

## Academic advising during emergency remote teaching and learning: A South African higher education perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Academic advising remains an emerging profession and practice in the South African higher education sector, with an increase in evidence-informed literature about advising for this context in recent years. The disruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have been significant for academic advising. This paper posits that the pandemic has had a catalytic effect on advising, how it is perceived, and how it is practiced at the university where the author works, thus potentially setting the scene for change. By drawing on data generated through interviews with 15 academic advisors, the paper examines the likelihood of change (or morphogenesis). The examination is underpinned by Social Realist principles. Margaret Archer's notions of structure, culture, and agency, as well as elements of her work on the morphogenetic cycle, guides the study. The focus is on the potential of advising and advisors within and for SA HE contexts. The academic advisors interviewed emerge as a previously under-valued and poorly utilised link among students, lecturers, and the broader institution. The paper concludes by elucidating how the work of academic advisors during the pandemic could bring about greater integration of advising with other dimensions of the academic project, while foregrounding the high-impact potential of advising for SA HE contexts.

## Introduction

Academic advising is well-established in the global north (Beatty, 1991; Aune, 2000; Donnelly, 2009; Hu, 2020) and Australia (Clark, 1989; Mann, 2020), yet remains an emerging profession and practice within the South African (SA) higher education (HE) sector, with a paucity of reliable literature about academic advising for the SA HE context (Strydom, 2017:104). Meaningful shifts have begun to occur since 2017 though. A multi-institutional Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) project funded by the DHET's University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) was launched that year. The project focuses on the professionalization of academic advising in SA. Concomitantly, the southern African community of academic advisors, ELETSA (which means advising in seSotho), was established. Even more encouraging is that there has been an increase in evidence-informed literature about academic advising within SA over the last five years, which includes a special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* dedicated to academic advising (see Vol. 9 No. 2, published in 2021). Nevertheless, the need for rigorous, evidence-informed scholarly contributions that lend gravitas to, define, clarify, and expand on the limited knowledge base about academic advising as a practice within SA HE contexts remains. The purpose of this paper is to make such a contribution.

The disruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have been significant for academic advising. In this paper, I posit that the pandemic has had a catalytic effect on academic advising, how it is perceived, and how it is practiced at the university where I work (UniMet<sup>1</sup>), thus setting the scene for change. I draw on data generated through interviews with 15 academic advisors working at UniMet to examine this potential change (or morphogenesis). The examination is underpinned by Social Realist principles, and I make use of Archer's (2000; 2005) notions about structure, culture, and agency, and elements of her work on the morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1995) for this purpose. While the challenges, affordances, and lessons that emerged during this study can and should inform structural changes at UniMet through policy at a practical level, the focus in this paper is on the emergent potential of advising and advisors within and for SA HE. At a time where academic advising for SA HE is still being conceptualised and defined, the academic advisors I interviewed at UniMet emerge as a previously under-valued and poorly utilised link among students, academics as university teachers, and the institution more broadly. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to elucidate the way in which the work of UniMet academic advisors during the pandemic could bring about greater integration of advising with other dimensions of the academic project, while foregrounding

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<sup>1</sup> A research-intensive public university located in a large metropolitan area of South Africa.

the high-impact potential (van Pletzen, Sithaldeen, Fontaine-Rainen, Bam, Shong, Charitar..., 2021) of advising for the broader SA HE sector.

### Background and context

The SA HE sector faced unparalleled challenges brought on by the rapid transition to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) (Cutri, Mena & Whiting, 2020; Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020). This not only meant preparing university educators (Krull & MacAlister, 2022) and students (de Klerk, Krull & Maleswena, 2021) to teach and learn remotely via online modalities, but once again highlighted the severe inequities and inequalities entrenched in the country's present day social reality as a direct result of historical injustices during its apartheid past (Czerniewicz, Agherdien, Badenhorst, Belluigi, Chambers, Chili..., 2020). At UniMet, the work of academic advisors remained focused on the holistic student experience, as was the case prior to the pandemic (de Klerk, 2021). Notably, Hodges *et al* (2020) emphasise the importance of holistic student support that goes beyond the academic dimension, while Johnson, Veletsianos and Seaman (2020) corroborate this by stressing the importance of guiding students through the transition to ERTL in order to "support, care for, and enable students to succeed" (Johnson, Veletsianos & Seaman, 2020:16). In the SA HE context, this guidance and support continued throughout 2020 and into 2021, with the initial phases of transition followed by ongoing student support needs, as the pandemic proceeded to shift and present new challenges throughout the year. Academic advisors provided this vital layer of support at UniMet, to help address the many challenges the students they engaged with faced.

During ERTL, students living in rural areas of the country often did not have access to electricity (Sifunda, Mokhele, Manyapelo, Dukhi, Sewpaul, Parker..., 2021:15), thus affecting their ability to charge learning devices (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2020:7). Moreover, mobile-network coverage was (and remains) poor or non-existent in remote areas (DHET, 2020:8), while students' access to sufficient mobile data (DHET, 2020:7) and the internet (Sifunda *et al*, 2021:24) was constrained. Additionally, home environments often proved un conducive to remote learning (DHET, 2020:7-8; Moosa, 2021; Sifunda *et al*, 2021:15), with many students reporting a lack of understanding by family members or others of the demands of university study. This would require a commitment to household chores during the daytime, thus necessitating students to attend to their studies late at night. Other challenges included suboptimal knowledge about the use of devices for learning and new learning platforms (DHET, 2020:8), feelings of isolation (Sifunda *et al*, 2021:23), and a sense of "being disconnected from lecturers and peers" (DHET, 2020:8). Some

students reportedly “experienced mild to severe psychological distress” (Sifunda *et al*, 2021:31). Evidently, the support needs of students during ERTL were diverse. The pandemic also placed the country’s gender-based violence (GBV) emergency in the spotlight once more (Amaechi, Thobejane & Rasalokwane, 2021; Nduna & Tshona, 2021; Odeku, 2021), as many women and children were suddenly forced to spend long hours in confined spaces with violent husbands, fathers, uncles, brothers and/or partners. For academic advisors working at the coalface of the student experience, ERTL brought new and unprecedented challenges, as they were often the ones with whom students were most likely to engage. Consequently, academic advisors at UniMet served as the node among students, central student affairs and academic departments within faculties, mostly using online modes to interact with these stakeholders.

### Literature review

Academic advising can have a significant impact on students’ social integration at an institution. Walsh, Larsen and Parry (2009) posit that isolation and poor social support increases a student’s prospects of dropping out of university. Conversely, it has been shown that students who were able to integrate socially at their institution of higher learning, were more likely to persist with their studies (Karp, 2011; Lotkowski, Robins & Noeth, 2004). Consequently, academic advisors must work to understand the daily experiences and needs of the students with whom they engage (Lee, 2018:77), both to support their social integration at the institution and to ensure they work with students as holistic social beings when they (the students) come to the advising engagement (de Klerk, 2021). Surr (2019:6) highlights how the evidence linking academic advising and students’ likelihood of persevering and succeeding continues to grow, which is why there is a need to expand the knowledge base on academic advising for SA HE contexts, where HE student persistence and success remain uneven.

The literature from the global north and Australia about academic advising is extensive (see for example: Beatty, 1991; Clark, 1989; Grites, 1979; Mann, 2020; Tuttle, 2000; Zhang & Dinh, 2017).

Academic advising is positioned 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 (de Klerk, 2021:103).

As mentioned earlier, literature about academic advising in SA remains limited (Strydom, 2017:104), but is increasing. Emekako and van der Westhuizen (2021) explore intentional advising for enhancing students' academic success, which demonstrates the application of a global north academic advising theory within a SA HE context. Furthermore, a special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* shares a series of papers that signals a significant contribution to the knowledge base about academic advising in SA. Tiroyabone and Strydom (2021) explore the potential of academic advising to enhance student success in SA, by drawing on global literature and a case study of their SA university. Their contribution is noteworthy as it broadens the knowledge base about advising in this country by providing a practical example thereof. Similarly, Obaje and Jeawon (2021) share the academic advising practices at their SA university, while highlighting strengths and challenges for the profession in a SA HE context. Van Pletzen *et al* (2021) provide an overview of their conceptualisation and implementation of an academic advising system at the SA university where they work, with their theory and model of academic advising marking a significant contribution in terms of how advising is implemented within a SA HE context. Additionally, the study by Moosa (2021) about the experiences of SA academic advisors during ERTL at one HE institution supports the notion of advising as concerned with the holistic student experience, while also making recommendations for the integration of advising services with other dimensions of the university. Lastly, Schoeman, Loots and Bezuidenhoud (2021) explore the integration of academic and career advising using the 3-I Process as a framework, while also making recommendations for how the framework could be adapted for use at other SA HE institutions. Beyond this collection of papers, the literature on advising in SA is sparse, which is why evidence-informed literature about the work of advisors is essential, especially as the profession shifts beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Theoretical and analytical framework

The larger study from which this paper emanates is informed by Social Realist principles. Margaret Archer is considered a seminal Social Realist theorist, having contributed extensively with regard to the notions of structure, culture, and agency (SCA), and the dual interconnected and autonomous ways in which these elements of social systems interact and emerge. Archer's (1995; 2000; 2005) work revolves around the interplay of SCA within social systems, exploring the many ways in which structures, cultures, and agency (whether individual or collective) can have enabling or constraining causal influences on one another. Structure is said to have "to do with material goods (unequally distributed across society) and is also the domain of social positions and roles" (Case, 2015:843), while culture implies "the world of ideas and beliefs" (Case, 2015:843). Agency is described as the "domain

of human action and interaction” (Case, 2015:843) and the “the power of individuals or groups to change their practices, conditions or contexts” (Leibowitz, Bozalek, Garraway, Herman, Jawitz, Muhuro..., 2017:5). In this paper, I use Archer’s (2000; 2005) work on structure and culture (and to a lesser degree, agency) to analyse the advisor interview data described below, and make meaning of the possibilities that have emerged during ERTL and what they may hold for the future of advising at UniMet and the broader SA HE sector.

Another key characteristic of Archer’s work is the interrogation of whether the interaction of SCA over time results in change (morphogenesis) or a continuation of the status quo (morphostasis). Here, Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic framework serves as a tool with which to interrogate and better understand the temporal interplay of structures, cultures, and agency, while also allowing for inferences to be made or conclusions drawn about why change may or may not emanate from that temporal interplay. The morphogenetic cycle is separated into four periods ( $T_1$  to  $T_4$ ). The first period ( $T_1$ ) denotes the prevailing cultural and structural conditions (or status quo) at the start of a cycle. This is followed by the observation and/or investigation of interactions of agents with structures and cultures, and structures and cultures with one another, termed  $T_2$  to  $T_3$ . Finally,  $T_4$  completes the cycle and denotes the point where one determines whether morphogenesis has occurred or not. In this paper, I am particularly interested in  $T_2$  and  $T_3$ , which denotes the novel interactions of academic advisors with structures and cultures during ERTL<sup>2</sup>.

### Methodology and data analysis

The study draws on phenomenographic principles (Marton, 1981; Tight, 2016). As Cibangu and Hepworth (2016:5) point out, the “focus of phenomenography is on people’s varying conceptions of a given phenomenon, not on the phenomenon itself”. For this study, I focused on the varying experiences of UniMet academic advisors of advising during ERTL. As such, phenomenography afforded me an opportunity to interrogate the diverse experiences of the advisors (Marton, 2015; Marton & Pong, 2005; Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016), while using Archer’s work for analysis and inferencing. The data that informs the study was collected by means of semi-structured interviews, which were conducted virtually (via Microsoft Teams) with 15 academic advisors from five faculties at UniMet. Ethical clearance was obtained via the UniMet institutional ethics committee and interviews took place over a three-week period towards the end of 2020, with each interview lasting

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<sup>2</sup> The prevailing cultural and structural conditions that existed prior to the pandemic and ERTL are explored in another paper.

approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were separated into three parts and this paper focuses on part three of the interviews, which explores academic advising during ERTL at UniMet in 2020. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber, who was required to sign a confidentiality agreement in line with institutional ethics requirements. Upon receipt of the transcribed texts, I began analysing responses using a colour-coding system. Adopting an iterative approach, each transcript was deductively analysed according to three broad categories: challenges, affordances, and lessons learned. Once completed, each transcript was revisited to extract and collate data (in the form of advisor quotes) into tables aligned to these themes. Upon completion, this data was used to inform the discussion section that follows below.

## Discussion

A tenet of Social Realism is that actions (or a lack thereof) occur within a preconditioned context that exists because of structures and cultures (Case, 2015:843). Prior to ERTL, academic advising existed as a support structure at UniMet (de Klerk, 2021). However, it remained mostly peripheral, seen as supplementary to the core academic project, and thus not culturally integrated within the broader institution. The pandemic served as a catalyst for change though, forcing a disruption of the status quo where structures and cultures that would not usually interact, were made to do so (i.e.  $T_2$  and  $T_3$  of Archer's (1995) morphogenetic cycle – the points of interaction). The interviews conducted with UniMet advisors provide insights into the properties emergent from these interactions in the form of inferences related to the future of academic advising at UniMet and, potentially, for SA HE. The next section explores the categories emergent from the interviews.

### *Advisor wellbeing to the benefit of student wellbeing and success*

In many regards, the pandemic thrust academic advising into the proverbial spotlight at UniMet, to the point where it resulted in a near-saturation of advising services. Interviewees 5 and 8 explain:

your work day isn't a work day anymore and weekends don't exist. Time doesn't exist and that can be quite problematic, because you sit down in front of your computer in the morning and then 12 hours later you're like, oh, I should most probably have dinner. [Interviewee 5]

more [was] being expected from advisors [...] if there is a fire an advisor should be there with her fire extinguisher. Any kind of problem, including problems that are definitely out of your hands. I think because everyone was overwhelmed with what was going on. So

even things that they can solve in departments and so on, would first be referred to advisors [sic]. [Interviewee 8]

While the latter signals a potential positive cultural shift in the way advisors are viewed and engaged with at UniMet, the extent to which advisors were being relied on during ERTL placed them at undue risk of burnout and fatigue. Interviewee 4 exclaims:

I'm exhausted, to be honest with you. I'm exhausted. [Interviewee 4]

While Interviewee 5 explains how academic advising during ERTL was:

quite draining, because to a certain extent you are giving [...] something of yourself to these students and if you just keep on doing that [...] with no kind of set work time [...], it can be very negative and of course, lead to your own burnout. And if you are burnt out, you can't help anyone. [Interviewee 5]

This elucidates an important lesson that emerged during ERTL. Academic advisors need to be supported and taken care of to prevent them from burning out. An advisor who is overworked does not have the capacity to help students, thus having a negative effect on student success. Interviewee 7 states:

if you [the university] say you care about students, [...] having a working [system of] and supported academic advisors, is a reflection of how much you actually care about your students. [Interviewee 7]

Institutions and the sector must ensure that academic advisors are appropriately supported and adequately resourced, to enable them to support students to the best of their ability. This support could take the form of structural change, such as employing additional advisors to decrease the workload of current advisors, or making available other necessary resources. Although more challenging to implement, it could also take the form of cultural change. A cultural-change agenda could be developed to facilitate enhanced integration of advising services with the work of academics, administrators and other support services. Failing to make these intentional shifts in structures and culture, could lead to a reversion to the pre-pandemic status quo (i.e. morphostasis), where advising resumes a peripheral, unintegrated position within the institution. Yet, concerted efforts to support advisors and to integrate advising within and across the institution, could result in a morphogenesis of the way in which academic advising is practiced at UniMet and, potentially, the SA HE sector, thus building on affordances that emerged during ERTL.



*Inequities foregrounded through advising*

The inequities that remain entrenched in the SA HE sector and which directly influences HE students' ability to study and succeed, were foregrounded during the pandemic (Czerniewicz *et al*, 2020; DHET, 2020; Sifunda *et al*, 2021). At UniMet, academic advisors found themselves at the coalface of this social reality, with countless students reaching out to them for support, advice, and guidance. Interviewee 8 explains:

in some cases when I would call a student, and the amount of noise in the background [...] would be so overwhelming for me, and I couldn't imagine how that student could be able to sit and study [sic]. And it wasn't one student. It's many students [sic]. So, you call them, and there's absolutely no space for that student to study. No space for them to take a phone call. And this is supposed to be a phone call which is helping them to think about doing better. [Interviewee 8]

The challenges the pandemic posed to the way advising as a support structure operated within the institution also contributed to the complexity of advisors' work during the pandemic. Interviewees 5 and 7 explain:

the context we live in is quite difficult with quite a big divide, a digital divide between our students. Some students have access to various electronics and the internet and all of those things and some students do not. [Interviewee 5]

it just highlighted how much the university system is unequal and how much it is inequitable. [...] there's a lack of equality and there's a lack of equity [...] then lockdown happened and all of that was highlighted, the extent to which there is inequality. [Interviewee 7]

Unfortunately, these realities are not confined to the pandemic and are likely to persist post-pandemic, although mitigated by the return of students to campuses and residences. These realities are also far more difficult to resolve, as they are rooted in deeper historical injustices entrenched in the sector and the country. Nevertheless, it remains essential to support academic advisors to help prevent them from feeling a sense of inadequacy in relation to their student support objectives. Failing to do so can have a dangerous influence on advisor morale, especially during high-pressure periods. The mandate of academic advising is student support and advisors often display an inherent conviction to help students:

I do worry that there are students that we haven't been able to help as much as we perhaps could have if we were face-to-face, because [...] it's more difficult to communicate with students. [Interviewee 12]

This trait is not negative in itself and is, arguably, one of the core characteristics of a good academic advisor. However, prolonged periods of inability to act on this mandate (e.g. as a consequence of the challenges posed during the pandemic because of entrenched inequities, for which advisors could find no immediate solutions) could have an unintended negative effect on academic advisors. Interviewee 7 states in quite a disheartened manner:

going forward, like I'm just, I don't know if I want to carry on with working in an unequal ecosystem. Lockdown had brought so many things to the fore. [Interviewee 7]

To help ensure a morphogenesis of academic advising post-pandemic, institutions must work to establish a culture that would bolster advisor morale and empower them, especially during difficult periods. Institutions could also work to harness the collective agential power of academic advisors from across the institution to try and address more complex, systemic challenges affecting their work and holistic student success.

*Connecting dimensions of advising: Students, academics and the broader institutional community*

The pandemic has made explicit the potential of academic advising within and for the academic project, and holistic student support. At a time where academic advising for SA HE is still being conceptualised and defined, the advisors interviewed at UniMet have emerged as a previously undervalued and poorly identified link among students, academics as university teachers, and the institution more broadly. Interviewees 2, 7 and 8 explain:

there is a huge need for academic advising out there. This has actually been amplified by this ERTL [sic], because things that we want to assume are very obvious to the learners, may not be that obvious. [Interviewee 2]

this lockdown period has highlighted even more why we need academic advising [...] why it's a thing that has to exist and why it's a thing that needs to be supported by the university, because academic advising is something that I feel a lot of, if not all the faculties, leaned on, you know. The lecturers, they kind of turned to us to help students [...] bridge that gap, because their job was to, you know, migrate their teaching and their material to an online space, but actually getting students across the bridge to getting their minds right, helping them with balancing their time and study skills, all those things, like lecturers leaned on us a lot. I think this period has highlighted why academic advisors are needed in the university ecosystem. [Interviewee 7]

seeing a greater need for advising because of so many dimensions or the needs that are there amongst the students. So, if there's anything, if there's any change that the pandemic brought to my, at least in my perspective [sic], that's actually that we probably need many more advisors in the faculties, than we have had previously. [Interviewee 8]

This shows how academic advising shifted from the periphery to being a core part of the academic project as a result of the pandemic, thus disrupting the pre-pandemic status quo:

you realize we worked every single day. There's no single day, people in our [unit] [...] sat down and did nothing. We were overwhelmed [...] That means that in as much as people have been looking at it [academic advising] from the peripheral and thinking oh, they are just support, [...] we are actually very, very key to the development of the students. [Interviewee 6]

Interviewee 9 identifies one of the most significant changes that occurred for advising at UniMet during ERTL:

advising is not easy and [...] it's a discipline the profession [sic] in itself, it's more than what we thought it was [...] you find yourself in between the students and the lecturers and the other stakeholders for the benefit of the student. [Interviewee 9]

This integration of academic advising with all other aspects of the academic project is significant. Enhanced connections among students, lecturers and other stakeholders within the institution is essential to ensuring true shifts to holistic student support, where the student is placed at the centre of the learning experience (whether within or outside of the classroom). What remains to be seen is whether this important shift in the way students are supported and academic advising is positioned within the institution (UniMet in this instance) will be retained beyond the pandemic.

### Conclusion and way forward

As the world continues to move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, shifts are beginning to manifest towards a so-called 'new normal'. Institutions are beginning to explore what the SA university of the future could (and should) look like, while ushering in the era of blended approaches to and pedagogies for learning and teaching. It is at this point that the purpose of academic advising for SA HE should be reimagined. In this paper, academic advising at UniMet is observed at the points of interaction in the morphogenetic cycle (i.e. T<sub>2</sub> and T<sub>3</sub>). Academic advisors (agents) interact with structures and cultures (i.e. the unique and disruptive contexts brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic). Through an analysis of the interview data, one begins to appreciate the complexities posed by the pandemic for academic advising and advisors working at UniMet. These experiences had tangible effects on advisors (e.g. feelings of burnout and isolation) and the students they worked with (e.g. challenges with remote learning under circumstances far from ideal for that purpose). Consequently, the pandemic has potentially catalysed the evolution (i.e. morphogenesis) of academic advising within the SA HE context (or at least at UniMet), by foregrounding the diversity of the work academic advisors do and the high-

impact potential of academic advising practices on the holistic student experience and affiliated success. However, the risk remains that this opportunity could be squandered and result in a reversion to the pre-pandemic status quo (i.e. morphostasis). It is at this point that the purpose of academic advising and the roles of academic advisors for this yet unknown 'new normal' should be reimagined and defined to guard against a reversion to the previous status quo and the loss of all that has emerged from the pandemic.

What happens next for academic advising is still to be determined: whether morphogenesis and the ushering in of a new era for advising in SA HE contexts, or morphostasis and a reversion to the pre-pandemic status quo where advising exists on the periphery within the SA HE context. Whatever the reality may be at T<sub>4</sub>, reliable knowledge about the nascent field of academic advising in SA is required. Considering the substantial differences in culture, geographic location, and leadership at SA HE institutions, further research about the nuances of academic advising at other SA HE institutions is essential to the expansion of knowledge about academic advising within the SA HE sector. While some of this work has been documented in the recent special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, structural differences and nuances existent among these institutions may mean that advising and the work of advisors are conceptualised and/or implemented differently from the way it is at UniMet. Finally, there is a need to incorporate student voices in the study of academic advising for the SA HE context, seeing that the purpose of advising should be axiomatically informed by and responsive to the needs of students within the SA HE sector.

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