

CREATING PATHWAYS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

ACADEMIC
ADVISING
AND
STUDENT
ENGAGEMENT

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Executive summary

This report focuses on two key concepts in current higher education – academic advising and student engagement. Both these concepts, as well as the relationship between them, have been well researched and developed internationally. In South Africa, student engagement research has been developing steadily over the past decade, thereby paving the way for identifying constructs or interventions which work symbiotically with engagement to support students' development and success. Through this report, we aim to share the significant relationship between academic advising and student engagement by highlighting the following findings:

- ***There is a link between academic advising and student success.*** University of the Free State (UFS) students who participate in academic advising have a higher probability of passing 70% of their modules than students who do not participate in advising.
- ***Students who participate in academic advising are more engaged.*** Of course this finding does not imply a causal relationship between advising and engagement, but it does tell us that students who participate in academic advising report that they feel more supported by their institutions, they are more aware of certain skills they develop within and beyond classrooms, they participate more in high-impact practices, and they report much better relationships with institutional staff and other students.
- ***Positioning academic advising as a high-impact practice is paying off.*** The Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the UFS has put in considerable effort to position and develop academic advising as a high-impact practice. The results reflect this as UFS students indicate that they more frequently participate in academic advising than the national sample, as well as increasingly recognise the quality of academic advising.
- ***Students want academic advising.*** The data show us that a large portion of students plan to participate in academic advising. As institutions we need to make sure that we are able to reach out to those students and provide them with the help and guidance they need.
- ***Fewer first-year students are participating in academic advising than senior undergraduate students.*** Academic advising needs to take place throughout students' higher education paths. Focusing on first-year students and creating a culture of advising would promote a continual process supporting students' progress and development.
- ***Relationships are key for quality advising.*** Student feedback on advising they received during registration at the UFS shows that the personal interaction and sense of care that students experience from advisors make a significant contribution to orientating themselves as new students.

These findings represent the first evidence-based understanding we have about the necessity and potential of academic advising in the South African context. The report also paves the way for institutions to give the necessary recognition to the role academic advising could play in helping their students successfully navigate through higher education institutions.

“Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a
successful college experience”
(Campbell & Nutt, 2008)



1) Introduction

This report is the first in a bi-annual series on creating pathways for student success with the aim to share practices impacting student engagement and success. The CTL at the UFS has hosted the South African Surveys of Student Engagement (SASSE) for over a decade and has weaved engagement data into teaching and learning, as well as other institutional endeavours targeting student success, such as academic advising. The CTL has positioned academic advising as a high-impact practice, and the efforts to develop advising are paying off. More students are participating in academic advising, and all students who receive advising are more engaged. This finding is also replicated in national SASSE data, thereby showing the potential of advising as an important factor in helping students to succeed.

Conceptually, the UFS has been playing a leading role nationally in developing academic advising. Through the Kresge Foundation funded Siyaphumelela initiative, significant advancements in defining and developing academic advising in South African higher education are taking place. Moreover, a collaborative University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) has been awarded to seven national higher education institutions over a period of three years (2018 – 2020) to drive a contextualised theoretical understanding of advising as a holistic developmental practice to promote professional practice, and to allow institutions to work collaboratively in advancing research and development in advising within South Africa. The potential of academic advising as a key contributor to students' development and success is therefore being recognised.

South African higher education institutions have a responsibility to help students navigate successfully through their studies. It is therefore our expectation that the sharing of UFS and national SASSE data that highlight certain practices which help students to succeed, will have an effect on institutions' alignment of their practices with what impacts students' experiences for the better.



2) What is academic advising and why is it critical?

Academic advising is an ongoing and intentional teaching and learning practice that empowers students in their learning and development process in order for them to explore and align their personal, academic and career goals. As a shared responsibility between the advisor and advisee, advising aims to maximise students' potential by facilitating a conceptual understanding, sharing relevant information, and developing a relationship focused on promoting academic success. The envisaged result is that students have a meaningful academic experience while in higher education and feel a sense of belonging to the institution (Siyaphumelela Advising Work stream, 2017). When advising is looked at as an educational process, it could play a central role in connecting students with learning opportunities to foster and support their engagement, success and the attainment of key learning outcomes (Campbell & Nutt, 2008).

In addition to the student engagement data shared in this report, several other South African and international studies affirm the importance of developing academic advising for student support, development, and ultimately success. For example, Wilson-Strydom (2015) focused on high school learners' transition to university in a South African context and found that schools are plagued by poorly trained teachers, a lack of resources, and inappropriate curriculums, which lead to a severe lack of preparation and university readiness in many first-year university students. The study also reflected on the impact of this transition on students of whom the majority are the first in their families to attend university, live off-campus and have to commute daily. These and other factors contribute to students feeling lost, scared, overwhelmed and confused about the transition, as well as in some cases lacking a sense of belonging. Internationally, research has frequently demonstrated that academic advising plays a significant role in increasing the retention rate of students at tertiary institutions, and of increasing students' chances of graduating (Elliot & Healy, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Peterson, Wagner & Lamb, 2001).

Cuseo (n.d) reports that academic advising has a number of other positive benefits (which indirectly may increase student persistence and retention in tertiary education), including: increasing students' overall satisfaction with their tertiary experience, increased utilisation of campus resources, developing educational and career decision-making skills, and facilitating more frequent student-staff contact outside of the classroom. It has also been found that contact with a concerned, caring staff member from one's tertiary institution plays a significant role in student retention and academic success, through increasing students' engagement, development, and cognitive growth (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Different aspects of advising, including advisor accountability, advisor empowerment, student responsibility, student self-efficacy, student study skills, and perceived support have all significantly linked academic advising to student success (Young Jones, Burt, Dixon & Hawthorne, 2013). Finally, academic advising has also been positively associated with students' sense of development and satisfaction with college and can impact all facets of a student's academic experience - ranging from development to practical applications of study skills (Pargett, 2011).

Over the last four decades, academic advising has typically been done in prescriptive and developmental ways at many institutions. More recently, however, institutional focus has gradually moved towards having 'student-ready' institutions and incorporating data analytics, which has also impacted how we view advising – adding a more proactive/intrusive form of advising. This implies having a more personalised outreach to students and building on prescriptive or developmental methods of advising. Table 1 provides an overview of the types of advising mentioned here.

Table 1: Types of advising

Prescriptive advising	Developmental advising	Proactive/Intrusive advising
The advisor/advisee relationship is based on power dynamics and the authority of the advisor (Crookston, 2009). In essence, students are in a very literal sense 'advised' to make certain choices.	Developmental advisors gradually shift the responsibility of the relationship to their advisees by helping them develop problem-solving and decision-making skills, challenging them to develop higher-order thought processes, and enabling them to gain clearer insights into their own goals as well as the goals of higher education (Appleby, 2008).	This model of advising is action-orientated to involve and motivate students to seek help when needed. Utilising the good qualities of prescriptive advising (expertise, awareness of student needs, structured programmes) and of developmental advising (relationship to a student's total needs), proactive/intrusive advising is a process of identifying students at crisis points, and urging them to make use of advising services offered before potential challenges might arrive.

2.1) Academic advising at the UFS

Academic advising at the UFS is viewed as a process within the teaching and learning space anchored by three core pillars; informational, conceptual and relational. The primary purpose of academic advising as a proactive model at the UFS is to assist students in navigating through the institutional structure and systems, thus helping them integrate their academic, personal, social and emotional development in mapping their career. By exploring the students' personal, academic and career goals, the advising process becomes the aligning factor. This is based on a hybrid approach that combines principles of prescriptive, developmental, and more dominantly, proactive/intrusive advising.

The UFS advising philosophy iterates that advising is a series of intentional interactions that synthesise the students' learning experience and is directed towards fulfilling the teaching and learning experience in higher education. Students learn to self-actualise, realise and connect their educational and career goals toward lifelong learning. Drawing fundamentally from social sciences, advising is structured in three critical paradigms: curriculum (what advising deals with), pedagogy (how advising takes place as a practice), and student learning outcomes (the result of advising). This philosophy builds on student engagement work where it has been established that academic advising is viewed as a way to connect students to the campus and help them feel that someone is looking out for them (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005).



3) The link between academic advising, student engagement and success

For the past decade, the CTL at the UFS has been central to contextualising student engagement surveys and developing the concept in the South African higher education system (see Strydom, Kuh & Loots, 2017). The potential of student engagement to guide focused interventions, measure and track impact, and helping to create a culture of evidence-based decision making is based on a substantive international body of research linking engagement behaviours with student development and success. In the South African context, we too are starting to collect evidence which shows the benefits of targeted interventions such as academic advising, in relation to students' engagement, development, and success.

The data presented here are primarily from two sources:

- First, the most recent 2017 UFS SASSE sample, consisting of 3 735 undergraduate students to provide an overview of advising and engagement at UFS; and
- Second, for comparison purposes, a national sample consisting of 11 universities (1 x comprehensive university; 4 x traditional universities; 6 x universities of technology), representing data from SASSE administrations between 2015 and 2017. A sample of 13 911 students produced the data. Since SASSE administration takes place every second year, this sample was composed to include a variety of institutions to best represent a national picture.

“Academic advising needs to take place throughout students' higher education paths. Focusing on first-year students and creating a culture of advising would promote a continual process supporting students' progress and development.”

3.1) *Student engagement and success*

From a student engagement perspective, student success extends beyond passing grades and includes the development of cognitive and social-emotional competencies that will prepare graduates to apply what they have learnt in the 'real world'; to make evaluations and judgements about information and sources of information; to be able to analyse and synthesise information from various sources; to evaluate their own views in relation to others'; and to embrace the variety of perspectives usually accompanying diverse people. This broad definition of success also includes the acquisition of other proficiencies that speak to the demands placed on 21st-century graduates by employers. Amongst others, these include being able to actively participate in a team; being able to work with and learn from diverse people and environments; and the ability to recognise and live out the social responsibility of a democratic citizen. How we develop these skills or capabilities in students depends on the extent to which we are creating enabling environments. One example of creating such environments is through high-impact practices (HIPs).

In the South African context academic advising has been identified as a potential HIP – which relates to a practice or intervention's ability to impact on students' cumulative learning. Kuh (2008) explains what makes such practices 'high-impact':

- They demand time and effort from students and staff involved;
- They demand interaction between staff and students as well as between peers over time;
- The more students participate in HIPs, the higher the probability that they will interact with diverse points of view, cultures, etc.;
- Even though structures of HIPs differ, students often get frequent feedback on their participation;
- Participation in HIPs provides students with different perspectives on how and where learning takes place; and
- It can be a life-changing experience for students, particularly related to understanding themselves in relation to others and acquiring valuable learning outcomes (graduate attributes).

The developmental benefits of students' engagement with HIPs have been well documented and Kuh (2008) recommends that all students participate in at least two HIPs throughout their undergraduate careers. The CTL's foregrounding of advising as a high-impact practice seems to be paying off. We are beginning to see a distinct trend that links academic advising with student success.

“The primary purpose of academic advising as a proactive model at the UFS is to assist students in navigating through the institutional structure and systems, thus helping them integrate their academic, personal, social and emotional development in mapping their career.”

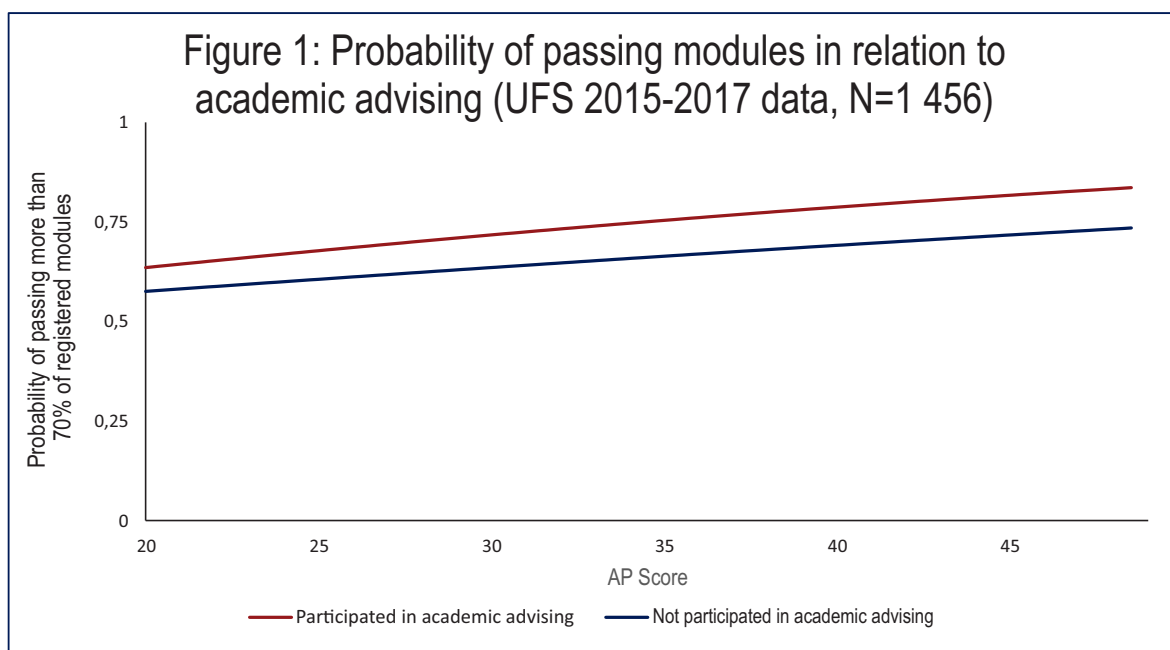
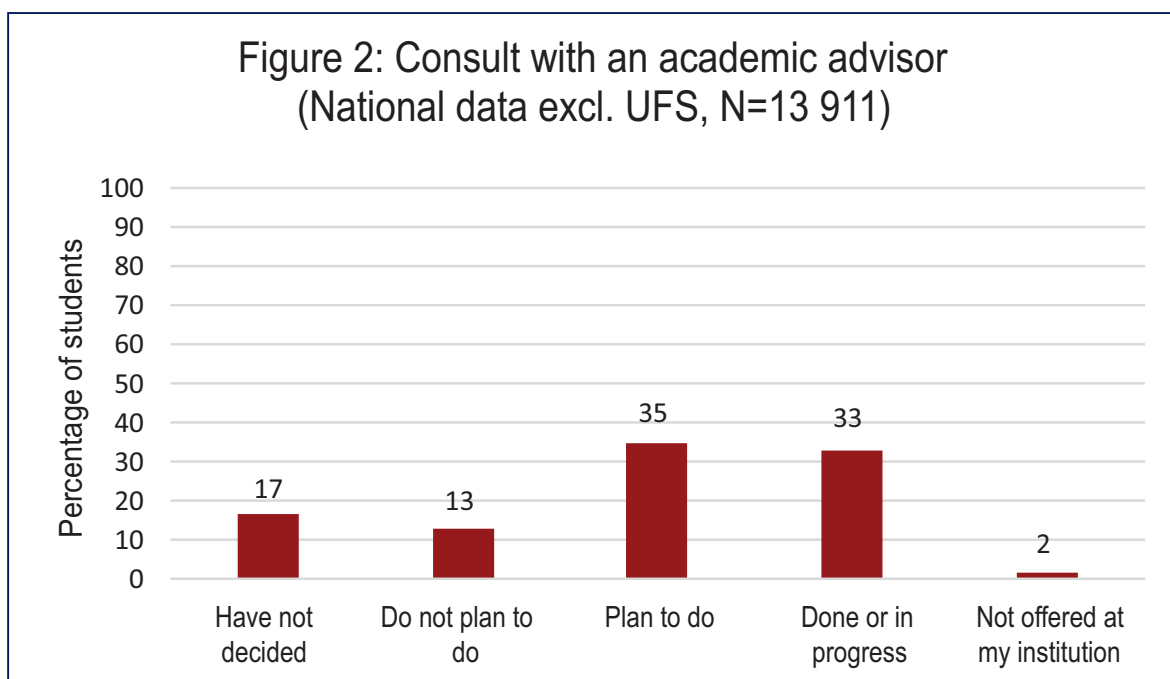


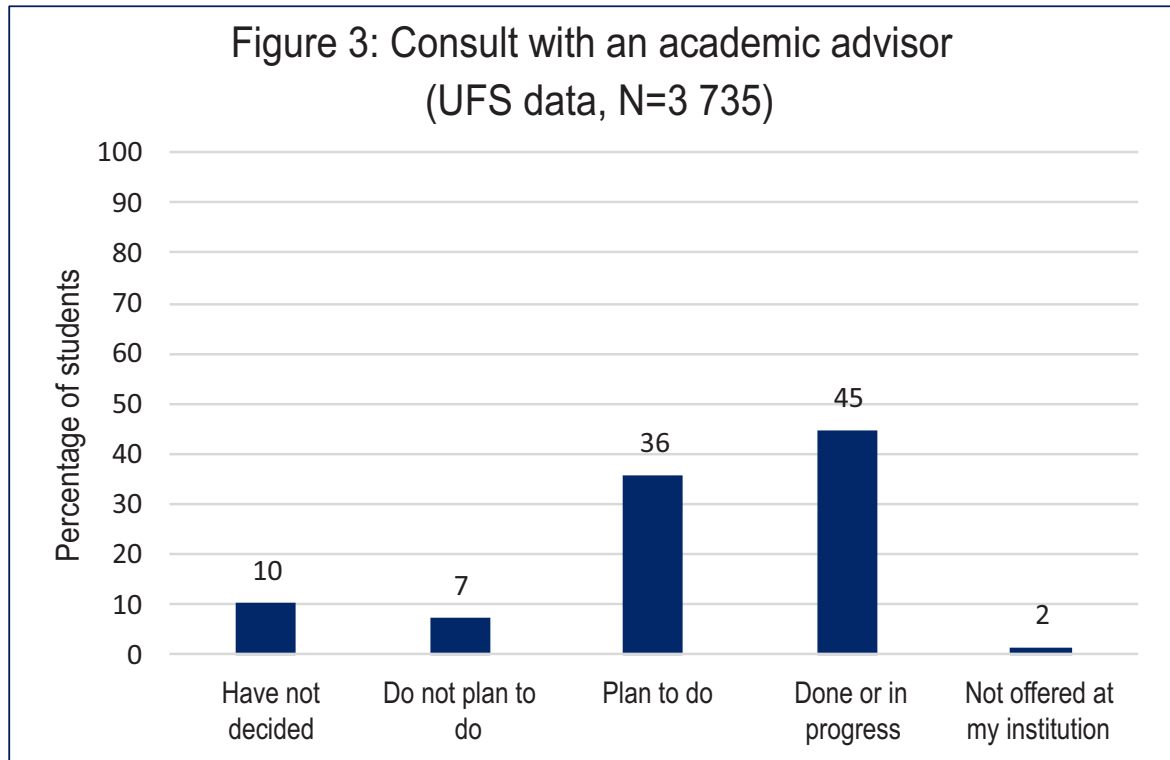
Figure 1 shows through linear mixed modelling that students who have participated in academic advising have a higher probability of passing more than 70% of their modules than a comparable group who have not participated in advising. This is the case regardless of students' Admission Point (AP) scores. Analyses such as these, which focus on students' actual behaviours and performance, support similar results from self-reported data linking the benefits of academic advising, student engagement, and success.

3.2) Participation in advising: A national vs. institutional picture

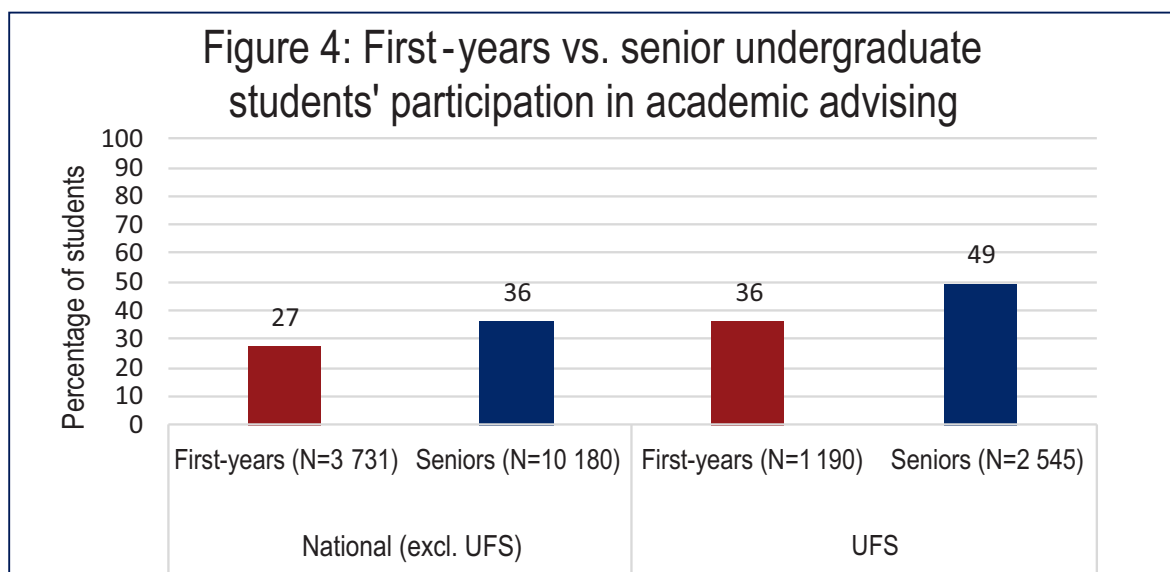
The SASSE asks whether students have consulted with an academic advisor to help them plan their studies. National data on this question, excluding data from the UFS, are displayed in Figure 2.



The majority of students nationally are either planning to consult with an academic advisor, or they have already consulted an academic advisor. To a much lesser extent, some students also indicate that they do not plan to consult an academic advisor or that they do not know of such services offered at their institutions.



The UFS students' responses to the question regarding academic advice are shown in Figure 3. Almost half of the SASSE sample indicated that they have consulted with an academic advisor, while more than a third of students were planning to engage with advising.



In both the national and UFS samples, senior undergraduate students have received significantly more academic advising than first-year students ($p \leq 0.00$). Nationally, less than 30% of first-year students have received academic advising, compared to more than a third of senior undergraduate students. At the UFS, more than a third of first-year students indicate that they have received academic advice, compared to about half of senior undergraduate students (Figure 4).

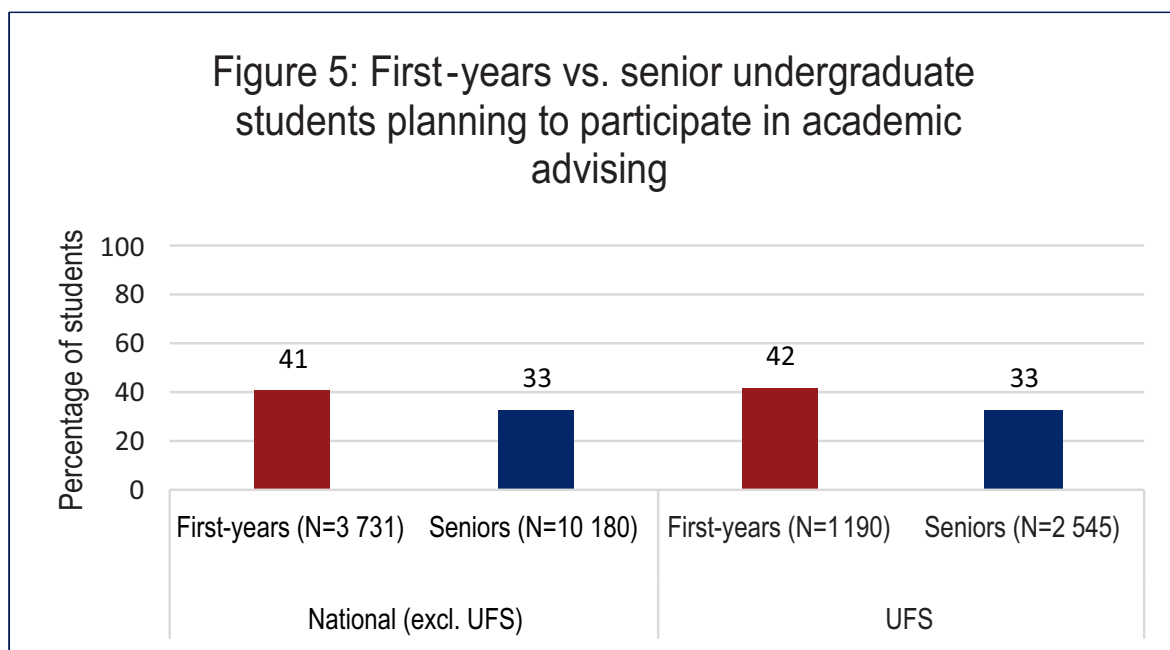
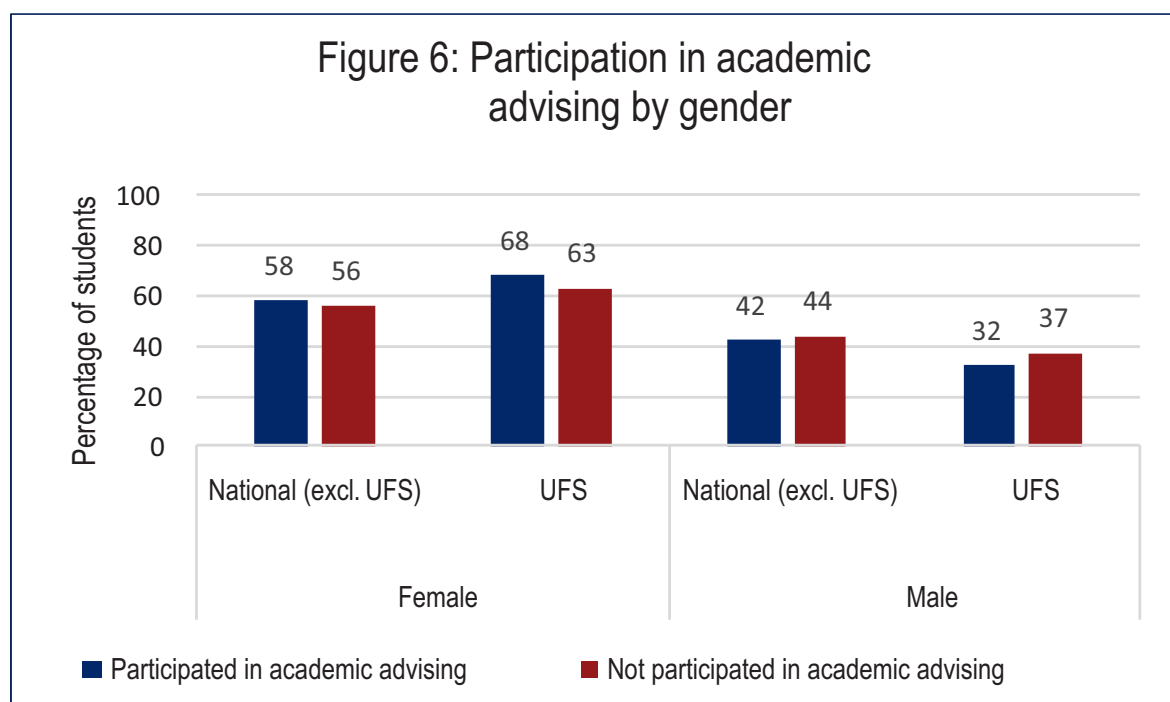
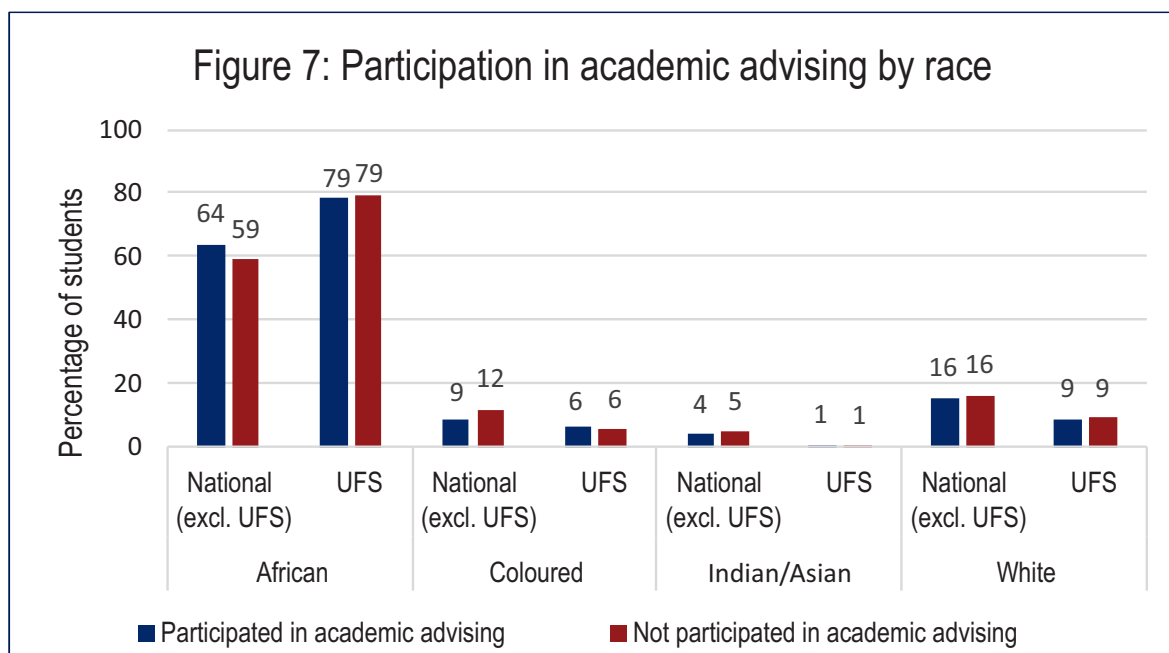


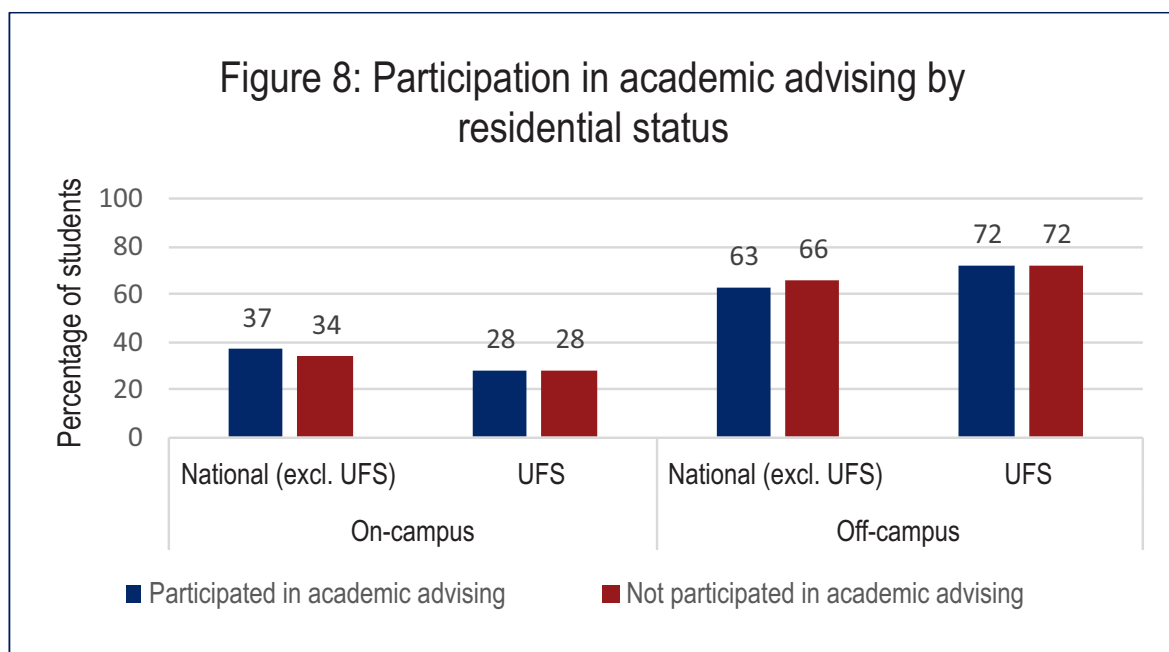
Figure 5 shows that a third of both national and UFS senior undergraduate students and almost 10% more first-year students (41% national and 42% UFS) indicate that they plan to engage with academic advising. An important consideration is whether we, as institutions, are doing enough to make these services accessible to students? And maybe more importantly, are we adequately equipped to help students make important decisions about their academic and career paths?



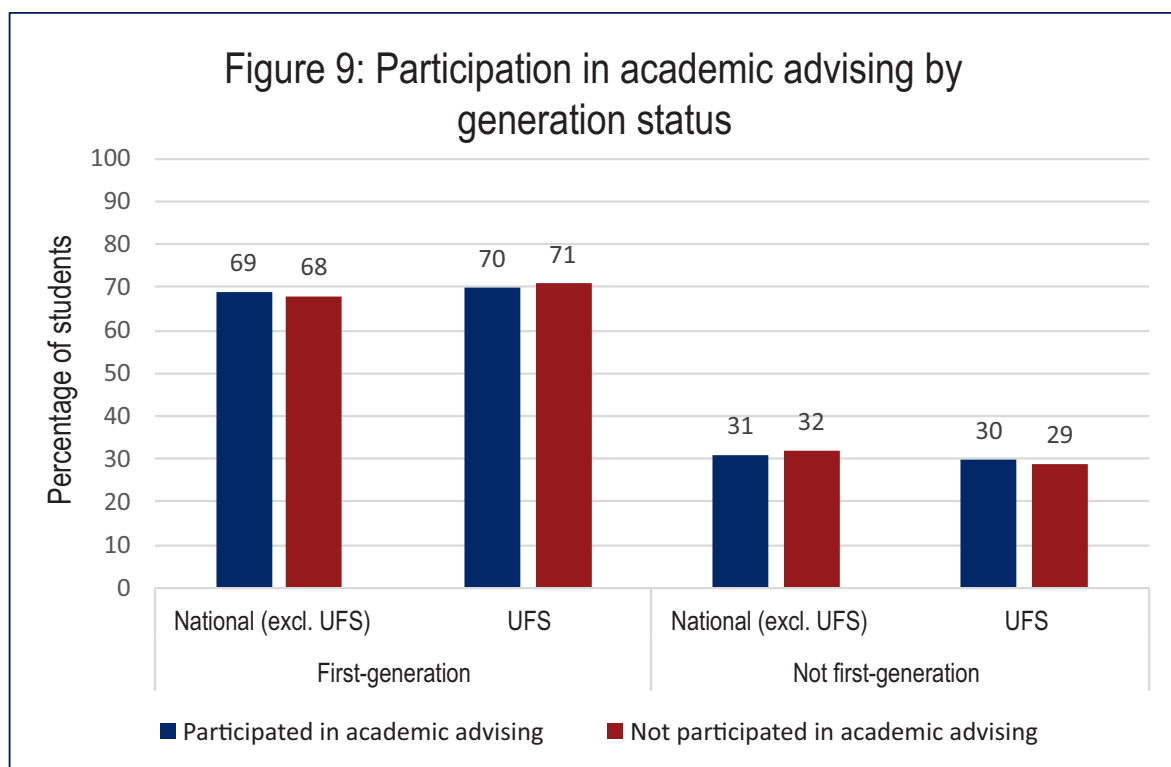
Based on gender, both national and UFS data show statistically significant differences ($p \leq 0.05$) between students who have consulted an academic advisor and those who have not. Females are more prone to participate in academic advising than males (Figure 6).



Racially, national data show statistically significant differences ($p \leq 0.05$) between students who have consulted an academic advisor and those who have not. Black African students are more prone to participate in academic advising than other race groups (Figure 7). White students show second most participation. Among the UFS students there was no significant difference in whether or not they have consulted an academic advisor or not based on race.



Based on residential status, national data show statistically significant differences ($p \leq 0.05$) between students who have consulted an academic advisor and those who have not. Of the students living on-campus, more are participating in advising than not. In contrast, of the students living off-campus, more students are not participating in advising (Figure 8). For the UFS students, whether they reside on- or off-campus does not impact their participation in academic advising as there are no statistical differences between these groups.



Being a first-generation student does not impact a student's participation in academic advising. No significant difference was found between students who have participated in academic advising and those who have not, for either the national or UFS data (Figure 9).

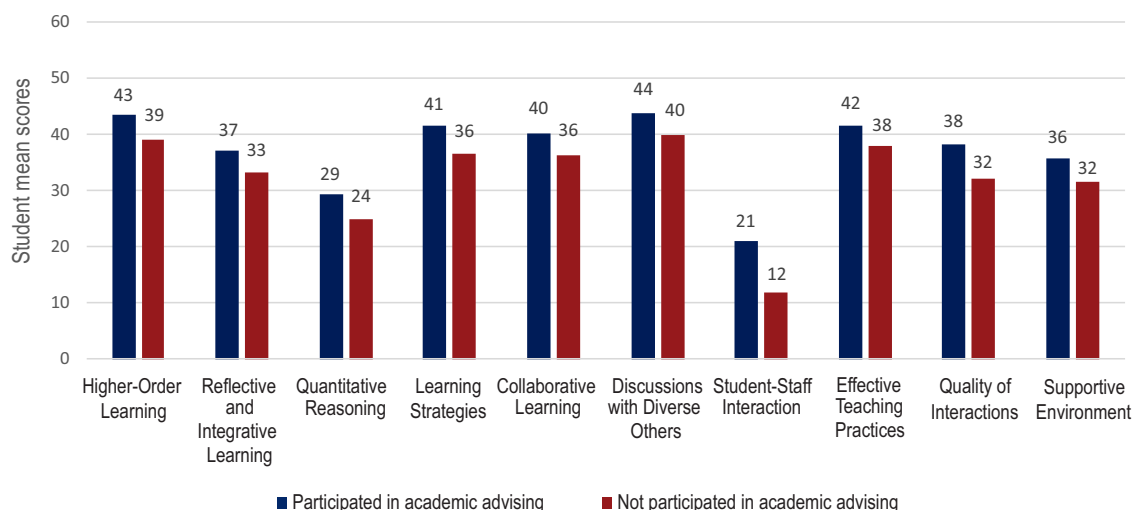
3.3) Engagement indicators and academic advising

The SASSE measures 10 indicators related to four broad themes (Table 2), including whether students feel academically challenged, to what extent they are learning with their peers, what their experiences with staff are, and how they perceive the campus environment.

Table 2: SASSE themes and indicators

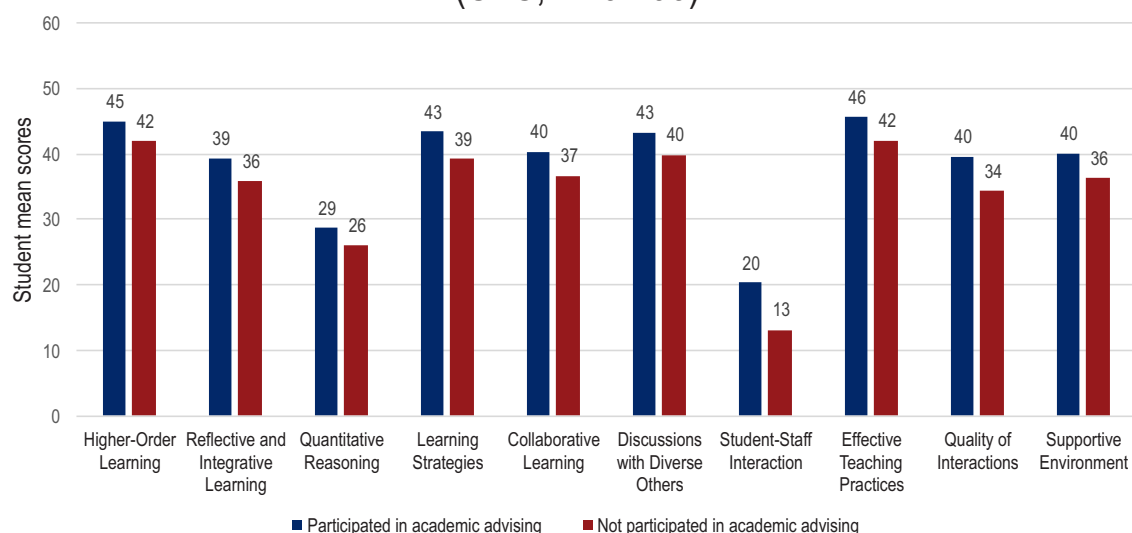
Themes	Engagement Indicators
Academic Challenge	Higher -Order Learning Reflective and Integrative Learning Learning Strategies Quantitative Reasoning
Learning with Peers	Collaborative Learning Discussion with Diverse Others
Experiences with Staff	Student - Staff Interaction Effective Teaching Practices
Campus Environment	Quality of Interactions Supportive Environment

Figure 10: Student engagement indicators and academic advising
(National excl. UFS data, N=13 911)



Students from both the national and UFS samples who have participated in academic advising indicate higher engagement across all indicators. The differences in the engagement indicators between students in the national sample who have participated in academic advising and those who have not are shown in Figure 10. All these differences are statistically significant ($p \leq 0.00$). There are large increases in the means of Student-Staff Interaction and Quality of Interactions for those students who have participated in academic advising. Very similar trends are seen in the UFS data shown in Figure 11. All these differences are also statistically significant ($p \leq 0.00$) and again large increases are seen in the means of Student-Staff Interaction and Quality of Interactions for those students who have participated in academic advising.

Figure 11: Student engagement indicators and academic advising
(UFS, N=3 735)



3.4) Participation in high-impact practices (HIPs)

Even though HIPs differ in priority and method between institutions, several potential HIPs for the South African context have been identified and are measured through the SASSE. Participation in all HIPs is significantly higher by those who engaged with academic advising. For both UFS and national samples, students engage most with other students through working with peers on projects and assignments, as well as making use of peer learning support services.

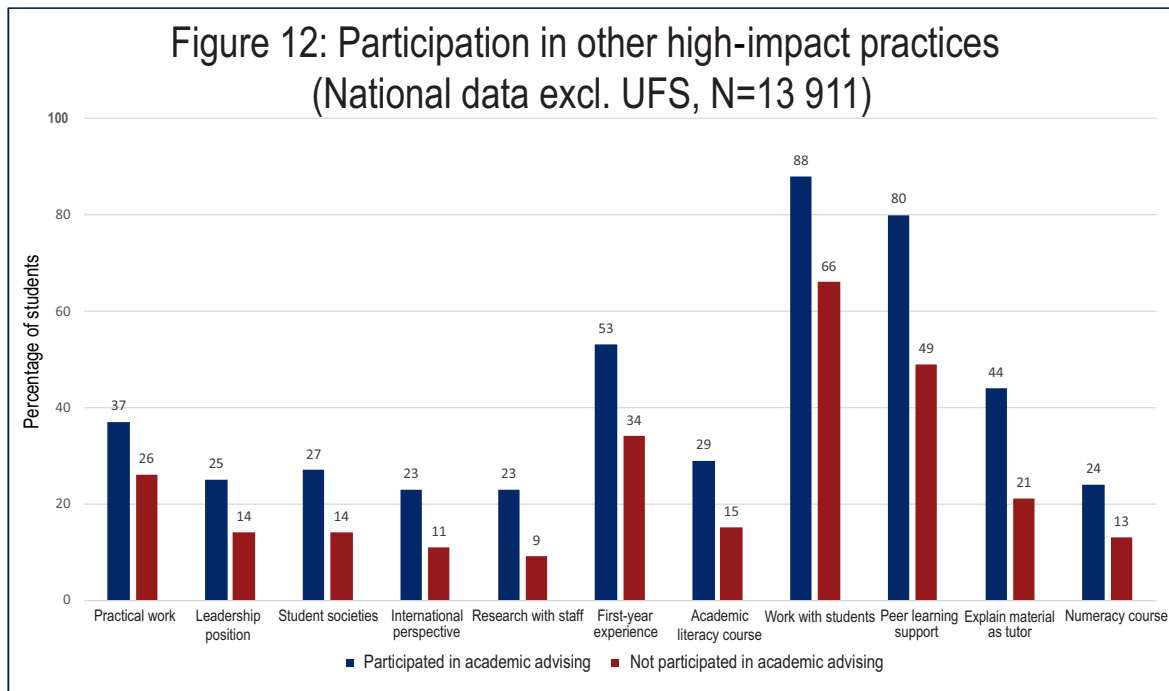
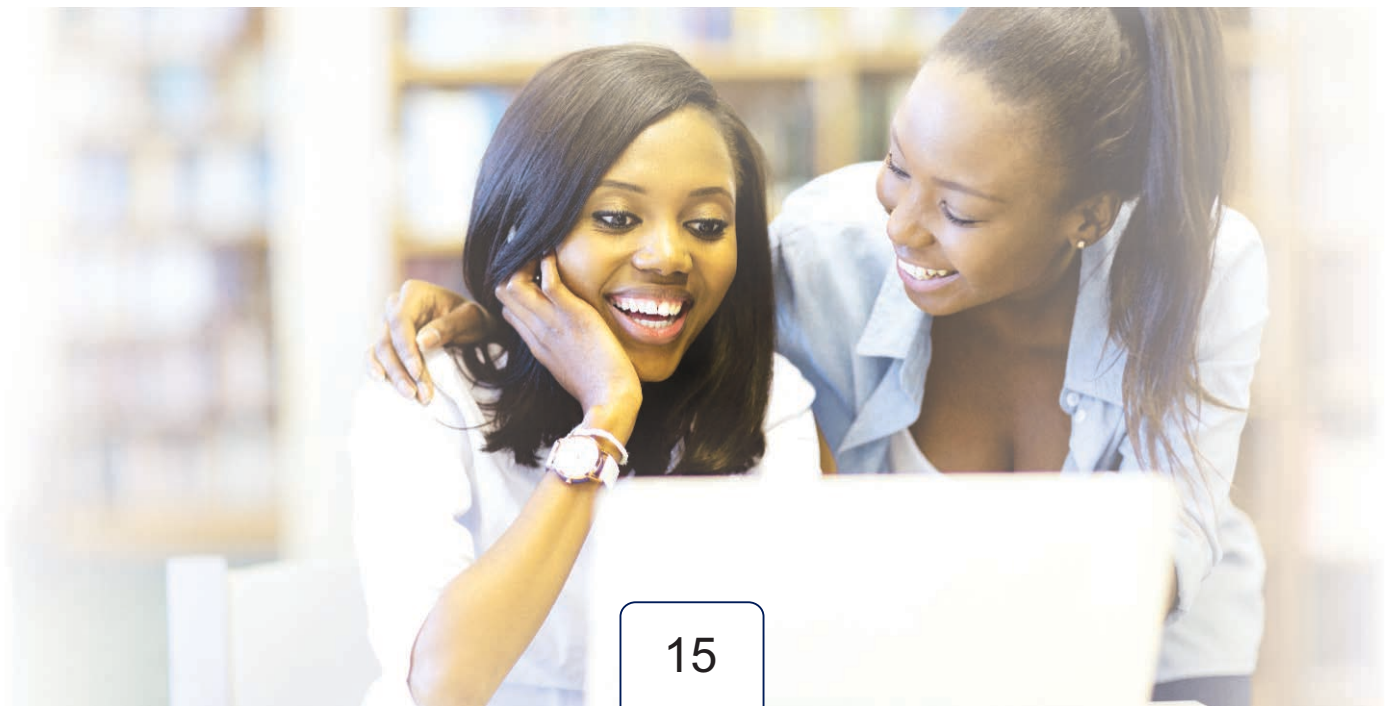
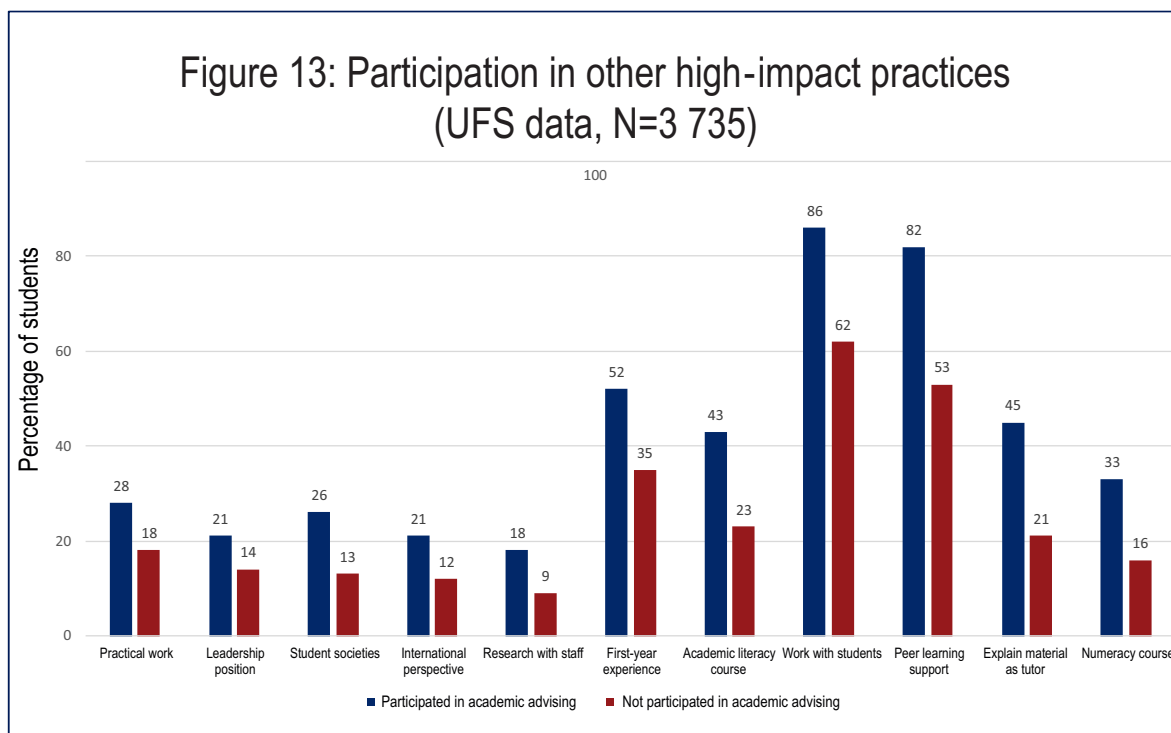


Figure 12 shows the national sample, with students who have participated in academic advising showing significantly ($p \leq 0.00$) more participation in all the other HIPs as well. Some noteworthy differences in participation include the 30% difference in making use of peer learning support, double the percentage of students who participated in advising who are acting as tutors, and more than a 10% difference in students who participated in advising engagement with student societies, research with lecturers, and taking up leadership positions.





UFS students who have participated in academic advising also show significantly ($p \leq 0.00$) more participation in the other HIPs than those who have not participated in academic advising (Figure 13). Participation in particular HIPs related to student development, such as engaging in literacy and numeracy courses, making use of peer learning support, and acting as tutors are even higher for students who have participated in academic advising than those who have also participated in advising from the national sample. Similar to the national sample though are the large differences between students who have participated in advising engagement with their peers through collaborations, as well as being more involved in research with staff members, student societies, and taking up leadership positions.

3.5) What do students perceive to gain from higher education?

The SASSE asks students to what extent their experience at university has contributed to their knowledge, skills and development in certain areas. The perceived gains items can be used as a data point to reflect on the extent to which students are developing graduate attributes that are associated with employability.



Figure 14: Perceived gains and academic advising
(National data excl. UFS, N=13 911)

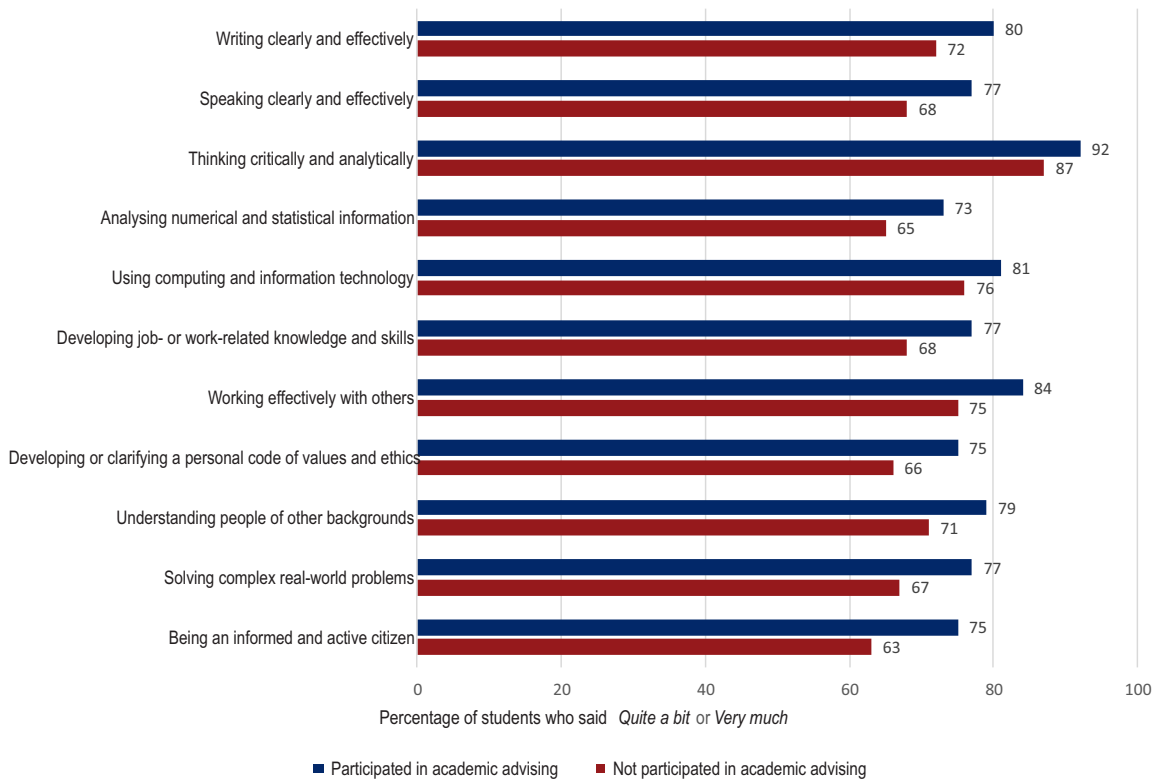
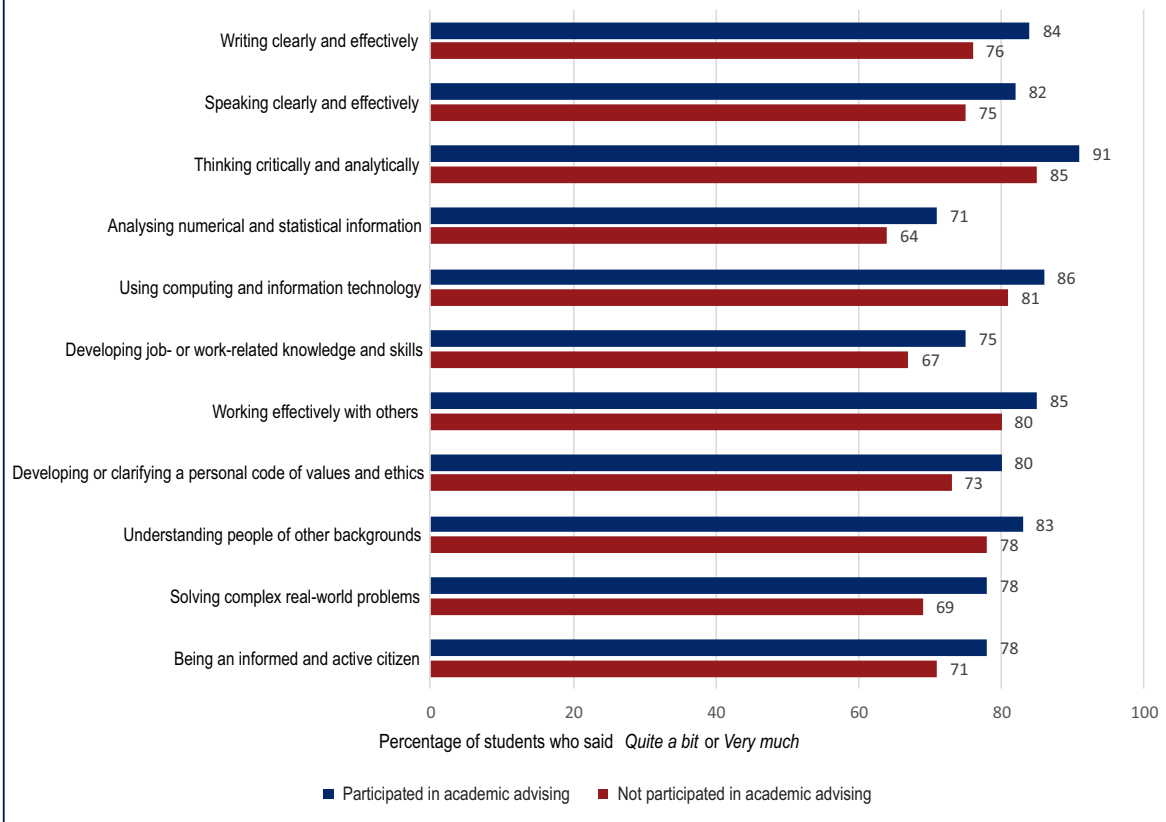


Figure 14 shows national data of students who reported that they have developed 'quite a bit' or 'very much' in these areas. Students who have participated in academic advising report significantly ($p \leq 0.00$) higher development of these skills compared to students who have not participated in academic advising. The biggest increases are seen in being an informed and active citizen, solving complex real-world problems, speaking clearly and effectively, developing job- or work-related knowledge and skills, and working effectively with others.

Figure 15: Perceived gains and academic advising
(UFS data, N=3 735)

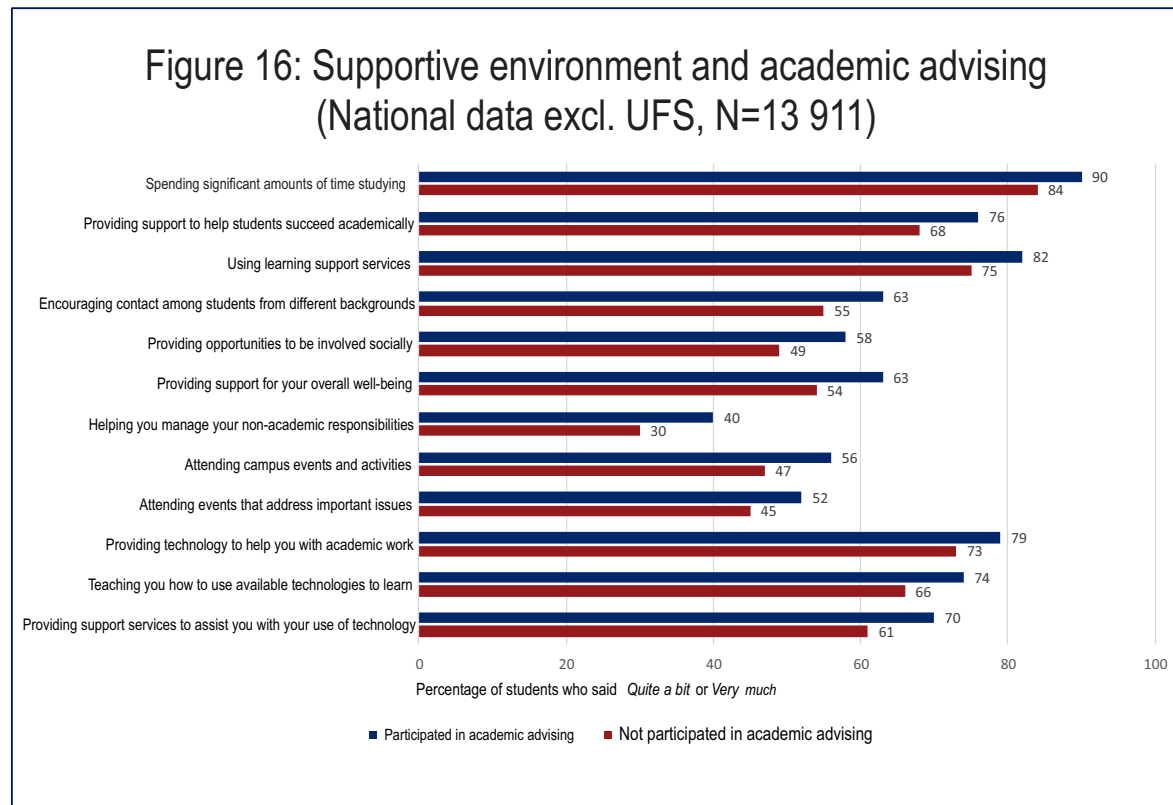


UFS students who have participated in academic advising also report developing significantly ($p \leq 0.00$) more in all measured areas than those who have not participated in academic advising (Figure 15). The areas in which students report the biggest increases in development include solving complex real-world problems, developing job- or work-related knowledge and skills, and writing clearly and effectively.



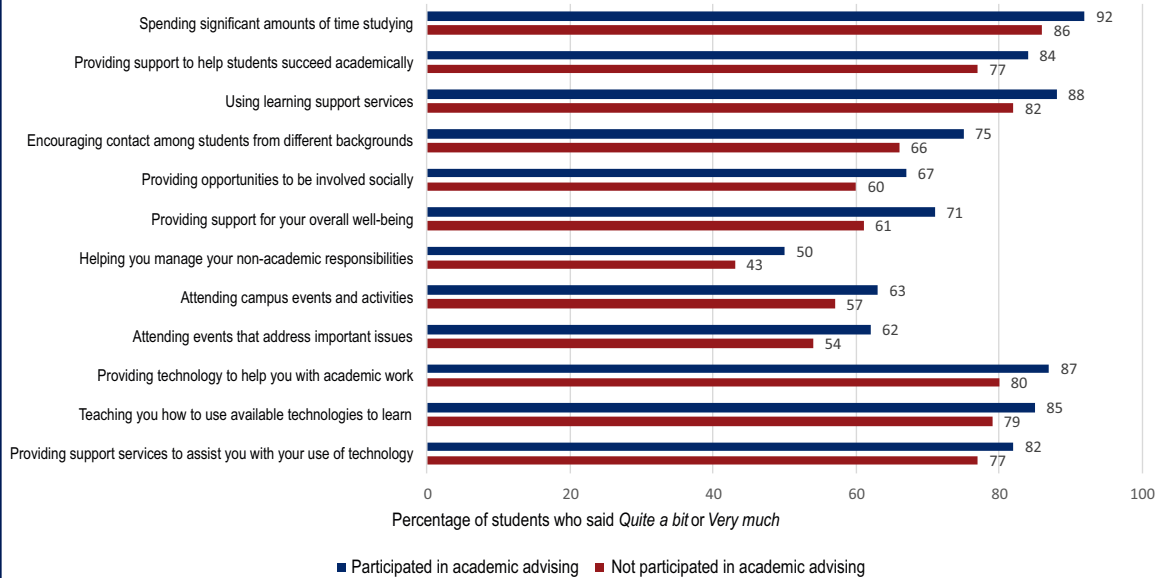
3.6) Experiencing a supportive campus environment

In order to measure the support that students experience, SASSE asks how much their institution emphasises certain aspects in their environment. Students from both samples who have participated in academic advising feel more supported academically and non-academically. However, the emphasis students in general feel their institutions place on helping them with their non-academic responsibilities is generally quite low and needs attention.



National data show that students who have participated in academic advising experience significantly ($p \leq 0.00$) more emphasis on all the aspects of a supportive environment compared to students who have not participated in academic advising. The biggest difference of 10% is seen regarding students' sense that their institutions are helping them manage non-academic responsibilities.

Figure 17: Supportive environment and academic advising
(UFS data, N=3 735)



UFS students who have participated in academic advising also reported experiencing significantly ($p \leq 0.00$) more emphasis on all the aspects regarding a supportive environment than those who have not participated in academic advising (Figure 17). The two items where students indicate the difference (10% and 9% respectively) is the extent to which they feel that the UFS provides support for their overall well-being, as well as the extent to which the University is encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds.



3.7) The quality of academic advising

The quality of academic advice might be just as important as the number of students engaging with advising. As academic advising is considered an exercise in teaching and learning, the relationship between advisors and students is fundamental and is characterised by mutual respect, trust, and ethical behaviour – even though the methods of interaction might differ.

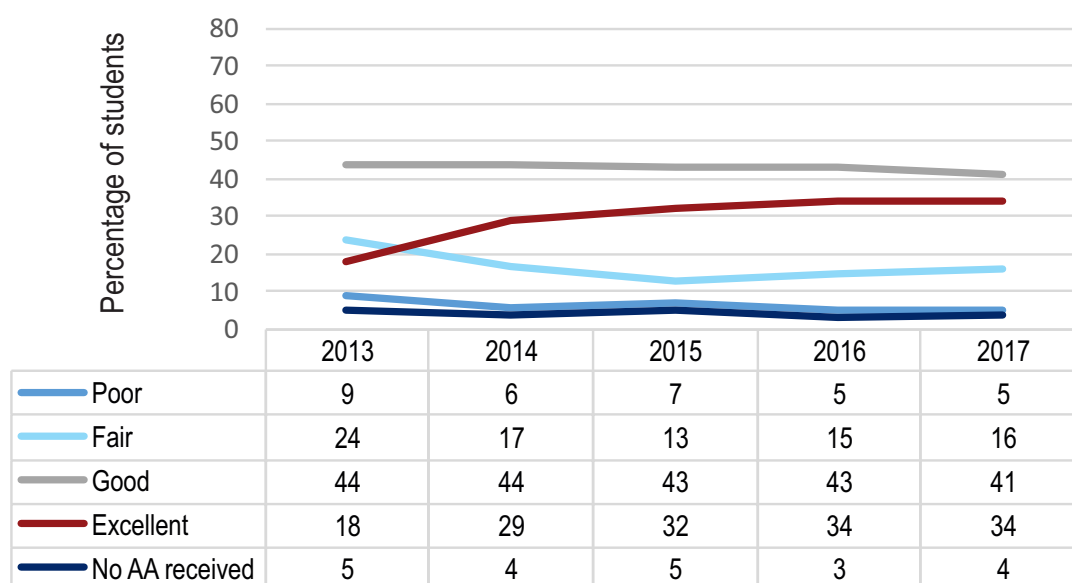
At the UFS specifically, we have observed that an advising process can help students identify personal strengths and interests related to their educational and career goals. The quality of advising thus relates directly to the relational component of academic advising. The engagement findings show that students who engage with advising report significantly better relationships with different institutional staff members, perhaps most notably with academic and support staff as well as their peers.

When asked to reflect on the relational component, students at the UFS allude to the impact and appreciation of intentional relationships, as well as being able to interact with someone who could share knowledge. In the 2018 UFS Registration Advising Survey students were asked what they valued most about the academic advising process. Some of the answers included:

- *That the advisors actually cared about you personally and your well-being and not only about you just being another student studying at the UFS who pays tuition fees.*
- *The advisor was friendly, warm and approachable. I value their true interest in me as a human most.*
- *I valued the fact that the academic advisors were knowledgeable about all the departments within the faculty and therefore they could adequately answer all my questions and give me direction where needed. I further valued the fact that the advisors were patient and kind, even though they may have encountered difficult students. Lastly, I appreciated their willingness to assist me to the best of their ability and going the extra mile to assist me with any queries that I may have had.*
- *The honesty and the sincere attention I was given. I also value how much knowledge the advisers had and how they wanted to assist me in having the same knowledge.*

“Students who participate in academic advising report that they feel more supported by their institutions, they are more aware of certain skills they develop within and beyond classrooms, they participate more in high-impact practices, and they report much better relationships with institutional staff and other students.”

Figure 18: Quality of academic advising over time



The UFS's efforts to widen the reach of academic advising as well as improving the quality of advising over time can be seen in Figure 18, with an incline in students' indications that the quality of advising they received was 'excellent' and a decline in students' responses as 'poor' between 2013 and 2017. In 2017, 75% of students completing the SASSE survey rated the quality of academic advice they received as 'good' or 'excellent'.

4) Widening advising platforms

Within the UFS a dedicated academic advising team played a crucial role in the academic rescue strategy of 2016 following the student #FeesMustFall protests. From the rescue strategy the UFS Advisement Office developed an interactive advising magazine, Kowsie Advice, released every quarter of the academic calendar. The second edition of 2017 was downloaded 19000 times.

The data below illustrates the reach of academic advising initiatives among students and staff (academic and support) at the UFS in an effort to be more intentional across the institution to build advising as a one of the high-impact practices that enhance student success.

Most important achievements of 2014 -2017

Year	Number of students using general academic advising services during registration (CTL advisors)
2014	2273
2015	1078
2016	1037
2017	2910

Academic Advisors trained: Staff with Basic Academic Advising Training

Year	Number of staff members trained
2012	45
2013	26
2014	32 + additional 22 trained by a United States-based National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) professional
2015	26
2016	31

Student participation in differentiated advising initiatives

2016	
Academic Advising Initiative	Number of students
Face-to-face with CTL advisors	216
Online advising interaction	25
Wired-In-Navigating-Graduation-Success (WINGS)	147
UFS101	6289
ResLife collaboration	147
Postgrad student workshops	22

2017	
Academic Advising Initiative	Number of students
Face-to-face with CTL advisors	345
Online advising interaction	589
Wired-In-Navigating-Graduation-Success (WINGS)	116
UFS101	5800
ResLife collaboration	251
NAS faculty workshops	526
Star of Stars (UFS Marketing Collaboration)	11



5) Conclusion

At the core of student engagement lies the interaction between students' participation in effective educational behaviours and the extent to which institutions are creating spaces for students to participate in effective educational behaviours. This implies a sense of accountability on the part of institutions to plan interventions, design spaces, and compile curricular and co-curricular high-impact practices in order to best support students' optimal learning and development.

Determining which practices have an impact on students' success has been well researched internationally, but contexts matter. In South Africa, the work on student engagement is helpful to determine which practices are good investments for student success. As one of these good investments, academic advising is considered one of the best vehicles for promoting the intellectual, personal, and social development of students. It is a service that links students' academic and personal worlds and, as a result, promotes holistic development. The data shared in this report provide enough evidence for the potential of academic advising to help students navigate through higher education.

That said, we need to ask whether students who might need more support are benefiting more from advising. While the overview of the national sample shows significant differences between all groups based on biographical data (except for generational status), interpretation of this needs to be done with care, considering that different institutions would have different approaches to advising. Thus, narrowing the focus to institutional levels might give a clearer picture. For example, the UFS data show that only gender and the students' year of study differ significantly. This means that more women tend to participate in advising, as well as more senior undergraduate students. This in turn implies that the institution could reflect on ways to involve more first-year students, as well as male students to take part in advising. Race, generation and residential status, as well as students' AP scores do not seem to influence whether they participate in advising - or in the case of AP scores, whether they benefit more or less from advising. This is important because it shows that advising really is beneficial for all students.

The significant differences in students' participation in engagement indicators and high-impact practices, as well as the differences in students' perception of skills they gained and how supportive their campus environments are, clearly show the differences in students' sense of engagement. Even though this data might not reflect causal relationships between engagement and advising, it is clear that students who participate in advising are much more engaged with their peers as well as their institutions. Finally, relationships seem to be a key element in students' perceived quality of advising.

This data, compounded by the number of students indicating that they are planning to participate in academic advising tell us that there is a need for institutions to invest more in the development of academic advising as well as professionalising training and development for advisors in higher education.



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