ESTABLISHING A BASELINE: A SOCIAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE ON ACADEMIC ADVISING AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY PRIOR TO COVID-19

D. de Klerk
Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8051-0833

ABSTRACT

Academic advising remains an emerging practice and profession within the South African higher education sector. Although there has been an increase in literature about advising in South Africa recently, there remains a dearth of literature about the experiences of academic advisors working in this context. This article aims to make such a contribution, by focusing in particular on the experiences and insights from 15 South African advisors (from one university) about academic advising *prior* to the COVID-19 pandemic. The data that informs this study was collected through semi-structured interviews. The focus in this article is on advisor responses to three of the interview questions, which proved sufficient because of the richness of the data. The study draws on elements of social realist Margaret Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework to explicate why this perspective on advising within a South African higher education context is necessary. Archer's (1995, 2005) work on structure, culture, and agency is then used as analytic lenses with which to analyse the advisors' experiences and insights of advising prior to the pandemic. A phenomenographic approach (Marton 1981; Tight 2016) is adopted to explore the varying conceptions (Cibangu and Hepworth 2016) of advising offered by the academic advisors. Nine focal areas emerge from these insights, which are analysed and discussed using Archer's (1995, 2005) structure, culture, and agency. It becomes apparent that academic advising was complex even before the pandemic. The advisors express an urgency to help others, raise concerns about entrenched inequities and resource constraints, highlight the pitfalls of inadequate help-seeking among students, and emphasise the need for better institutional integration of academic advising at the advisors' university, among other things. It becomes clear that there are numerous structural and cultural tensions that constrain advisor and student agency, possibly to the detriment of student success. The article leaves the reader with insights into the experiences of academic advisors prior to the pandemic, thus providing a baseline against which to measure advising during and beyond the pandemic, at a time when advising in South African higher education is still being developed and defined.

Keywords: academic advising, academic advisors, agency, culture, higher education, social realism, South Africa, structure, student advising

INTRODUCTION

There has, for some time, been a dearth of literature on academic advising within and for the South African higher education context. Encouragingly, this has begun to change, following the launch of a national project in 2017, which focuses on the professionalisation of advising for the South African context (Tiroyabone and Strydom 2021). Nevertheless, most of what has emerged either focuses on the adoption of Global North academic-advising models within the South African higher education context (e.g., Van Pletzen et al. 2021), academic advising during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Moosa 2021), examples of how academic advising could support students in extended curriculum / access programmes (e.g., Sekonyela 2021), or quantitative studies that aim to document students' reasons for seeking advice (de Klerk 2021). Research on the collective experiences and insights of practising academic advisors within the South African higher education context that documents the nature of academic advising *before* COVID-19 remains scarce. The purpose of this article, which forms part of a larger study on academic advising as a profession and academic advisors as practitioners within the South African context, is to make such a contribution.

Strayhorn (2015, 62) sheds light on why academic advisors are essential to the higher education ecosystem:

> "[t]hey help make the implicit explicit, the hidden known, and the unfamiliar commonplace. They help students navigate college by making clear what students need to know and do to be successful. They help students find a sense of belonging on campus."

Consequently, the focus of this article, which comes at a time when academic advising for South African higher education is still being developed (Obaje and Jeawon 2021), is on the collective voices of 15 academic advisors from across a large, research-intensive public university in South Africa (the University of the Witwatersrand, also known as Wits), and their insights, experiences, and perceptions of advising before the COVID-19 pandemic.

This perspective is necessary, as it provides a baseline against which to measure what emerged regarding academic advising in South Africa during the pandemic (de Klerk 2022; Moosa 2021), and it investigates the state of advising as the sector moves beyond the pandemic. Underpinned by social realist tenets, the article draws upon the notions of structure, culture, and agency (SCA) (Archer 1995) to analyse interview data, along with elements of Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework to explore the nature of academic advising at Wits before the pandemic. Ultimately, the findings are used to describe advising as perceived by advisors within the context of a South African university. This then serves as a baseline against which to measure academic advising in South Africa in the future, especially as the author argues

elsewhere that the pandemic may have been a catalyst for change, both in terms of how advising is practised and how it is perceived within the South African higher education context.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

The importance of context and contextual relevance in higher education matters cannot be discounted. Leibowitz et al. (2015, 327) explain "that a deeper understanding of context across higher education institutions could provide insights that might better inform policy at the national level". This claim is significant, as it delineates the autonomous identity and power of institutions within the higher education sector (institutional context), indicating that no institution can function independently from the sector as a whole (national context). These contexts remain interconnected and dynamic. This is noteworthy because, while this article focuses on academic advising at Wits, the findings are relevant to the sector at large.

Context is crucial to the arguments made in this article for two reasons. First, the emergence of academic advising as a profession within South African higher education is still nascent, although it has existed elsewhere for quite some time. It is the uniqueness of the South African context and the novelty of academic advising within it that lends relevance to this article. Second, Archer (1995, 11) speaks of context as an environment in which the features of a system are either reproduced (i.e., remain unchanged: morphostasis) or transformed (i.e., change occurs: morphogenesis). Leibowitz et al. (2015, 316) explain that "higher education institutions are contexts in which features of the higher education sector may be either reproduced or transformed". Consequently, as Leibowitz et al. (2015) explicate, Archer's (1995) explanation of context allows one to consider "some of the ways in which institutional contexts may influence how change occurs [or does not occur]" (Leibowitz et al. 2015, 316), both within the institution and the sector at large. This pertains to the data that emerged from the advisor interviews that inform this article, and it is central to establishing a baseline of academic advising within the South African higher education context before the pandemic.

The contextual realities of the South African higher education sector are unique in many regards. The country lies in the Global South, which means it experiences inherent resource constraints compared to countries in the Global North (Leibowitz et al. 2015, 316). However, this alone is not what sets South Africa apart; there are many other countries in the Global South that face similar constraints (what Boughey and McKenna (2021, 9) term "the economic imperative"). Rather, it is the economic imperative coupled with "the social imperative" (Boughey and McKenna 2021, 9) that makes South Africa and its higher education sector unique.

The country's social imperative (i.e., that which relates to equity) is tied to its apartheid

past, which continues to have tangible effects on the sector and its stakeholders after nearly 30 years of democracy (Dominguez-Whitehead 2017). The shortage of funding for students (the economic imperative) from previously disadvantaged backgrounds (the social imperative) is well-known (e.g., Scott 2016) and severely affects many students' prospects of success. It is within this challenging context, predominantly at the grassroots level of the student experience, that academic advisors work.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Context is formed through the interplay between and among structure, culture, and agency (SCA). The emergent properties that arise from that interplay constitute contextual social reality at any given moment. Archer (1995) uses the dual autonomy and interconnectedness of SCA extensively in her social realist theorising. Case (2015) explains how Archer (1995) separates the structural domain into two parts: structure and culture. Structure "has to do with material goods (unequally distributed across society) and is also the domain of social positions and roles" (Case 2015, 843), while culture encompasses "the world of ideas and beliefs" (Case 2015, 843.), including propositional knowledge, myths and opinions (Case 2015). Agency is described as "the domain of human action and interaction" (Case 2015, 843), with actors and agents forming part of and interacting with structure and culture, both of which also interact with one another. This acting and interaction that occurs between and among SCA is what determines contextual reality at any given moment. Within South African higher education, influenced by the economic and social imperatives (Boughey and McKenna 2021), this acting and interacting lends the sector its contextual uniqueness. It is within this context that academic advisors attempt to mitigate the challenges faced by students in order to help afford them epistemological access to knowledge (de Klerk 2021, 117).

Context and change are connected. Thus, Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework serves as an analytical tool with which to investigate temporal change or stasis, by examining the interaction of SCA. Boughey and McKenna (2021) explain that a morphogenetic cycle commences at T_1, the prevailing conditions (or status quo) at the start of a cycle. The next phase, where SCA interact, is called T_2 and T_3. The interplay of SCA at this phase can lead to the emergence of new SCA, which could in turn change the prevailing conditions at T_1. This interplay can also bring about new morphogenetic cycles. Finally, T_4 is the point at the end of a cycle where one determines whether what occurred at T_2 and T_3 has brought about a morphogenesis of the prevailing conditions at T_1 (i.e., change and a new status quo) or whether the prevailing conditions at T_1 persist (i.e., morphostasis).

To determine whether change has occurred, one must understand what existed at the start

(T_1) and what happened thereafter (the interplay at T_2 and T_3), before being able to determine morphogenesis or morphostasis (T_4) as an outcome. A social realist perspective that draws upon SCA can be useful in this regard. This article aims to establish a T_1 baseline for academic advising at Wits before the COVID-19 pandemic, with the findings potentially extrapolatable to the broader South African higher education context.

LITERATURE

As mentioned, the literature on academic advising in South Africa remain limited and although the past few years have seen an increase in publications on the practice and profession, additional studies on advising within and for the South African context is needed. A social realist view of advising, which draws upon SCA to explore the temporal emergence of advising within this context, adds a novel perspective to understanding the changing field of academic advising in South Africa.

A review of the literature indicates that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the few papers on academic advising in South Africa focused on two broad themes: (i) identifying students classified as “at-risk” (or high risk) of failing or dropping out and linking them to an academic/student advisor (e.g., Mayet 2016, 4; Moodley and Singh 2015, 95); and (ii) enabling student engagement in educational settings through academic advising, by incorporating the student voice in student success and advising work (e.g., Strydom and Loots 2020). None of these papers include the voices of practising advisors, nor do they adopt a social realist lens to analyse the emergence of advising in South Africa.

Literature on South African advising published since the COVID-19 pandemic focuses largely on: (i) the adoption and implementation of Global North academic-advising models within South African higher education contexts (e.g., Emekako and Van der Westhuizen 2021; Obaje and Jeawon 2021, 24–25; Van Pletzen et al. 2021); (ii) academic advising during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., de Klerk 2022; Moosa 2021); (iii) the incorporation of advising in university access / extended curriculum programmes (Ogude et al. 2021; Sekonyela 2021); and (iv) quantitative studies that aim to document students’ reasons for seeking advice (de Klerk 2021). Additionally, and most notably, literature on academic advising in South Africa from South African scholars has begun to emerge, signalling a promising shift towards more authentic, Global South perspectives on advising within this context (e.g., Schoeman, Loots, and Bezuidenhoud 2021). However, there is an absence of literature on the experiences and perceptions of practising academic advisors within South African higher education settings before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Insights of this nature are essential at a time when the South African higher education

sector is moving beyond the pandemic and advising within the country is still being developed and defined (Obaje and Jeawon 2021, 18). Documenting what is known about advising before the pandemic can provide both a valuable record of the emergence of advising in South Africa and a baseline against which to evaluate the affordances and constraints of advising practices during and beyond the pandemic. Consequently, this article documents experiences and perceptions of academic advisors at Wits before the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

By adopting a phenomenographic approach (Marton 1981; Tight 2016), the study draws upon the varying insights of 15 academic advisors at Wits regarding advising before the pandemic. This is one of the key advantages of the phenomenographic method, as the "focus of phenomenography is on people's varying conceptions of a given phenomenon, not on the phenomenon itself" (Cibangu and Hepworth 2016, 5). As such, the varying insights gleaned from the advisors are analysed by means of SCA, which provides a coherent picture of academic advising at Wits before the pandemic.

Data was collected through interviews by means of semi-structured, open-ended questions, which allowed interviewees some freedom in their responses. Areas that warranted clarity were further probed by the interviewer, as were novel observations made by interviewees. This article draws upon responses to three questions from the interviews:

1. Do you think there are intrinsic motivators that drive academic advisors to do what they do, and what are they?
2. What are the top three challenges academic advisors face that create barriers to advising? Why do you perceive these as barriers?
3. What are the most common barriers that prevent students from seeking advice and why do students avoid seeking advice?

Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber, before coding and analysis.

The author made use of both inductive and deductive approaches to analyse the data, which as Bertram and Christiansen (2014, 133) explain, is not uncommon. Initially, an iterative, inductive approach was adopted to explore the interview data. The author was receptive to what could be gleaned, with no pre-set expectations (Bertram and Christiansen 2014, 133). Several areas of focus emerged during this phase of the analysis. Next, a deductive analysis of the focus-area data was conducted, using SCA as the analytical framework (Bertram and Christiansen

2014, 133). This enabled the author to make observations about advising within a South African higher education context before the pandemic. The section that follows presents what arose from this twofold inductive–deductive process.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This study is informed by a rich dataset and the author acknowledges that other researchers may have gleaned different insights from the data. Nevertheless, the author is confident that the interpretation and analysis of the interview data shared in this section provide accurate insight into advising at Wits before the pandemic.

Focus Area 1: Urgency to help others (agency)

One of the tenets of social realist theory is the premise that any action, or lack thereof, occurs within a context conditioned by the existing effects of structure and culture (Case 2015, 843). Interviewee 1 states:

> "... when I came in, I found it just a lot fulfilling [sic] [...] My thing is just, I wanted to give back, so I think that's what motivates me [...] you know [...], helping somebody with challenges that I probably went through and [...] making it a bit easier for them." (Interviewee 1).

Interviewee 1's agential drive to help others and make a difference is clear, yet they say "... when I came in, I found it just a lot fulfilling [sic]". Thus, while the advisor wants to fulfil their purpose of touching lives and helping students, their agential drive stems from pre-existing structural and cultural influences in their life. For example, they mention their own past and how it has likely contributed to what drives them in their work as an academic advisor – a sentiment echoed by Interviewees 9, 12, 13, and 15.

The need to help also seems to extend to advisors' sense of self, relating both to their professional identity and their position as role models for students:

> "... I didn't like seeing more students struggling [sic]. You know, if there's something that could be done, [...] I would naturally [...] want to step in to do something about it. And I felt like [...] in this position that I am in, I am able to actually effect that." (Interviewee 3).
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> "... academic advising is very much a personal issue ..." [...] "... you have to care for people, first." (Interviewee 6).

In addition to supporting the comments above, Interviewees 2 and 8 emphasise the importance of supporting both the academic dimension and broader dimensions of the student experience, thus confirming the holistic nature of academic advising.

> "I'm deeply interested in student success and [...] it's also about assisting them [students] to navigate this journey, for them to finish the programme. [...] that on its own, motivates me. To see that the student is well taken care of outside the lecture room." (Interviewee 2).
>
> "... trying to help the students see their own role within a teaching situation so that they maximize on their learning. So that they know that their learning is not only affected by what the lecturer is doing, but it is also affected by how they position themselves within that learning situation." (Interviewee 8).

This is an important reminder that, while academic advising is a student support endeavour concerned with holistic student success, it is also a teaching and learning endeavour. These advisors work to enact agency, driven by their motivation to help students and break down structural and cultural barriers to epistemological access for students (de Klerk 2021).

Focus Area 2: Representation (agency emergent from structure and culture)

A reality of the South African higher education sector is the continued inequity in the representation of black South Africans in academia (Belluigi and Thondhlana 2022), although shifts are emerging (Breetzke and Hedding 2018). This is a legacy from apartheid (Belluigi and Thondhlana 2022), and while much has been done towards structural reform and transformation within the sector over the past two decades (Belluigi and Thondhlana 2022; Breetzke and Hedding 2018), more is required to achieve meaningful and sustained change. Interviewee 3 identifies the importance of representation by black South Africans within the advising profession:

> "There aren't a lot of [...] black South African academics and [...] it was an issue for me, in that we don't have [...] any representation." [...] "... I felt there was a need for representation ..." (Interviewee 3).

Additionally, Interviewees 7 and 14 link their work with students in the current climate to their own experiences as black South Africans working in the sector:

> "... intrinsic motivators for a black woman would be the fact that black students are the ones that are disadvantaged ..." [...] "Black students are the ones who are worse off ..." [...] "They are most disenfranchised and [...] the scales are not in their favour." [...] "... the majority of the students that actually need academic advising look like me ..." (Interviewee 7).
>
> "... in my case it would be my experience as a South African who has come from a historically disadvantaged cross-section of the community and being able to identify [...] with the students in terms of some of the issues that they struggle with ..." (Interviewee 14).

This speaks to the need for cultural and structural change in the sector to move the needle towards meaningful change, while simultaneously counteracting the microaggressions (e.g., microassaults, microinvalidations, and microinsults) experienced by some African academics within the sector (Belluigi and Thondhlana 2022, 144). Moreover, these observations relate to the premise that students are more likely to succeed when they are connected to someone within the institution to whom they can relate and who takes an interest in them and their wellbeing (Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth 2004).

Focus Area 3: Counteracting entrenched inequities (agency stemming from structure and culture)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the inequities entrenched in the South African higher education sector were foregrounded in unprecedented ways (Czerniewicz et al. 2020). However, these inequities had been ingrained in the sector long before the pandemic. The 2015 and 2016 FeesMustFall movements, for example, highlighted them on a national scale (Dominguez-Whitehead 2017). As the discussion in this article aims to establish a baseline for academic advising before the pandemic, it is useful to explore how advisors observe the inequities affecting students and the work of advisors pre-pandemic. Consider this quote observation by Interviewee 5 (Interviewees 2 and 8 make similar comments):

> "... disparities between students and not just in material possession, but also in the academic background they come from before they came to university." [...] "... you have to really understand where students are coming from for you to be able to help them to the fullest of your ability and to understand [...] the roadblocks that they are also facing." (Interviewee 5).

These inequities can constrain advisors' work, which often leads to frustration when advisors are unable to help students resolve certain challenges, thus impeding both advisor and student agency. Consider, for example, the following comment from Interviewee 4:

> "... the social injustices. To see some students who, if they had the right resources, they would make it [sic], but everything works against them. And sometimes, no matter what you try, with some of them you cannot win. And that for me, it's always the one that hits me the most [sic], is to see a person having to leave because there is no more funding." (Interviewee 4).

Nevertheless, academic advisors could work to counteract these entrenched inequities, *because* of their unique roles. Strategically positioned as nodes that connect academic divisions/lecturers, students, and student-affairs entities across the institution, advisors can help clarify the equity-related challenges experienced by students, while helping to find solutions to

these challenges. Consider Interviewee 12's observations of the role of advisors:

> "... recognizing that this work needs to be done [...] there is a personal motivation to try and help with that. Try and contribute to [...] remedying that situation, to playing your part in society ..." (Interviewee 12).

Focus Area 4: Enabling student agency by fostering a growth mindset (agency)

While this article is not intended to delve deeply into the complexities of the work by Dweck and others regarding growth mindset and student motivation (Dweck 2015; Yeager and Dweck 2012), it is related to it. Dweck (2015) found that helping students to change their mindset towards learning (i.e., fostering a growth mindset) could make them more motivated, which simultaneously improves their prospects of academic success and self-regulation. Similarly, Yeager and Dweck (2012, 302) indicate how students' mindset could help them persevere, despite academic and/or social challenges. Concomitantly, academic advisors are often faced with the prospect of guiding students through academic and/or social challenges, with advising becoming a means to help them acquire a growth mindset. Consider, for example, Interviewee 12's observation that:

> "... there is a certain element that comes from students as well, because you do need them to take responsibility for their studies, for their work, and that is not necessarily forthcoming [...] They kind of just want you to tell them what to do, and to me that's not really effective advising. That's just telling students what to do, rather than working with them." (Interviewee 12).

Interviewee 12 explains that advisors should not simply tell students what to do but instead work with them to foster a sense of responsibility for their university experience. This responsibility should be shared, with the advisor initially assuming a leading role and subsequently shifting the responsibility to the student as the relationship develops. Thus, there is a link between what Interviewee 12 observes (i.e., fostering students' growth mindset) and enabling student agency.

Moreover, students' growth mindset and agency links to help-seeking behaviour (Petersen et al. 2009). Interviewee 1 explains: "... sometimes we get students that are not self-motivated already, you know? So, we need to then [...] start to motivate them ..." (Interviewee 1).

Here, academic advisors could play an important role in helping students practice better help-seeking behaviour, which in turn could enhance their sense of belonging and prospects of success (Sithaldeen et al. 2022). Sithaldeen et al. (2022, 80) asserts that "[h]elp-seeking is an important self-regulated strategy for student success...". Consequently, students who can self-

regulate and identify the need to seek help as soon as necessary are enabled to practice agency. Additionally, advisors from across Wits could collaborate to develop a strategy (i.e., a structural enabler) to facilitate students' help-seeking behaviour. This could positively influence students' ability to self-regulate, thus allowing them to determine for themselves when they need to seek advice and about what. The latter also has the potential to realise cultural change among Wits students over time. An associated benefit could be that the constraints Interviewee 1 experiences in doing their job may be mitigated. However, the matter of students' help-seeking behaviour goes beyond the realm of growth mindset and motivation, as indicated in Focus Area 5 below.

Focus Area 5: Issues of help-seeking among students (culture and student agency)

While the discussion in Focus Area 4 above addressed the matter of supporting students to acquire the awareness to know when to ask for help, Focus Area 5 assumes that some students already know that they need help but deliberately avoid asking for it. Consider the observations by Interviewees 11 and 12:

> "... students that are [...] really struggling and they know that there is support available to them, but they do not come and consult." (Interviewee 11).
>
> "... they see seeking advice as [...] a form of weakness [...] even when they approach you, they're like: 'you know, I really thought I could do this by myself and I didn't want to ask anyone for help, but I really need it'." (Interviewee 12).

This speaks to students' internalised beliefs about what it means to ask for help, which could be linked to prevailing cultural pressures at Wits. To this end, Interviewee 7 shows concern about how students viewed the idea of asking for help (this aligns to similar sentiments by Interviewees 2, 3, 8, and 9):

> "... the stigma that if you need advising as a student, it means that you are not smart. It means that you are lazy. It means that you can't figure it out on your own." [...] "The stigma about needing help." (Interviewee 7).

While the institution must certainly assume accountability for the prevailing cultural beliefs that may cause students to shy away from asking for help (even when they know where to find it and that they need it), peer pressure could also contribute to this reticence. Interviewee 6 observes: "... another reason [...] why I think the students are troubled to come forward, is peers. The peer pressure [sic]. 'How it makes my friends judge me'." (Interviewee 6).

This appears to be an instance where culture constrains agency. Interviewee 6 implies that

while students may know they need help (i.e., agency), pressure from peers prevent them from seeking it (i.e., culture). Challenging a phenomenon such as peer pressure would be undeniably difficult. However, the institution and advisors could collaborate with student leaders (e.g., the student representative council, student councils within faculties, and peer-mentor programmes) to coordinate a concerted effort to change students' perception of seeking help. Students should be encouraged to voice their fears and failures to their peers, and they should be conditioned to be supportive when a peer does so.

In essence, this speaks to the need for change in the way students interact with one another, as well as the prevailing culture within the institution. These two elements are intrinsically linked and gaining insight into how institutional culture and the culture that emerges among students in a programme, faculty, and/or institution influence one another, could help establish ways to counteract students' reticence to seek help. Academic advisors are well positioned to assist in this regard and addressing this may be crucial to students' prospects of success. Interviewee 13 observes that students often reach out when it is too late, which is echoed by Interviewees 4, 5, and 11: "... most students actually come for assistance when it's a little bit too late ..." [...] "... for some people seeking help is a symbol of weakness." (Interviewee 13).

Consequently, by changing the prevailing cultural beliefs that equate help-seeking with weakness in the minds of students, and thus enabling student agency to the extent where they ask for help as soon as the need arises without fear of prejudice, their chances of success could increase manifold.

Focus Area 6: Poor institutional integration of academic advising (structure and culture)

As mentioned earlier, academic advising remains an emerging profession and practice in South Africa. This appears to result in ambiguity and confusion among students at Wits about the purpose and objectives of the practice, as well as the role advisors could play in their learning journey. Interviewees 5, 8, and 12 make similar observations to Interviewee 2 below:

> "... some of our students actually do not understand what academic advising is. They may know that there is a unit for academic advising, but they are not sure of what support they should be getting from there." (Interviewee 2).

The aforementioned interviewees all emphasise the need for more systematic and coordinated efforts to elucidate academic advising for students. This could include information on the extent and limitations of advising within a faculty or institution, who should approach academic

advisors for support, how this should be done, and what areas of support advisors are equipped to focus on. However, the problem appears to go beyond students not knowing what the purpose and objectives of advising are.

Some advisors are concerned about students not being aware of their existence, despite efforts to the contrary. Consider the comment by Interviewee 1 (echoed by Interviewees 3, 13, and 14):

> "... as much as I would have liked to think that students are aware of the services that we have, [...] there is still students that come at the end of the year, and they say I didn't know that there was [Academic Advising] and it helps with this and that." (Interviewee 1).

From these and the preceding advisor observations it appears that there is a need for better structural and cultural inculcation of academic advising at Wits; a need that was magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Moosa 2021). This may speak to cultural and structural changes that are necessary within the institution to: (i) enhance student awareness of advisors and the support they offer; (ii) increase the frequency and intentionality with which awareness initiatives occur; and (iii) normalise academic advising within the institution. This should not be the sole responsibility of academic advisors. It requires a systematic approach that involves all student support services, administrative staff, and academics within the institution (i.e., structural measures to promote advising within the institution, such as a coordinated marketing campaign and communication strategy). Moreover, if students themselves realise the importance of advising in relation to their prospect of success, they are more likely to promote it among their peers. Lastly, culturally normalising academic advising among students could also have a positive auxiliary influence on students' help-seeking behaviour and growth mindset (see Focus Areas 4 and 5), thereby enhancing their proclivity for seeking help and taking ownership of their success.

Focus Area 7: Dissonance between advising and the core academic project (structure and culture)

Another area interviewees also voiced concerns and frustrations about, was the way in which some academic/lecturing staff appeared to perceive advising. Interviewee 5 states that there appears not only to be a:

> "... deficit view of the student, but also then of the service. So [...] if it's positioned in that way, from other places in the university, that students are only sent to advisors [...] if they are 'broken' or 'need fixing' in some way, then it's also bad for the student. Because, to a certain extent, you're

> telling the student that they're broken as well, or that they have some or other deficit." [...] "... a lot of things stem out of how academic advising [...] [is] positioned at universities. It is better if there can be some kind of an integration." (Interviewee 5).

This observation shows how deficit perceptions about students seem to be filtering through to academic advising as a practice. Additionally, Interviewee 11 laments the lack of awareness and understanding that staff exhibited towards advising (also echoed by Interviewees 2 and 15):

> "... there seems to be no understanding of the role of the advisors by the institution ..." [...] "So, you had to constantly educate and try to convince, particularly the lecturers [...] why do you exist in this institution, what is your role." (Interviewee 11).

These advisors allude to the need for structural and cultural shifts in the way advising is understood, integrated, and valued at Wits. The structural and cultural dissonance they observe between the work they do and how it is perceived by academic staff could ultimately disadvantage students. Meaningful efforts by the institution to enhance structural and cultural integration of advising with the academic project is essential. Boughey and McKenna (2021) reiterate the need for a crucial partnership between those doing academic development work and those in academic positions. Academics cannot abdicate this responsibility and, in the case of Wits, academics and advisors should be working together to the benefit of students.

Interviewee 2 proposes that existing structures within Wits (e.g., teaching and learning committees) could be used to help clarify to academics what academic advising is and how academics and advisors could collaborate:

> "... the best thing is actually to use all the teaching and learning committees [...] where we actually come together." [...] "... make it very clear to them [...] what we are trying to achieve, and we are actually trying to assist them ..." (Interviewee 2).

This could lead to enhanced integration of academic advising at Wits, which may in turn create a cultural shift in how advising is perceived at the institution, both by academics and by students. However, for this to occur, structure and culture must be complementary (Boughey and McKenna 2021, 133), which requires broad stakeholder commitment.

Focus Area 8: Resource constraints (structure and, to an extent, culture)

At least five of the interviewees alluded to resource constraints affecting their work, with time constraints and the student-advisor ratio appearing to be of greatest concern. These observations by Interviewees 3 and 8 resonate with those shared by others (e.g., Interviewees 4, 5, and 9):

> "... lack of time because [...] there are probably [...] projects that one could think of and [...] because of time you end up not being able to fulfil [...] that. And the other could be [...] resources, I think as well [sic]. Be it money or funding or whatever." (Interviewee 3).
>
> "... the advisor-student ratios, so the workload." (Interviewee 8).

One possible reason for these resource constraints (i.e., structural constraints) could be because the profession is not widely integrated within the South African context. This may have significant consequences for advisors working at Wits and other South African higher education institutions. A survey conducted by the American National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in 2011 found that the advisor–advisee ratio in the United States ranges between 1:233 and 1:600 (Robbins 2013). Conversely, I have shown elsewhere that the advisor–advisee ratio in the faculty where I work at Wits was approximately 1:2375 (for undergraduate and postgraduate students collectively) at the time that paper was published (see: de Klerk 2021, 107). This ratio is likely a consequence of the nascent nature of academic advising in South Africa and evidently places inordinate strain on academic advisors.

At Wits, there are on average between two and three academic advisors per faculty. The institution had 40 669 registered students in 2020, of which 24 383 were undergraduate students (Facts & Figures 2021, 6). As such, there is severe misalignment between the number of academic advisors within the institution (15 at the time of the interviews) and the number of students potentially requiring support. Consequently, the observations by interviewees regarding time and resource constraints are put into perspective. The structural under-resourcing of advising at Wits appears to be constraining advisor agency, while advisors' lack of time and resources may prevent them from developing new and responsive solutions to the challenges their students face. One way to mitigate this is to appoint peer advisors (students within the institution or faculty) to supplement the work of academic advisors (e.g., Spark et al. 2017). However, this requires time and financial support from the institution (i.e., structures), as well as cultural shifts as discussed in Focus Areas 5–7 above and Focus Area 9 below.

Focus Area 9: Manifestation of power relations (culture and, by extension, structure)

Power relations manifest regularly and in diverse ways within higher education settings (e.g., Carvalho and Videira 2019). This observation by Interviewee 1 (similar to one made by Interviewee 6) indicates that hierarchies of power also manifest within academic advising spaces:

> "... there is this gap [...] that students come with already, because I could even hear when they come into some of the sessions, they'll already be referring to me as ma'am." [...] "... they see me as an advisor up there and then themselves as a student very down there ..." [...] "... there's just a fear, you know, they have that fear or that anxiety that they just don't want to [...] go and approach somebody from the institution ..." (Interviewee 1).

Interviewee 1 seems to be observing hierarchical structures within the institution, the way in which these structures appear to constrain student agency, and an associated cultural property that emerges from the interplay between the hierarchical structures and student agency. Interviewee 1's observed reticence among students to engage with university staff, whom students perceive to be superior to them (i.e., an agential constraint), is not uncommon and relates to the discussion in Focus Areas 4 and 5 above regarding students' help-seeking behaviour. If students are not comfortable to engage with academic advisors, who are often a first point of contact, they run the risk of minor problems escalating. This can negatively influence students' experience within the institution, their academic performance, and their chances of persistence and success.

Addressing how students encounter and perceive these structural and cultural realities when entering the institution may be particularly challenging. As Boughey and McKenna (2021, 133) explain, "structures require complementary cultures to be effective". Thus, even if Wits could make the hierarchical structures within the institution less intimidating (which in itself is often ingrained over many years), the associated cultural power relations that have emerged will also have to change. Academic advisors are uniquely positioned to support these cultural shifts. Kezar and Eckel (2002, 440) suggest that micro-level change within the institution could be the foundation for realising change at higher levels. In turn, Strayhorn (2015, 62) reminds that "effective academic advisors, as cultural navigators, recognize higher education as a culture and know something about this journey called *college*".

In the case of Wits, if academic advisors can collaborate (across their faculties) to change how students experience power relations within the institution by normalising student–advisor interaction, they could begin to change students' perceived reticence to "approach someone from the institution" (Interviewee 1) and thus begin to realise cultural change over time.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of academic advising within the South African higher education sector continues. In this article, the voices of 15 academic advisors from one South African university were used to establish a baseline against which to compare the evolving profession as the sector

shifts beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Archer's work on structure, culture, and agency as an analytical lens with which to analyse interview data, a picture emerges of the complexities that characterise the work of academic advisors within the South African higher education context, even before the pandemic.

The nine focus areas elucidate the key elements of the advisors' work. The article illustrates how entrenched cultures may prevent students from seeking the help they need and how advisors are suitably situated to help rectify this behaviour. Advisors' frustrations regarding entrenched inequities (i.e., the social imperative as per Boughey and McKenna 2021) that constrain their agency and that of the students they work with, remind us quite starkly of how these inequities affected many South African students during the peak of the pandemic and continue to do so. However, as illustrated in this article, these inequities were affecting the work of advisors long before the pandemic. Additionally, the need for advising to be systematically inculcated at Wits is evident; both to benefit students and to better enable advisors to support and guide the students they work with.

As the South African higher education sector continues to move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, contextual changes are inevitable. There have been shifts in the modes of teaching and learning, and an unparalleled awareness of the inequities entrenched in the South African higher education sector has emerged. Drawing upon the information about advising before the pandemic shared here, and what has been learned about advising during the pandemic (de Klerk 2022; Moosa 2021), the scene is set for structural and cultural change in how advising is practised and perceived in South African.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The author declares that he has no personal or financial interests or relationships that could have influenced this study or its findings.

The author ascribes to the highest standards of ethical conduct in all his research endeavors. This study was approved by the Wits Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) prior to data collection (Protocol Number: H20/04/06).

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