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EDITED BY  
Mei Tian,  
Xi'an Jiaotong University, China

REVIEWED BY  
Ben W. Walker,  
Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom  
Xingtian Cao,  
Xi'an Jiaotong University, China

\*CORRESPONDENCE  
Jessica Versfeld  
✉ [jessica.versfeld@up.ac.za](mailto:jessica.versfeld@up.ac.za)

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# A qualitative study illustrating factors that enable and constrain academic advising practices in a Global South context

Jessica Versfeld<sup>1\*</sup> and Curwyn Mapaling<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Engineering Department, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa, <sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

**Introduction:** Academic advising plays a crucial role in South African higher education, especially considering the country's diverse student population, historical injustices, and socio-economic inequalities. However, there is a lack of research supporting academic advising practices in this context.

**Methods:** This study employs a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured in-depth interviews with four academic advisors from the Engineering, Built Environment, and Information Technology (EBIT) department at a South African university. A socio-ecological lens is applied to explore the factors enabling and constraining best practices in academic advising.

**Results:** Key findings reveal that academic advisors face challenges such as limited resources and institutional support. However, opportunities exist for fostering student resilience and academic success. The study identifies enablers and constraints across microsystemic (e.g., advisor passion and resilience), mesosystemic (e.g., interdepartmental collaboration), and macrosystemic (e.g., institutional policies, socio-economic factors) levels.

**Discussion:** As part of the Global South, South Africa shares many socio-economic and educational challenges with other countries in the region. The study's findings offer insights that may be relevant to similar contexts. By illuminating the mechanisms that empower the academic advising community, this research seeks to inform the development of more effective student support interventions. The socio-ecological framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected influences contributing to the efficacy and challenges faced by academic advisors in engineering departments.

## KEYWORDS

academic advising, resilience, education, university policies, interdepartmental collaboration, socio-economic inequalities, professional development opportunities, Global South

## Introduction

The multifaceted role of academic advisors encompasses various responsibilities aimed at enhancing student success. These responsibilities include proactive outreach to students, encouraging their engagement in intervention programmes, providing counselling to mitigate risks and challenges, conducting workshops on time management and study skills, monitoring individual students' academic progress to identify potential issues early on, supporting students who seek assistance voluntarily, and offering guidance to those considering programme changes (Assiri et al., 2020; de Klerk, 2021; Strydom and Loots, 2020; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021). In the specific context of the current study conducted within a

South African university's Engineering, Built Environment, and Information Technology (EBIT) departments, the model of academic advising is primarily the responsibility of dedicated academic advisors whose main role is to provide academic support and guidance. These advisors work closely with academic staff but do not have teaching responsibilities. Academic advising plays a critical role in South African higher education, acting as a fundamental mechanism to facilitate connections between faculties and student support services (Assiri et al., 2020; Loucif et al., 2020). In this pursuit, academic advising has the potential to transcend its functional role, emerging as a transformative force that promotes educational excellence and empowers students to achieve both academic and personal goals within the distinctive dynamics of South African universities (de Klerk, 2021; Strydom and Loots, 2020; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021).

The necessity of this study stems from the lack of comprehensive research on academic advising practices in the Global South, particularly within the unique socio-economic and political context of South Africa. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring how academic advising can be optimised to address the challenges faced by students, especially in demanding engineering programmes. While extensive research on optimal academic advising practices has been conducted in developed nations, there remains a scarcity of comparable studies addressing academic advising in developing countries within the Global South (Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021; Looker, 2018; de Klerk, 2023). The unique socio-economic and political context in South Africa presents challenges and opportunities for academic advising, necessitating a nuanced exploration of the factors that enable and constrain academic advisors in guiding students, particularly in rigorous and demanding engineering programmes (de Klerk, 2021; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021).

Despite South Africa's classification as an upper-middle-income country by the World Bank, it struggles with pronounced inequality, as indicated by the Gini coefficient (World Bank, 2018). Education emerges as a pivotal tool for fostering economic and social advancement in South Africa, and similar post-colonial nations (Francis and Webster, 2019; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021; World Bank, 2018). However, the South African higher education system faces challenges in meeting the demand for skilled graduates, especially with high enrolment rates, retention, and graduation difficulties among first-year students, first-generation students, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds (de Klerk, 2021; Scott, 2018; Strydom and Loots, 2020). Despite funding initiatives aimed at increasing access, graduation rates remain low, with only 29% of students registering for undergraduate degrees in 2011 completing within the stipulated time frame (StatsSA, 2019). Specifically, in engineering departments, completion rates vary widely, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to student success or attrition (Fisher, 2011; Govender, 2018; Pocock, 2011). Moreover, the transition from the National Diploma (NDip) to a tertiary Bachelor of Engineering Technology degree (BEngTech) introduces additional complexities, compounded by the inadequate preparation provided by the South African schooling system for engineering students (Oyerinde and Dienga, 2023; Van Der Merwe and Maharaj, 2018).

The socio-ecological lens is central to this study, offering a framework to examine the interplay between individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal factors that influence academic advising

practices. This perspective allows for a holistic analysis of the environment in which academic advising occurs, highlighting the interconnectedness of various influences and their impact on advising effectiveness. By incorporating additional scholarly perspectives, this study underscores the significance of the socio-ecological framework in understanding and enhancing academic advising in South Africa. Recent developments in academic advising in South Africa have been influenced significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has catalysed changes in how advising is perceived and practiced (de Klerk, 2023; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021). Studies at institutions like the University of the Free State highlight the importance of advising in connecting students to support services and improving educational outcomes (de Klerk, 2023; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021). This period has seen a shift in the perception and practice of advising, with academic advisors emerging as crucial links among students, lecturers, and institutions, and their role being increasingly recognised for its high-impact potential in the South African higher education context. Critical reviews of practices, such as those at the Durban University of Technology, have contributed to this evolving body of literature, reflecting on the strengths and challenges of current strategies, and engaging with best practices for the future of academic advising in South Africa (de Klerk, 2024).

## A socio-ecological lens on what enables and constrains best practice academic advising

This study employs a socio-ecological lens, drawing on the work of Bronfenbrenner and others, to comprehensively explore the factors enabling and constraining best practices in academic advising within the South African higher education context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ramos and Hughes, 2020; Wosnitza et al., 2018). By positioning the current research as a pilot study, the researchers aim to provide illustrative insights into the socio-ecological factors that enable and constrain academic advising practices in South Africa. This approach allows the researchers to present the data as a reflection of the broader socio-ecological context, encompassing micro, meso, exo, and macro-level influences on academic advising. By adopting this multidimensional approach, the research seeks to elucidate the mechanisms that empower academic advisors to effectively respond and adapt to the challenges inherent in their working environment. The study strategically positions these factors within the various systems of the socio-ecological model, discerning their intricate relationships across micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. At the microsystemic level, the research delves into the immediate influences on academic advisors, including individual experiences, interpersonal relationships, and the direct academic environment. Meso-level considerations involve an analysis of organisational structures and collaborative dynamics within departments, highlighting the role of departmental policies, team interactions, and shared practices in shaping advisory roles (de Klerk, 2021; Ungar, 2012). The exosystemic dimension examines external factors impacting advisors, such as university policies, broader educational trends, and societal expectations. The macrosystem encompasses overarching societal, cultural, and economic forces, providing a broad perspective on the context in which academic advising operates (de Klerk, 2021; Gu, 2018; Mansfield and Beltman, 2019; Ungar, 2012).

The study posits that recruiting highly qualified advisors is important but not sufficient for institution-wide improvement in advising (He et al., 2020). Instead, it emphasises the interconnectedness of advisors' professional wellbeing with the overall health of the institution and the field of advising. A holistic approach, considering both systemic and collective dimensions, is crucial for meaningful progress in South African higher education (He et al., 2020; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021). Drawing on Hargreaves and Fullan's concept of professional capital, this research applies the framework to academic advising, incorporating human, social, and decisional dimensions (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Human capital involves personal attributes such as backgrounds, experiences, and training. Social capital pertains to the nature of interactions among advisors within the higher education context, and decisional capital involves how decisions are made in line with the institution's vision (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). The study gathers qualitative insights from four academic advisors in the EBIT department of a South African university, aiming to deeply understand the intricacies of academic advising.

Recognising the collective importance of academic advisors, the research seeks to inform funding allocation, professional development opportunities, and policy decisions related to academic advising (de Klerk, 2021; He et al., 2020; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021). Additionally, insights from developed countries underscore the need for addressing both conceptual and informational aspects in professional development initiatives for academic advisors (He et al., 2020; Zarges et al., 2018). The study also notes disparities between advisors' transformative beliefs and institutional preferences for information-based practices, suggesting that institutions should focus on leveraging social and decisional capital to empower the advisor community collectively (He et al., 2020). The wellbeing of individual advisors is linked to the overall health of the institution and the advising field. Research from developed countries indicates varying levels of advisor wellbeing, influenced by work conditions and student interactions (de Klerk, 2021). Advisors expressing dissatisfaction often cite workload and lack of support as major concerns, highlighting the need for formal recognition and feedback mechanisms (de Klerk, 2021; He et al., 2020; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021). The study recognises the scarcity of research on advisors' beliefs, practices, and wellbeing, underscoring the need for higher education professionals to cultivate a supportive, systemic environment for academic advising (He et al., 2020; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021).

## Methodology

### Design

The study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with academic advisors to uncover the intricate and often unarticulated factors influencing academic advising. This approach is well-suited to capturing the complex realities and lived experiences of advisors within South African higher education. The interview questions were designed to explore key themes such as the challenges faced by academic advisors, the support systems available to them, and the socio-ecological factors impacting their roles. These questions were developed through a review of existing literature and in consultation with experts to ensure they effectively address the research questions.

For a detailed list of the interview questions, please refer to [Supplementary material](#).

### Sample selection

A purposive sample of four academic advisors from the EBIT department at a leading South African university was selected. This cohort was chosen due to their direct involvement and specialised expertise in academic advising within this particular academic discipline, which aligns with the study's focus on identifying best practices in academic advising (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Patton, 2014). The selected academic advisors met specific criteria: they were registered psychologists, comprising two counseling psychologists, one research psychologist, and one educational psychologist. All participants had at least 2 years of experience in academic advising.

### Data collection

Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews, typically lasting between 45 and 60 min, were conducted with the selected academic advisors to gain insights into their experiences, perspectives, and challenges in academic advising. The interviews were designed to explore a range of topics, including personal beliefs, practices, and factors influencing the wellbeing and effectiveness of advisors in their roles. This approach aimed to uncover the nuanced and often unarticulated aspects of academic advising, providing a deeper understanding of the advisors' perspectives and experiences (Clarke and Braun, 2013; Seidman, 2006).

### Data analysis

The data analysis process involved the verbatim transcription of audio-recorded interviews conducted with academic advisors from the EBIT department. The interviews were structured around a detailed questionnaire that covered various aspects of academic advising, including background and experience, advising practices, challenges, socio-ecological influences, and professional wellbeing (see [Supplementary material](#)).

A thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify patterns and themes within the data. This process involved multiple coders to enhance reliability and validity, incorporating different perspectives into the coding process. The thematic analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data, reflecting the authentic experiences and perspectives of the participants (Clarke and Braun, 2013). The inductive approach was particularly suited for this study, as it ensured that the findings were not constrained by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Instead, the themes developed naturally, grounded in the actual data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and subtleties of academic advising practices and challenges within the South African higher education context (Nowell et al., 2017; Saldana, 2015). The initial phase of analysis involved open coding, where segments of data were labelled based on their relevance to academic advising practices and challenges. Each transcript was reviewed line-by-line, and initial codes were generated to capture key concepts and ideas expressed by

the participants. This process was iterative, with codes being refined and adjusted as more data was reviewed.

Following the open coding, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. These categories were then analysed to identify overarching themes that encapsulated the core issues and dynamics described by the advisors. The themes that emerged from this process were reflective of the participants' lived experiences, ensuring that the findings were deeply rooted in the qualitative data. After the themes were identified through the inductive analysis, the socio-ecological lens was applied as a secondary interpretative framework. This theoretical model, based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, provided a structured approach to understanding the various levels of influence on academic advising practices.

The dual approach of inductive theme development followed by the application of the socio-ecological lens ensured that the study remained grounded in empirical data while benefiting from a comprehensive theoretical analysis. This methodology allowed the themes to emerge organically from the data, ensuring authenticity and relevance, while the socio-ecological model provided a structured lens to interpret these themes within the broader context of South African higher education.

## Ethical considerations

Strict ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the commencement of interviews, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's purpose and their rights as participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to all participants, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. All data collected, including audio recordings and visual materials from the poster presentations, were securely stored and accessible exclusively to the research team, ensuring the privacy and protection of the participants' information (Israel and Hay, 2006; Resnik, 2011).

## Results

The results section of this study synthesises the emergent themes from interviews with academic advisors, elucidating the myriad factors that facilitate and impede on the practice of academic advising. Through a thematic analysis, these factors are distilled into three principal themes: (4.1) Microsystemic factors dynamics in academic advising best practice, (4.2) Mesosystemic dynamics in academic advising, and (4.3) The impact of macrosystemic dynamics on academic advising in South Africa. Each of these themes encapsulates a set of interconnected elements, collectively illustrating the complex and layered nature of academic advising.

### Microsystemic factors dynamics in academic advising best practice

The first theme delves into the critical microsystemic elements that both enable and constrain academic advising best practices, focusing on passion, resilience, and professional development opportunities. The role of individual resilience and

intrinsic motivation as drivers of effective academic advising is well-documented in the literature. Advisors who exhibit a deep-seated passion for their work and the resilience to overcome challenges tend to create more meaningful and supportive advising relationships, which are key to student success (de Klerk, 2023; Gu, 2018; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021). The concept of resilience, in particular, has garnered attention for its significant impact on academic advising. Resilient advisors are better equipped to handle the complexities and stressors associated with their role, maintaining a positive and adaptive stance in the face of adversity (de Klerk, 2023; Troxel, 2019). This ability to adapt is pivotal in the dynamic and often challenging landscape of higher education, where advisors must navigate a range of student needs and institutional demands. Moreover, professional development plays a pivotal role in enhancing the capabilities of academic advisors. Structured training programmes and continuous learning opportunities enable advisors to stay current with evolving educational trends and best practices in the field (Lowenstein, 2005; NACADA, 2017). Such programmes not only enhance their technical skills and knowledge but also contribute to the development of soft skills, such as empathy and effective communication, which are essential in fostering strong advisor-student relationships (Kuhn et al., 2006; Troxel, 2019).

### Passion and resilience enables effective academic advising practice

The practice of academic advising is notably bolstered by enablers such as passion, strong personal motivation, and resilience. These qualities are not only essential in overcoming the myriad challenges inherent in academic advising but also in fostering a positive and impactful advising environment, as a participant noted that, *"having a passion for student success is really important, because you do not get paid that much, so if you aren't passionate about student success you will not be effective in your role."* This finding is in line with existing literature which underscores the pivotal role of individual resilience and intrinsic motivation in the field of academic advising (de Klerk, 2023; Gu, 2018; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021). Intrinsic motivation, characterised by a genuine passion for guiding and supporting students, is a fundamental driver that propels academic advisors to excel in their roles, as seen in this participant, *"I myself I struggled academically... which ignited my passion for academic advising. When I advise, I feel it from the stomach up because I can literally see a student struggling before they can explain."*

This deep-seated enthusiasm often translates into a more personalised and committed approach to student advising, leading to better student outcomes (Deci and Ryan, 2012; Theron and Theron, 2014). Furthermore, resilience, the capacity to withstand and adapt to the challenges and stressors of the advising role, is crucial in sustaining effective practice over time. Resilient advisors are more likely to demonstrate adaptability, persistence, and a positive outlook, even in the face of difficulties (Theron and Theron, 2014; Ungar, 2012). Interview excerpts from the current study highlight how advisors' resilience and passion are instrumental in navigating complex advising scenarios and in maintaining a high level of student engagement. Advisors who exhibit these qualities are often more adept at creating supportive and empowering advising relationships, which are crucial for student success.



## Professional development enables academic advising practice

Professional development is critical in enhancing the effectiveness of academic advising. A participant explained, “I did the AAPD [Academic Advising Professional Development] course and that was really amazing and helped a lot.” Research shows that essential attributes for successful advising, like motivation and resilience, are greatly strengthened through targeted professional development (He et al., 2020; Zarges et al., 2018). Continuous learning and skill enhancement are vital components of an advisor’s professional growth.

Programmes offering current advising techniques, technological know-how, and insights into student needs, such as workshops and seminars, are indispensable for advisors. These opportunities enable them to better understand and meet the diverse needs of students (Lowenstein, 2005; NACADA, 2017). Another participant supports this by saying, “that AAPD course we did with the University of the Free State was very good, I think all advisors should do that course.” Additionally, institutional support and recognition contribute significantly to advisors feeling valued and motivated, enhancing job satisfaction and commitment (Creamer and Scott, 2000; Habley et al., 2012).

## Mesosystemic dynamics in academic advising

The second theme critically examines the mesosystemic factors influencing the efficacy of academic advising in underscoring how interconnected elements within educational institutions impact advising practices. These factors encompass the interplay of departmental policies, institutional culture, interdepartmental collaborations, and the overarching educational environment. Academic literature has increasingly recognised the significant role these elements play in shaping academic advising (de Klerk, 2023; Gu, 2018; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021).

Interdepartmental collaboration is also a vital component of the mesosystem. This subtheme highlights how poor communication channels within university structures can significantly hinder the effectiveness of academic advising. Effective communication and coordination across academic departments, student services, and administrative units are essential for a holistic approach to academic advising. For instance, a participant noted, “we do not communicate with admin nearly enough – so if there are changes in rules and regulations the advisors are not informed and we cannot do our jobs properly.” Research indicates that such collaboration can significantly improve the advisor’s ability to cater to diverse student needs, thereby positively influencing student outcomes (Light, 2001; Swecker et al., 2013). However, advisors in the conducted interviews frequently cited mesosystemic barriers, particularly the compartmentalisation of university departments, as impediments to optimal advising practices. A participant explained, “we cannot operate like islands anymore, when students come to us and they get ping ponged around, it makes us look useless as advisor.” The lack of streamlined communication and coordination among various stakeholders was identified as a major constraint.

## Enhanced collaboration with lecturing staff enables academic advising

This subtheme emphasises recent improvements in collaboration and interaction between advisors and lecturing staff, notably in

engineering departments, as a key factor in promoting best practices in academic advising. A participant expressed, “I have been an advisor for 5 years now, and last year [2022] was the first time we started meeting with lecturers and working together and I think it’s really important.” Within the mesosystem, the policies and culture of educational institutions are pivotal in determining the structure and approach of academic advising. This system involves interactions among various departments and services within the institution, which can either facilitate or impede an advisor’s effectiveness in guiding students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kuh et al., 2006). A participant added, “buy-in and support from lecturers is so important. I think lecturers underutilise advisors, we are there to make their jobs easier so they should use us more.” Policies that foster support and a culture of collaboration within the institution can significantly enhance the advisors’ capacity to provide comprehensive student support.

## The impact of macrosystemic dynamics on academic advising in South Africa

In the South African higher education landscape, macrosystemic dynamics exert a profound influence on academic advising which is intricately shaped by the nation’s distinctive socio-political history and the multifaceted nature of its student population. Academic advisors are required to navigate a myriad of cultural, economic, and linguistic diversities, necessitating an approach that is both culturally sensitive and inclusively responsive to these variances (Badat, 2010; Morrow, 2009). Furthermore, national educational policies focused on rectifying historical educational disparities and promoting broader access to higher education significantly inform the practices and methodologies of academic advising (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). Economic factors, including the allocation and management of university funds, also critically influence the scope and efficacy of academic advising services (Schreiber, 2015; Wangenge-Ouma, 2010). These macrosystemic elements collectively craft a complex and challenging environment for academic advising within South Africa which demand a high degree of adaptability and a comprehensive understanding of the overarching societal and educational context.

## The constraints of macrosystemic dynamics on academic advising best practices

Academic advisors have identified several macrosystemic factors that significantly impede optimal advising practices. These include the following categories:

### Inconsistent policies

Academic policies, such as the N + 1 rule and stringent exclusion criteria, negatively impact student support mechanisms and their academic success trajectories (The “N + 1 rule” at the University of Pretoria [UP] refers to a policy that allows students an additional year beyond the standard duration of their degree programme to complete their studies. This means that if a programme is designed to be completed in “N” years, students have “N + 1” years to finish. This rule provides flexibility for students who may need extra time due to various circumstances, ensuring they have an additional year to meet all academic requirements without penalty).

TABLE 1 Summary of best practice academic advising constraints and enablers across systems.

Theme	Subtheme/Category	Enabler	Constrainer
Theme 1: Microsystemic factors dynamics	Subtheme 1.1: Passion and resilience enables effective academic advising practice	Passion for student success; resilience in adapting to advising challenges	Navigational difficulties in complex advising scenarios
	Subtheme 1.2: Professional development enables academic advising practice	Professional development opportunities; institutional support and recognition	Lack of continuous professional growth opportunities
Theme 2: Mesosystemic dynamics in academic advising	Subtheme 2.1: Inadequate communication among university stakeholders constrains academic advising		Poor communication within university structures; Departmental silos
	Subtheme 2.2: Enhanced collaboration with lecturing staff enables academic advising	Improved collaboration and interaction with lecturing staff	
Theme 3: The impact of macrosystemic dynamics on academic advising in South Africa	Subtheme 3.1: The constraints of macrosystemic dynamics on academic advising best practices		Inconsistent policies; Financial management challenges; limited institutional advocacy; academic blacklisting

### Financial management challenges

Issues such as the mismanagement of financial aid funds [e.g., National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)] lead to delays in student registrations, thereby disrupting academic processes.

### Limited institutional advocacy

The universities' constrained role in advocating for systemic changes at governmental and policy-making levels is a barrier to effective student support.

### Impact of academic blacklisting

Exclusion policies not only affect students' immediate educational opportunities but also have long-term ramifications on their career prospects. These macrosystemic challenges underscore the need for a strategic and systemic approach in academic advising, one that is cognisant and responsive to the broader institutional and national educational landscapes.

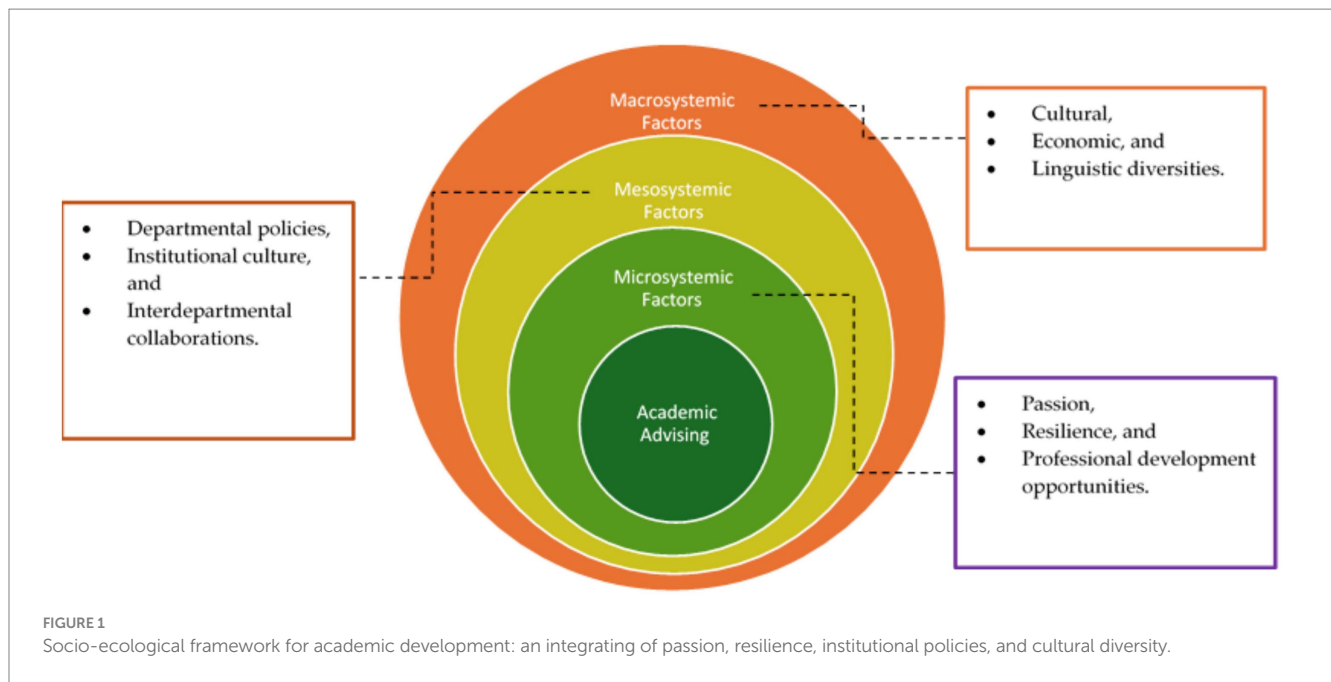
Table 1 summarises the themes, subthemes and categories identified across microsystems, mesosystems, and macrosystems by separating them into enablers and constrainers.

In the complex landscape of higher education, particularly within the Global South, understanding the multifaceted influences on academic development is crucial. The socio-ecological framework provides a comprehensive lens to examine these influences, integrating individual attributes such as passion and resilience, institutional elements like departmental policies and interdepartmental collaborations, and broader cultural, economic, and linguistic diversities. The diagram below, titled "Socio-Ecological Framework for Academic Development: Integrating Passion, Resilience, Institutional Policies, and Cultural Diversity," encapsulates these diverse themes. By situating academic advising within this framework, we aim to illuminate the mechanisms that empower advisors to deliver effective interventions, thus fostering a more supportive and inclusive educational environment in South African universities (Figure 1).

## Discussion

The current study, grounded in a socio-ecological framework, reveals the complex interplay of factors at microsystemic, mesosystemic, and macrosystemic levels that influence academic advising practices, particularly in engineering departments. At the microsystemic level, the study highlights the vital roles of individual attributes such as passion and resilience in academic advising. These personal qualities are essential in navigating the multifaceted challenges of advising and fostering meaningful student-advisor relationships (de Klerk, 2023; Gu, 2018; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021). The findings also underscore the importance of professional development in enhancing advisors' capabilities, aligning with the perspectives of Lowenstein (2005) and NACADA (2017). This professional growth not only improves technical advising skills but also fosters essential soft skills, contributing significantly to the quality of advisor-student interactions.

At the mesosystemic level, the study identifies both enablers and constrainers in the institutional context. Enhanced collaboration with lecturing staff, as evidenced by the emerging practices in 2022, facilitates more effective advising processes. Conversely, inadequate communication among university stakeholders emerges as a significant barrier, highlighting the need for improved interdepartmental coordination and information sharing to support effective advising practices (Light, 2001; Swecker et al., 2013). At the macrosystemic level, the study delves into broader societal, economic, and policy influences on academic advising. It draws attention to the complexities of advising in the unique socio-political and economic context of South Africa, where factors such as historical educational disparities, funding challenges, and institutional policies shape the landscape of academic advising (Badat, 2010; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020; Wangenge-Ouma, 2010).



The study's implications are far-reaching, suggesting the need for a systemic and strategic approach to support academic advisors. This approach should address the multifaceted dimensions influencing academic advising, from individual advisor wellbeing to broader institutional and societal contexts. As such, institutions should prioritise the development and implementation of policies and practices that acknowledge and address these diverse factors, thereby fostering an environment conducive to effective academic advising.

## Conclusion

Utilising a socio-ecological lens, the current study uncovered the nuanced interplay of microsystemic, mesosystemic, and macrosystemic factors that both enable and constrain effective academic advising. The comprehensive literature review highlighted the scarcity of research on academic advising in the Global South, particularly within the unique socio-economic and political context of South Africa. This gap underscores the necessity of exploring how academic advising can be optimised to address the challenges faced by students, especially in demanding engineering programmes. Key findings from the interviews with the academic advisors highlight the importance of personal attributes such as passion and resilience, the critical role of professional development, and the impact of institutional culture and interdepartmental collaborations. Additionally, the study sheds light on the broader societal and economic influences within the South African context that shape academic advising practices. These findings, informed by both the literature and empirical evidence, underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of academic advising in South Africa, revealing both opportunities and challenges in enhancing advising practices.

## Limitations and delimitations

The study's findings are based on a small sample size of four academic advisors from a single South African university's EBIT. This small sample size, while allowing for in-depth exploration, limits the generalisability of the results to other contexts or institutions. Additionally, the study relies on qualitative data, which, while rich in detail, may not capture the full breadth of academic advising experiences across different settings. The absence of student perspectives is another limitation, as the study focuses solely on the advisors' experiences. This choice was made due to real-world constraints and the aim to deeply understand the advisors' roles. The perspectives gathered are also subject to the individual biases and experiences of the participants, which may influence the interpretation of the findings.

The study focuses specifically on academic advising within the context of South African higher education, particularly within engineering departments. This focus was chosen to explore the unique challenges and opportunities in this field, but it also means that the findings may not be applicable to other disciplines or regions. The use of a socio-ecological lens provides a comprehensive framework for analysis, but it also sets boundaries on the factors considered, potentially overlooking other relevant influences outside this framework. Furthermore, as researchers, our position as insider researchers may have influenced the study's design and interpretation. This positionality was considered in the analysis to minimise bias.

## Recommendations for enhancing academic advising practices

The following recommendations are proposed to enhance the practice of academic advising, particularly within engineering departments:

For academic institutions:

- **Institutional support and recognition:** Strengthen institutional support for academic advisors by formally recognising their contributions to student success. Recognition can take various forms, such as formal awards, professional development opportunities, and public acknowledgment of advisors' efforts. For example, organisations like the UK Advising and Tutoring association (UKAT) and National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) offer professional recognition schemes and awards that highlight the valuable work of advisors. These programmes not only acknowledge the achievements of advisors but also provide a framework for professional growth and development. By implementing similar recognition initiatives, institutions can enhance job satisfaction and commitment among advisors, ultimately contributing to improved student outcomes.
- **Enhanced communication channels:** Improve communication channels within universities by establishing clear and effective protocols between academic advisors, administrative staff, and faculty. This will facilitate seamless information flow and coordination, ensuring that advisors are well-informed and can perform their roles effectively.
- **Interdepartmental collaboration:** Foster a culture of collaboration within educational institutions. Encourage regular meetings and partnerships between academic advisors and lecturing staff to ensure a unified approach to student support and advising.

For policymakers:

- **Policy review and advocacy:** Advocate for and contribute to the development of policies that support academic advising. Review and adapt academic policies to align with the realities and challenges faced by advisors and students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds.
- **Addressing macrosystemic challenges:** Recognise and address the broader macrosystemic challenges that impact academic advising. Engage in dialogues with policymakers and stakeholders to tackle issues like educational disparities, funding constraints, and systemic barriers to student success.

For academic advisors:

- **Cultivating advisor resilience:** Focus on building resilience among academic advisors through training and support systems. Equip advisors with skills to manage stress and adapt to changing circumstances within the academic environment.
- **Professional development:** Encourage continuous learning and skill enhancement through targeted professional development programmes. These programmes should offer current advising techniques, technological know-how, and insights into student needs to better understand and meet the diverse needs of students.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Faculty Committee for Research and Ethics at UP. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

## Author contributions

JV: Conceptualization, Data curation, Project administration, Writing – original draft. CM: Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2024.1419070/full#supplementary-material>



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