



# Understanding the perceptions of academic advising among male students in South African Universities: A qualitative study

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions and experiences of male students regarding academic advising in higher education institutions. Male students often underutilize academic advising services, which can influence their academic success, retention, and overall engagement. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through a Google Forms survey with open-ended questions targeting 20 male undergraduate students from a South African university. Thematic analysis revealed key themes regarding perceptions of advising, factors influencing engagement, and barriers to participation. Findings suggest that male students perceive academic advising as beneficial but often avoid it due to stigma, lack of awareness, time constraints, or prior negative experiences. Recommendations emphasize the need for targeted advising strategies that consider gendered experiences, culturally responsive communication, and the integration of digital advising tools. This study contributes to higher education scholarship by offering insights for improving academic advising services tailored to male students' needs, particularly within the challenging context of the Global South.

**Keywords:** Academic advising, male students, perceptions, qualitative study, higher education, engagement, retention.

## INTRODUCTION

Academic advising represents a cornerstone of student success and retention within the landscape of modern higher education.<sup>1</sup> Institutions increasingly recognise advising as a high-impact practice, one that provides essential guidance, personalised support, and mentorship to students navigating complex academic, administrative, and developmental pathways.<sup>2</sup> Effective academic advising is defined as a collaborative process between students and advisors, designed not merely for administrative course sign-up, but for supporting academic achievement, promoting personal development, and fostering career

<sup>1</sup> Binu James Mathew and Omer Ali Ibrahim, "Effective Advising: How Does Academic Advising Influence Student Learning Outcomes in Higher Education Institutions in Oman?," *Cogent Education* 10, no. 1 (December 31, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2197663>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard J Light, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

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readiness.<sup>3</sup> Advisors provide critical guidance on course selection, academic planning, institutional policies, and the development of study skills.<sup>4</sup> When advising is executed proactively and developmentally, it demonstrably influences student engagement, academic performance, and overall institutional retention rates, often mitigating the effects of poor pre-college academic preparedness.<sup>5</sup> The quality of these interactions can even be a predictor of persistence, offering the crucial social and academic integration points identified by Vincent Tinto's theory.<sup>6</sup>

However, the efficacy of advising is critically dependent upon student utilization. Research consistently indicates a pervasive gender-gap in the use of institutional support services, where male students globally under-utilise academic advising compared to their female peers.<sup>7</sup> This discrepancy contributes significantly to observed disparities in academic engagement and subsequent academic outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Recognizing and addressing this systematic under-utilization is not merely an institutional prerogative, but a critical research necessity, particularly concerning male students' psychological and socio-cultural decision-making processes regarding help-seeking behaviour in academic contexts.<sup>9</sup>

The reluctance of male students to engage with academic support structures is a widely documented phenomenon linked to broader sociocultural expectations. Globally, male students face unique challenges in higher education, often stemming from gendered communication norms and societal pressure that discourages perceived weakness or reliance on external help.<sup>10</sup> This resistance is frequently rooted in a culturally reinforced desire for self-reliance and independence, leading to internalized barriers against seeking institutional support.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, male students are less likely than their female peers to participate in advising services, tutoring programmes, and other academic support initiatives.<sup>12</sup>

The core of this issue lies in the interpretation of help-seeking as a display of academic or personal failure.<sup>13</sup> Studies suggest several reasons for this trend, including cultural norms discouraging help-seeking behaviour, perceptions of advising as remedial, and concerns about time commitment.<sup>14</sup> This avoidance is amplified by the concept of masculine discrepancy stress, where men feel distress when their performance or needs conflict with internalized masculine ideals, further cementing their resistance to services seen as "remedial."<sup>15</sup> Male students often exhibit higher levels of self-reliance, which may limit their engagement with institutional support structures.<sup>16</sup>

The investigation of these dynamics takes on added complexity when situated in a Global South context such as South Africa.<sup>17</sup> Here, the challenges of student engagement are significantly compounded by historical legacies of inequality, pressing socio-economic disparities, and cultural

<sup>3</sup> George D Kuh et al., *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Bryant L Hutson and Ye He, "Future-Forming Research in Higher Education: A Review of Academic Advising Literature from the United States," *Tertiary Education and Management* 30, no. 4 (2024): 257–75.

<sup>5</sup> Hutson and He, "Future-Forming Research in Higher Education: A Review of Academic Advising Literature from the United States."

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (University of Chicago press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Shaun R Harper and Frank Harris III, "Men of Color: A Role for Policymakers in Improving the Status of Black Male Students in US Higher Education.," *Institute for Higher Education Policy*, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Linda J. Sax and Jennifer A. Harper., "Gender Gaps in Student Engagement: Understanding Why Men Underperform," *Journal of Higher Education* 95, no. 1 (2024): 56–78.

<sup>9</sup> Jason A. Laker and Tracy Davis, "Masculinities and Men's Help-Seeking in Higher Education," *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 60, no. 2 (2023): 145–62.

<sup>10</sup> Michael E Addis and James R Mahalik, "Men, Masculinity, and the Contexts of Help Seeking," *American Psychologist* 58, no. 1 (2003): 5.

<sup>11</sup> Y. Joel Wong and Stefan Chu., "Cultural Influences on Male Help-Seeking: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 24, no. 1 (2023): 22–35.

<sup>12</sup> Simon Robertson and Brendan Gough, "Men, Masculinities, and Health: Critical Perspectives," in *Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology and Mental Health*, ed. John Barry and Roger Kirby (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Erin L Pederson and David L Vogel, "Male Gender Role Conflict and Willingness to Seek Counseling: Testing a Mediation Model on College-Aged Men.," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 54, no. 4 (2007): 373.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald F Levant and Y. Joel Wong, "The Psychology of Men and Masculinities," *Annual Review of Psychology* 74(2023):1–28.

<sup>15</sup> Caroline S. Reigeluth and Joseph H. Addis, "Gender Role Strain and Discrepancy Stress: Implications for Men's Health," *Men and Masculinities* 26, no. 3 (2023): 387–405.

<sup>16</sup> Will H Courtenay, "Constructions of Masculinity and Their Influence on Men's Well-Being: A Theory of Gender and Health," *Social Science & Medicine* 50, no. 10 (2000): 1385–1401.

<sup>17</sup> Jaya Pillay, "Higher Education and Social Transformation in South Africa," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 37, no. 3 (2023): 1–14.

narratives that shape attitudes toward resilience and support seeking.<sup>18</sup> The enduring effects of apartheid have created deeply entrenched structural barriers for historically marginalized Black male students, who often enter higher education facing issues of inadequate prior schooling and financial precarity that profoundly affect their use of support systems.<sup>19</sup>

Academic advising in this environment must be viewed as a potentially transformative activity, but one that is constantly subject to intense external pressures, particularly the overwhelming necessity for advisors to address basic survival needs like funding, accommodation, and food security.<sup>20</sup> This reality fundamentally alters the scope and efficacy of traditional advising models borrowed uncritically from the Global North.<sup>21</sup>

A significant gap exists in the literature regarding the specific perceptions and experiences of male students concerning academic advising within the culturally and structurally challenging environment of South African higher education. The low utilization rate among male students suggests that current advising structures may not be adequately addressing their unique needs, nor effectively counteracting the pervasive sociocultural barriers to help-seeking.<sup>22</sup> Understanding the precise barriers and facilitators within this specific context is essential for policy refinement and practical implementation, particularly in light of the decolonization of knowledge movement, which demands culturally-responsive support services.<sup>23</sup>

This study aims to explore male students' perspectives on academic advising to identify the barriers, facilitators, and potential strategies for improving engagement. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are male students' perceptions of academic advising?
- How do male students experience academic advising?
- What factors influence male students' decisions to seek or avoid academic advising?

### Significance and Contribution

The significance of this study is rooted in its potential to inform evidence-based policy and practice within South African higher education institutions. By providing localized, qualitative insight into a demographic that is historically under-researched, the findings challenge the tacit dominance of theoretical perspectives and practices drawn solely from developed countries.<sup>24</sup> The research moves beyond simply identifying the under-utilization problem; it critically examines the specific intersection of gendered reluctance and structural, Global South constraints that perpetuate the engagement gap. Ultimately, the study contributes to scholarly efforts to enhance support mechanisms for male students, promote equitable academic outcomes, and foster sustained retention by providing concrete evidence for developing gender-aware and culturally-responsive advising strategies.<sup>25</sup>

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic advising has emerged as a critical component of student success in higher education, with scholars increasingly recognizing its role in promoting retention, engagement, and holistic

<sup>18</sup> Crain Soudien, *Realising the Dream: Unlearning the Logic of Race in the South African Schooling System* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Wapula Mdepa and Jane Tshiwula, "Student Diversity in South Africa: Challenges and Recommendations for Higher Education," *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 21, no. 1 (2023): 55–76.

<sup>20</sup> John Mangundu, "Higher Education Institutional Innovation: An Analysis of Challenges to e-Academic Advising during Emergency Remote Teaching," *SA Journal of Information Management* 24, no. 1 (October 12, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajim.v24i1.1569>.

<sup>21</sup> Achille Joseph Mbembe, "Decolonizing the University: New Directions," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2016): 29–45.

<sup>22</sup> Danie de Klerk, "Making Known the Real: An Exploration of Academic Advising Practices in a South African Higher Education Context," *Journal for Students Affairs in Africa* 9, no. 2 (December 28, 2021): 101–21, <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v9i2.3702>.

<sup>23</sup> Le Grange L, "Decolonising the University Curriculum," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30, no. 2 (June 2016), <https://doi.org/10.20853/30-2-709>.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Scott, "Designing the South African Higher Education System for Student Success," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1–17.

<sup>25</sup> Gugu Wendy Tiroyabone and François Strydom, "The Development of Academic Advising to Enable Student Success in South Africa," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 9, no. 2 (2021): 1–15.

development.<sup>26</sup> Tinto's seminal work on student integration established that both academic and social integration are essential for fostering student persistence, with advising serving as a key mechanism for facilitating these forms of integration.<sup>27</sup> Students who maintain meaningful connections with institutional support structures demonstrate higher rates of retention and academic achievement, whereas those who experience isolation face elevated attrition risks.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the documented benefits of academic advising, research consistently reveals a significant gender gap in service utilization. Male students across diverse institutional contexts underutilize academic support services compared to their female counterparts, a phenomenon linked to broader sociocultural expectations surrounding masculinity and help-seeking behavior.<sup>29</sup> Addis and Mahalik's research on men's help-seeking patterns demonstrates that traditional masculine norms emphasizing self-reliance and emotional stoicism create substantial barriers to accessing institutional support.<sup>30</sup> This reluctance is further compounded by what Courtenay terms "masculine discrepancy stress," wherein men experience psychological distress when their needs conflict with internalized masculine ideals.<sup>31</sup>

The intersection of gender and institutional context becomes particularly salient in the Global South, where historical legacies of inequality and resource constraints shape student engagement patterns.<sup>32</sup> De Klerk's examination of academic advising in South African higher education reveals that advisors frequently prioritize addressing students' basic survival needs, such as funding, accommodation, and food security, over traditional academic guidance.<sup>33</sup> This reality fundamentally alters the scope and efficacy of advising models imported uncritically from Western contexts.<sup>34</sup> Mbembe's work on decolonizing the university curriculum further emphasizes the necessity of culturally responsive support services that acknowledge the specific historical and structural realities of post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>35</sup>

Peer influence and relational quality emerge as critical facilitators of male student engagement with advising services. Laker and Davis's research on masculinities and help-seeking in higher education demonstrates that male students respond positively to advising relationships characterized by collaboration rather than hierarchy.<sup>36</sup> Vygotsky's social constructivist theory provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics, suggesting that advisors function as "More Knowledgeable Others" who scaffold student learning through supportive interaction.<sup>37</sup> When peer networks normalize help-seeking behavior, male students are more likely to overcome internalized barriers and engage with institutional support.<sup>38</sup>

Structural barriers also significantly impede access to academic advising. High student-to-advisor ratios, limited availability, and competing commitments such as employment and commuting create practical obstacles that disproportionately affect marginalized student populations.<sup>39</sup> Tiroyabone and Strydom's analysis of academic advising in South Africa confirms that these structural constraints interact with psychological and sociocultural factors to produce compounded disadvantage for male students.<sup>40</sup> Digital interventions and flexible advising formats have been proposed as potential solutions, though their effectiveness depends upon addressing underlying awareness gaps and stigma.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>26</sup> NACADA (National Academic Advising Association), "The Concept of Academic Advising," *NACADA Review* 41,no.2(2021):7–14.

<sup>27</sup> Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*.

<sup>28</sup> Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, 89.

<sup>29</sup> Addis and Mahalik, "Men, Masculinity, and the Contexts of Help Seeking."

<sup>30</sup> Addis and Mahalik, "Men, Masculinity, and the Contexts of Help Seeking."

<sup>31</sup> Courtenay, "Constructions of Masculinity and Their Influence on Men's Well-Being: A Theory of Gender and Health."

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan D Jansen, *Knowledge in the Blood: Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 23- 45.

<sup>33</sup> de Klerk, "Making Known the Real: An Exploration of Academic Advising Practices in a South African Higher Education Context."

<sup>34</sup> de Klerk, "Making Known the Real: An Exploration of Academic Advising Practices in a South African Higher Education Context," 115.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Mbembe, "Decolonizing the University: New Directions."

<sup>36</sup> Laker and Tracy Davis, "Masculinities and Men's Help-Seeking in Higher Education."

<sup>37</sup> Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, vol. 86 (Harvard university press, 1978), 86.

<sup>38</sup> Sax and Jennifer A. Harper., "Gender Gaps in Student Engagement: Understanding Why Men Underperform," 64.

<sup>39</sup> Tiroyabone and Strydom, "The Development of Academic Advising to Enable Student Success in South Africa."

<sup>40</sup> Tiroyabone and Strydom, "The Development of Academic Advising to Enable Student Success in South Africa,"8.

<sup>41</sup> Mangundu, "Higher Education Institutional Innovation: An Analysis of Challenges to e-Academic Advising during Emergency Remote Teaching."

The theoretical integration of Tinto's student integration theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Vygotsky's social constructivism offers a comprehensive framework for understanding male student engagement with academic advising.<sup>42</sup> Maslow's framework illuminates how basic and security needs must be satisfied before students can prioritize higher-order academic goals,<sup>43</sup> while Vygotsky emphasizes the relational and social dimensions of learning and development.<sup>44</sup> Together, these perspectives underscore the multidimensional nature of barriers to advising engagement and the necessity of holistic, contextually appropriate intervention strategies.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Tinto's Theory of Student Integration

Academic advising plays a critical role in supporting student persistence, retention, and overall academic success, particularly in higher education institutions serving diverse populations. Tinto's theory of student integration provides a foundational lens for understanding these dynamics, emphasizing that both academic and social integration are essential for fostering student persistence. Students who are well-integrated into the academic and social life of their institution are more likely to remain engaged and achieve their educational goals, whereas students who experience disconnection face higher attrition risks.<sup>45</sup> In the context of male students, underutilization of advising services can impede integration, resulting in delayed academic progression or disengagement.<sup>46</sup> Tinto's framework thus highlights the importance of creating opportunities for both academic and relational engagement to support persistence.<sup>47</sup>

### Developmental Approach to Academic Advising

Building on Tinto's model, the developmental approach to academic advising underscores structured guidance, proactive mentoring, and personalized support.<sup>48</sup> Research suggests that proactive advising, rather than reactive or remedial intervention, enhances student engagement and satisfaction.<sup>49</sup> Advisors serve not only as administrative guides but also as facilitators of students' academic and personal development, promoting goal-setting, decision-making, and reflective learning practices.<sup>50</sup> Empirical studies indicate that regular, meaningful interactions between students and advisors improve academic integration, student retention, and overall institutional engagement.<sup>51</sup>

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Complementing Tinto's integration theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a psychological perspective on student engagement.<sup>52</sup> Maslow proposes that human behavior is motivated by a progression of needs, from physiological and safety needs to social belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.<sup>53</sup> In higher education, students must often satisfy basic and safety needs before they can fully engage with higher-order academic or personal development goals.<sup>54</sup> Male students experiencing financial precarity, inadequate housing, or other structural challenges may deprioritize engagement with

<sup>42</sup> Kuh et al., *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*.

<sup>43</sup> A. H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (July 1943): 370–96, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>.

<sup>44</sup> Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, 52 - 57.

<sup>45</sup> Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, 120 - 125.

<sup>46</sup> Kuh et al., *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*, 45- 47.

<sup>47</sup> Virginia N. Gordon, "The Developmental Role of Academic Advising," in *Academic Advising: A Comprehensive Handbook*, ed. Virginia N. Gordon, 2nd ed. ( San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 73–89.

<sup>48</sup> Jared. Drake, "The Power of Proactive Advising," *NACADA Journal* 31, no. 2 (2011): 6–12.

<sup>49</sup> Abraham Harold Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation.," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370.

<sup>50</sup> M. K. R. Nkomo and S. T. Mthunzi, "Ethical Considerations for Online Qualitative Research in African Contexts," *African Journal of Research* 8, no. 1 (2018): 34–45.

<sup>51</sup> P. N. Makhubu, "Academic Advising and the Student Retention Challenge in South African Higher Education," *South African Journal of Student Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2016): 1–18.

<sup>52</sup> K. B. E. Radebe and G. C. R. Nkosi, "Academic Exclusion and Institutional Support for Disadvantaged Students.," *African Journal of Higher Education Studies* 10, no. 1 (2018): 1–15.

<sup>53</sup> Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, 84 - 91.

<sup>54</sup> Suzanne C. Campbell, *The Power of Academic Advising*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 35 -40.

academic advising, focusing instead on survival-related concerns.<sup>55</sup> Understanding these psychological determinants provides insight into why some male students underutilize support services despite recognizing their benefits.<sup>56</sup>

### **Vygotsky's Social Constructivism**

Vygotsky's social constructivist theory further illuminates the relational dimension of academic advising, emphasizing the role of social interaction in cognitive development.<sup>57</sup> Advisors can act as More Knowledgeable Others (MKO), scaffolding students' learning and helping them navigate complex institutional systems.<sup>58</sup> Peer interactions also contribute to social learning, as students observe and model help-seeking behaviors within their networks.<sup>59</sup> In contexts where masculine norms promote self-reliance, peer endorsement can normalize engagement with advising without threatening masculine identity.<sup>60</sup> This perspective highlights the importance of relational quality and social modeling in advising practices.<sup>61</sup>

### **Structural and Institutional Factors**

Structural and institutional factors significantly shape male students' engagement with advising.<sup>62</sup> Limited advisor availability, high student-to-advisor ratios, and administrative burdens can impede access, particularly for historically marginalized groups in South African universities.<sup>63</sup> These systemic constraints interact with psychological and sociocultural factors, compounding barriers for male students and reinforcing patterns of underutilization.<sup>64</sup> Effective advising interventions must therefore address not only individual motivations but also structural design and relational quality to create a holistic support environment.<sup>65</sup>

### **Culturally Responsive and Decolonized Approaches**

Finally, culturally responsive and decolonized approaches are essential in the South African higher education context.<sup>66</sup> Scholars argue that advising models imported uncritically from the Global North often fail to account for historical inequalities, socio-economic disparities, and culturally specific help-seeking behaviors.<sup>67</sup> Contextualized strategies that integrate developmental, relational, and culturally attuned practices can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of advising for male students. An integrated theoretical framework combining Tinto's student integration, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Vygotsky's social constructivism provides a multidimensional understanding of male students' engagement with academic advising, highlighting the interaction of psychological, relational, and structural determinants.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Approach**

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine in depth the subjective perceptions and lived experiences of male students engaging (or choosing not to engage) with academic advising.<sup>68</sup> Qualitative inquiry is especially appropriate when the research aim is to understand how participants

<sup>55</sup> Darrell Thomas, "The Role of Academic Advising in Supporting Persistence of First-Generation College Students," *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 49, no. 4 (2012): 447–63.

<sup>56</sup> Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, 122.

<sup>57</sup> Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," 375.

<sup>58</sup> Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, 88.

<sup>59</sup> Radebe and Nkosi, "Academic Exclusion and Institutional Support," 8.

<sup>60</sup> Loyiso Jita, "Post-Apartheid Higher Education in South Africa," *The Journal of Higher Education* 85, no. 3 (2014): 432–57.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas, "The Role of Academic Advising in Supporting Persistence of First-Generation College Students," 458.

<sup>62</sup> Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," 375.

<sup>63</sup> Campbell, *The Power of Academic Advising*, 58.

<sup>64</sup> Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, 125.

<sup>65</sup> Jansen, *Knowledge in the Blood: Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past*, 55–58.

<sup>66</sup> Addis and Mahalik, "Men, Masculinity, and the Contexts of Help Seeking," 5–14.

<sup>67</sup> M. E. R. De Villiers, "Decolonising Academic Advising in South Africa: From Western Models to Contextualized Practice," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 9, no. 2 (2021): 41–58.

<sup>68</sup> J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches (4th Ed.)* (Sage, 2018).

interpret their experiences, construct meaning, and engage in decision-making processes rather than seeking numerical generalizability.<sup>69</sup> The study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which privileges contextually embedded understandings, recognizing that students' perceptions of advising are socially, culturally, and institutionally situated.<sup>70</sup>

Given the focus on meaning-making and experience, a descriptive-exploratory strategy was adopted: this allowed the capture of rich narrative data while retaining sufficient flexibility to identify emergent themes without imposing a heavily pre-structured framework.<sup>71</sup> In designing the study, considerations were given to the alignment of research questions with methods: the open-ended nature of the inquiry (What are the perceptions? What factors influence seeking or avoiding advising?) aligns with qualitative methods that provide access to participants' voices and reflections.<sup>72</sup>

### Context and Participants

The research was situated at a comprehensive South African university, chosen because it offers a typical Global South higher education context characterised by legacy inequalities, resource constraints, and diverse student demographics. The participant sample comprised 20 male undergraduate students, identified through purposive sampling, which enabled the selection of individuals who had at least some exposure to academic advising services (either proactively or reactively).<sup>73</sup> Each respondent was assigned an alphanumeric code (P1–P20) to ensure anonymity and protect confidentiality.

Purposive sampling is consistent with qualitative research best practices when the aim is not statistical representativeness but rather the depth of insight from a focused subgroup of interest.<sup>74</sup> The eligibility criteria ensured that participants had navigated institutional advising processes, thereby enabling the collection of meaningful narratives about engagement, avoidance, and perceptions. The relatively small sample size is justified in qualitative research by the intention of achieving thematic saturation rather than broad generalisation.

### Data Collection: Online Qualitative Survey via Google Forms

Data collection was conducted via an online open-ended questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The instrument consisted of a set of open-ended questions prompting participants to recount their experiences with academic advising, motivations for seeking or avoiding it, perceptions of its utility, and suggestions for improvement. The decision to use an online survey format incorporated pragmatic considerations (ease of access, convenience for participants, cost-effectiveness) and was sensitive to the institutional constraints faced by students (e.g., time commitments, commuting, part-time work).

However, the use of open-ended survey instruments in qualitative research demands careful methodological attention. Scholars caution that free-text responses may lack depth, context, and opportunities for follow-up probing, thereby limiting the richness of data if not managed carefully.<sup>75</sup> To mitigate this, the survey included prompts encouraging elaboration, and participants were advised that they could take their time to respond in narrative form. While interviews or focus groups may afford deeper interaction, the chosen format balanced access and feasibility in the South African higher education context.<sup>76</sup>

### Ethical Considerations and Procedural Rigor

Ethical approval was obtained from the institution's research ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants were provided with information sheets, gave informed consent, and were assured of anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The online

<sup>69</sup> S. B. Merriam and E. J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. ( Jossey-Bass, 2016).

<sup>70</sup> Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985).

<sup>71</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed., vol. 3 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002).

<sup>72</sup> Derald Wing Sue and David Sue., *Counselling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice*, 8th ed. ( Hoboken: NJ: Wiley, 2021).

<sup>73</sup> Higher Education South Africa, *Student Enrollment Trends by Gender* (Pretoria: HESA, 2023).

<sup>74</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, 6th ed. ( Los Angeles: Sage, 2018).

<sup>75</sup> Lawrence A Palinkas et al., "Purposive Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42, no. 5 (2015): 533–44.

<sup>76</sup> Ilker Etikan, Sulaiman Abubakar Musa, and Rukayya Sunusi Alkassim, "Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling," *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1–4.

data collection platform was configured so that responses were stored securely, identifying information was omitted, and data access was restricted to the researcher.

In addressing online research ethics, special attention was paid to issues of digital access, anonymity, informed consent delivered remotely, and data security, all of which are elevated concerns in higher-education research using digital tools. Furthermore, the principle of reflexivity was applied: the researcher actively reflected on his positionality, the power differential between advisor and student contexts, and the potential for biases in interpretation. To support credibility and dependability, the data analysis process was documented in an audit trail, and peer debriefing with a colleague was conducted to review coding and theme generation.<sup>77</sup>

### Data Analysis

Data was analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase procedure set out by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data (reading and re-reading responses), (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes among codes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.<sup>78</sup> This process enabled systematic extraction of salient patterns of meaning across the dataset, identifying how male students conceptualized academic advising, what factors inhibited or facilitated engagement, and how their lived context shaped their decisions.

Coding was conducted manually in Microsoft Excel, allowing iterative refinement of codes and theme boundaries. The researcher engaged in constant comparison of data segments, revisited participant responses when themes were unclear, and employed memo-writing to capture analytical reflections. While the online qualitative survey format limited the capacity for follow-up probing, the analytic process sought to maximise depth by clustering responses around shared patterns and distinguishing distinctive participant voices.

### Methodological Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of an online open-ended survey may have limited the richness of data compared to in-depth interviews: as noted by qualitative methodology experts, open-text responses may lack contextual detail, opportunities for follow-up questions, and may risk superficiality.<sup>79</sup> Second, the sampling strategy, although purposive and appropriate for qualitative inquiry, may have introduced self-selection bias: participants who elected to respond may differ systematically (e.g., more aware of advising or more reflective) than those who did not respond. Third, reliance on self-reported experiences means that recall bias and social desirability may affect responses. Finally, the focus on a single institution restricts transferability of findings beyond that particular context: while contextual richness was prioritised, the findings are not generalisable to all South African or Global South institutions.

To ameliorate some of these limitations, the study documents the analytic process transparently, uses participant-coding to protect anonymity, encourages narrative richness through prompts, and situates findings within their institutional and socio-cultural context. The researcher also maintains an audit trail and engages in peer debriefing, contributing to the trustworthiness of the study.

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the qualitative survey responses from 20 male undergraduate students revealed three overarching themes describing perceptions, barriers, and facilitators of academic advising engagement. These findings situate the experiences of male students within both psychological and structural frameworks, confirming patterns identified in prior literature while highlighting context-specific dynamics in the South African higher education landscape.

<sup>77</sup> John R., Evans and Stan L. Mathur, "The Value of Online Surveys," *Internet Research*, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Melissa DeJonckheere and Lisa M Vaughn, "Semistructured Interviewing in Primary Care Research: A Balance of Relationship and Rigour," *Family Medicine and Community Health* 7, no. 2 (2019): e000057.

<sup>79</sup> Rose Wiles et al., "The Management of Confidentiality and Anonymity in Social Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11, no. 5 (December 2008): 417–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701622231>.

**Theme 1: Perceptions of Academic Advising: Value versus Avoidance**

Participants consistently acknowledged the utility of academic advising, particularly for administrative tasks and crisis resolution, yet exhibited reluctance to engage proactively.

**P3 remarked,**

*“I know advisors can help with planning my courses, but I only go when I have a problem”.*

This statement underscores a reactive view of advising, aligning with international findings that male students often underutilize support services unless facing immediate academic difficulties.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, students reported that engaging with advising carried a social stigma, especially when perceived as remedial.

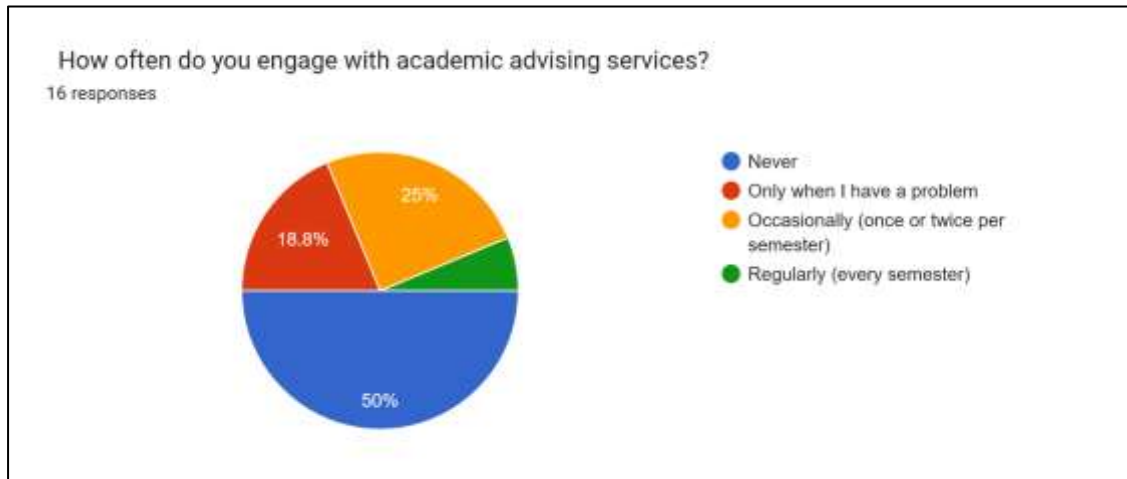


Figure 1: Data collected transpired like the above pie chart

**P12 stated,**

*“Academic advising feels like something for students who struggle, not for me.”*

This stigma reflects broader masculinity norms, which interpret reliance on institutional support as weakness.<sup>81</sup>

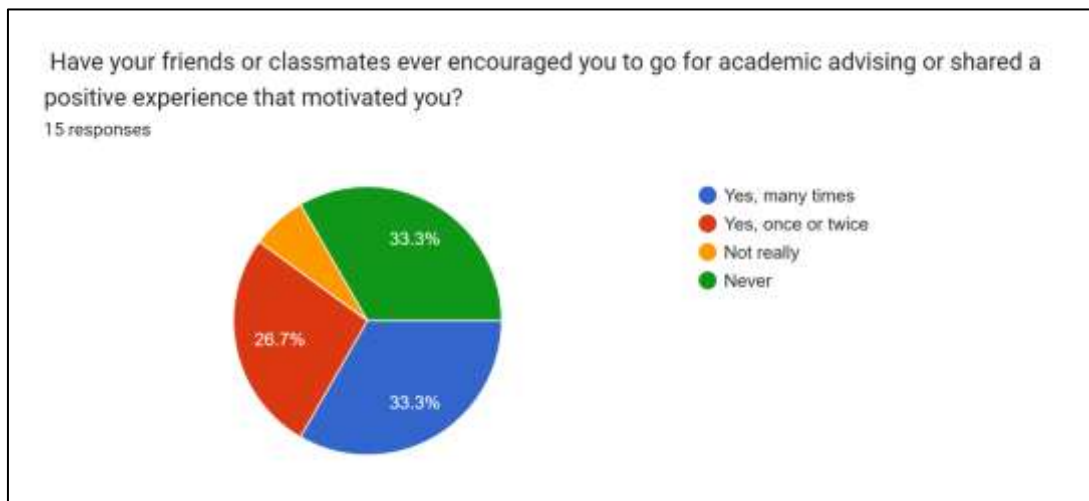


Figure 2

<sup>80</sup> R. Emekako and S. van der Westhuizen, “Progressive and Developmental Pathways for Student Retention and Academic Success: Lessons from One-on-One Student Academic Advising,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 35, no. 6 (December 2021), <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-6-4208>.

<sup>81</sup> Chithira Johnson et al., “Student Support in Higher Education: Campus Service Utilization, Impact, and Challenges,” *Heliyon* 8, no. 12 (December 2022): e12559, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e12559>.

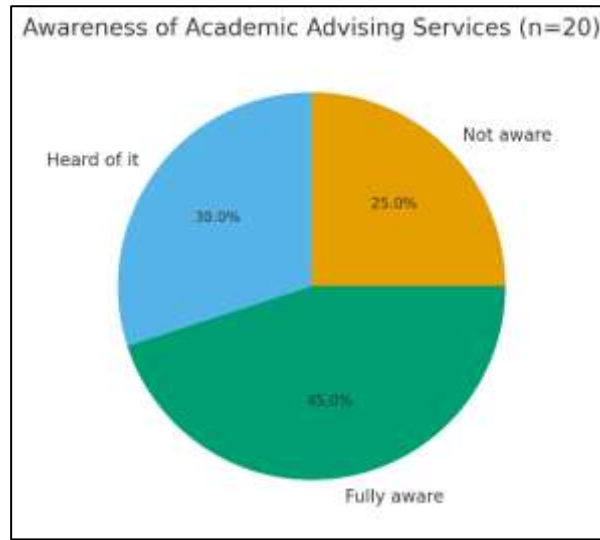


Figure 3. Awareness of Academic Advising Services

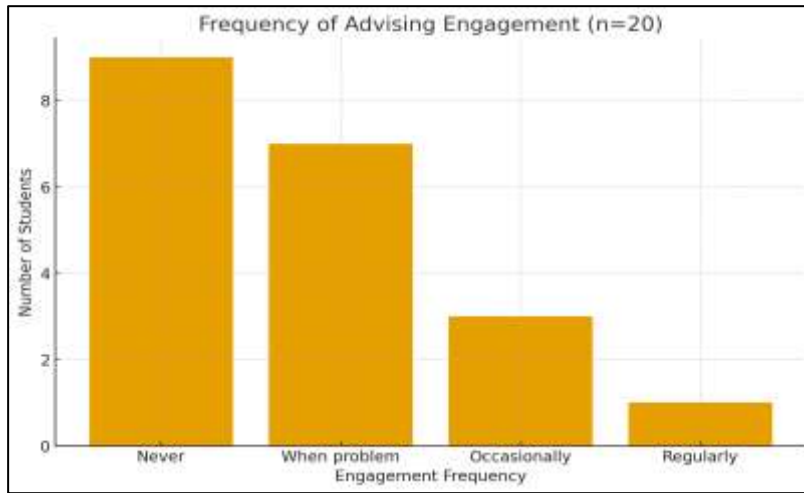


Figure 4. Frequency of Advising Engagement

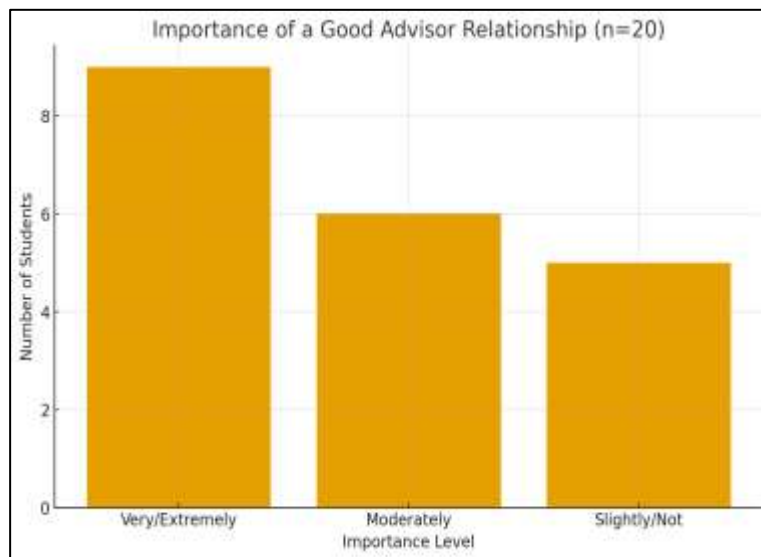


Figure 5. Importance of a Good Advisor Relationship

## **Theme 2: Barriers to Engagement: Sociocultural and Structural Constraints Internalized Masculine Self-Reliance**

Many participants expressed a desire to manage challenges independently.

### **P19 explained,**

*“I feel like asking for help, especially as a man, shows weakness. I should be able to figure things out on my own.”* Such self-imposed expectations are consistent with prior research on male help-seeking behavior.

### **Structural Inaccessibility and Time Constraints**

Structural barriers such as limited advisor availability, high student-to-advisor ratios, and competing commitments like work or commuting were significant deterrents.<sup>82</sup> Several students indicated that scheduling appointments often did not justify the perceived benefits, a pattern previously identified in South African higher education research.<sup>83</sup>

## **Theme 3: Facilitators: Relational Quality and Peer Normalization**

Relational quality between students and advisors was a key facilitator.

### **Participant 15 commented,**

*“The only time I went back was when the advisor felt like a real person, not just a bureaucrat. Someone who actually listened.”* Peer influence also encouraged engagement.

### **As Participant 12 shared,**

*“My roommate told me the advisor helped him save his financial aid, so I went. It wasn't about courses, it was survival”.* These findings align with literature highlighting relational trust and peer modeling as central to student engagement.<sup>84</sup>

Overall, these themes indicate that while male students recognize the value of academic advising, sociocultural norms, psychological barriers, and structural constraints limit participation. Relational trust and peer recommendation provide essential pathways for improving engagement in this demographic.<sup>85</sup>

## **Synthesis and Interpretation**

Overall, the thematic analysis reveals that male students' perceptions of academic advising are shaped by awareness, relational quality, peer influence, perceived usefulness, and institutional accessibility. Awareness gaps and relational barriers appear to be the strongest inhibitors of engagement. Importantly, the desire for supportive, friendly, and proactive advising suggests that male students value connection but may not seek help unless the environment feels safe and encouraging.

This aligns with South African research showing that male students often struggle with help-seeking due to cultural expectations of independence and self-reliance. Universities should therefore invest in more visible advising structures, relational training for advisors, and targeted communication strategies to enhance male student engagement.

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<sup>82</sup> Azianti Ismail et al., “Students' Satisfaction towards Academic Advising Service,” *Asian Journal of University Education* 17, no. 3 (August 1, 2021): 291, <https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v17i3.14497>.

<sup>83</sup> Adi Sapir, “What Student Support Practitioners Know about Non-Traditional Students: A Practice-Based Approach,” *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 6 (September 19, 2022): 2064–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1946015>.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson et al., “Student Support in Higher Education: Campus Service Utilization, Impact, and Challenges.” This study shows the difference in help-seeking behaviour by gender and major.

<sup>85</sup> Emekako and van der Westhuizen, “Progressive and Developmental Pathways for Student Retention and Academic Success: Lessons from One-on-One Student Academic Advising.” This study shows one-on-one advising improves retention when relational. Overall, these themes indicate that while male students recognize the value of academic advising, sociocultural norms, psychological barriers, and structural constraints limit participation. Relational trust and peer recommendation provide essential pathways for improving engagement in this demographic

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay of psychological, structural, and sociocultural factors influencing male students' engagement with academic advising in a South African higher education context. Integrating these results with Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Vygotsky's Social Constructivism provides a deeper understanding of how institutional practices, personal motivations, and relational dynamics shape help-seeking behavior.

### Perceptions and the Stigma of Help-Seeking

The study confirmed that male students often perceive academic advising as reactive or remedial, consistent with the internalization of traditional masculinity norms. This aligns with Tinto's model, which emphasizes the importance of both academic and social integration in fostering persistence. Male students' reluctance to seek advising reflects a misalignment between their perception of institutional support and their need for social and academic integration, ultimately impeding their academic progression.<sup>86</sup> The stigma associated with seeking help underscores a broader cultural pattern where reliance on institutional support is seen as a vulnerability rather than a resource for development.<sup>87</sup>

### Psychological Barriers and Masculinity Norms

Internalized self-reliance emerged as a prominent psychological barrier. Participants' emphasis on independent problem-solving reflects the influence of gendered socialization and cultural expectations, consistent with existing studies on male help-seeking avoidance.<sup>88</sup> This barrier is further illuminated by Maslow's framework: the fulfillment of basic and security needs (Levels 1 and 2) takes precedence over self-actualization or academic skill development (Level 5).<sup>89</sup> For students facing financial precarity or systemic inequities, proactive engagement with academic advising may be deprioritized relative to survival-related concerns. This insight is critical in the South African context, where historical inequalities intersect with gendered expectations to produce complex patterns of engagement.

### Structural and Institutional Constraints

The findings also reveal structural impediments, including limited advisor availability, high student-to-advisor ratios, and administrative burden. These constraints mirror international literature on advising challenges in higher education, highlighting that institutional design can unintentionally reinforce underutilization.<sup>90</sup> Within Tinto's framework, insufficient access to relational support hinders academic integration and exacerbates attrition risk. Moreover, structural constraints disproportionately affect marginalized male students, compounding the psychological barriers created by masculinity norms.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Hitches et al., "Strengthening Student Support: Students' Voices on What Does (Not) Work in High School and University," *International Journal of Educational Research* 130 (2025): 102529, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102529>.

<sup>87</sup> Sofia M. Pimenta, Simon C. Hunter, and Susan Rasmussen, "The Influence of Stigma and Trust in Young People Seeking Support for Their Own or a Friend's Symptoms: The Role of Threat Appraisals," *Child & Youth Care Forum* 52, no. 3 (June 29, 2023): 559–81, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-022-09698-6>.

<sup>88</sup> Zac E Seidler et al., "Engaging Men in Psychological Treatment: A Scoping Review," *American Journal of Men's Health* 12, no. 6 (2018): 1882–1900.

<sup>89</sup> Saul McLeod, *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15240897>.

<sup>90</sup> Jessica Versfeld and Curwyn Mapaling, "A Qualitative Study Illustrating Factors That Enable and Constrain Academic Advising Practices in a Global South Context," in *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 9 (Frontiers, 2024), 1419070.

<sup>91</sup> Esther Nuuyoma and Nevensha Sing, "Revisiting Tinto's Student Integration Theory: A Framework for Understanding Doctoral Student Attrition and Enhancing Retention Strategies," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* IX, no. V (June 13, 2025): 4095–4109, <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRIS.2025.905000313>.

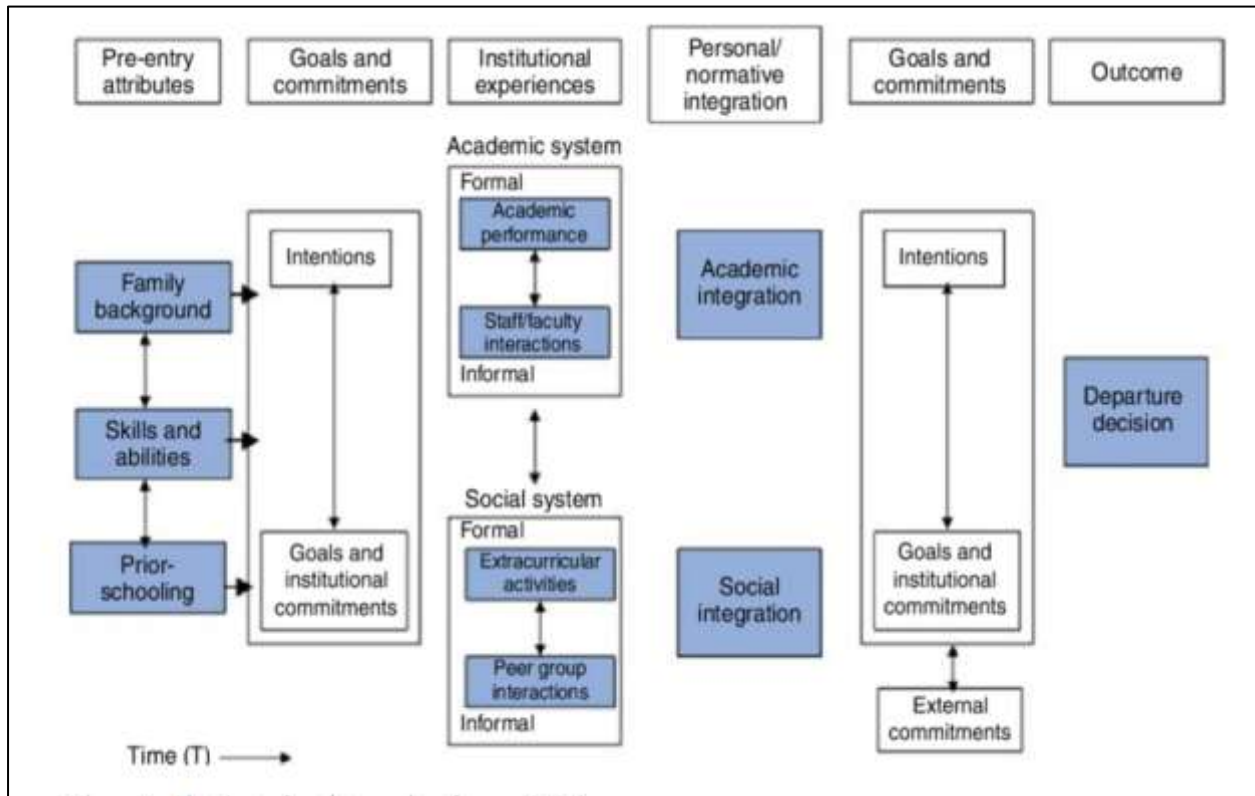


Figure 6: Tinto's student integration theory (1993)

### Facilitators: Relational Quality, Peer Influence, and Social Constructivism

Relational factors, trust, approachability, and perceived advisor competence were pivotal in facilitating engagement. Participants emphasized that advisors who demonstrated genuine care and accessibility motivated continued utilization.<sup>92</sup> Vygotsky's Social Constructivism helps explain this dynamic: advisors function as MKO, providing scaffolding that enables students to navigate complex academic systems.<sup>93</sup> The relational interaction not only transfers practical knowledge but also models help-seeking behavior in a socially acceptable way. Peer influence further normalized engagement with advising services. Students reported that observing or receiving recommendations from peers reduced stigma and motivated participation. This aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on social learning, where interaction with peers mediates behavioral and cognitive development. In contexts where male students feel pressure to conform to self-reliance norms, peer endorsement serves as a critical mechanism for legitimizing help-seeking without compromising masculine identity.<sup>94</sup>

### Implications for Practice

The study suggests that effective academic advising for male students in the Global South requires strategies that address both psychological and structural barriers. Gender-sensitive approaches, culturally responsive communication, and peer mentorship programs can reduce stigma and normalize engagement. Institutional reforms, such as improved advisor accessibility, manageable student-to-advisor ratios, and integration of digital advising platforms, can further alleviate structural constraints.

<sup>92</sup> Nidhi Singh et al., "Building Trust and Engagement: A Comprehensive Framework for Analysing Influencer Credibility in Social Media," *Journal of Enterprise Information Management* 39, no. 1 (February 2, 2026): 329–54, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEIM-03-2025-0187>.

<sup>93</sup> Sigit Wibowo, Muhammad Nur Wangid, and Fery Muhamad Firdaus, "The Relevance of Vygotsky's Constructivism Learning Theory with the Differentiated Learning Primary Schools.," *Journal of Education and Learning (EduLearn)* 19, no. 1 (2025): 431–40.

<sup>94</sup> Ruihua Li, Norlizah Che Hassan, and Norzihani Saharuddin, "College Student's Academic Help-Seeking Behavior: A Systematic Literature Review," *Behavioral Sciences* 13, no. 8 (July 31, 2023): 637, <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13080637>.

## **Contribution to Theory and Localized Understanding**

This research contributes to the higher education literature by contextualizing male help-seeking within South Africa's socio-historical realities. It demonstrates how Tinto's integration theory, Maslow's needs hierarchy, and Vygotsky's social constructivism converge to explain patterns of engagement. Specifically, it shows that barriers are rarely unidimensional: psychological reluctance interacts with structural limitations and socio-cultural expectations, creating compounded deterrents for male students. Consequently, advising interventions must be multidimensional, simultaneously addressing relational, cognitive, and systemic needs.

## **Discussion Summary**

In summary, the underutilization of academic advising by male students in this study reflects the intersection of internalized gender norms, structural constraints, and socioeconomic pressures. Facilitators such as relational trust and peer modeling demonstrate that targeted, culturally aware, and relationally oriented advising practices can meaningfully enhance male engagement. The findings underscore the need for institutions in the Global South to adopt holistic, context-sensitive strategies that acknowledge the interconnection of psychological, structural, and social determinants in student support.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Gender-Sensitive Advising Practices**

Based on the findings, higher education institutions should adopt gender-sensitive advising practices that specifically address the unique needs and perceptions of male students. Advisors should be trained to recognize how masculinity norms influence help-seeking behaviors and develop strategies to reduce stigma associated with utilizing academic support services. For example, framing advising as a proactive developmental opportunity rather than a remedial service can encourage male students to engage early and consistently.

### **Peer Mentorship and Social Modeling**

Peer influence emerged as a significant facilitator in male students' engagement with advising. Institutions should consider implementing peer mentorship programs where experienced students guide and normalize engagement for their peers. Such initiatives not only provide practical academic guidance but also help to reshape social norms around help-seeking, reducing the perceived conflict with masculine identity.

### **Structural and Digital Interventions**

Structural barriers, such as high student-to-advisor ratios and limited accessibility, can discourage utilization of advising services. To address these challenges, institutions should optimize advisor allocation, streamline administrative processes, and integrate digital advising platforms that offer flexible access to support. Online platforms, virtual advising sessions, and scheduling tools can make engagement more convenient, particularly for students balancing academic, work, and personal responsibilities.

### **Contextually Relevant and Culturally Responsive Approaches**

Given the historical and socio-economic realities of South African higher education, advising interventions must be culturally responsive and contextually tailored. Programs should acknowledge structural inequities, integrate culturally appropriate communication strategies, and adopt decolonized frameworks that resonate with students' lived experiences. By doing so, institutions can create a supportive environment that is inclusive and sensitive to the challenges faced by male students.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the complex interplay of psychological, structural, and sociocultural factors that shape male students' engagement with academic advising in a South African higher education context.

Male students' underutilization of advising services is influenced by internalized masculinity norms, financial and structural barriers, and historical inequities that affect access and perceived relevance.

The findings emphasize that effective academic advising for male students requires a multidimensional approach, combining relational quality, peer influence, culturally responsive communication, and structural optimization. Integration of Tinto's student integration theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Vygotsky's social constructivist framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing engagement and highlights areas where institutional intervention can be most impactful.

Ultimately, this study contributes to higher education scholarship by offering context-specific insights for the Global South, demonstrating the need for holistic, gender-aware, and culturally sensitive advising strategies. Implementing these recommendations can enhance male students' academic persistence, improve retention outcomes, and foster equitable access to support services, thereby strengthening institutional capacity to respond effectively to diverse student needs.

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