

# Academic Advisors in Australian Higher Education: Perceptions, Role Identities, and Recommendations

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*Previous research has evidenced the importance of student and staff interactions as critical functions to support student success at university. Increasingly, academic advising units support these interactions. However, while common throughout North American contexts, little is known about the implementation of such units internationally. In this paper, we use a case study methodology to discuss the introduction of an academic advising team at an Australian university to explore how staff adjusted to these new roles and their reflections on how others perceived them. We use reflective diaries submitted by the advisors (n = 11) to analyze how their role identities formed over time and suggested recommendations for supporting teams in the future.*

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Universities are more than places for students to obtain qualifications or credentials for future careers; they are also deeply social ecosystems that encourage students and staff to form networks and engage in ongoing dialogue (Curran, 2017; Dickerson et al., 2016). Writing on the positional centrality of universities, Eaton and Stevens (2020) identified universities as “hubs that connect people, ideas and resources across domains” (p. 4). However, these hubs are increasingly complex. Most universities around the world teach multiple disciplines, with increasing cross disciplinary degrees available, and often operate in blended online and face-to-face delivery models. Many support an array of functions outside teaching and learning, including extracurricular opportunities, research centres, and libraries to name a few (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2018; Lella et al., 2012). These complexities and choices can make the university experience an incredibly enriching but also complicated process for students.

Research has continually shown the importance of student and staff relationships to ensure that students feel supported during their university experience (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Hagen & Trama, 2016). Felten and Lambert (2020) argued that universities need to adopt “relationship-rich” educational strategies, some as simple as asking students “what’s their story?” to drive meaningful relationships (p. x). However, they also noted that this important work of connecting with students often gets lost or overlooked. As class sizes become larger or move online, or if university staff feel overwhelmed by workloads, the unmeasured tasks such as connecting with students may be deprioritised (Dollinger, 2020). One solution to this issue is to create more focused, targeted staff roles that are explicitly aimed at supporting meaningful, one-to-one conversations with students. Already prevalent in the United States, these roles often take the form of academic advisors (Cate & Miller, 2015). Academic advisors, assigned to cohorts of students, can be a friendly connection with whom students can discuss their course selection, extracurricular involvement, and other opportunities or events on campus about which students may not be aware.

There is ample evidence on the many benefits of academic advising for students. Young-Jones et al. (2013), in a study of over 600 students, found that meeting with an academic advisor positively contributed to student self-efficacy, study skills, and perceived support from the university. Other studies have found that academic advising can lead to increased student loyalty, which links to improved retention (Vianden & Barlow, 2015). Academic advising has also been found to have a positive impact on student grades and self-perceived learning gains (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). Additionally, Tudor (2018) found that academic advising increases student retention and higher post-completion job satisfaction. Previous research has also recommended academic advising as a mechanism to support student belongingness on campus, enhanced learning experiences, and identification and connection with career

goals (Hunter & White, 2004; Wenham et al., 2020). Academic advising is an equitable way to provide support to students because it can create formal advising channels that proactively reach out to students.

While the benefits of academic advising are well published in the North American context, academic advising is still emerging as a professionalized service in the Australian context (Wenham et al., 2020). This is especially critical, as the introduction of new services or ways of working in higher education has often met resistance. Trowler (2019), in his book about accomplishing change in higher education, noted that the context of “teaching and learning regimes” are often intensely rooted in a specific culture and context, created over time, and that driving change, either in staff perspectives or behaviors, can be difficult. Thus, in order to understand the success of a new initiative, looking at impact measures (e.g., participation rates) is not enough; we must also understand staff perceptions and experiences.

In this paper, we use a case study methodology to explore a newly introduced academic advising unit at a large research-intensive university in Australia. The academic advisors in our study are predominantly discipline specific (i.e., within a faculty); however, a few cater to other specific cohorts (e.g., equity scholarship recipients). We use reflective diary entries, submitted by the 11 academic advisors over the course of a year, to explore how roles formed, how they perceived others viewed them, and their perceptions on the impact they had on student success. The research questions guiding this study are:

- RQ1. How did academic advisors feel others (e.g., students, staff) perceived their role?
- RQ2. How did academic advisors conceptualize their own roles and/or measure their impact and success?
- RQ3. What advice or suggestions did academic advisors have to improve support mechanisms and role clarity for their roles in the future?

### **Overview of Academic Advising**

The spread of academic advising is concurrent with the massification of higher education after World War II through to the 1980s. As universities grew, systems and administration became more complex, and there was a growing need to create a professionalized body of workers to ensure that

students could navigate the university and support healthy retention rates (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019; Suvedi et al., 2015). Drake (2011) has previously conceptualized academic advisors as the “way finders” tasked with helping students negotiate the higher education maze. There are a variety of academic advising models, spanning discipline-focused programs or programs embedded within a department, to generic advice for information on courses or specific help resources for students. Models also vary depending on how they communicate or reach out to students, with some models being proactive or intrusive, where the initial consultation is initiated by the advisor, and potentially mandatory (frequently used for “at-risk” students; refer to Varney, 2012). These models differ from academic advising that is optional for students and more developmentally focused. Grites (2013) wrote that developmental, or holistic, academic advising became commonly discussed in literature starting in the mid 1980s, with the growing recognition that universities should support “whole of student” development that traversed intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and vocational boundaries. Today, developmental advising is the predominant model, with academic advisors increasingly expected not only to support students to meet graduation requirements but also to help them reflect on future careers and life decisions (Tudor, 2018).

Academic advisors play an important role in helping universities improve student retention and timely completions (Tudor, 2018). Several studies have evidenced that even one meeting with an academic advisor can improve the likelihood that a student will remain at the university (Arhin et al., 2017; Braun & Zolfagharian, 2016; Swecker et al., 2013). Some scholars have even suggested that academic advisors become the managers of the student-university relationship (Vianden & Barlow, 2015). In fact, as class sizes increase, or courses move to scalable online formats, academic advising may be a critical opportunity for students to have a one-to-one conversation with a staff member about their interests, concerns, and future goals. Lee (2018) argued that academic advising is often the front-line face to student issues like campus racism and/or daily microaggressions for minority students. She suggested that, given the broad nature of academic advising, professional development for advisors needs to incorporate topics and training that focus on helping students feel included within the community and building trust between the student body and university staff (Lee, 2018).

Most research on academic advising to date, including within the United States, has explored the student perspective or experience related to academic advising (Braun & Zolfagharian, 2016; Vianden & Barlow, 2015). In this study, our unit of analysis is the academic advisors themselves. Specifically, we analyze reflective diaries from a recently introduced academic advising unit in Australia to understand their experiences and role development in the pilot implementation. It is important to note that academic advising in Australia is still relatively new and has rarely been discussed in scholarly literature (Mann, 2020). Therefore, our study presents a unique perspective on academic advising in the emerging context of Australia. It is also relevant to add that there has been a growing consensus in Australian higher education to recognize the importance of the first-year experience (also known as transition pedagogy; see Kift, 2015; Naylor et al., 2018). The academic advisors in this study were specifically implemented to support first-year students.

### **Research Design and Methods**

To explore the experiences of a recently introduced academic advisor unit at a large research-intensive university in Australia, a case study methodology was utilized. Case study methodology is an exploratory research approach that is useful for exploring how a phenomenon occurs or interacts within a selected context (Daniel, 2007; Meyer, 2001). However, unlike grounded theory or ethnographic research, which mandates that themes should emerge from the data, case study methodology often utilizes conceptual categories or prior research themes to guide the collection and analysis of data (Meyer, 2001). For example, in this study, we used a process known as “structural coding” to label participants’ responses to our pre-determined research questions (Saldaña, 2009). Specific research boundaries are critical to a case study (Daniel, 2007). In this study, the case study is bound by several factors, including the Australian university setting, the specific academic advising unit, and our research questions.

The method applied in the study was a series of reflective diaries that were submitted by the participants ( $n = 11$ ), which our university ethics committee approved (ethics number HEC19132). Reflective diaries are increasingly used as an alternative to interviews or qualitative surveys within qualitative research as they allow for participants to share their voice(s) and experiences

freely, while supporting introspection (Wall, 2008; Winkler, 2018). Practically, diaries also allow for participants to engage in the research process in their own time. This factor was especially important in our research as academic advisors had consultations with students throughout the day and needed to be available to take drop-ins if students requested them (either online, in-person, or over the phone). Diaries also supported academic advisors in reflecting on their experiences over time, and many remarked that differences between their first entries to their last entries highlighted how their roles had developed. The first diary entries were collected in March 2020, while later diary entries were collected in November 2020 (reflecting the Australian academic calendar year from March-November).

The diaries were semi-structured in design, with question prompts that advisors could use to reflect and free space for other comments or stories. These question prompts linked to our research questions and allowed us to organize the data. The following question prompts were used:

1. What barriers and/or challenges have you faced in your role?
2. What impact (if any) have you had on students’ success?
3. How is the help you have offered to students unique or different?
4. What greater support or training do you need for your role?

In our approach, academic advisors were asked to write as many, or as few, entries as they wanted over the course of one academic year and to submit these to the principal investigator (Dollinger) who would anonymize them. Anonymization was implemented to ensure privacy. As Dollinger was a higher education researcher, who was external from the academic advising unit, she would ensure advisor anonymity before the entries reached the other members of the research team. The other members of the research team were senior leaders at the university including: the Manager of the Academic Advising, the Deputy Director of Advising and Success, and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students). While all eleven participating academic advisors submitted at least one entry, the total number of entries from advisors varied with a total of 34 entries. Word count within each entry also varied with some entries as short as 300 words and other entries as long as 1,000. Please note, some academic advisors were assigned to

specific discipline departments (e.g., business, engineering) while others were assigned to cohorts (e.g., equity students, students on a specific regional campus). None of the academic advisors in this study had teaching responsibilities. Please see Table 1 for a full breakdown of collected data.

Once diary entries were anonymized, the authors coded the data into an excel spreadsheet by participant and then by related research question, a process known as structural coding (Saldaña, 2009). The research team then took turns themeing the data. Rossman and Rallis (2003) explained that when themeing data, researchers should look for a phrase or sentence that participants mention which describes more subtle or tacit processes. To illustrate, we would first structurally code all the data that related to how academic advisors felt others perceived them. We then used a three-step analytical approach of describing, comparing, and relating (Bazeley, 2009) to uncover a theme that other staff viewed new academic advisors as adversarial or encroaching on their areas (see results below).

The research team had varying areas of expertise, (e.g., higher education, psychology, student administration) so there were discussions on the implications of the data and how it linked to existing literature. We also conducted member checks (Carlson, 2010) post-analysis to ensure that we accurately categorized participant words, minimizing misunderstandings and/or excerpts taken out of context. These checks consisted of sending participants a word document with excerpts from their diaries, along with our notes illustrating how the excerpt linked to a theme. Rarely did the academic advisors request any edits or modifications, and most edits were simple re-wording for clarification.

## Results

As previously mentioned, we structurally coded our findings to relate to our research questions (sometimes referred to as labelling), and then we applied additional qualitative data analysis, sometimes called “themeing the data” (Saldaña, 2009). Therefore, to discuss our findings, we have organized our data by research question and then highlighted any themes that arose.

### Perceptions of Academic Advisors

Participant diaries frequently discussed how others at the university perceived the academic advisors. Specifically, participants often expressed

**Table 1.** Overview of participants by advisor type and diary entries

Participant Pseudonym	Type of Advisor	Total Diary Entries
Mary	Departmental-specific	1
Jared	Departmental-specific	6
Patrick	Departmental-specific	6
Fiona	Departmental-specific	5
David	Departmental-specific	3
Lily	Departmental-specific	1
Katherine	Departmental-specific	1
Deborah	Departmental-specific	1
Caroline	Departmental-specific	1
Paula	Cohort-specific	7
Michael	Cohort-specific	2

frustration that others at the university felt their new roles encroached on other teams’ areas or responsibilities. As an example, one academic advisor wrote in their diary:

There has been one professional staff work area demonstrating mild resistance [to my role]. Whilst I have enjoyed good working relationships with the members of this team in my previous roles at the university, I found, upon meeting late last week, one key member now demonstrated an apparent forced disinterest, using phone and gazing out the window as we talked... It was a somewhat uncomfortable meeting. I explained that my role would not be replacing any existing services and was focussed on filling service gaps... (David, March, 2020)

Similarly, another participant also expressed discomfort on how some other teams treated the academic advisors. They noted that this may be because the academic advising unit was new and therefore may be perceived by other colleagues as a challenge to the traditional university structure. They wrote:

The detractors tend to be rather more parochial. They have their way of doing things and seem threatened by initiatives which differ from “the way we do things.” I’ve had staff tell me that our team is trying to control things, or that we need to be here for longer in order to understand the milieu, or otherwise imply that we are treading on

“their territory” without respecting the work that has gone on before. (Jared, April, 2020)

Interestingly, the quote above highlights how one academic advisor had been told that their team needed to be at the university for longer, and yet all the academic advisors hired by the university were already university employees and had been moved to the new unit.

Over time, diary entries became more positive, with a few noting that other teams had been in touch, and they were starting to work more collaboratively. For example, one participant wrote:

I am feeling more in touch with some of the different divisions of the university that I will be working with (scholarships, for example) and I think that they are beginning to have a greater awareness and acceptance of my role, and are therefore looking to me for support with students and issues more regularly. (Paula, July, 2020)

Academic advisors also wrote about how students perceived them. They mentioned that it was hard, especially during COVID-19 when their services were moved online, to promote the new academic advising unit. Others expressed difficulty in signaling to students that they were not part of a generic central service, but rather a dedicated academic advisor for a specific cohort, and as such, students could use their name and begin to a form a relationship with them, something that was previously not supported in the generic student support model. Excerpts that highlight these findings include:

I feel that advising is still a bit of an unknown entity for students (particularly in the world of COVID) – this made it hard to be able to sell all of our skills. (Lily, April, 2020)

Students just see the role as go to for help. A student actually responded to my customer relationship management system email this week with “Dear ASK [University Name]” even though my name was at the end of my original email. (Patrick, September, 2020)

Several of the academic advisors also noted that they felt some of the misconceptions from students

and staff about their role related to their official title. They wrote:

The term “academic advisor” has been misconstrued. Some academics think I am their assistant (for all enquiries), some students think I am an actual academic and they have expected in depth knowledge of subject content. (Mary, September, 2020)

I think potentially that the term “Academic Advisor” may be misleading for student initial impressions on what the service has to offer. Potentially a name change or a colloquial term (such as Uni Advisor) might suit and define the role more. (David, October, 2020)

Overall, participants indicated that over the course of the first year, more students and staff became aware of their roles and had a better understanding of their responsibilities. As one academic advisor wrote, “2020 was a hard year for lots of reasons, but I think we’re getting settled into our roles now and more students keep booking consultations, so I’m looking forward to 2021” (Michael, September, 2020).

### **Role of Academic Advisors**

The next section of our data related to participants’ reflections on what their role was and how they believed their role had impacted students so far. In the beginning of the diary process, participants often spoke of the confusion around their roles, highlighted in excerpts below:

This week, I am finding that my role has a lot of different stakeholders, and sometimes achieving clarity on the priorities of my role is hard. I feel like once I am more established in the role (which, as a pretty new role, the scope of is still being discovered) I will have more of a grasp of everything. At the moment, my head spins a little with all of the different competing priorities. (Paula, April, 2020)

As none of the participants had ever worked in academic advising, diary entries also discussed how some felt they were not picking up the new skills or systems as quickly as their colleagues. One academic advisor wrote:

Initially I found the systems to be quite challenging. Particularly as almost everyone else in the team had previous experience with the systems. I found this impacted on my confidence regarding my abilities, as I immediately viewed myself as “behind the pack.” However, I have since caught up and while I feel there is room to learn more about the systems, and improve my efficiency using them, my confidence issues are no longer a problem. (Caroline, June, 2020)

However, as time went on, the participants became more confident and wrote increasingly of having a positive impact for their student cohorts. In particular, participants often discussed how they provided a “face” to otherwise complex and faceless services. One academic advisor wrote, “The way I sum up my job is as a case manager for students and when needed I check back in and follow up with them instead of a proscriptive transaction [that] shows care” (Fiona, September, 2020). Other academic advisors saw their job as alleviating some of the work for faculty members. They noted that the academic advisors “complemented” the teaching teams and explained, “Lecturer’s core business is delivery of subject content, the rest is secondary in their time, but for us the ‘rest’ is primary” (Michael, September, 2020). Occasionally participants also reflected on how they could harness their own previous student experience to help connect or empathise with their students, as one participant wrote:

Working with students takes me right back to those days where I struggled and never thought I would complete my degree. There was so much change occurring in my life outside of university, and the challenges I faced at that time heavily impacted on my capacity to be a successful student. Back then I thought if there’s one positive from my time at university, it was that I had “done it all.” I had failed, deferred, achieved good, average and poor grades; applied for special consideration, transferred to a different university, transferred to a different course, utilized counselling services, had a Learning Access Plan, and accumulated unnecessary debt due to not taking notice of the census date! (Caroline, June, 2020)

The prevalent theme academic advisors saw in their role was support of “whole of person” development. For example, one academic advisor mentioned the importance of helping students to become independent or “self-sufficient,” while another academic advisor discussed building students’ self-efficacy and confidence:

Academic advisors are teaching students to work out how to become self-sufficient in managing that situation in future. It starts with simple system navigation right through to making enrolment decisions about subjects that suit their strengths and interests. It’s about supporting the whole student. (Patrick, July, 2020)

I spoke with a student this week about his academic recovery but got more into his motivations behind choosing his course, what he wants in life, and then also discussed “easy” topics like his hobbies and movies. He had said he was feeling overwhelmed and on edge, but that our (hour long) conversation helped put things in perspective and build his own confidence. I was just showing him ways of thinking, but he had the answers and ideas in him. (Mary, September, 2020)

I also feel that many students have stated they are unaware of all the options available to them and appreciate someone being able to provide more than one solution to their current situation—and also looking holistically at their course for options of completion; pre-reqs etc. that they may not have realized and potentially identifying issues before they arise. (Katherine, August, 2020)

Another theme that arose was around the self-perceived roles of academic advisors and the uniqueness of their centralized, proactive, and administrative roles. To illustrate, participants often spoke about the outreach efforts within their team to contact students who were disengaged, as two participants wrote:

Our help is very different to what other parts of the university have to offer. The main difference is proactive outreach and intervention. No other area done [*sic*] anything like this. We also reach out to every student

not just the ones that are brave enough to ask for help. (Fiona, November, 2020)

Simple strategies such as study plan health checks, I feel have made significant impacts on setting students up right from the very beginning. So many students I have connected with via this approach might have been on a very different path if we had not intervened. (David, September, 2020)

Another participant went further and discussed how academic advisors not only provided ongoing care for the students, but also—with their administrative power to modify data in the student systems (e.g., subject approvals, course transfers)—provided a one-stop-shop for students needing help. They wrote:

Lecturers and academics must teach, and while many of them enjoy the pastoral care part of their jobs, few of them have the time, training, or connections to do that really well. Other student engagement teams have the desire to impact on students, and develop great programs to do this, but their roles generally preclude them from supporting individual students with their academic issues. They also lack the administrative power to make or effect changes. Despite best intentions, often students are incorrectly advised, and that support is transactional. Advice is sometimes fire-and-forget it. (Jared, April, 2020)

### **Recommendations to Support Academic Advisors**

Lastly, we analyzed the data to understand what modifications or recommendations academic advisors would make in order to improve their role clarity or team support. Participants frequently mentioned access to student data—either collecting more nuanced data or having easier access to data. The excerpts below highlight this trend:

I still need easier access to student data. At the moment I have to pull scholarship data from one systems, then run the student IDs through another system just to get their campus and course details. We are looking at the capacity to have a custom report from our institutional performance and planning unit,

which would make the job a lot easier! (Paula, September 2020)

Data, Data, Data: We have an amazing data guy already, but our needs are complex and ever-expanding. We need to either be given customized reports and dashboards that we can run (easily and reliably) on command, or a team of data humans to support our work. (Patrick, October 2020)

No real systems issues; however, I would like to have more autonomy/access/knowledge of running my own reports. Tend to have to wait for new cohort lists. If I did this myself, I would run a new one every week to have the most up to date information. Alternatively, it would be good to have a dedicated “data specialist” with strict timeframes for providing reports to us. (Mary, September 2020)

Participants also felt more could be done to strengthen their position within the university. For example, as the university was going through a restructure during the introduction of the new academic advising unit, one participant indicated, “More needs to be done so that it’s known that [the academic advisors] are here to stay. Our own leaders are fierce advocates, but what we want most ardently is the support of our peers in teams with overlapping responsibility” (Jared, June, 2020).

Other participants noted the importance of reducing overlap between teams, or at minimum, communicating more effectively with one another to ensure that advisors can help promote the various programs and events offered across the university, as showcased in the excerpts below:

I feel that sometimes there is a crossover of services which can exhaust students and make them unresponsive. This seemed to be the case with [a recent] grade campaign as students were emailed multiple times from different teams. (Fiona, May, 2020)

Ensuring that we are kept in the loop with the workings of the rest of the university is also an issue that I think needs work. We are often notified too late of programs, workshops, sessions and events that we could be actively promoting to our students. Having

the most up to date information is crucial to ensure we are giving out sound advice and referring students on to relevant and important event. (David, September, 2020)

Finally, a few participants recommended that the team have more opportunities to discuss their roles and potentially engage in conferences or peer-review based research. One academic advisor mentioned on their ability to speak at an internal university teaching and learning event:

Standing on stage at the summit and being able to talk about my work for over 22 minutes without looking at my pages of notes once was a real affirmation that I know the work that I do, I am good at it, and that is meaningful work. I think everyone should have these experiences. (Paula, September, 2020)

### **Discussion**

Previous research has identified how the implementation and support of academic advising units can support student success, with benefits including: higher retention, improved engagement, and a greater sense of belongingness in the university community (Drake, 2011; Harris, 2018; Swecker et al., 2013). In this study, we sought to explore the lesser-known aspects of academic advising from a staff perspective. Namely, how did a recently introduced academic advising unit in Australia adapt into their roles, how did they perceive how others saw them, and what impact, if any, did they feel they had on their student cohorts? Our results indicate that at times, and especially in the beginning of their new roles, academic advisors felt in conflict with other teams within the university. This is likely linked to the Australian context of the study, as academic advising is less commonly found within Australian universities. However, over time, as academic advisors' roles and responsibilities became clearer, other staff units began to collaborate with them. This finding builds on previous literature that discusses the difficulty of enacting change in university structures and the time needed for ways of working to shift (Trowler, 2019). To date, most of the research investigating resistance to change in higher education has been specifically focused on academic roles and departments (e.g., Annala et al., 2021; Lisewski, 2020). Our study illustrates that this change may be similarly fraught in third-

space professional teams, where similar feuds over resources, roles, and power may play out. As described by Annala et al. (2021), staff who exhibit "oppositional agency" often do so because they do not believe the change is necessary (p. 8). Therefore, to reduce future opposition to new academic advising units, better arguments must be made about the value and benefits of the change through university-wide dissemination.

Our results also showcased the importance of professionalizing new academic advisors to equip them with the skills and systems knowledge they need to be successful (McGill et al., 2020). In a study of academic language and learning, Evans et al. (2019) found that the professional development of advisors required a "unique set of professional and personal attributes, skills and depositions" (p. 1133). These skills, as highlighted by the Australian academic advisors in our study, need to also include data collection and data analysis. Unfortunately, in the Australian context where this study was conducted, research skills, such as literature reviews, design of data collection methods, and data analysis, are not well supported in professional and/or third-space workforces (Whitchurch, 2012). However, by enabling all university staff to evaluate and research their own areas, universities may be able to help support employee motivation, autonomy, and support the development of mutual respect among colleagues (Graham, 2013). As evidenced through our data, one participant, in particular, felt great pride at being supported to present his work at an internal university conference. This type of networked opportunity, which allows for staff to upskill as well as disseminate their work, is valuable and should continue to be supported.

Similar to the findings above, our findings also call into question whether the title of "academic advising" is the best term for universities outside of the United States to use. While in the USA this term is well-known, our results indicate that the term may have confused students and other staff, with some indicating they were unsure what the scope of the role was. One staff participant suggested that the term "Uni Advisor" may be clearer in the Australian context. Similar findings from New Zealand have found that university students have little or no expectations on the quality of academic advising they could expect (Buissink-Smith et al., 2010). Our results therefore highlight the importance of raising awareness and socializing new academic advising units in international contexts.

While our study focused on the staff experience of introducing an academic advising unit, some of the results also speak to the staff's perceived benefits of offering academic advising to students. As previous studies have shown, academic advising can be an incredibly valuable resource to students (Braun & Zolfagharian, 2016; Kraft-Terry & Kau, 2019; Lee, 2018). This is particularly relevant for the context of our study, as the university course structure is currently undergoing changes and may increase the demand for one-to-one student support and advising. Further, the university discussed here caters to a significant first-in-family student cohort (approximately 30% of the total student population) who may benefit from nuanced and personalized advising support. Future research in new academic advising contexts should continue to explore these benefits.

### Limitations

There are several limitations associated with this study. First, we only used reflective diary entries from the academic advising team and did not have the opportunity to triangulate the data with other sources. This limitation was due to the team's tight time commitments and extra pressures added by the COVID-19 pandemic that limited supplementary data collection, such as interviews or focus groups. At the time of writing (January–June 2021), COVID-19 outbreaks were still common in Australia, causing distress among students and placing pressure for advisors to focus their available time on supporting additional consultations with students. Our sample size for this study is also relatively small (all academic advisors participated, but there were only 11 advisors at the time of the pilot) and was only collected at one institution. It would be beneficial if future research continued to explore some of the findings presented in this research to other sites with larger participant samples.

### Implications and Future Research

This study specifically explored the implementation of a new academic advising unit at a large, research-intensive university in Australia. The findings have significant implications for any higher education context that is implementing new academic advising units. In particular, our findings highlight the difficulty in implementing change, or new organizational structures, in the often-rigid traditional model of universities. As predicted, the introduction of the academic advis-

ing unit was met with resistance from other areas and teams. While resistance decreased over time, there remains a need for more research into how change can be managed and supported prior to implementation to decrease role confusion and ensure staff wellbeing. This is especially critical in the post-COVID-19 context, where many universities will likely be reflecting on their structures and offerings and changes will become more common. Our findings also showcase the importance of providing training resources for new academic advisors to help them become professionalized experts. In fact, since the conclusion, the academic advisors in our study have found American advising mentors and have anecdotally spoken highly of having this support to understand their roles better.

Our findings also further cement the importance of academic advisors in the modern and complicated university context. As stressed by our participants, there was real value for students in the ability to form a meaningful, ongoing relationships with staff members who could support them both administratively and developmentally. Through their diaries, academic advisors often noted that their proactive approach in reaching out to students frequently made a significant difference in the lives of students, and they were able to create a sense of connection in an otherwise difficult year. Ongoing research should continue to explore the interpersonal benefits of supporting academic advising units as well as investigate student perspectives and experiences related to academic advising.

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