Navigating the path to academic success: The impact of student academic advising at a university of technology

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Abstract. The significance of student academic advising and its contribution towards student success cannot be overemphasised. Yet the conceptualisation, implementation and impact of academic advising have not been rigorously researched in most South African Universities, particularly Universities of Technology. Given the poor throughput rates in most of these universities, this paper sought to investigate the role and the impact that academic advising could potentially have in enabling conditions for students to navigate their academic paths for success. The paper used the concept of academic advising as an engaging educational process where the focus is not just advising students on the information that students need to learn in the form of content but, more importantly, on the learning that focuses on outcomes for student learning. The potential for this conceptual framework is to promote student success. Data was sourced from the selected cohorts of students who enrolled for academic advising practices at a university of technology. The data was sourced through a qualitative methodology to understand how many students from the enrolled cohort experienced academic advising as an enabling or constraining environment for their success. It also obtained descriptive data on students' perceptions of academic advising. Preliminary findings reveal that the concept of academic advising mentioned above could be a useful intervention in assisting struggling students to navigate their academic paths. However, there is also a challenge associated with an inadequate understanding of the academic advising concept and its importance towards contributing to students' academic success. This challenge is attributed to the limited number of students that attend academic advising. The implication for this is a serious hindrance in enabling the success of academic advising initiatives.

Keywords: Academic Advising, Student improvement and success, Mixed methods

1   Introduction

One of the ways of establishing sound and fruitful academic relationships between students as individuals and the institution is through the mechanism of student academic advising. Improving student success is regarded as one of the critically imperative ways of navigating student success [1] contended that institutions could become generators of economic prosperity by placing greater focus on student success. A healthy and sound relationship between students as individuals and the institution increases the chances of meeting students' needs, resulting in the creation of pleasant academic excellence and experiences [2] Therefore, there should be roles played by

the institution to ensure that the academic relationship mentioned above exists and serves the intended purpose of ensuring student academic success. This then talks to the department that promotes teaching and learning in the institution, the Teaching and Learning Development Centre (TLDC). The significance of academic advising is a critical component of student success. It assists students in making informed decisions regarding course selection, career pathways, and overall academic progress. However, in achieving student academic success, academic advising has encountered challenges such as limited resources and time constraints that hinder the goal of promoting student academic success.

In 2018, the Centre for Teaching and Learning reported national and international research regarding SAAs. This research indicates that SAA advances student success and engagement by integrating support and facilitating improved coordination, empowering students with relevant information and allowing students to establish an effective relationship with the institution through academic advising.

In the context of a university of technology, the impact of student academic advising on their academic success remains a critical area of inquiry. As such, [3] further argues for the institution's vitality better to comprehend the existence and roles of academic advising since it can guarantee the students' academic excellence. Moreover, the impact of academic advising depends on conceptualising and implementing academic advising to all relevant stakeholders, mostly those working directly with students and academic advisors. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how academic advising shapes students' educational trajectories and outcomes within the technological academic environment. By analysing advising practices and their alignment with students' goals, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into enhancing advising strategies and ultimately improving students' academic achievements.

2   Research Methodology

Research Approach: This qualitative study employs a phenomenological research approach. According to [4], this approach focuses on clearing the unclear human experiences and structures to understand the actual meaning of the phenomenon better. Moreover, this approach proves to be suitable since this paper aims to explore students' lived experiences in the context of academic advising and its impact on student success within a university of technology.

Participants: Participants were Mangosuthu University of Technology Students, utilising Purposeful sampling. These nine students were selected from the three faculties (Engineering, Management Science, and Natural Science), representing a range of experiences and perspectives.

Data Collection: In-depth interviews were conducted with nine selected students. Interview questions were designed to explore the following aspects: (1.) Perceptions of the academic advising process, (2.) Notable instances of successful advising experiences, (3) Challenges faced in advising and navigating academic paths, (4.) Student outcomes influenced by advising (e.g., academic performance, engagement). (5.) Suggestions for improving the academic advising process.

Data Analysis: Data was analysed through Thematic analysis, where collected data were coded and interpreted. Initial coding was performed to identify meaningful data units and generate preliminary codes. These codes were grouped into potential themes and were further analysed and connected to develop a logical narrative that captures the impact of academic advising on student success.

3   Findings and Discussion

These findings are based on qualitative research where in-depth interviews were conducted with nine Mangosuthu University of Technology students from the three faculties (Engineering, Management Science, and Natural science). This approach focuses on clearing the unclear human (student) experiences and structures to understand the actual meaning of the phenomenon better. Moreover, to further provide the phenomenon of the study, the study is underpinned by the Social Cognitive Theory, a review of the paper, and provision of the definition of academic advising theory.

3.1   Definition

Academic advising has shifted from the peripheries of higher education to finding its space at the midpoint of student success initiatives in higher education [5]. Advising professionals, also called academic advisors and personal tutors, serve as faculty associates, student advocates, mentors, and campus leaders. United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring (UKAT) [5] defines personal tutoring as a focused personal relationship whereby an advisor allows students to become autonomous, assertive learners and good members of society. This collaborative and perpetual relationship connects students to their institution by supporting them in their courses and beyond academics. Moreover, [6] defined academic advising as deliberate and planned interactions with a pedagogy, curriculum, and student learning outcomes. Academic advising contextualises and synthesises students' educational experiences within the frameworks of their abilities, aspirations, and lives to lengthen learning beyond campus timeframes and boundaries.

3.2   Findings based on literature review.

Academic advising plays a crucial role in supporting students' academic pursuits, and its impact on student success has been a topic of interest for researchers and educators. The concept of academic advising, tailored to meet individual students' needs, has gained prominence due to its potential to enhance student outcomes. This literature review synthesises key findings and insights from existing research on the effects of academic advising on student success within university settings.

Importance of Academic Advising: Academic advising has evolved beyond course selection guidance. It is now recognised as a comprehensive support system contributing to students' holistic development and success [7]. Furthermore, [8] reveal that students face environmental hurdles such as independent learning, living, and navigating new social environment. Similarly, these challenges hinder their skill development and qualities for self-regulated learning and multiple modes of engagement, such as cognitive, behavioural, and social. [9] further argues that to persuade students to plan on how to achieve their desire goal and succeed, academic advising plays an important role.

Personalisation and Student-Centered Approach: The shift towards personalised academic advising stems from the understanding that each student's academic journey is unique. A student-centred approach acknowledges individual differences, interests, and goals, which can lead to higher levels of student motivation and achievement [10-11]. Personalised advising recognises the diverse needs of students, fostering a more tailored and impactful guidance process.

Moreover, research suggests that personalised academic advising positively correlates with improved academic performance—studies by [12-13] reveal that students who receive tailored guidance are likelier to choose appropriate courses, effectively plan their academic paths, and achieve higher grades.

Student Engagement and Satisfaction: Personalised advising enhances student engagement by fostering a sense of connection and individualised support. [14-15] posits that engaged students are more likely to set academic goals, persist through challenges, and maintain active involvement in their learning process. Additionally, students who feel supported through personalised advising report higher satisfaction with their university experience [16].

Advisor-Student Relationship: Central to effective academic advising is the advisor-student relationship. Research by [10] underscores the importance of building trust, rapport, and open communication between advisors and students. This also indicates that only a sound, healthy and harmonious relationship can fulfil the purpose of the relationship's existence. [1] further mentioned that a strong advisor-student relationship is associated with higher levels of engagement, better understanding of academic requirements, and improved decision-making. In turn, the intended purpose of the relationship can be lucratively achieved.

The literature demonstrates a growing recognition of the positive impact of academic advising on student success. Academic advising contributes to improved academic performance, engagement, and satisfaction, emphasising the importance of a student-centred approach within higher education institutions. However, addressing challenges and ensuring the effectiveness of advisor training are critical aspects for harnessing the full potential of academic advising.

3.3   Theoretical Framework

The journey to academic success can be challenging, especially in a university of technology's dynamic and competitive environment. Effective academic advising plays a crucial role in supporting students in academic excellence. Hence, to further

explore the impact of academic advising at the University of Technology, this study is underpinned by the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). Social Cognitive Theory further explores student success's significance by helping students navigate their academic journey.

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT): Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is a foundational framework for understanding the interplay between individual cognition, social interaction, and environmental factors in shaping student academic success. Literature [8] further reveals that students encounter environmental hurdles not limited to independent learning, navigating new social environment and new ways of living. Therefore, the Social Cognitive theory emphasises the role of self-efficacy, where students' beliefs in their abilities to navigate their academic paths successfully are influenced by their interactions with academic advisors, peers, and their perceived mastery experiences.

3.4   Findings

Data was collected from nine students from three different faculties at Mangosuthu University of Technology, where interviews were conducted with those students. Preliminary findings reveal that the prominent challenge is the inadequate understanding of the academic advising concept and its importance in students' academic success and improvement. This, in turn, hinders the success of the academic support initiative. These challenges were discovered during sessions, such as one-on-one consultations with students and interaction between lecturers and advisors. During academic advisors' and lecturers' meetings, it was revealed that these two stakeholders were unaware of the benefits of academic advising initiatives towards academic success. The study revealed that although students were aware of the academic advising programme, they only went to sessions because they were asked to and not because they essentially understood the importance of it until they visited and had sessions with academic advisors. In most cases, students do not honour their sessions because they do not understand the importance of ensuring they meet with their academic advisors.

To collect data, interviews were conducted. The students were asked if they were aware of the academic advising, and 66.7% out of nine participants indicated they were aware. When asked how they find the initiative towards their success, 77,8% said it is useful. Of the students who participated in the study, 22% said they were unaware. When asked why, participant one said, "I have not heard of the academic advising initiative". When asked the reasons, the answer was, "I am not the type of person who attends any university programme or asks anything from the pop-up tables on anniversary lanes by advisors or any support structure. I am here to obtain my qualification and leave; the rest is not my concern".

Out of nine students interviewed, most students who are aware of the academic advising programme are those who have seen their academic advisors, and those who are not sure are those who either did not honour their appointment or those who do not entirely attend any programme, whether in campus or their respective residences. While some say academic advising must be biased towards students and work with

them not lecturers. To further find the academic advising on students' success in the university, eight out of nine students, 88,9% said it has a great impact because those who have utilised the academic advising initiative remain in the university and achieve greater results. Findings further assisted in uncovering effective strategies for improving academic advising services.

3.5 Discussions

Academic advising is not a prominent concept in most universities in South Africa, making it difficult for students and some university staff to understand its impact and benefits. In turn, this means the teaching and learning department (TLDC) has a huge role in promoting this office as the department that ensures student improvement and success. Although TLDC has a role to play, academic advisors, in collaboration with lecturers, also ensure that any student leaving their office benefits academically and psychosocially. Therefore, [17] SAAs must understand that they have a shared responsibility with relevant stakeholders in ensuring student success and retention and that they graduate on time. Hence, SAAs must ensure that they understand the culture of the university and students when selecting models that best suit the needs of students in their practices. This means, if need be, they can either be developmental or prescriptive. However, when there is a need, advisors can sometimes use both models during their consultations. This will ensure students' success and that they complete their course on record time when this academic advising initiative is introduced to them at their entry-level. NACADA's definition highlighted the most vital aspect of advising, which focuses more on student success and achievement than retention [18]. This is because when focusing on retaining students, they can remain in the university for more than the required period and complete on record time. Therefore, the impact of academic advising towards student success and improvement further revealed that 77.8% of students stated that they find the advising initiative more helpful. In comparison, 89% of students indicated that they are thrilled with the services provided by the academic advisors. This indicates that academic advising positively impacts student performance, as per the findings presented.

Academic advising seems to have a greater impact when all relevant stakeholders support the advising programme. However, more studies can be exploited, focusing on researching and Investigating the cultural competencies of advisors in supporting diverse students and the strategies of enhancing inclusivity, such as proactive outreach initiatives and professional development programs. These studies will assist advisors in identifying their potential while finding ways of improving the services of their respective advising offices.

4   Conclusion

Effective academic advising is vital in helping students achieve academic success at a technological university. Academic advisors play an important role in assisting students in navigating their academic path and optimising their learning outcomes by

offering tailored guidance, establishing educational and professional goals, and resolving difficulties. The emphasis must be on improving advisors' abilities to ensure they are equipped and competent enough to deal with diverse students to ensure a positive impact on the university. Different models can be utilised to ensure that Universities of technology strengthen their advising services to serve their diverse student populations better and promote a culture of success by recognising the value of continual improvement and new methods. Academic advising has proved to be helpful in the academic journey of students. While navigating the student's success, findings revealed that most students viewed academic advising as a crucial and critical mechanism in ensuring students' academic success and excellence. Therefore, as much as the concept has been recently adopted by South African universities as reported by NACADA, it has played a fundamental role in the students' lives and is still showing greater potential for perpetually promoting and improving student academic excellence and success.

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