

## **Perceptions and Experiences of Academic Advisers and Minoritised Students at a UK University**

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## Perceptions and Experiences of Academic Advisers and Minoritised Students

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### Abstract

Academic advising can support students' academic development and intrapersonal skills whilst fostering a sense of belonging at university. Despite recent advancements in knowledge and practices, it is not clear how best to support minoritised students, who experience outcome differentials and life circumstances that differ from the majority. Following a reciprocal mentoring programme pairing academic staff and minoritised students at a UK university, we explored students' academic advising experiences. Qualitative data were collected and analysed via framework analysis. The mentoring led to both groups improving relational understanding. Ten themes categorised into three domains (Personal Factors, Institutional Factors and Interplay Between Personal and Institutional Factors) highlighted complex issues that affect students' day-to-day lives, their ability to engage with academic advising, and factors that affect academic advising practices. Recommendations such as strategies to improve relationships, structured and developmental advising models, and guidance to improve role-specific clarity are provided.

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# Introduction

## Academic Advising

Academic advising (or personal tutoring) is derived from the concept of 'loco parentis' (to take responsibility of a parent; Antoney, 2020) and is an important aspect of the university experience. Academic advisers have been described as the 'human face of the institution' for learners (Wootton, 2006), providing information about processes and expectations, supporting learning, fostering relationships, and facilitating belonging through relational support (Thomas, 2006). Good advising is linked to better learner performance and improved satisfaction (Meehan & Howells, 2019) and as institutions seek to enhance the student experience, has evolved to encompass personalised learning support, intrapersonal development, and personal aspiration progression too (UKAT, 2023). Indeed, Stork & Walker (2015) suggest that academic advising should aim to develop academic performance whilst fostering emotional wellbeing through individualised support. Since the landmark 'What Works' (Thomas, 2012) publication, there has been increased interest in how best to support students, and the development of organisations such as the US' NACADA (The National Academic Advising Association) and UKAT (the United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring association) has furthered professionalism, profile, and collaborations throughout the sector.

## Literature

Despite advancements in practice and improved understanding, little research appears to explore how academic advisers can best support minoritised students. This is surprising, as student diversity has increased as higher education has globalised and barriers to access have diminished (DeWitt & Altbach 2020; Universities UK, 2019). Data indicates that minoritised students experience increased dropout and differential outcomes when compared with the majority (Hillman, 2021), even when entering with the same tariff as their peers (Universities UK, 2019). This suggests that unaddressed inequalities persist despite increased participation. Indeed, as Grant (cited in Swain, 2008) discusses, increasing student diversity creates new challenges, and academic advising has perhaps become even more important as its requirement to support minoritised students' individual academic, social, and transitional needs become clearer.

The power of the student voice to inspire, educate and transform practice within higher education is now well understood (Ashton-Hay & Williams, 2023; Cook-Sather & Mathews, 2023), and the exploration of under-represented student voices could provide new and important information to facilitate understanding of lived experiences to enhance academic advising (Ecochard & Fotheringham 2017; Quan, He & Sloan, 2016). Indeed, it might be difficult for academic staff to fully appreciate student experiences if their own differ markedly, however it is also academic staff that support learners' academic and transitional experiences and foster their academic belonging as advisers through a relational practice (Antoney 2020; Thomas, 2006). Academic advising has been described as a collaborative partnership of mutual responsibility—an alliance between staff and student (McIntosh et al., 2022). This alliance might need to be built upon a foundation of mutual understanding for it to be effective. Whilst data in this area appears sparse, humanised (that is, staff being seen as relatable, demonstrating caring and commitment to their students), multifaceted (addressing complex issues beyond just classroom progression), and proactive (forthcoming

and developmental, rather than reactive) academic advising appeared to be successful in supporting racially-minoritised students in the U.S. (Museus & Ravello, 2021). It is perhaps unsurprising that person-centred, holistic advising appears to be an effective approach; engendering a sense of belonging appears to be an important aspect of good academic advising for all student groups (Meehan & Howells, 2019) and might be a necessary foundation for a good student experience in general (Bell, 2021).

### **Minoritised Students**

Minoritised student identities can encompass multiple and intersectional social categories, including racial, socioeconomic, gender, sexual orientation, and physical characteristics, amongst others (Museus & Ravello, 2021). This means that minoritised individuals might possess complex backgrounds and identities that create unique challenges and barriers not experienced by the majority. To date, evidence exploring lived experiences and the role of academic advising to support minoritised learners' journeys within higher education appears to be thin, with the limited data focusing mostly on racial minoritisation (Museus & Ravello, 2021). Equity gaps and outcome differentials exist across social categories however, and the existing data might not fully illuminate experiences of other social groups. The exploration of learners' lived experiences might help to highlight information that enables academics to gain deeper appreciation of students' journeys and develop new approaches that facilitate academic development and progression through academic advising. We therefore sought to address the evidence gap and aimed to 1), understand the common experiences of minoritised students enrolled at a large UK university; and 2), explore academic advising within the minoritised student experience. To that end, we wanted to explore minoritised students' educational journeys and identify barriers and facilitators of academic advising as perceived by staff and students who completed a reciprocal mentoring programme designed to connect unacquainted academics and students at a large UK university.

## **Method**

### **Study Approach**

This study explored the experiences of minoritised students and academic advisers who completed a reciprocal mentoring programme at a large UK university. This programme connected unacquainted individuals to explore the experiences of minoritised students and the role of academic advising as a means of fostering relational support, academic development, and progression. Indeed, mentoring is a well-established tool that facilitates learning and development through partnership (Lunsford et al., 2017), and while several mentoring models exist including 'peer-to-peer' (Maccabe & Fonseca, 2021) and 'reverse' (Curtis et al., 2021) mentoring, reciprocal mentoring is a recent advancement that facilitates mutual exchange between individuals with different backgrounds (Desai et al., 2018). Whilst some research has highlighted that reciprocal mentoring can be effective at fostering understanding between executive staff and underrepresented groups (Peterson & Ramsey, 2021), this method had yet to be explored with academics and minoritised learners within higher education. Whilst it is not the aim of this study to evaluate the reciprocal mentoring programme per se (and so this will not be discussed beyond the description provided below), the insight and experiences of its participants are elucidated following its completion and in detail, through qualitative description employing framework analysis as the analytical tool of choice.

## **Reciprocal Mentoring**

The reciprocal mentoring consisted of four semi-structured meetings completed throughout a semester to explore the experiences of minoritised students and role of academic advising within the educational journey. Prior to commencing, participants completed mandatory training which discussed good mentorship practice, active listening techniques, safeguarding and data protection alongside the aims, objectives, and expectations of the mentorship. Participants were provided with a handbook which detailed the topics and included a diary to complete during and after each meeting. Diary data was not collected as part of the study but served as a reflective tool and aide memoir for participants. Meetings were semi-structured, with icebreaker activities to establish rapport, key themes to discuss related to the aims and objectives, and opportunities to explore any topic of relevance that participants wished. This was necessary to allow participants to form deeper connections and explore unforeseen topics that might be important to the study. Meetings were instructed to be undertaken on campus and online and were not supervised by the research team however participants were prompted to meet at specific timepoints in the semester. The meeting structures, topics and format were developed with student researchers who were recruited to co-create and co-deliver this study and the mentoring programme, embedding authentic student voice into its creation and delivery. The student researchers were fully embedded into the design and delivery of the project as equals with lived experience, first-hand knowledge and unique insight that informed this project (Cook-Sather & Mathews, 2023). Upon completion of the mentoring, participants were invited to interview to explore the aims and objectives of this study (Figure 1).

## **Philosophical Orientation and Study Design**

This research was undertaken using a qualitative description approach underpinned by constructivist ontology and relativist epistemology (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Qualitative description is a flexible qualitative methodology used to explore and describe human experiences in a straightforward manner without needing to align with deeply theoretical contexts and designs such as phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography (Doyle et al., 2020). For the purposes of this study, qualitative description would allow for insight to be gained into participants' experiences that could then be articulated in language true to participants' words whilst meeting our aims and objectives, and framework analysis could be used as an analytical tool to explore and contrast findings between participant groups (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002).

## **Ethics**

Institutional ethical approval was granted prior to data collection (ethics review ID: ER38931135). Participants provided written informed consent and were aware of their right to withdraw. Due to the possibility that sensitivities could arise during the study (including the mentoring programme), a referral system was established if participants experienced undue distress and required exclusion.

## **Research Team: Reflexivity**

Researchers within this study consisted of academic staff (DR, SB, and MJ) and students from intersectional minoritised backgrounds (ST, DB) from a post-1992 UK University who co-created and co-delivered this study. In the UK, post-1992 universities are 'modern' universities which include former polytechnic and colleges of advanced technology that were

granted university status following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Each staff researcher was an experienced academic adviser who has worked with minoritised groups extensively. DR is a male academic from a racially-minoritised and marginalised background employed in a leadership role within an academic department; SB is a female senior lecturer within a central directorate with oversight of academic advising policy and practice within the University; MJ is female and the Head of Academic Advising at the same institution. Both student researchers (ST and DB) were international students from racially-minoritised backgrounds enrolled onto postgraduate courses living in the UK for the first time.

### Participants

Participants ( $n = 10$ ) consisted of five staff and student pairings that completed the mentoring programme. Inclusion criteria stipulated that staff must undertake academic advising within their roles and students must self-identify from one or more of the institutionally recognised minoritised groups (Table 1). Sampling was undertaken purposefully, and participants were recruited from clubs, societies, and academic departments throughout the institution. Due to pilot interviews revealing that collected data would be complex, deep and information rich, and the accessibility and extensive commitment requirements needed of participants, sampling was based on pragmatics as well as data adequacy (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Prior to the mentoring, interested participants were instructed to provide a written expression of interest (EOI) detailing their motivations, their journey into higher education, and important background information relevant to the study, including self-identified demographic data. Pairings were then created based on interest and outcome motivation indicated from the EOIs.

**Table 1**

*Participant Representation and Institutional Minoritised Student Categories*

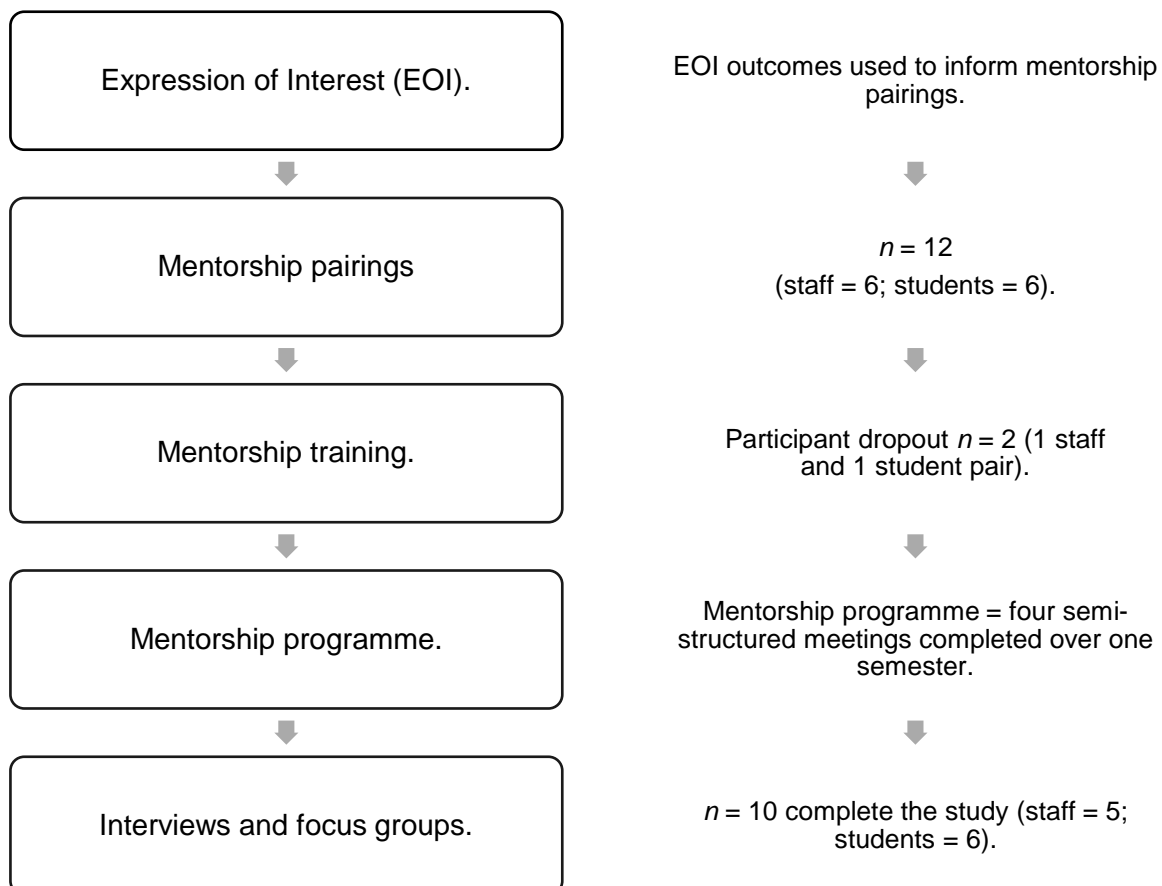
<b>Minoritised Students</b>	
<b>Participant Representation</b>	<b>Institutional Categories</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Racial minorities</b></li> <li>• <b>International students</b></li> <li>• <b>LGBTQ+ students</b></li> <li>• <b>Mature students</b></li> <li>• <b>Caregivers</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racial minorities</li> <li>• International students</li> <li>• Disabled students</li> <li>• LGBTQ+ students</li> <li>• Mature students</li> <li>• Caregivers</li> <li>• Estranged students</li> </ul>

## Data Collection

Data were collected via online semi-structured interviews and focus groups immediately following completion of the mentoring programme (Figure 1). These were prompted by an interview guide that was co-created and piloted prior to administration and were identical for both groups and data collection methods. To minimize power dynamics, the student researchers interviewed student participants and the staff researchers interviewed staff participants. All student researchers were trained researchers familiar with qualitative research and in-depth interviewing. To enhance trustworthiness, respondent validation was sought at the end of each interview, and notes were taken during data collection to facilitate questioning and later analysis. All interviews were conducted online using Zoom videoconferencing software (Version 5.10.7) however participants were given the option to choose either face-to-face or an online interview. User-specific authentication and real-time encryption was activated to ensure privacy. Interviews were recorded securely with password protection to an online server. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymised by a data transcription service prior to analysis.

**Figure 1**

### Study Procedure



## Data Analysis

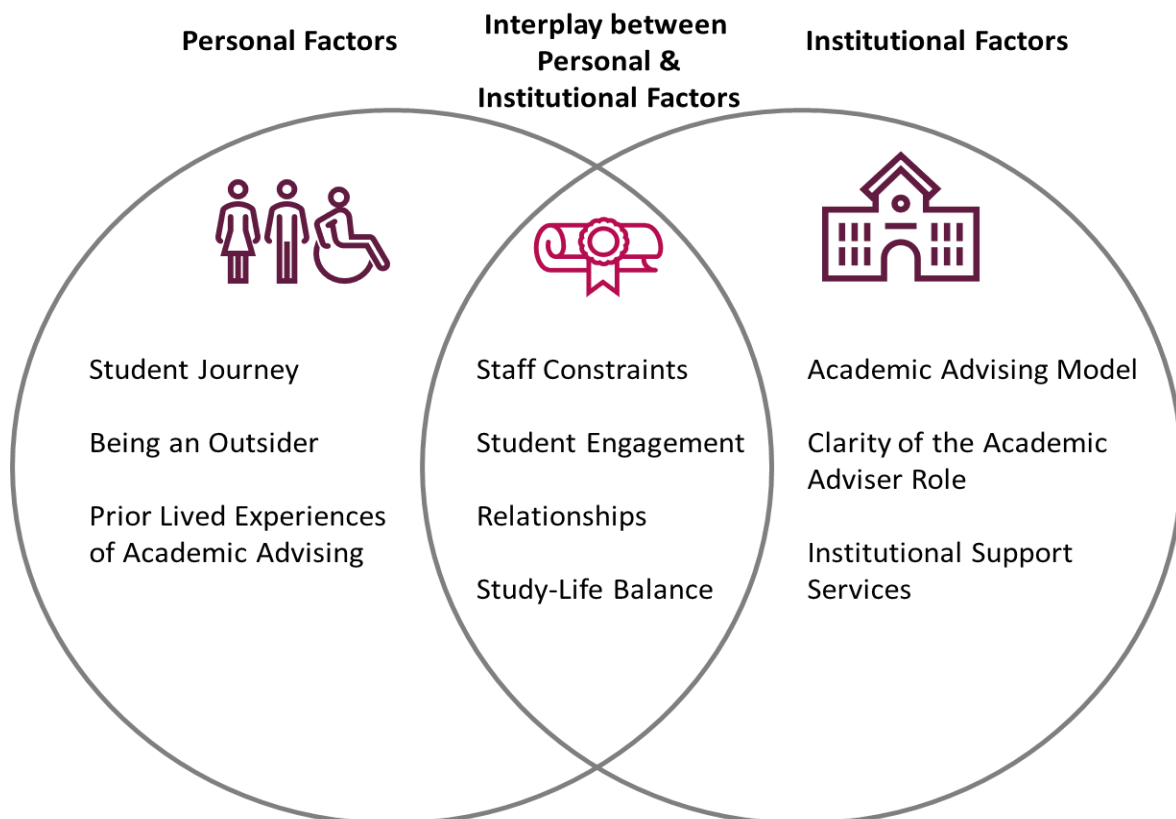
Transcripts were analysed thematically using Framework Analysis as described by Ritchie and Spencer (2002) to explore the experiences of minoritised students and academic advising as perceived by both participant groups. Briefly, Framework Analysis is a systematic tool that facilitates transparent data management and reduction, enabling the comparison of data concepts across cases and themes. Within this research, staff and students were treated as different cases and themes were derived inductively and deductively from the data as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) whilst remaining true to participants' language. The analysis was undertaken by all authors, who analysed transcripts, coded, themed the data, corroborated and agreed the thematic framework collectively through a series of meetings.

## Results

Participants that completed the study consisted of 5 academic staff (2 male and 3 female academic advisers) and 5 minoritised students (2 males and 3 females). The minoritised students' self-identified social categories can be found in Table 1, four of which articulated their self-identified intersectionality of social categories. Briefly, three students (one male and two females) were international students, two of which were caregivers and of African descent, and the other LGBTQ+. One student was a male British-Pakistani and Muslim, and another was a British mature female caregiver of Caucasian origin.

## Figure 2

*Thematic Framework*



*Note.* Ten themes emerging from the analysis which can be said to fall broadly into three main domains: Personal Factors, Institutional Factors, and the Interplay between the two.



Ten themes were drawn from the data and categorised into three domains. Themes were personal factors experienced by individuals ('Student Journey'; 'Being an Outsider'; 'Prior Lived Experiences of Academic Advising'), institutional factors related to the structure and implementation academic advising practice ('Academic Advising Model'; 'Clarity of the Academic Adviser Role'; and 'Institutional Support Services') and themes that sat between domains demonstrating interplay between personal and institutional concepts ('Staff Constraints'; 'Student Engagement'; 'Relationships'; 'Study-Life Balance') (Figure 2).

## **Personal Factors**

### **Student Journey**

Students disclosed complex issues which affected their educational journey. Staff were attuned to students' experiences and reflected upon cultural disparities, contrasting educational backgrounds, differences in expectations around educational practices, and how these impacted the students. Differences in culture and societal systems created significant challenges for the international students.

...I didn't know exactly how things in the system generally work, when you need to do something/anything, from getting a bank account and housing... I didn't know a lot about how school works in general and even though I didn't go to uni in my country I know how it works. I didn't know here, so I didn't know what to expect. I had no idea about anything. I didn't know how grades are calculated or expressed or anything at all. (Student).

Both groups expressed the importance of avoiding assumptions about life circumstances. Staff reflected and suggested that students' motivations and experiences could be very different from their own. Staff participants felt academic advising needed to be non-judgmental and personalised to the students' situation, needs and goals.

It was a matter of having that understanding of the next person's journey and how you could be a part of that and support them on that journey...and see what this current journey is for students and kind of the issues that they face, because sometimes you forget, don't you, because you think 'I'm in this role and I've been there and done that, and it's probably the same for them' – but it isn't and there is just so much that has changed since then. (Staff).

### **Being an Outsider**

Most students revealed that they felt like an outsider at university, which led to feelings of frustration and exclusion. Participating staff shared the perception that minoritised students can feel marginalised and described instances whereby their student partners experienced seclusion. For one international student, an inability to integrate negatively impacted their wellbeing. For this individual, disparities in background created insurmountable barriers, and a lack of connection led to insecurities and problems which then affected their wellbeing.

...so, I haven't made any friends for real since I've been here, and I've been here a couple of years. And I do have a problem, or I have developed a problem when speaking to people because I internalise myself without wanting to. (Student).

For some international students, stark differences in norms, education systems and day-to-day life exacerbated the feeling of being different. Cultural disparities and language barriers were cited by both groups as problems that could lead to cliques and marginalisation. Some staff also suggested that some majority students' lack of cultural curiosity and acceptance of difference could be creating conditions that foster the isolation of minoritised students. Interestingly, one staff member also explained that their racially-minoritised partner self-imposed their own disengagement, thus isolating themselves because they felt too different from their peers to fully integrate.

...it was actually my student who was refusing to engage ...the first meeting was very 'I'm not engaging, these people are not like me, they don't do this' and they were the ones putting these barriers up. (Staff).

A lack of diversity in academic staff was also highlighted by some students, who felt that non-minoritised staff might need further support to understand the needs and experiences of minoritised groups specifically.

We have white lecturers far more than black lecturers, so looking at that ratio, and looking at the number of whites ...they need to understand how to support black students as well and the challenges that they might be facing. (Student).

A sense of belonging was emphasised as being crucial by both groups. Some staff indicated that conditions to create belonging needed to come from students specifically, rather than be staff led. Other staff also articulated that a challenge of their role was to foster the feeling that students deserve to be in higher education, suggesting that issues of confidence might also exist for some student groups leading to imposter syndrome.

... one of the biggest issues that I come across as an academic adviser is that sense of feeling like you belong at university full stop... it's quite hard as an academic adviser to help someone integrate and embed. (Staff).

### **Prior Lived Experiences of Academic Advising**

Students' experiences of academic advising affected their engagement with the process. For international students, educational experiences prior to studying in the UK could impact whether they chose to engage, overlapping with the student journey theme also. Negative experiences with staff affected the likelihood of continued engagement, such as staff not answering questions, students not being taken seriously, or concerns dismissed, which fostered disconnection and disengagement.

And that was the last time, that conversation was the last time I tried at all to speak to my academic adviser. After that I gave up and I just concluded that we can't communicate like normal people because the answer was 'if you're struggling financially why don't you go to work. (Student).

## Institutional Factors

### AA Model

Local approaches taken to operationalise academic advising created positive or negative experiences for students and was revealed to be an important factor that determined engagement with support. Both groups discussed the value of face-to-face interactions and meetings which build rapport. Online meetings and tutorials early in the relationship did not allow for deep human connection, however. Nevertheless, a combination of online and face-to-face meetings reduced barriers to engagement and increased accessibility, which was viewed positively by both groups.

[It] was really nice to meet her face-to-face, but the rest, because she lived quite far away and I am usually working, as I am waiting to start [the meeting] I'm working in the background, so it was really useful for me to do the Zoom as well. (Student).

Structured and timetabled meetings increased students' engagement with meetings and embedding academic advising within the curriculum facilitated the development of relationships, as staff could develop deeper connections through overlapping roles and outside of scheduled meetings.

We have a model where the academic advisers all teach their students in the first year, and so you have that relationship with the student aside of the academic advising role, so that when it's needed, like say a crisis happens or whatever else, they already have that relationship with you. (Staff).

Deficit approaches whereby academic advising was only offered as a means of solving problems were not always valued by students, who chose to disengage from this approach.

So in my case [structured academic advising sessions] didn't happen. It was more of a – you have my email and if you have any problem then contact me. So we did have four or five sessions in each semester, but they were, how should I put it, yes, people didn't turn up mostly but that's okay. I turned up for myself. But the conversation went 'How are you, are you okay? How are you getting on, how are your assessments, do you need any help? No, no, no. Okay'. And it could take ten minutes. (Student).

### Clarity and Understanding of Academic Adviser role

While some staff acknowledged the role and value academic advising, its clarity, remit, and definition could be 'redefined [sic] better' and 'promoted better' to students to improve engagement.

I think for me it was just about being really clear up front about academic advising, not the deficit thing, that its improving performance academically, professionally ... Average to good, good to great, whatever that is. Improving in their own terms, being really positive, using some impact statements from students as to what they did and what the value of it was, I think would be really helpful. (Staff).

Students reflected this observation and suggested that course induction programmes could better clarify the scope and purpose of the role, although others acknowledged that it was difficult to absorb information provided during inductions, which could overwhelm students.

### **Institutional Support Services**

Both groups discussed the role of centralised pastoral support. Staff reflected on a self-referral system and online platform recently employed within the institution. Staff felt that this system led to a reduction in personalised support, and students expressed that this created a barrier when needing to discuss personal issues. Navigating online systems and multiple points of contact within and outside of departments was revealed to be confusing for students, who articulated a preference for fewer points of contact, simpler systems, and greater human interaction.

## **Interplay between Personal and Institutional Factors**

### **Staff Constraints**

Staff disclosed a range of factors they perceived to affect their role effectiveness. A lack of awareness and understanding around complex issues such as intersectionality and mental health awareness were discussed, which could create circumstances whereby students' needs might not be fully met.

...we are not even close to being able to understand intersectionality, so we are potentially talking about people from minoritised groups but in complex interactive ways. (Staff).

Both groups discussed the importance of training and development. This included mental health awareness, counselling skills, and cultural competence training, such that appropriate support could be provided within an academic advising capacity. Organisational and infrastructure problems could also create additional barriers. For one-to-one, face-to-face meetings, staff were concerned about the appropriateness and availability of spaces, citing the need for rooms to be sufficiently private and safe. Other issues included supporting large volumes of students, how this created pressures, and how meetings could suffer if sufficient time was not allocated to build rapport. Staff workloads were also revealed to be a major challenge discussed by both groups. High workloads and poor workload planning could lead to academic advising duties not being met well. Reflecting on a period of industrial action experienced during their studies, one student explained that if staff morale was lacking due to unsatisfactory work and pay conditions, that this would then filter through affecting the experiences of students.

...They have workloads, and they have student assignments and exams to mark and they've got things to do and if there is no motivation for them to even do their own work to their own satisfaction, who is going to care about the extra time for one student (Student).

### **Student Engagement**

Participants agreed that students did not always understand academic advising, creating non-engagement. This was often when deficit practices were adopted (overlapping with the

'Clarity of the Academic Adviser Role' theme) and where power dynamics made academics appear unapproachable. This was discussed with respect to overseas approaches specifically, discussed by international student participants. Where students enter the UK system with this prior experience, this then affected engagement at the UK institution. Yet, once UK norms and practices were understood, Academic Advisers were seen as approachable, and the service was appreciated.

...I never had the opportunity of getting close to any lecturer, because in my own country lecturers are idolised, they see themselves as a mini god, there is so much power imbalance, so much – they see themselves as so powerful, and they determine what happens to you academically and even determine what happens to you outside of academics ....So I never had any connection with my lecturer in the way that I was able to talk to [their mentor]... He made so much impact on me, for the fact that he came down to my level and he opened up to me and made me feel comfortable around him. (Student).

### **Relationships**

Building relationships was considered essential by both groups. Authenticity and strong interpersonal skills were seen to be particularly important by students.

...if you've got somebody who is warm and understanding then they are the perfect person for an academic role. (Student).

However, students discussed instances where changes to their Academic Adviser meant that creating long-lasting relationships was difficult and led to disengagement. Developing and sustaining a longer-term relationship was important, to create deeper connection and sense of belonging. Staff raised concerns over high student volumes and a lack of time creating barriers to building effective relationships, as well as disparities in commitment to the role demonstrated by some staff.

...I think that it's fair to say that there are some people that are quite committed to the role and others who are not. (Staff).

### **Study-life balance**

Several factors affected students' study-life balance, which affected engagement and life experiences. Commuter students were revealed to be at greater risk of isolation and might find it harder to access support. Participants acknowledged that students have complex lifestyles, that financial burdens meant that they were increasingly balancing work with study, and that Academic Advisers need to be mindful and sympathetic to complex life circumstances. Discussions elucidated those international students face additional pressures, including accommodation issues, settling-in families, obtaining bank accounts (etc.), and adjusting to a new society in general. Some staff expressed that while some international students were disregarding institutional advice not to bring families prior to securing accommodation, they still needed to be supported.

We must give some support to people in the circumstances that they've got, not the circumstances that we would like them to have. (Staff).

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of minoritised students and examine the role of academic advising in their educational experience. Through the 'Being an Outsider' theme, participants provided rich accounts revealing that minoritised students can feel disconnected from peers, staff, and the institution, cultivating a lack of belonging and feelings of difference. A sense of belonging is a basic psychological requirement (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Maslow, 1968) and is important for retention, satisfaction, motivation, and enjoyment at university (Pedler et al., 2022). Within educational contexts, a sense of belonging is formed through social connections with staff and peers (Watson et al., 2010), and through the interconnection of environmental, social, and cognitive factors, supports feelings of connectedness and a sense of purpose in relation to a learner's academic and career aspirations (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Importantly, the need to belong has been shown to be crucial for transition into Higher Education (Maunder, 2018), and that a sense of belonging is essential for other psycho-emotional experiences as wellbeing, self-esteem, relationships, and stress management (Slaten et al., 2016). Indeed, a sense of belonging appears to be an important foundation for a positive higher education experience, that both academic staff and student communities play a crucial part in its development (Bell, 2021). Preliminary findings of this study reveal that there is a need for universities to support the successful transition of students into the higher education community to foster academic potential, but also for social and psychological wellbeing too.

Students cited cultural disparities and prior educational practices that fostered confusion whilst adjusting to the university environment, particularly the international students. This exacerbated problems with transition and engagement. The international participants had no previous experience and limited understanding of academic advising, as well as other educational practices common to the home institution. Evidence indicates that international students report challenges when entering new educational contexts (Sherry et al., 2010). Issues such as language proficiency, cultural disparities, social exclusion, discrimination, and racism have also been described elsewhere (Ploner, 2018). Institutions can also adopt 'deficit' models that attempt to address presupposed assumptions of illiteracy and unfamiliarity with autonomous pedagogies with their international students (Ploner, 2018). Counterintuitively, such practices might exacerbate further disconnection (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017). Participants here articulated a similar perception. Interestingly, for one international participant in this study, engaging with academic staff was perceived to be so taboo due to hierarchical structures and perceived power dynamics within the educational context of their home country, that they made no attempt to connect with their academic adviser during their studies in the UK, despite prompts to do so. This prior experience created powerful barriers to this students' engagement with tutorial support and their willingness to develop relationships with staff to facilitate their own development. Indeed, it is important for universities to understand the complex academic, social, and cultural context within which some students arrive from; transitional arrangements for international students might need to be expanded beyond practices that promote 'assimilation' to gain reciprocal understanding of needs and expectations to develop more personalised approaches to supporting students.

Our results highlight that clarity and understanding of the academic adviser role is of key importance for helping institutions remove barriers to engagement. For many students, their first experience of advising occurs when they initially enter Higher Education. Having no prior experience may lead to students perceiving that the role is only a support mechanism, reflecting a deficit model, which has been revealed to be unsatisfactory. Given that academic advising works best through a developmental approach (Grey & Osbourne, 2020), it is important that the purpose, benefits, and boundaries of the role are clearly defined, articulated, and reinforced by institutions (Lochtie et al., 2018). Participants here identified induction as being a good time to clarify this information initially, however inductions are also characterised by an excess of information which can also create confusion (Quan et al., 2016). Thus, we recommend that institutions make the strategic effort to clarify the role during induction but reinforce positive messaging about its purpose in facilitating academic development throughout semesters and within the curriculum. This is especially important since research has shown that a gap between student expectation and the reality of the support they receive is related to both dissatisfaction and disengagement with their academic adviser (Yale, 2019).

Both participant groups here articulated the perception that some academic staff also appear to be uncertain about the scope and expectations of the advising role, and suggested that further training, student case study testimonials, and improved messaging about the role would be useful in clarifying its scope for academics. Within the home institution of this research however, a suite of training, information and signposting is available for staff, and each department has an appointed individual leading on academic advising at a local level. Yet, it still appeared that confusion persisted locally. Whilst this was surprising, participants here also articulated that this issue is likely to be related to capacity and workload issues. To highlight, the 'Staff Constraints' theme highlighted work-related pressures impact the ability of staff to fully engage with and perform some work tasks well, including academic advising. Indeed, recent data also highlights that work imbalances can lead to strategic disengagement by academic staff that leads to some work tasks not being completed (Griffin, 2022).

Results of this study perhaps indicate then that poor workload planning could be an important barrier to effective academic advising for some staff, and that institutions need to be mindful of the balance and volume of academic work to enable advisers to have the capacity to develop the relational practices that facilitate effective practice (McIntosh et al., 2022; Meehan & Howells, 2019), as well as satisfaction and retention (Bell, 2021). In some cases, high student-to-adviser ratios meant that staff were unable to connect with students on a deeper level, which is needed to foster a meaningful experience (Meehan & Howell, 2019). Indeed, research elsewhere indicates the value that racially-minoritised students place on deeper 'humanised' relationships with their academic adviser (Museus & Ravello, 2021). Negative academic advising experiences were also revealed to be an important issue here that led to some students purposefully disengaging. Worryingly, Yale (2019) found that negative academic advising experiences were a powerful demotivator for learners that can lead some to re-evaluate their decision to go to university, underscoring the impact of a poor advising experience. Encouragingly however, Yale (2019) also revealed that a positive relationship with an academic adviser was found to provide a buffer against some of the challenges that learners can experience, and that this contributed to a sense of belonging as well as increased resilience.

Both groups in our study expressed the benefits of structured advising, timetabled meetings, establishing clear objectives and evident linkages to the curriculum within the academic advising model, which created a productive foundation for a positive advising experience. Face-to-face meetings were seen as being particularly important for building initial relationships, developing rapport, and fostering connection. Although remote academic advising is not a new concept (Steele & Thurmond, 2009), the Covid-19 pandemic required a rapid pivot to video conferencing for our participants. Participants also articulated that these technologies were still valuable post-pandemic and were useful for arranging meetings when scheduling issues created difficulties. Online meetings therefore reduced barriers for both groups and offered a degree of flexibility that was absent pre-pandemic. Thus, we recommend that group tutorials and initial meetings with new students be conducted in-person where possible, to aid rapport building and facilitate relationship development, but that online meetings might be helpful later, and where appropriate.

Study-life balance issues were an important problem for some students here, which affected their ability to engage fully with their studies and actively participate in academic advising. It was revealed that our students balanced complex lives along with studying that created a dilemma for some, where the institutional requirements for attendance, engagement in learning and teaching conflicted with life circumstances outside of the classroom. Our staff participants recognised the challenges that some students can experience and indicated that institutions need to better acknowledge such circumstances to offer an educational experience that better fits the complexity of modern life for some. Indeed, commuting, caring responsibilities, part time working, family and religious commitments are all necessary parts of life for many students that can affect their studies (Maguire & Morris, 2019) and were articulated here by our participants. Such circumstances are likely to increase as institutions improve access for previously underrepresented groups (Hillman, 2021). Individualised, student-centred approaches to advisory support are widely advocated for in the sector (Grey & Osbourne, 2020), and have unsurprisingly been shown to be effective at developing racially-minoritised learners (Museus & Ravello, 2021). Indeed, taking the time to understand students, recognise their personal circumstances and providing appropriate, personalised tutorial support will become increasingly important as institutions increase access, but can only be meaningful given the institutional appetite to support it once participation increases accordingly. Getting to know students, purposefully building rapport and active listening are simple, interpersonal strategies that were revealed here to make a difference in forming sound relationships and can be helpful at the individual level initially to develop personalised support (Bell, 2021; Lochtie et al., 2018). Providing more complex interventions that reflects complicated personal circumstances would require intervention at the institutional (and perhaps) sector level, however.

Our participants discussed preferences for sustaining advising relationship throughout a student lifecycle to ensure consistent support and deeper connections, reflecting evidence elsewhere (Grey & Osbourne, 2020). Personality clashes and negative experiences can be problematic however, and negative academic advising experiences can lead to student withdrawals and increased attrition for institutions (Yale, 2019). Indeed, it has been suggested that no academic advising experience is perhaps better than a poor academic advising experience (Yale, 2019). Therefore, institutions might need to have mechanisms in place to enable students to change advisers. Interestingly, some institutions employ staff with the specific responsibility of advising and tutoring only (Reimers, 2022; Smith, 2022),



which can allow for focused, targeted interventions (Loonat et al., 2022), and strategic resourcing that reduces staff resource costs (Reimers, 2022; Smith, 2022). Students, however, prefer that advisers understand their courses (Grey & Osborne, 2020). The UKAT professional standards framework cites the ability to promote understanding of the curriculums' logic and purpose as a key academic advising competency requirement (UKAT, 2023). Indeed, resourcing models that exclude academic staff may lose course connectivity, create unforeseen problems for staff and students due to complex or confusing support structures. Students prefer to have the attention, care, and support of their academics (Bell, 2021), which creates a foundation for multifaceted and personalised advisory support that has been shown to be preferable by racially-minoritised students (Maseus & Ravello, 2021) and were articulated here. Other approaches for institutions include allocating self-selected academic advisers only, who are more likely to be engaged with the role which could lead to a better experience for students. Resource constraints and workload planning complexities might make such a model challenging, particularly for larger providers, which would require institutional support and significant organisation to be operational.

It is important to note that this was a co-created study undertaken by staff who undertake and lead academic advising at the home institution and minoritised students who contributed as dialogic partners and researchers throughout this study at all stages from conception to completion. Students participating as co-creators in educational practices has become increasingly common as students show greater interest in actively participating in their educational institutions (Dollinger et al., 2018). Indeed, the value of the student voice to further pedagogic understanding has become increasingly explicit and is perhaps now even necessary to foster further educational advancements as the student community evolves (Cook-Sather & Mathews, 2023). Indeed, we believe that this has become more important as student communities becomes increasingly diverse and as institutions undertake reforms that reflect their individual equity, equality, diversity, and inclusion agendas. Indeed, our student authors offered first-hand knowledge, insight and lived experiences that were formative to the design, shape, analysis, and interpretation of this research. A recent editorial clearly articulates the value of the student voice within higher education, particularly where dialogic partnerships can be developed to enhance student experiences, but also within integrated co-creational roles involving pedagogy, curriculum, and equity consultation (Ashton-Hay & Williams, 2023). We would extend this to include research too, particularly as it relates to understanding student journeys and to enhance practice. To that end, it was important therefore that minoritised students actively co-created and undertook this research as well as participated as the knowers and knowledge holders with lived experiences of the subject matter, to complement those of the academic team, and add to existing evidence in this space. We believe that deep-rooted, authentic student voice with students at the heart of the research, both as researchers and participants, is therefore an important strength of this research.

Participants here were self-selected, based on purposive sampling, and whilst the data we collected was complex, with smaller sample sizes the experiences and perceptions of some can be overrepresented. However, the data we collected was also information rich, detailed, and of very high quality, which allowed for in-depth and robust analyses to be completed and for information power to be sufficient for the purposes of this study and specificity of the sample (Malterud et al., 2016). Whilst we were able to recruit student participants across a range of groups (Table 1), we were unable to recruit disabled or estranged participants.

Further work is perhaps needed to explore the experiences of these students specifically. It was interesting to note that some of our findings are perhaps not limited to the experiences of minoritised students only, suggesting that some issues were universal experiences and inclusive of all student communities. Where this is the case, institutions should consider approaches to improve the experiences of all student groups.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst we have discussed common experiences here, care must be taken not to homogenise the minoritised student experience, either through interpretation of this research or during academic advising interactions. The lived experiences of others can be very different from our own, and this has clear implications for both institutions and individual academic advisers. From an institutional perspective, our findings identified themes that affect minoritised students' ability to effectively participate in academic advising processes and with the wider engagement with the university. A key factor in supporting minoritised students is the ability to build authentic relationships in which the individual is 'seen'. Institutions have a responsibility to establish processes that facilitate this, and work to communicate the role and remit of the academic adviser to both staff and students in an appropriate way. Factors such as competence, confidence and capacity that affect staff ability to conduct effective academic advising should be scrutinised and limitations mitigated. Institutions should set expectations as a priority, for example, through the delivery of engaging and informative role, boundary, and expectation-setting sessions to international students as part of their orientations. Embedding academic advising, where possible, either in curriculum or through activities such as extended inductions and systems which allow the retainment of the same adviser over the course of a student's studies can facilitate the building of relationships. From an individual perspective, academic advisers should be encouraged to challenge their biases and assumptions and take a non-judgmental approach to understanding their students' circumstances. Staff should acknowledge that the student journey is likely to be very different to their own and reject preconceived assumptions. By focusing on a developmental approach to academic advising and employing active listening to 'see the individual', staff can work with students to help them identify and work towards their desired goals. Individual Academic Advisers should commit to their own professional development; institutions can facilitate this by offering development opportunities which directly seek to provide opportunities to understand students in the broadest sense, including minoritised students.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university.

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