about results of tests/examinations or about previous semesters/years of study, as well as script and performance review processes. Entries about course content, in particular, relate to workload issues and problems with course content and understanding. This section also captures general updates about whether students' studies are progressing or not. *Subsidiary Category 3: Career Planning and Advising* denotes engagements where students require advice about possible career paths based on their chosen degree and subjects. *Subsidiary Category 4: Degree Change and Degree Fit* entries both refer to students who are experiencing challenges in the degrees for which they are registered, including inquiries about the process to change degrees, and to consultations where students ask for information about other degrees and study options. *Subsidiary Category 5: Deregistration* covers instances where students inquire about deregistration as an option, instances where students are advised about deregistration processes, and instances where a discussion about deregistration is initiated by the academic advisor as an option in light of current circumstances or events. As Table 1 shows though, the work of FCLM academic advisors involves far more than what Overarching Category 1 covers.

Overarching Category 2: Follow-Up Sessions

Overarching Category 2 represents 8% of all entries; it has three subsidiary categories, namely Subsidiary Category 6: Follow-Up Meeting; Subsidiary Category 7: Mentoring Meeting with Success Tutor (i.e. Peer Advisor), and Subsidiary Category 8: Readmitted Student Consultation. These categories collectively denote engagements with students that follow from a first or initial consultation; cover discussions about plans put in place during previous consultations; provide updates on matters discussed during previous consultations and/or general check-in conversations to see how the student is doing; discuss new matters arising, and provide progress updates. The meetings can have a positive, negative, or neutral

atmosphere which depends on what may be happening in a student's life at the time of the meeting. Nevertheless, the fact that the student attends follow-up engagements can be said to show accountability; this may well indicate that the student needs interaction and engagement, as well as support and advice. Of particular importance here is the fact that the academic advisor prompts the student for a follow-up engagement at the end of a consultation. In this way, the academic advisor nudges the student to be accountable for whatever may have been discussed during their engagement, while sustaining the advising loop. Not all consultations will require follow-up engagements, but to many students it signals an important link to someone within the institution who takes an interest in their well-being.

Overarching Category 3: Other Matters

The third overarching category and its subsidiary categories (i.e. *Subsidiary Category 9: Calculator*, *Subsidiary Category 10: Miscellaneous*, and *Subsidiary Category 11: Physical Health*) are collectively called "Other Matters" because they do not fit into any other overarching or subsidiary category and/or they may not have occurred with enough prevalence to be included elsewhere. This particularly applies to *Subsidiary Category 10: Miscellaneous*. *Subsidiary Category 9: Calculator* may appear to fit into *Overarching Category 7: Socio-Economic Matters*; instead, it relates to a loan calculator initiative coordinated and managed by the academic advisors. Entries about physical health in *Subsidiary Category 11* relate to instances where students' physical health might have had an impact on their study plans and/or on their degree trajectory, which would require the academic advisor to work with the student to develop contingencies and plans for return after the physical health issue has been resolved or is under control. Jointly, "Other Matters" is an important overarching category, as it speaks to both the diverse needs of students and to the importance for academic advisors to be able to assist with matters that they may never have experienced before.

Overarching Category 4: Psychosocial Matters

Psychosocial challenges and support needs signify an overarching category that interconnects with most other overarching and subsidiary categories. This classification of matters can both result in the types of challenges presented in other categories and/or be consequences. *Subsidiary Category 12: Mental Health* relates to instances where students report mental health challenges; provide feedback or updates on known mental health challenges, or are referred to the institutional Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) on suspicion of suffering from mental health challenges. *Subsidiary Category 14: Stress and Anxiety* cover entries linked to stress and anxiety about studies, examinations and assessments, relationships, the future and career prospects, family matters, academic progress in relation

to peers, and post-examination stress, among others. *Subsidiary Category 13: Personal and Emotional Matters* links closely to *Subsidiary Categories 12 and 14*, but it should not be conflated with either. While students may require professional help for mental health challenges, as well as stress and anxiety management, there are elements of the relationship between the academic advisor and student that falls outside the realm of professional counselling and related services. Having someone in the institution who is not a counsellor or psychologist and who has a vested interest in students and their well-being, can play a major role in students' ability to persist with their studies and, ultimately, to achieve success (see for example Hill, 1995; Karp, 2011; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Rendon, 1994; Surr, 2019).

Overarching Category 5: Referrals

Subsidiary Categories 15 to 22 demonstrate the broad network of relationships that academic advisors must have in the faculty where they work, across the institution, and with Student Affairs services in particular. Although an academic advisor remains the person in the institution with whom the student forges a personal connection, the advisor does not necessarily have the expertise, knowledge, or authority to help address and resolve particular matters. As such, an academic advisor would refer a student to whoever may be most appropriate to address a particular challenge: CCDU for therapy or careers counselling, an Assistant Dean or Faculty Registrar to help resolve an administrative matter or appeal, and/or an academic advisor from another faculty to address matters pertaining to that faculty. A strong referral system is essential to effective academic advising and to the success and well-being of the student. Referrals also provide academic advisors with an opportunity to close the advising loop by scheduling follow-up sessions with students, where they can provide updates and feedback about the referral matters, and establish the students' accountability.

Overarching Category 6: Skills

The sixth overarching category has to do with skills and skills development. *Subsidiary Category 26: University Life/ Work-Life Balance* includes instances where students are finding life at university challenging and/or where they want to engage more actively in activities related to university life. Entries in this category also relate to instances where students find it difficult to manage their work-life balance (e.g. dedicating either too much attention to studies or too much attention to other activities). Entries coded in this category may also include reports of anxiety about graduating and about having to start working. *Subsidiary Categories 23: Excellence Skills* and *25: Time Management* cover time management, note-taking strategies, study and exam planning, pre-reading, reflective practice (e.g. free writing), study skills and techniques, assignment and paragraph writing, and exam and test-taking strategies. *Subsidiary Category 24:*

General Life Skills relates to advice about managing general life challenges and instances where students report issues in managing such challenges.

Overarching Category 7: Socio-Economic Matters

Overarching category 7 comprises subsidiary categories 27 to 34 and constitutes 21% of all the entries captured. Socio-economic matters, including funding, accommodation, food security, transport and more, denote a significant dimension of the work that South African academic advisors do. This will be explored in depth in paper two of the current series.

The Baseline Data

From the baseline dataset (see Table 1), it is evident that an academic advisor must be familiar with a broad range of interconnected matters when providing advice and support to students. These range from academic matters and students' skills needs to psychosocial and socio-economic issues; this supports the notion of students being holistic social beings who come to the academic advising engagement from their own unique social reality. Another crucial role of the academic advisor is to be a referrer. To do this accurately and timeously, the academic advisor must refer students to the relevant support services in the institution, while maintaining a relationship with those referral parties to ensure that students are provided with the best support possible. This also links to the notion of follow-up engagements, where academic advisors schedule a follow-up meeting with students, thus creating a sense of accountability. Students do not only need to heed the referrals, but they also need to play an active part in addressing and (ideally) resolving whatever issue/challenge about which they sought advice. Ultimately, the baseline data is useful to gain insight into the day-to-day needs of students as a means of tracking and monitoring them, to gauge student uptake and engagement with academic advisors, and to draw conclusions about the nature of the support services required by students and within the institution.

Discussion

The Empirical, the Actual and the Real

By approaching the data with Bhaskar's (1975) and Archer's (1995, 2000, 2005) ideas about stratified layers of reality in mind, the baseline data afford three layers of interpretation. At the layer of the Empirical, one is able to start identifying the numerous support needs presented by students during the timeframe when the author collected data, which links to their unique experiences in FCLM. By clustering the data into a subsidiary and over-arching categories, one

is able to identify thematic areas of support that could require the attention of academic advisors during the course of their duties, while also affording an opportunity to start crystallising the needs of students in FCLM. Moving to the layer of the Actual, one is able to draw inferences about events (whether known or unknown) that result in the experiences of students and, by extent, academic advisors at the level of the Empirical. In considering these layers as a collective, one can begin to draw inferences about the skills requirements and training needs of South African academic advisors, the types of support services required (both by students and within the institution), and the importance of ensuring that there are strong ties between academic advising services and institutional student support services. Moving to the layer of the Real, one can begin to interrogate the unseen structural and cultural mechanisms, whether physical or social, that result in experiences and events at the layers of the Empirical and the Actual. In other words, the baseline dataset gives the author proverbial access to the Real through layers of interpretation and inferencing at the levels of the Empirical and the Actual. This also means that, although the baseline data is only representative of one academic advisor's engagements with students over a three-year period, one is able to infer and theorise more broadly about academic advising within the SA HE context.

Making Known Some of the Real

Grants

Since 2014, when the author started working in the student success and support space as an academic advisor, there have been a commendable commitment to student success and support nationally, and by association support to the work of academic advisors. Most notably are the following support initiatives: i) the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), which makes funding available to South African universities through the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) in three-year cycles;⁶ ii) the South African Institute for Distance Education's (*Saide*) *Siyaphumelela* (We Succeed) Project,⁷ which has strong ties with the DHET and the US-based Achieving the Dream Network, which is funded by the Kresge Foundation;

6 The UCDG aims to transform "teaching, learning, and leading" (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2017, p. 2) to enhance "quality, success, and equity in universities" (DHET, 2017, p. 2).

7 The *Siyaphumelela* Project focuses on the use of data and data analytics to drive evidence-based initiatives and interventions to enhance student success and support at partnering South African universities (i.e. taking what is proven to work to scale, based on evidence).

and iii) the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) Quality Enhancement Project.⁸ The *Siyaphumelela* Network enables networking and collaboration among academic advisors and others working in the student success and support space. It also enables more scholarly work about the realities and unique challenges of the SA HE sector, as well as efforts to address the many structural, sectoral, and institutional issues affecting South African students. In turn, the UCDP has enabled the launching of academic advising as a practice at the author's institution. These enabling structures made it possible for the author to create the baseline dataset and, consequently, more evidence-based contributions about the complex nature of academic advisors' work. Accordingly, this is an example of how national structural support has enabled academic advising as a profession, both by making funding available for its growth and by making academic advisors' work a strategic priority (e.g. the multi-institution UCDG-funded project that aims to professionalize academic advising in SA). However, not everything happening at the national level has been constructive or enabling.

The idea of academic advising as a profession in the SA HE sector was only introduced at the national level in a meaningful way in 2017 with the commencement of the aforementioned multi-institutional professionalisation project, despite explicit links between academic advising and SA HE student support work made by Bitzer (2009) and Singh (2015). Prior to 2017, work in this space was sporadic and not easily identifiable or defined it lacked the rigorous, evidence-based foundation, which Surr (2019) promulgates, or the intentionality, sustainability, and coherence, which Tinto (2014) deems vital to work in student success. Furthermore, although the availability of grants to enable the work of academic advisors is encouraging, the UCDG has been overshadowed by tremendous year-on-year underspending across multiple grant cycles. Of the approximately R510 million allocated to 24 public universities in South Africa in 2017 (Ministerial Statement, 2016, p. 18), just over R103 million went unspent (DHET, 2018, p. 18). This is by no means anomalous or uncommon.

The idea of funding being available to address systemic challenges (e.g. equity of access and student transitions, among others) juxtaposed with the immense underspend causes frustration, especially when the baseline data shows that many students consulted about matters directly related to these systemic challenges. This indicates an egregious flow in structures governing the spending of grant monies or, possibly, how grant holders and managers might be ill-equipped to spend these. By extension, this affects academic advisors at grassroots level, as they are often the ones faced with having to support and advise students without necessarily being able to find long-term, workable, and sustainable solutions to the structural mechanisms at play. Furthermore, when these factors lead to student dropout or academic exclusion, academic advisors either have to guide students through the trauma of exclusion or else they are faced

8 The project aims to "improve student success at [...] Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and in the [...] sector as a whole" (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2014, p. 1).

with the reality that students with whom they have worked and built relationships, have to drop out because of factors beyond the students' and academic advisors' control. In this way, the disjuncture between grant availability and management constitutes a structural constraint on the academic advisors' work, and on their ability to enact agency in the advising space.

Evidence-Informed Approaches to Academic Advising

Academic advisors tend to be primarily focused on students as social beings, concerning themselves with the day-to-day challenges which students face at the layers of the Empirical and the Actual—and rightly so. Yet, in order to truly help students be successful, they must use the available tools to capture information about these students and to feed this information into the stream of institutional data that inform predictive analytics models and early-warning systems. In turn, these can enable academic advisors to better understand mechanisms that drive events that are likely to present challenges to students. The *Siyaphumelela* Project promotes and enables the use of data and evidence to take best practices to scale and to share findings nationally (and across the network of partner institutions) through the annual *Siyaphumelela* Conference and other platforms.

Consequently, there has been a structural change overtime at the institution where the author works, in the form of plans and frameworks that aim to address some of the underlying factors that affect the work of academic advisors. This includes efforts to develop and make available early-warning systems, an intervention portal for capturing data about student engagements and interventions, investment in predictive analytics capabilities to enable academic advisors to implement proactive, preventative strategies, and associated interventions. However, structural challenges such as the ongoing national students' funding crisis (Wangenge-Ouma & Carpentier, 2018; Wangenge-Ouma, 2021) exponentially increase student traffic for academic advisors, which then occupies a great deal of their time. This often results in student engagements and interventions not being captured in the intervention portal (or at least not timeously). Consequently, the data stream into the system is not always constant, which then results in (potentially) skewed or inaccurate early-warning flags or alerts. Similarly, the culture among academic advisors is such that not all of them necessarily utilise all these resources consistently and intentionally. Academic advisors' beliefs about at-risk labelling might also affect the culture of regularly capturing intervention data, as might matters of morale in such a high-pressure and emotional environment. The irony is that data fed into the predictive models are meant to generate leading indicators that could help academic advisors in their efforts to prevent future students from being at risk of failing or dropping out.

Conclusions

First, in a series of papers emanating from the author's doctoral research, this article begins to crystallise for the reader the highly complex nature of academic advising as an educational practice within the SA HE sector. The author uses a baseline dataset created from engagements as an academic advisor with students over a three-year period (2015 to 2018), and he analyses the data by adopting Archer's notions of Social Realism as a theoretical framework and critical lens. This allows one insight into the experiences of students and academic advisors and the events resulting from those experiences. Accordingly, the baseline data has revealed the diverse and multifaceted range of matters that academic advisors need to be equipped with in order to assist students, and the importance of networking with institutional support services and academic advisors from other faculties. In turn, the third layer, the Real, has afforded an opportunity for inferential observations about the underlying mechanisms that drive experiences and events at the layers of the Empirical and the Actual. By briefly observing some of the ways in which stratified structural and cultural elements within the SA HE sector affect academic advisors' work, one can begin to see how these elements potentially affect academic advisors' (in)ability to enact agency within the academic advising space.

In conclusion though, if we consider Social Realism to be concerned with the tenets of a stratified and interconnected social reality, and if we acknowledge academic advising as a social practice that views students as holistic social beings coming to the advisor-advisee engagement, then it is safe to deduce that academic advising as a practice concerns itself with the constraints and barriers (far more than enablers) which affect students' ability to navigate and progress through the complex social reality of the South African HE sector. In this case, the social reality, viewed from the students' perspective, is the institution where they are studying. However, academic advisors are as concerned with epistemology as they are with constraints or barriers to students' progress and success. For in as much as academic advisors work to address or resolve the challenges affecting the holistic HE experience of the students with whom they work, they are ultimately doing so to eliminate barriers to epistemological access for those students. Whereas at the layer of the Empirical, the baseline data may elucidate the day-to-day experiences (and challenges) about which students seek advice, and whereas the layer of the Actual may provide insight into events that bring about student experiences, it is at the layer of the Real that one comes to appreciate how the actions of academic advisors are intended to afford students equal and equitable epistemological access to HE knowledge bases. This allows one to deduce that, whereas academic advising as an educational practice is concerned with addressing the day-to-day challenges that students experience, academic advisors as practitioners are as concerned with enabling epistemological access to knowledge bases for students, as they are with the daily challenges and barriers SA HE students face.

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Statements

Research Ethics

The author subscribes to the highest levels of ethics during his research. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained through the author's institutional Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical). All data is presented in aggregate form and no individual is identifiable from the data shared in this paper.

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