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Understanding Individual Consultations (ICs): Insights from Academic Language and Learning Advisers' perspectives

Vahede Nosrati, Vittoria Grossi, Terrie Fraser and Caroline Wright-Neville

Student Outcomes, Student Success, Deakin University, Melbourne, Victoria 3125, Australia

Emails: vahede.nosrati@deakin.edu.au; vittoria.grossi17@gmail.com; terriefraser14@gmail.com; c.wrightneville@deakin.edu.au

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Individual Consultations (ICs) are an integral part of the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) Adviser role, designed to enhance students' academic literacy, including discipline-specific familiarity and integration. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, advisers increasingly support wellbeing and personal development (Gurney & Grossi, 2023; Schmidt & Schneider, 2023), adding to the complexity of their role. Studies provide insights into the potential for ICs to impact student learning through dialogue and scaffolding informed by socio-cultural Vygotskyan approaches (Vygotsky, 1978). However, further research is needed to document the IC structure, function, and contributions to learning.

This study deepens the understanding of ICs from the perspective of ALL advisers. It is part of a larger project, *Understanding ICs: Students and Adviser Perspectives* (Bak et al., 2023; Editorial Introduction to this issue), using semi-structured interviews analysed discursively. The research explores how advisers navigate the complex interpersonal dynamics of ICs to balance authority with empathy and support. Through discussions of IC practices, advisers offer valuable insights into these sessions while constructing an agentive and critically reflective professional identity. These findings highlight how ICs contribute to student learning and promote their value across the university. This is crucial in a context increasingly dominated by rationalisation and reliance on self-access and automated/GenAI services, underscoring the importance of connective services.

Key Words: Individual consultations, advisory work, advice-giving, Academic Language and Learning (ALL), professional identity, interdiscursivity.

1. Introduction

One of the ways the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) field contributes to the development of academic literacies – as defined by Lea and Street (1998) and Wingate (2011), and further outlined by Briguglio and Watson (2014) and Maldoni (2017) – is through the Individual Consultations (ICs) program. ICs offer a distinct, personalised service that allows advisers to work closely with students on academic, social, and wellbeing issues. Though ICs vary across institutions, they are generally structured as one-on-one sessions focused on addressing students' unique

academic challenges. This one-on-one support is essential for exploring the nuanced needs of each student. ICs are complex and diverse interactions as observed by Chanock's (2000) study, noting that, "*there are no others like them"* (p. 65), while Hamilton illustrates their diversity when he describes their nuanced complexity in, "*A tale of two consultations*" (Hamilton, 2020, p. 70). A recent *Connect. Inspire. Share.* session focusing on ICs and advisers' and students' experiences brought further insight into the complexity of IC interactions which were again reviewed and shared by practitioners from four ALL units (AALL, 2024). A follow-up session provided perspectives from students who attended ICs, sharing their experiences and the impact on their academic journey (Chanock et al., 2025).

Building on these insights, the existing literature on ICs has further established their primary aims, explored their structures, and analysed the complex interactions within them, as will be discussed in Section 2. Studies have also highlighted how IC work supports other areas of ALL work and, more recently, how ICs can be evaluated to demonstrate impact through institutional data, which is further explored in Section 2. This study contributes to this scholarship by offering new insights from interview data with advisers, specifically around adviser identity and its potential influence on how ALL programs are perceived and valued by university colleagues. The significance of these findings lies in their potential to inform both the understanding and representation of ALL within academic institutions.

To further explore these aspects, the following literature review examines past research to illustrate the changing approaches in IC studies, including a focus on advice-giving language – a topic extensively researched within Linguistics but less so in ALL. From our perspective, incorporating these studies is essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the discourse that characterises ICs. The study then presents three key themes identified in the analysis, with implications, limitations and recommendations discussed in the final sections to conclude the paper.

2. Literature review

This review examines ICs in academic advising, highlighting their role in fostering learner autonomy, metacognitive development, and disciplinary socialisation. Drawing on sociocultural theory, it explores how ICs address diverse needs through dialogic collaboration and relational advising, emphasising their importance in higher education.

2.1. Aims, structure and value of ICs

ICs provide valuable opportunities for advisers to work alongside students over time, tailoring each session to the student's unique needs and goals. These interactions enable advisers to gain insights into student learning, informing other aspects of ALL work. A key objective of ICs is to promote learner autonomy by assisting students in recognising their strengths, identifying areas for growth, self-regulating their learning, and adopting strategies to achieve mastery in their disciplines (Chanock, 2002; Hamilton, 2020). However, the realisation of this goal is contingent on factors such as learner motivation and institutional constraints, often shaped by fiscal limitations.

In further examining the dynamics of ICs, Hattie et al. (1996) identify three domains of study support – cognitive, metacognitive and affective – highlighting that interventions may address one or all of these dimensions. Collins et al. (1998, as cited in Wilson et al., 2011) further frame IC discourse as a continuum, ranging from didactic approaches to collaborative and autonomous learning methods. Similarly, Crabbe et al. (2001) highlight the potential of ICs to clarify goals, support metacognitive development, and address students' beliefs about learning, while also deepening their understanding of academic tasks.

Drawing on Vygotskyan sociocultural theory, seminal studies position ICs as inherently dialogic and collaborative, with advisers scaffolding support within students' zones of proximal development (Chanock, 2000; Clerehan, 1997; Wilson et al., 2011; Woodward-Kron, 2007). For instance, Clerehan (1997) describes IC discourse as student-centred and dialogic, with advisers and

students often completing each other's speaking turns. However, unlike classroom settings, these interactions include spontaneous exchanges and diverge from typical conversational patterns.

Similarly, Woodward-Kron and Jamieson (2007) examine recorded adviser-student interactions, illustrating how both parties collaboratively clarify meaning, negotiate changes, and engage in explicit teaching. Their study challenges the misconception that ICs focus solely on "fixing grammar", instead illustrating that the primary focus is on understanding the adviser's and learner's unfamiliar territories. Using Hallidayan discourse analysis, the study highlights the complexities of adviser-student exchanges, including tensions arising from unfamiliarity with disciplinary norms and expectations. Chanock's (2000) study provides detailed, first-hand accounts of her support for four distinct students throughout their degrees, each presenting unique learning needs and backgrounds. Employing Vygotskyan principles, Chanock tailored her guidance to each individual, underscoring the unique, dialogic nature of ICs. She states "… if I have learned things from each student that help me teach others like them, I have also learned that, strictly speaking, there are no others like them" (p. 65).

Wilson et al. (2011) extend this perspective, exploring how advisers blend didactic methods – such as modelling academic language – with strategies like hedging, active listening, and questioning to promote learner autonomy. Their study demonstrates how advisers encourage students to move beyond a narrow "skills" focus to adopt a broader "literacies" perspective, positioning students as disciplinary "insiders" while advisers, as "outsiders," facilitate critical reflection and independent decision-making. This approach, as the authors suggest, is vital for advisers to adopt, as it enables students to engage more fully with disciplinary demands while building their autonomy.

These studies collectively refute the notion that ICs are mere spaces for grammar correction. Woodward-Kron and Jamieson (2007) previously called for more empirical studies to clarify the true aims and methods of ICs, advocating for greater awareness of their nuanced role in academic support. In the following decades, however, research in this area shifted from in-depth interactional analyses to studies evaluating the broader impact of IC programs on student success (Berry et al., 2012; Campitelli et al., 2020; Evans & Ashton-Hay, 2019; Gao & Reid, 2015; Kokkien & Stevenson, 2019; Ma, 2018). Additionally, contemporary literature explores adviser identity, examining how advisers' roles and self-perceptions influence the IC experience (Edwards et al., 2023; Grossi et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2023). This evolving focus on adviser identity enriches our understanding of ICs not only as collaborative, learner-centred spaces but as dynamic sites of academic, personal, and professional growth within ALL.

2.2. Value of ICs – beyond the task

Studies have shown that ICs not only support students' individual learning needs but also inform broader advisory work within units of study (Chanock, 2007). By working closely with particular cohorts, advisers can tailor support to align with disciplinary requirements. For example, Woodard-Kron (2007) highlights the essential role ICs play in supporting postgraduate students from English as an Additional Language (EAL) background, who often encounter unique linguistic and academic challenges. Further studies (Campitelli et al., 2020; Gao & Reid, 2015) demonstrates how ICs enhance both academic and linguistic competencies across diverse student populations.

Additionally, studies show ICs play a pivotal role in helping students become socialised into their disciplinary fields, by acquiring a discipline-specific habitus (Roberts & Reid, 2014). By engaging in tailored interactions with advisers, students gradually adapt to the values, norms, and practices characteristic of their academic disciplines. This socialisation process is essential for helping students transition from novices to more competent, autonomous learners within their fields. Building on this idea, Chahal et al. (2019) conceptualise ICs as spaces of hospitality, where advisers guide students – particularly those feeling like outsiders – through the academic system,

fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. By fostering an environment of hospitality, ICs can help students feel valued and supported as they transition into their academic roles.

More recently, Hamilton (2020) reconceptualises the role of ICs as fostering 'study support literacy,' encompassing skills like cultural capital, evaluative judgment, interpersonal skills, digital literacy, and self-regulated learning. He emphasises that managing these literacies promotes learner autonomy, with ICs serving as micro-teaching spaces where advisers and students collaborate to address learning needs, avoiding over-reliance on advisers.

In line with this, other studies have highlighted the reflective nature of Language and Learning Advising (LLA) work. Advisers view ICs as valuable learning opportunities, fostering reflection and shifts in professional identity (Chanock, 2000; Gurney & Grossi, 2019). This reflective practice enables advisers to develop a more nuanced understanding of their role, while continuously adapting their approach to better meet the diverse needs of students. However, ICs face challenges, including being seen as remedial, misunderstood, or costly (Chanock, 2007; Laurs, 2010; Roberts & Reid, 2014; among others). Cost-cutting measures, such as triaging, drop-in services, or outsourcing, further threaten their sustainability (Benzie & Harper, 2020). With the anticipated reduction in international student enrolments due to shifts in government policy and broader migration trends, the future integration of ICs into academic support remains uncertain. The next section explores how language shapes IC effectiveness and adviser-student interactions.

2.3. The language of advising

Advice-giving is a communicative activity aimed at persuading and encouraging change, prevalent in both everyday and professional contexts (Locker & Limberg, 2012). Linguistic and applied linguistic studies reveal that advice-giving varies significantly across domains. For instance, research in health communication and counselling (Heritage & Drew, 1992; Silverman, 1997) highlight the nuanced ways advice is offered within different healthcare settings, while educational research has examined its role in teacher-student interactions (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Tassinari, 2022). These studies consistently reveal that advice-giving is far from a simple or routine matter, as professional groups differ significantly in their degree of directness and strategies used to convey advice (Carson & Meynard, 2012).

In higher education, advice-giving is integral to teaching and academic support. As Locker and Limberg (2012) observe, "it is probably one of the foremost duties of any educator to help students in their academic and personal development by means of passing on advice" (p. 8). This is evident in diverse contexts within HE, including written feedback on student work, particularly in second language learning contexts (see Tsedendamba et al. (2020) for a review of these studies). Furthermore, the dynamics of advice are central to supervisory relationships with research students (Carter & Laurs, 2016; Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Pare, 2014) and peer-to-peer feedback in educational settings (Angouri, 2012). These studies highlight advice as a critical tool, adaptable to various communication needs and contexts.

Advice-giving in HE continues to garner attention for its role in fostering academic development, and research has delved into how these interactions are linguistically constructed to encourage learning. Building on the communicative nature of advising described in the previous paragraphs, studies have specifically examined the language of advising interactions, often framed within established practices like 'conferencing' in US English composition studies (Gumperz, 1992) or 'the office hour' at universities (Limberg, 2012). These contexts highlight the dynamic and dialogic nature of advising, where language use is tailored to address individual student needs and goals.

Moore (2012) compares language learning advising and academic language support, highlighting the nuanced ways advisers adapt communication to context. While these sessions share similarities with classroom talk, they are more personalised and interactive (Clerehan, 1979). Advisers may incorporate teacher talk when modelling academic conventions or clarifying expectations

(Carson & Mynard, 2012). This balance ensures flexibility, allowing strategies to align with learners' experience, confidence, and needs (Limberg, 2010). In their seminal politeness work, Brown and Levinson (1987) describe advice-giving as a Face Threatening Act requiring politeness strategies to mitigate offense. However, critiques (Locher & Watts, 2005) suggest a dynamic view of politeness, emphasising relational work as a co-constructed practice that evolves with context and relationships. In professional contexts like educational advising, relational work highlights the negotiation of roles, hierarchy, and trust, requiring advisers to balance authority with empathy while supporting students' autonomy.

Further expanding on the relational approach, Spencer-Oatey's (2008) "rapport management" framework shifts the focus from individual face needs to broader interpersonal concerns such as respect, autonomy, and involvement. It emphasises creating a supportive environment that fosters trust while minimising face threats. For example, in educational settings, the adviser's language might shift between direct instruction and supportive questioning, depending on the advisee's level of experience and confidence. By viewing politeness through this broader lens, Spencer-Oatey's model offers insight into how advisers can adapt their communicative strategies to match the interpersonal goals of each advising session, whether to guide decisively or to empower the advisee's independent decision-making.

This perspective aligns with Locker and Limberg's (2012) view of advice-giving as multifaceted, involving practices like counselling, information-sharing, suggesting, and storytelling. McCarthy (2010) highlights the adviser's role in fostering learner autonomy through adviser-learner dialogue, emphasising macro and micro skills that address the nuanced challenges of advising. This brief review demonstrates that negotiation and dialogue are central to these interactions, as advisers respond to students' questions and facilitate change, requiring significant relational work to mitigate the risks of face-threatening acts. Locker and Watts (2009) define relational work as:

> … all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice. (p. 96).

Relational work is essential in all interactions, and its execution varies across different communities of practice. The institutional context will define appropriate levels of directness and mitigation (Locker & Limberg, 2012). For instance, in certain self-help contexts, personal narratives may be viewed as a form of advice (Harrison & Barlow, 2009, cited by Locker & Limberg, 2012, p. 5), highlighting the flexibility of advising practices.

This overview underscores the complexity of advice-giving, which can be seen as both an art and a strategy. Our aim is to foreground these insights, as they offer valuable perspectives on how ICs are analysed. ICs are distinct institutional practices where advice-seeking is a central activity, but they also involve other forms of discourse. As advisers navigate various hybrid discourses – including encouragement, criticism, and everything in between – their language use must be attuned to the nuances of the interaction. Effective advising requires careful listening and the ability to respond adaptively to the diverse communicative needs of each student (Sarangi, 2000).

3. Exploring ALL advisers' perceptions of ICs

This study draws on data collected as part of the project *Understanding ICs: advisers and students' perspectives.* In that study, five ALL advisers and 21 students were interviewed about their experiences with ICs and their respective practices. This study focuses specifically on the data from the advisers. The advisers – Glenn, Jim, Grace, Lillian and Georgina (pseudonyms) – have diverse disciplinary backgrounds and varying levels of experience in their roles.

The idea for this study emerged during informal team discussions, where the authors reflected on the challenges encountered in their IC practice. One challenge highlighted was the need to make the value of IC work more visible and better understood by colleagues. Specifically, we aimed to

demonstrate that ICs are not merely services for editing and proofreading but multifaceted teaching sessions that significantly contribute to student learning and outcomes. Another challenge was the institutional pressure to prioritise quantitative measures, such as taking attendance and compiling user satisfaction responses, under the guise of evaluation. In our view, these approaches overlook the more nuanced aspects of ICs, such as how learning from these interactions can inform broader advisory practices, as highlighted in the literature review.

Data collection took place in early 2020, during the initial phase of online work due to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. This period, described as an "epoch-making event" (Ryan et al., 2023), saw rapid and unprecedented changes in educational practices. We recognise that the data was collected at the cusp of the pandemic, when the full impact of lockdown measures was not yet fully understood. Additionally, this was before the rise of Generative AI (GenAI), which has since become a significant concern within our sector.

4. Methodology and data analysis

The data for this study consists of transcripts from semi-structured interviews with five advisers, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes (see Appendix A for interview questions). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because they allow for the exploration of discourse features within a group and provide a flexible framework for uncovering dynamic interactions. As Nikander (2012) notes, interviews are effective for eliciting "talk on topic" and can address past, current, and future perspectives on virtually any issue (p. 400). Interviews, as an interactional form, are influenced by both the context of the interview and the identities of the interviewer and participants (De Fina, 2019). We agree with De Fina (2019) that "each interview is a unique interactional event" (p. 16), and thus we refrain from making direct comparisons of responses across participants, as this is not the focus of the study.

The five advisers who participated were invited to take part in interviews conducted by a new member of the team who had not worked closely with them but was an experienced ALL adviser. This lack of prior relationship between interviewer and participants was beneficial, as it helped minimise any preconceived notions or biases that could arise from an insider's perspective. However, it is important to acknowledge that the participants and the researchers share a common insider knowledge of the higher education sector, having each worked in the field for over a decade. This shared background provided a deeper understanding of the context but also made us aware of our own filters, biases, and anticipated viewpoints as we analysed the data. The interviews were conversational in nature, facilitated by the shared understanding of the role and context between the interviewer and interviewees. This led to more open, detailed responses, often accompanied by unsolicited narratives and additional questions, which helped participants reflect on their practices. After the interviews, participants were sent their transcripts for review and were given the option to withdraw from the study, with one participant choosing to do so.

To analyse the data, we adopted the iterative approach outlined by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009). This involved a process of reading, re-reading, and discussing the transcripts, allowing us to identify patterns and refine our interpretations. Over time, three key themes emerged through this cyclical process of analysis, discussion, and revisitation. The next section presents these themes, illustrated with excerpts from the interviews that highlight how these ideas are constructed and understood within the context of adviser-student interactions.

5. Interpreting, unravelling and managing complexity

The first theme centres on the description, aims and structure of the ICs. Advisers describe ICs as complex, dynamic interactions that require careful management to achieve their intended outcomes. Successfully navigating these interactions demands the deployment of a range of strategies tailored to the evolving needs of the session.

Grace, one of the advisers, captures this complexity by stating, *"So your job as teacher is to work out what their understanding is"*, emphasising the importance of identifying the student's baseline comprehension as a starting point. This process necessitates active listening, initiating and maintaining a dialogue, and collaboratively negotiating the session's focus. Advisers also reflect on the need to address issues that may extend beyond the immediate topic or inquiry introduced at the beginning of the session. Glenn, another adviser, characterises this nuanced process as *"careful untangling"*, highlighting the deliberate and thoughtful approach required.

Although Glenn does not explicitly define this "careful untangling," it implies the use of specific communicative strategies (cf. Activity Types) to resolve the presenting issue. These strategies often include careful relational work, ensuring that both the content and the interpersonal dimensions of the interaction are effectively managed. In presenting the excerpts from our data, we have highlighted certain words and statements in bold to emphasise key points.

Example 1 – Negotiating the topic: Mismatch of the problem

Students often attend ICs seeking support, but aligning their perceived needs with the adviser's observations can be challenging. This mismatch requires negotiation to proceed effectively. Jim reflects on this process:

> *I think that isn't necessarily how the students all see it but I guess* ***that's a fight*** *in the nicest way of the word – to use the word –.*

Jim elaborates with an example:

> *I think it is important to not lose sight of, the difference between what* ***the client thinks is the problem and what actually is the problem once you've had a look at what they're doing****, that really can take up quite a lot of time so a student will come and say I want you to help me with structure and I'll say what do you mean by – so I'll put it back to them. What do you mean by structure?*

Jim explains that once he identifies the issue as a lack of argument rather than structure, the challenge shifts to effectively communicating this to the student. This process is far from straightforward. In the extract, we observe Jim guiding the student to analyse the task, using probing questions to foster a constructive discussion.

> *And then they can't articulate it and I'll say okay, well, let's have a look at your document and the document won't be structured at all and I'll say okay, well, let's have a look at the question. What were you thinking about this? And then it will be clear from discussing with them that they haven't done any research, or it will be clear from discussing something with them that they cannot articulate a point in a succinct way if you know, if you paid them.* ***So you suddenly, oh, the issue here isn't necessarily about structure.*** *It is you don't actually have the content and the argument capability to build something that's a structure and so you then have to you know, work through* ***convincing them*** *that that might be something to work on.* (Jim)

We note Jim's use of terms like "fight", "convince", and "negotiation" to describe these interactions, suggesting the inherent difficulty in adviser talk within ICs. His emphasis on persuasion highlights the resistance students may feel when their understanding is challenged. This aligns with Woodward-Kron and Jamieson (2007), who observed that academic advising often involves persuading students of the need for changes or clarifying intended meanings. Jim adds that his goal is to help students become less defensive and more open to feedback, though he acknowledges this is a gradual process unlikely to be resolved quickly.

Example 2 – Negotiating language and cultural barriers

Advisers reported that language barriers can sometimes complicate understanding a student's request, particularly in a multilingual university setting. Lillian provides an example, noting that

miscommunication often arises when English is not the student's first language. To mitigate this, she prepares for sessions by pre-reading tasks and drafts whenever possible, enabling her to anticipate what might be needed. However, the 30-minute session limit and the absence of drafts received beforehand or last-minute revisions of drafts can hinder this preparation.

In sessions, Lillian addresses misunderstandings by slowing her speech and asking clarifying questions. Instead of direct questioning, which she found less effective, she adopts a softer approach, using specific "small questions" to encourage dialogue and create a supportive atmosphere. As she explains:

> ***So, asking a lot of questions, so creating this little model of many little questions you are getting to the point that you understand what they mean, what kind of help they expect, and to help them also express what kind of difficulties they have.*** *Plus it helps also to read what they have answered for the assignments and based on that you know – of course you can say "What's the problem?", so where the problem is in what they have written, what else has to be included, but I've noticed that I have to – like I said, a lot of additional small questions, then you have to try to slow down when you speak.* (Lillian)

This strategy aligns with McCarthy's (2010) observation that questioning is a key tool in advisory talk, helping advisers gauge the student's position and needs. Listening attentively and interpreting the answers builds trust, showing students their concerns are understood and reinforcing confidence in the adviser's guidance. Lillian also demonstrates sensitivity to the nuances of second-language communication, adapting her approach to accommodate students' preferences. We interpret this as an example of adopting Firth's (1996) concepts of "let it pass" and "make it normal", where advisers focus on the intended meaning rather than being distracted by non-standard language use. This adaptive strategy fosters effective communication in lingua franca contexts.

Example 3 – Emotions

Managing emotions and personal relationships adds complexity to the IC. Advisers often encounter students who are stressed and anxious, and while wellbeing concerns are prevalent in ICs, not all advisers see managing emotions as part of their role (Gurney & Grossi, 2023). When students are stressed, advisers must address both emotional and socio-psychological aspects of the interaction. This aligns with Vygotskyan theory, which emphasises the entwining of affective and cognitive learning. Tassinari (2016) notes that "individuals learn with their whole mind, with rationality, passion, understanding and, in essence their whole being" (p. 75) and reports that expressions of emotions are integral to advisory sessions and advisers adopt the "mirror, emphasise or counterbalance the learner's emotions" (p. 71) strategies to put students at ease.

Lillian reflects this approach in her sessions, aiming to reduce stress and create a supportive atmosphere:

> *I think the overall aim is to give support to the students that are feeling overwhelmed or not well enough prepared to start studying at the university.*

She strives to make the session feel like a friendly, non-judgmental discussion, helping students feel comfortable:

> *But it's just pushing them but also making a comfortable, friendly environment, that they are not asked by the lecturer, they're just having a discussion with a person who wants to help, who wants to truly support them, and that helps.* (Lillian)

There are instances when the strategies employed by the adviser fail to alleviate the student's anxiety, particularly when the student is not receptive to support. Glenn recalls an IC where, despite his multiple attempts to assist the learner – providing clear explanations, offering extra follow-up time, demonstrating how to use the laptop, and being encouraging – tension increased instead of easing.

> *… it was very much about, "you can do this, it'll be a little tricky in the beginning, but you'll be able to do it. I just want you to set up some things to enable you to be more efficient. When she came back a few days later, I was trying to get her to – we were going to set up her bookmarks et cetera – and she said, "**you don't know**" – I think at one point she was trying to do something and I had said to her, "look, I've already suggested that you do it that way, it's much easier and quicker" and she kept reverting back to the other. I said to her, **"you're doing that again!" and that was it.** She said, **"you don't know how"** – what was it she said to me– **"you don't think I can do anything can you?" She took it very personally**.*

Glenn found the experience upsetting, as despite dedicating extra time and effort, his attempts to help seemed to make the situation worse. The student appeared humiliated by her inability to follow the instructions, which contributed to her growing frustration. It is possible that the student had underlying reasons for her lack of confidence with technology, hinted at by her incomplete statement, "you don't know …". Or perhaps her comments indicate an undisclosed disability. The comment is a timely reminder that an LLA does not have the full picture of a student when they attend and are not always able to make the needed adjustments. Her low confidence, likely shaped by external factors, was evident, but she was not ready to share these at the time, as suggested by the false start in her response. Glenn, intent on providing the "extra help" he felt was needed, found that his approach did not have the desired effect. Reflecting on the encounter, he felt uncertain about the next steps, wondering whether reaching out to the student again would be well-received. Ultimately, Glenn was left with a sense of failure, as he was unable to establish the rapport necessary to offer effective support – something he typically manages with ease.

He explains:

> *… generally, I establish rapport very quickly but in this particular case, it made me realise – it was all, I was trying to help her, I had gone out of my way to make extra time for her and it seemed that she was – she wasn't ungrateful she was grateful –* ***but she was very on edge.***

This example also highlights the complex nature of advisory work. A student's receptiveness to support depends on various factors, including personal context, circumstances, and identity, and sense of self. Additionally, we note students' expectations of the service, and their own self-perceptions can significantly influence the effectiveness of the support provided. Advisers must constantly navigate these dynamics and negotiate what can realistically be achieved in the interaction.

6. Explaining complexity – Adviser stances

The semi-structured interviews revealed advisers' perspectives on the role of higher education (HE) in society and their views on institutional changes. A recurring theme in their responses is the belief that education should promote lifelong learning, a goal that has also been highlighted in other contexts (e.g., Loads, 2007). Additionally, advisers attribute many of their challenges to broader institutional and societal factors. By doing so, they position themselves as critical professionals who actively engage with the evolving landscape of HE. The excerpts below illustrate how advisers adopt a particular stance toward HE, often reflecting on how it has changed from their earlier work experiences. While they may accept certain aspects of these changes, their critiques indicate a strong epistemic commitment to the ideals of HE. This aligns with Ochs' (1993, p. 288) assertion that individuals and communities construct their identities by expressing specific stances. In this case, advisers articulate their critical perspectives, revealing a tension between their values and the HE systems they navigate.

Example 1 – Managing multiple goals – Lifelong learning

The advisers emphasise their dual focus in ICs: addressing immediate needs, such as improving a draft within a limited timeframe, and fostering longer-term development. Their aim is not just

to solve the problem at hand but to create a lasting impact. For Glenn, this means ensuring students leave the session with a clear sense of what to do next – *"at the very least student leaves knowing what to do/having an idea of what do next"* – and feeling equipped to continue developing their skills. Similarly, Jim highlights the importance of helping students build confidence to "put something down on paper" and feel motivated to return for further support.

Lillian's perspective extends this idea by positioning the IC as not only addressing unit-specific challenges but also contributing to students' broader academic and professional growth. For her, the goal is to help students become better writers and, ultimately, better professionals:

> *I would include a lot of international students, who generally want to improve their writing skills, so it's not only about grades for this certain unit but in general they want to become better students and as a result better professionals.* (Lillian)

Glenn further frames the IC as foundational, focusing on skill-building that equips students for future, more complex tasks. He stresses the importance of shifting students' mindsets toward lifelong learning:

> *So, getting them* ***to think about learning as an ongoing process****, not just that you're there to solve their issue. How can they take on an understanding that, you know, "you're doing really well and you're understanding this" and, "it's really good because you're going to have to do more essays in the future where you apply these skills and the tasks will get larger in scale and complexity and so, see that as something that's constantly in development*. (Glenn)

Together, these insights illustrate the advisers' commitment to managing multiple goals within ICs. While they address immediate practicalities, they also strive to instil a broader understanding of learning as a continuous, transformative process. This aligns with their professional stance on the role of higher education in fostering lifelong learning, as discussed earlier, and underscores their agentive role in shaping students' academic journeys.

Example 2 – Education as empowering

The advisers view ICs as potentially transformational, with the ability to empower students and influence their academic success. However, they acknowledge the challenges posed by the transactional nature of higher education, where students often prioritise practicalities – such as reducing word counts or determining the number of paragraphs – over deeper engagement with learning. Glenn reflects on this tension, noting the adaptability required to balance immediate student needs with fostering a broader, more meaningful educational experience:

> *I think we've got quite a lot of flexibility, maybe not as much with the time, but if the student is receptive and they are keen to continue on that path of development,* ***I think there's quite a lot that we can do.*** (Glenn)

Yet, Glenn also highlights the constraints posed by students' personal circumstances, such as financial pressures, and the fast-paced nature of contemporary education. These factors often impede a richer scholarly engagement. While he strives to inspire proactive, independent learners, Glenn describes this as an aspiration constrained by systemic and situational factors:

> *I just think, are we working to really –* ***within our limited parameters*** *because we can do a lot but* ***there's a lot of things we don't have control ove****r – so I hope that we can continue to foster proactive, independent learners that are inspired by what they study. That for me, sometimes I feel is a challenge. Not because of us so much, it's because of the circumstances and the student's particular situation.* (Glenn)

The language of "hope" reflects both his ambition and the inherent uncertainty of his influence. Glenn's critique of the university as being "entrenched in a culture of transaction" underscores the broader institutional challenges that hinder a more empowering and aspirational approach to

education. For him, working with research students provides a reprieve, as their intrinsic passion for study often aligns more closely with his professional ideals.

The participants also emphasise the broader empowering potential of education through ICs. Grace described each consultation as an opportunity to contextualise a specific task within a larger academic framework, encouraging students to extend their learning beyond immediate needs:

> *So I think each individual consultation is an opportunity to put this task in context of other similar tasks and also it is an opportunity to maybe take the students a little bit further than what they actually just need for that specific tasks.* (Grace)

Similarly, Glenn stresses the importance of helping students see how the skills they develop in ICs can serve them in future contexts, highlighting a forward-looking approach:

> *… putting that within the wider context of their personal needs as a learner but then also, potentially, thinking about how those things that they're learning will need to* ***be plied or developed further as they progress***. (Glenn)

The advisers attribute many of their challenges to broader institutional decisions, particularly those driven by neoliberal approaches that emphasise transactional relationships in HE (Desierto & de Maio, 2020; Ryan et al., 2023). This critique underscores their stance on the evolving role of HE in society, aligning with their broader reflections on the empowering and lifelong learning potential of ICs. The advisers position themselves as critical professionals navigating the tensions between systemic constraints and their aspirational goals. While these systemic pressures are longstanding, the interviews conducted in 2020 highlight a moment of flux, with advisers beginning to notice changes accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the full impact of the shift to online learning was not yet apparent, the advisers were already reflecting on its implications for their practice and its effect on students.

Georgina articulates these changes most explicitly, noting the shifts she observed and expressing concern about their long-term effects:

> *I guess interpret and unravel perhaps the bigger process that the students are involved in of gaining academic literacy, and I also see that –* ***I think probably even more so with Zoom****, the importance of the student being aware of the wider environment and* ***what universities do and the purpose of degrees and how this can empower them.*** *So, I guess long term they would be my aims and to help the student develop the skills, facilitate their skill development and understanding to the point where they can become, as they say, independent learners.* (Georgina)

Georgina's observations resonate these changes explicitly, noting the shifts she observed, and observations resonate with Glenn's earlier critique of the transactional culture dominating HE and the challenges of fostering empowerment and lifelong learning within such a framework. Together, these reflections reveal how the advisers negotiate the dynamic and often contradictory landscape of contemporary HE. Their comments build on earlier examples, such as Glenn's emphasis on inspiring proactive learners despite systemic constraints and Grace's focus on situating ICs within a broader academic context. This collective narrative highlights the advisers' critical engagement with their institutional environment, emphasising their commitment to education as a transformative and empowering process.

Georgina's reflections further illustrate how systemic institutional changes, particularly those shaped by neoliberal agendas, have impacted both her role as an adviser and the students she supports. She identifies the introduction of the three-trimester system, now a common structure in HE, as a significant barrier to effective teaching and learning, especially for cohorts such as students from EAL backgrounds and mature-age learners. These groups, often facing unique challenges and lacking prior academic preparation, are placed in precarious situations by structural

changes that reduce teaching time and intensify the pace of learning. Georgina critiques this corporatisation of higher education, observing:

> *I would put it down to the **increasing corporatisation of the university culture** which I think the university is definitely – in my view has headed that way, along I presume with all the others, **but there's a lot of institutional constraints** and in particular the administrative decision to move to three trimesters.* (Georgina)

Georgina also highlights how broader participation initiatives have failed to adequately support non-traditional students. While acknowledging the importance of access for such cohorts, she observes that institutional shortcomings – such as the elimination of preparatory programs – have compounded the challenges faced by these students. For example, she notes that "the lack of preparation by some cohorts" is not inherently the problem but that the shortened trimester system leaves these students in a precarious position. This, in turn, undermines their opportunities for success, as Georgina observes students who already face disadvantage arriving at university "with hopes" only to encounter further structural hurdles.

Georgina's reflections on past programs, such as summer preparatory courses, highlight the possibilities of a more supportive approach. She describes teaching mature-age students in rural areas, many of whom had never previously considered higher education but were "these really bright capable women" who found empowerment through tailored support. She recalls:

> *At one stage we were getting students taking them through a guided essay writing process and then they would go home and write their essay and come back the next day, it'd be done over a weekend, and we'd give them feedback on their individual writing and stuff. So why am I saying that? I've lost my train of thought**. I just really love that aspect that you were helping these people to empower themselves.*** (Georgina)

This emphasis on empowerment resonates with earlier examples where advisers like Grace and Glenn discussed fostering independence and encouraging lifelong learning through ICs. However, Georgina's critique highlights how structural changes – such as the shift to a faster-paced academic calendar – undermine these values. While Grace and Glenn focus on strategies to inspire and prepare students within these constraints, Georgina's account emphasises the systemic barriers that advisers cannot easily overcome. Together, these perspectives demonstrate the tension between the aspirational goals of advisers and the realities in HE system. Connected to this critique of corporatisation is the way advisers navigate their changing roles in response to students being framed as "clients". Jim discusses this shift, emphasising the importance of not merely responding to students' superficial requests but engaging more deeply to understand the root of their challenges. As Jim states (see above) it is important to note what the "client" is seeking and what the problem is.

While Jim acknowledges the transactional nature of some consultations, such as when students seek help with referencing, he frames these interactions as part of a longer-term effort to engage students and encourage them to return for further support. His reflections suggest a tension between adapting to the changing educational landscape, which prioritises efficiency and student retention, and his desire to foster deeper, more transformative learning experiences. Jim's concerns extend to other areas such as access to IC support, which reveals the complex and sometimes conflicting dynamics advisers face in a corporatised higher education system.

7. Discussion

This paper has examined how advisers discuss their IC work in semi-structured interviews, highlighting themes that reflect both established patterns and the nuances of their unique contexts. While many findings align with existing research and our collective experience, the analysis offers fresh insights by employing advice-giving language and identity as analytical lenses. Rather

than merely reiterating known challenges, the data validates prior observations and reveals new dimensions of adviser-student interactions. The emphasis on advice-giving as both a linguistic and identity-driven practice provides a novel framework for understanding the intricate dynamics and multifaceted identities of advisers within ICs. These findings not only confirm existing knowledge but also open avenues for further investigation.

The data reveals the inherent complexity of ICs, characterised by their diversity, unpredictability, and the need for constant analysis and negotiation. Advisers often described their work as "untangling", addressing issues that span academic, social, and emotional domains. Adding to this complexity is the intercultural nature of ICs, where advisers may accommodate EAL speakers' preferences or their avoidance of certain discourse strategies. Successfully navigating ICs demands a high level of relational work, requiring advisers to balance trust-building, confidence-boosting, and face-saving strategies while employing a dynamic repertoire of communicative tools such as questioning and suggesting.

Sarangi's (2000) concept of "interactional hybridity" (p. 13) aptly captures the conflation of discourse types in these contexts, further illustrating the multifaceted nature of ICs. Advisers operate within this hybrid space, navigating multiple priorities while ensuring effective communication. Previous research has noted that negotiating talk in advising sessions can be complex, yet strategically managed communication mitigates many challenges (Locker & Limberg, 2010, cited in Locker & Limberg, 2012). The advisers in this study demonstrate a repertoire of strategies to address these complexities, balancing short- and long-term goals, clarifying misunderstandings about academic expectations, and adapting to time constraints within sessions. This dynamic interplay of strategies underscores the interdiscursive nature of ICs, where professional talk blurs disciplinary and interpersonal boundaries. The negotiation and occasional resistance encountered in advice-giving highlight ICs as fertile ground for further exploration into the nuanced challenges of academic advising.

The second focus of the analysis considers adviser identity, particularly its implications for professional resilience and belonging. Drawing on sociolinguistic frameworks (Omoniyi & White, 2006) and Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) notion of identity as "the social positioning of self and other" (p. 586), we observe how advisers discursively construct their professional selves within ICs. This identity work often involves taking stances that are explicitly or implicitly indexed during interactions, with advisers in this study notably aligning themselves with students by adopting a critical stance toward institutional practices. This alignment positions advisers in opposition to the neoliberal policies shaping higher education, such as shortened trimesters and the discontinuation of preparatory courses. One adviser critiques these changes, asserting that they undermine the quality of education students deserve. This articulation of dissatisfaction constitutes a small but significant act of resistance to the dominant managerial ideology (Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019).

The literature often characterises advisers as occupying a marginal identity within institutions (Edwards et al., 2023; Grossi et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2023). However, the data suggest that within the IC context, advisers present a more agentive and critical professional identity. Unlike other advisory roles, such as embedding (Gurney & Grossi, 2019; Grossi et al., 2021), which may involve institutional gatekeepers, the IC context affords greater autonomy, allowing advisers to negotiate directly with students. This autonomy, coupled with the potential for meaningful interactions – whether through single consultations or repeat visits – enables advisers to witness and contribute to students' academic progress, reinforcing a sense of purpose and empowerment. Moreover, the recognition of student success, alongside the absence of institutional barriers within the IC framework, allows advisers to construct an identity that is both critical and proactive. This agentive positioning highlights the importance of ICs not only as sites of student support but also as spaces where advisers navigate and assert their professional values amidst broader institutional challenges.

8. Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the intricate dynamics of ICs, offering insights into the challenges and complexities advisers navigate while negotiating student and institutional goals. It emphasises the dual function of ICs: as spaces for supporting student learning and as sites where advisers construct and articulate their professional identities.

The data illustrates how advisers position themselves as critical and reflective professionals, often challenging the neoliberal policies shaping higher education. Their critical stance – manifested through their dissatisfaction with structural changes like shortened trimesters and the discontinuation of preparatory courses – reflects their commitment to fostering meaningful educational experiences. Advisers approach ICs as flexible and responsive educators, addressing students' academic, social, and emotional needs while negotiating within institutionally defined boundaries. This balance highlights their ability to manage the complexity of ICs, often drawing on and comparing the present system of intensified and shorter trimesters to their early experiences as advisers, while also underscoring the diversity of ICs and the need for further research to capture their variability. A taxonomy of ICs could enhance our understanding of how these consultations function across different contexts, offering insights into their pedagogical potential and impact on student success. For example, comparing ICs embedded within specific units of study to those offered through open booking systems could illuminate the unique challenges and opportunities in each approach.

Future research should also focus on recorded interactional data to deepen our understanding of advice-giving strategies and the extent to which students take up and act on these strategies. Additionally, studying how advisers' narratives contribute to their professional identity construction could provide valuable insights into storytelling's role in resilience and belonging, though this study's small, localised dataset limits generalisation while raising critical questions about broader applicability. As the sector continues to grapple with rationalisation and restructuring, it is imperative to prioritise research that supports advisers' professional practices and enhances the effectiveness of ICs. We hope this study encourages further exploration into the complexities of ICs, ensuring they remain a cornerstone of equitable and transformative education.

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Declarations

1. **Ethics approval**: This research was approved by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee under approval number HAE 20-007.
2. **Competing / conflict of interests:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Interview questions for advisers

1. Tell us about your IC practice. What do you see as the general/overall aims of the ICs? What you do you understand as the short/long term aims of the ICs?
2. What do you expect students will learn/get out of the session?
3. More broadly, what if any, challenges do the IC present to you as an LLA?
4. What sort of difficulties, if any, have you encountered working with the students during the ICs? Can you recount a particular IC that illustrates that?
5. Have you found that IC impact or inform other areas of your work? How so?
6. Provide a multimodal response of their choice.

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