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Exploring Undergraduate Students' Experiences with Academic Advising: Personal Connection and Effectiveness in Academic Planning at a Vietnamese University

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Abstract. Academic advising plays an important role in student success. However, its effectiveness depends on both relational and functional dimensions. This convergent mixed-methods study was conducted at a public university in Vietnam to explore student experiences with academic advising through a convergent parallel design combining survey data (N = 213) and interviews (N = 8). Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred at the interpretation stage, where questionnaire results were compared with interview themes to provide an understanding of students' experiences with academic advising. The quantitative findings revealed that the students strongly preferred face-to-face advising for building personal connection and rapport, while digital platforms were considered functional but less personal. Similarly, the students perceived digital advising as effective for tasks such as course selection and degree requirement clarification but favoured in-person sessions for academic planning and goal setting. The qualitative insights highlighted the importance of advisor empathy, interactive dialogue, and structured planning. This study emphasises the need for blended advising models that integrate digital convenience with relational depth. Recommendations included advisor training in interpersonal skills, culturally responsive communication, and an institutional investment in technology-supported advising systems. These findings contribute to the literature on advising practices in Southeast Asian higher education and offer strategies for enhancing student satisfaction and academic success.

Keywords: digital platforms; academic advising; personal connection; effectiveness

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1. Introduction

Academic advising is widely recognised as a critical component of student success and retention in higher education, serving as a bridge between institutional resources and individual student needs (Hawthorne et al., 2022). Effective advising not only facilitates academic planning but also fosters student engagement, motivation, and persistence toward degree completion (Versfeld & Mapaling, 2024). However, student experiences of advising vary significantly due to factors such as advisor accessibility, communication quality, and institutional support systems (Suleiman et al., 2024).

Recent studies highlight that advisor accountability, perceived support, and rapport are strong predictors of positive advising experiences and academic achievement (Hawthorne et al., 2022). In contexts marked by resource constraints and socio-cultural complexities, such as the Global South, these factors become even more critical for shaping equitable and effective advising practices (Versfeld & Mapaling, 2024). Understanding what influences student experiences with academic advising is therefore essential for developing evidence-based strategies that enhance satisfaction and learning outcomes.

The importance of digital and mobile technologies in reshaping learning experiences in higher education has been highlighted. Samala et al. (2025) emphasise that mobile learning has evolved into a pedagogical approach, supporting flexibility, accessibility, and learner engagement across disciplines and regions. Complementing this perspective, Papadakis et al. (2024) underscore the transformative potential of digital innovation and cloud-based technologies in fostering interactive, student-centered learning environments. Such educational shift toward technology-mediated learning has implications for digitally supported academic advising and student support practices.

Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU), established in 2009, is a public university in Vietnam. It offers 47 undergraduate programs, 12 master's programs, and one doctoral program, and is nationally accredited for its education quality. TDMU is a member of the ASEAN University Network and the global CDIO initiative, and is aiming to become a 'smart and happy university' recognised internationally (Thu Dau Mot University, 2024). Like other Vietnamese universities, TDMU faces challenges in advisor-advisee communication, which often stem from ineffective internal communication systems, unclear policy dissemination, and hierarchical cultural norms that discourage open dialogue (Le, 2024; Ngo et al., 2024). These barriers can negatively impact academic progress, student satisfaction, and retention rates, highlighting the need for improved communication strategies in higher education contexts.

Studying advisor-advisee communication in Vietnamese universities is essential because effective advising is strongly linked to student success, retention, and wellbeing (Drake, 2011). In Vietnam's context, cultural factors such as the high power distance and indirect communication styles often hinder open dialogue, leading to misunderstandings and unmet academic needs (Ngo et al., 2024). Furthermore, as universities strive for internationalisation and quality assurance,

improving advisor-advisee relationships becomes critical for aligning with global standards and fostering student-centered learning environments. Research in this area can provide actionable insights for policy makers and educators to help them design training programs, feedback systems, and culturally sensitive advising models that enhance educational outcomes.

Undertaking this study is necessary because academic advising plays a central role in supporting student success. However, students' experiences across advising modalities remain underexplored in many non-Western higher-education contexts. As universities increasingly integrate digital communication tools into advising practices, there is a need to understand how these modalities affect relational quality and effectiveness in academic planning from the student perspective. This study addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence from a Vietnamese university, contributing insights that can inform advising models and support efforts to enhance student satisfaction and engagement.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do undergraduate students perceive personal connection in digital advising contexts?
2. How do undergraduate students evaluate the effectiveness of academic advising across face-to-face and digital advising contexts?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Factors Affecting Advisor-Advisee Communication and Student Satisfaction

Effective advisor-advisee communication is associated with academic success and student satisfaction in higher education. Recent research emphasises that communication quality (e.g., clarity, responsiveness, and empathy) significantly influences the students' perceptions of advising effectiveness and their overall university experience (Ismail et al., 2021). Advisors who demonstrate reliability and empathy foster trust, which enhances satisfaction and retention rates. Conversely, poor communication practices, such as delayed responses or a lack of transparency, often lead to frustration and disengagement (Mathew & Ibrahim, 2023). Cultural and institutional factors also play a role.

Power distance, indirect communication styles, and expectations of advisor authority can discourage students from openly expressing concerns or asking questions, particularly in hierarchical higher-education contexts in Asia (Liu & Renn, 2024; Schell, 2023). In addition, institutional expectations that emphasize student self-advocacy and initiative may conflict with culturally grounded norms of deference, leading to misunderstandings and reduced perceptions of support if advising practices are not culturally responsive (Schell, 2023). Hierarchical norms and large student-to-advisor ratios can limit meaningful interaction, potentially reducing opportunities for personalised guidance (Afzal et al., 2024).

Student satisfaction is closely linked to the advisor's ability to provide timely and accurate academic information (Ismail et al., 2021). A global survey revealed that

nearly half of students lacked guidance on course sequencing and graduation requirements, highlighting the systemic gaps in academic communication (Flaherty, 2023). These deficiencies can delay graduation and negatively impact institutional reputation. Proactive communication strategies, such as scheduled check-ins and digital reminders, have been shown to improve advising outcomes and student persistence (Feygin et al., 2022).

A growing body of literature has examined the role of digital technologies in higher education. Using a PRISMA-guided bibliometric analysis, Samala et al. (2025) suggest that research on mobile learning has expanded rapidly over the past decade, with increasing attention to learner satisfaction, communication, and engagement. Similarly, Papadakis et al. (2024) argue that cloud technologies and digital platforms enable more flexible and collaborative educational interactions, reshaping how students access academic support and guidance. Such insights provide a backdrop for examining how digital tools influence students' experiences of academic advising, particularly in relation to communication quality and perceived effectiveness.

2.2 Advisor-Student Rapport

In this study, academic advising is conceptualized primarily as an ongoing process. From this perspective, advising support students' academic, personal, and professional development across their university experience. Academic advisor-student rapport is widely recognized as a critical determinant of students' satisfaction and academic success (Ismail et al., 2021; McGill, 2021). When advisors establish meaningful relationships with students, advising becomes more than a procedural exchange focused on course selection or degree requirements, evolving instead into a relational and developmental process (McGill, 2021).

Effective rapport is grounded in mutual respect, trust, and a genuine sense of care, enabling students to feel valued as individuals rather than treated as administrative cases (Ismail et al., 2021). Such relationships foster open communication, encourage students to seek guidance proactively, and support both academic and personal development. By providing support, advisors contribute to students' sense of belonging within the institution, which in turn enhances motivation, engagement, persistence, and overall educational success (Fong et al., 2024).

Furthermore, students who perceive their advisors as approachable and invested in their holistic development report higher satisfaction and academic confidence (Alsabhan et al., 2025). Rapport is strengthened through consistent communication, active listening, and personalised feedback, which help students feel valued and understood. Lack of rapport, on the other hand, often results in students viewing advising as a bureaucratic requirement rather than as a developmental process (Afzal et al., 2024). Training programs for advisors that emphasise interpersonal skills and cultural sensitivity have been found to significantly improve rapport and advising quality (Abbaszadeh et al., 2025).

2.3 Academic Planning and Its Impact

Academic planning, which is the process of guiding students through course selection, the degree requirements, and career alignment, is a fundamental function of advising. Research shows that effective academic planning reduces uncertainty, supports timely graduation, and enhances the students' sense of control over their academic trajectory (Mathew & Ibrahim, 2023). However, gaps persist: many students report insufficient guidance on electives, research opportunities, and extracurricular activities, which can limit their engagement and professional development (Alsabhan et al., 2025). Integrating technology-driven tools, such as degree audit systems and personalised dashboards, alongside advisor consultations, has emerged as a best practice to improve planning efficiency and student satisfaction (Feygin et al., 2022).

2.4 Learning Outcomes and Advising Modality

Does the mode of advising affect academic outcomes? It has been suggested that access to advising (rather than its modality) is the critical factor. Frequent advising, regardless of online or face-to-face, is linked to persistence and a higher GPA (Kuhn & Garcia, 2020). In practice, allowing students to meet when they are available (e.g., evenings and weekends via video) can increase the total advising contact hours, which may indirectly boost achievement. In fact, a recent study at a research university found that offering both in-person and video appointments let the students connect more often, and that convenience led to higher overall engagement (Peters et al., 2023). Students perceived the same level of support and guidance from virtual appointments as from face-to-face.

It is worth noting that effective advising contributes to student success by clarifying goals, planning their studies, and connecting them to resources (McGovern et al., 2024). Online advising platforms that integrate these planning tools (e.g., degree maps, automated scheduling, early alerts) may enhance these outcomes. For example, a study on an 'intrusive advising' model using Blackboard Collaborate (synchronous group advising) showed high student satisfaction and engagement, suggesting that the creative use of technology can amplify advising's impact, and there is no inherent disadvantage in virtual advising as long as key advising functions (degree planning, encouragement, resource referrals) are preserved (Wang & Houdyshell, 2021).

2.5 Modes of Digital Advising

Synchronous video can cultivate personal connection and enhance social presence, supporting emotional and cognitive engagement during advising sessions (Wang & Houdyshell, 2021). These technical affordances suggest complementary roles between online or in-person. Both can be overlaid to fit their needs (Wang & Houdyshell, 2021). For instance, simple questions (e.g., course substitutions, and enrolment deadlines) may be handled via email or chat, while complex planning (e.g., multi-year course mapping, and career discussions) may warrant video or face-to-face time (Kalamkarian & Karp, 2017).

Most higher education institutions now integrate digital scheduling and advising tools that enable students to book in-person or virtual advising appointments through centralized online systems, reflecting the increasing technologization of

student support services (Coffey, 2024; Paschke & Ditta, 2025). These systems are often embedded within or linked to learning management systems (LMS) and institutional communication platforms, allowing advisors to disseminate information and maintain ongoing contact with students through email, LMS announcements, and other digital modalities (Shaw & Gilani, 2024). In the Vietnamese context, universities have rapidly expanded the use of LMS platforms and institutional email as primary channels for academic communication and advising-related information, particularly following the acceleration of digital transformation in higher education (Nguyen, 2024; Pham & Tran, 2020).

However, recent studies, largely conducted outside Vietnam, suggest that reliance on a narrow set of communication modes may limit accessibility and student engagement. Instead, contemporary advising research recommends offering multiple, coordinated communication channels, including online appointment systems, synchronous virtual advising, email, and LMS-based resources, to better accommodate students' preferences and enhance satisfaction with advising services (Paschke & Ditta, 2025; Shaw & Gilani, 2024).

A modern digital advising program typically includes:

- Email and LMS messaging: For general queries, documentation, and follow-up. Advisors are advised to respond promptly and in a conversational tone (e.g. adding clarifying questions) to mimic personal interactions (Kuhn & Garcia, 2020).
- Telephone and instant chats: Advisors can discuss the program requirements verbally, although this lacks visual cues. Good practice is to modulate tone and summarise the key points since students cannot see the advisors' expressions (Kuhn & Garcia, 2020).
- Video conferencing: Video allows advisors to share their screen and even use virtual whiteboards to plan schedules (Wang & Houdyshell, 2021). It also tends to hold the students' attention better than phone (no distraction of driving and work) (Kuhn & Garcia, 2020). Students and advisors report that video meetings enable questions and rapport-building akin to in-person sessions (Peters et al., 2023; Wang & Houdyshell, 2021).

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in theoretical perspectives that have explained how students develop perceptions of personal connection and advising effectiveness across both face-to-face and digital modalities. Three key bodies of theory informed the conceptual foundation: developmental academic advising theory (Crookston, 2009; O'Banion, 1972), communication and social presence theories (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Short et al., 1976), and technology-mediated advising frameworks (Kalamkarian & Karp, 2017). These perspectives provided a lens for understanding the relational and functional dimensions of advising that shaped the students' experiences.

2.6.1 *Developmental Academic Advising Theory*

The study drew upon the developmental advising framework, which posits that academic advising is not merely transactional but a relational and holistic process supporting the students' personal, academic, and professional growth (Crookston, 2009; O'Banion, 1972). Developmental advising emphasises shared responsibility, personalised guidance, and advisor-student rapport. These elements are relevant to the students' perceptions of personal connection in advising. This perspective suggests that effective advising requires empathy, active listening, and collaborative goal setting, all of which are more easily achieved in face-to-face interactions (Crookston, 2009; O'Banion, 1972).

Within this framework, personal connection functions as a core mechanism through which advisors support the students' identity formation, motivation, and long-term planning. This study applied this theory to interpret why students tended to associate stronger relational bonds with in-person meetings, where non-verbal cues, immediacy behaviours, and conversational flow were naturally present.

Although O'Banion's (1972) theory is an early framework, it remains foundational to contemporary advising practice. Its core principles have been extended and operationalized through later models, including learning-centered advising (Lowenstein, 2005) and the core competencies framework (NACADA, 2017), which conceptualize advising as a continuous, relational, and developmental process. Accordingly, this study draws on O'Banion's (1972) theoretical foundation while aligning with its modern conceptualizations in digitally mediated and blended advising contexts.

2.6.2 *Communication Theories: Social Presence and Media Richness*

To understand advising in digital environments, this study was informed by social presence theory (Short et al., 1976) and media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Social presence theory (Short et al., 1976) proposes that communication media varies in its ability to transmit warmth, empathy, and interpersonal cues. Richer media, such as face-to-face communication, enable greater immediacy and emotional connection, whereas text-based or asynchronous tools often feel impersonal. This theoretical lens helped to explain the students' perceptions that digital communication, despite being functional, lacked the relational depth required for strong rapport.

Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) further argues that complex or ambiguous tasks are better suited to media capable of supporting real-time interactions, feedback, and nuanced understanding. Applied to this study, this theory helped to interpret why students considered digital channels adequate for routine tasks (e.g., checking requirements) but preferred richer modalities, especially face-to-face meetings, for holistic academic planning and goal setting.

Although media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) and social presence theory (Short et al., 1976) are not new, they remain highly relevant and articulate foundational principles of human communication that continue to underpin contemporary digital interaction. These theories explain how communication

modalities vary in their ability to convey social cues, immediacy, and relational meaning. Subsequent research on online learning, video-mediated interaction, and digital advising has consistently drawn on these theories to interpret why richer, more synchronous forms of communication foster stronger relational connection, trust, and engagement (Borup et al., 2014; Lowenthal, 2009; Wang & Houdyshell, 2021).

2.6.3 Technology-Mediated Advising Models

The study also drew on emerging frameworks of technology-mediated and blended advising (Kalamkarian & Karp, 2017), which conceptualises digital tools as complementary rather than replacement mechanisms for advising. These models emphasise that email, messaging applications, and video conferencing can enhance access, convenience, and responsiveness, but their effectiveness depends on the alignment with advising task complexity and student needs.

Within this framework, advising was conceptualised along two dimensions:

- Functional effectiveness is associated with the delivery of accurate, timely, and actionable academic information.
- Relational engagement refers to the extent to which advising fostered trust, connection, and student motivation.

The study used the dual-dimension model to interpret the distinction students made between discrete planning tasks (well-supported by digital platforms) and comprehensive developmental advising (better supported by in-person communication). This theoretical lens was found to be especially relevant in the Vietnamese context, where hierarchical cultural norms and communication styles shape how students engage with their advisors.

2.6.4 Integrated Conceptual Understanding

These theories suggested that advising effectiveness is influenced by both modality and relational quality, with different communication channels affording varying levels of social presence, media richness, and developmental support. Developmental advising theory (Crookston, 2009; O'Banion, 1972) highlights the centrality of relational connection. Communication theories (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Short et al., 1976) explain why such connections are easier to form in face-to-face contexts. Technology-mediated advising models (Kalamkarian & Karp, 2017) clarify the complementary benefits of digital channels for functional tasks.

By integrating these perspectives, the study framed academic advising as a blended interactional process shaped by the interplay of communication mode, relational expectations, and task complexity. This theoretical grounding guided the interpretation of the findings and provided an explanatory framework for understanding the students' differentiated experiences with face-to-face and digital advising.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), which allowed both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected and analysed simultaneously to provide a comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences with academic advising. The quantitative component consisted of a structured questionnaire (Table 1), while the qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews. Both strands were given equal priority and integrated during interpretation to triangulate the findings and enhance validity. This design was chosen to capture both measurable patterns and nuanced perspectives, aligning with recommendations for mixed-methods research in educational contexts.

Table 1: Structure of the questionnaire

Section	Construct	Item type
Section 1	Demographic information (2 items)	Multiple choice
Section 2	Advising interaction frequency (1 item)	Multiple choice
Section 3	Digital communication channels (1 item)	Multiple choice
Section 4	Meeting initiation (1 item)	Multiple choice
Section 5	Advisor-student rapport (4 items)	5-point Likert scale
	Perceived effectiveness in academic planning (4 items)	5-point Likert scale

3.2 Questionnaire validation

The questionnaire was informed by the literature. Key constructs emerging from the literature served as the conceptual foundation for item generation. All items were written in plain language and tailored to the Vietnamese university context to enhance relevance and comprehensibility.

To establish content validity, the initial version of the questionnaire was reviewed by two colleagues with expertise in higher education and applied linguistics. These reviewers examined the items for clarity, alignment with the research questions, and coverage of the targeted constructs. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to item wording to reduce ambiguity and ensure conceptual consistency across sections.

In addition, the questionnaire was piloted informally with a small group of undergraduate students who were not included in the main study sample. Their feedback was used to refine item phrasing and confirm that instructions and Likert-scale options were easy to understand.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

This study employed a non-probability convenience sampling technique. The participants for the quantitative phase were 213 fourth-year undergraduate English majors enrolled at Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam. These students were selected because they had substantial experience with academic advising throughout their program, making them well-positioned to evaluate its effectiveness. The sample included both male and female students, representing

diverse academic performance levels. Their gender and GPA distribution is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Gender and current GPA distribution (N = 213)

Category		Count	Percent
Gender	Male	62	29.1%
	Female	148	69.5%
	Prefer not to say	3	1.4%
Current GPA	9.0 - 10.0	13	6.1%
	8.0 - below 9.0	40	18.8%
	7.0 - below 8.0	70	32.9%
	6.0 - below 7.0	45	21.1%
	5.0 - below 6.0	28	13.1%
	4.0 - below 5.0	12	5.6%
	Below 4.0	5	2.3%

For the qualitative phase, eight students were recruited for in-depth interviews using convenience sampling, reflecting accessibility and their willingness to participate. The interviewees provided rich insights into the relational and functional aspects of advising, complementing the broader trends identified in the survey.

3.4 Data Collection

For the quantitative phase, the questionnaire was distributed electronically using Google Forms. Data collection took place over a two-week period. A total of 213 valid responses were obtained and included in the analysis.

Following the survey, the qualitative phase was conducted through semi-structured interviews. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to indicate their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. From those who volunteered, eight students were selected using convenience sampling based on availability. An interview guide was developed in alignment with the key constructs in the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted individually in Vietnamese, either face-to-face on campus or via video conferencing platforms. Before each interview, participants were reminded of the study's purpose, assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately and then integrated at the interpretation stage to allow for triangulation and comparison of findings across data sources.

3.5 Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the questionnaire was analysed using descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, to identify patterns in the students' perceptions of personal connection, rapport, and

academic planning effectiveness. The analyses provided a clear overview of advising preferences and satisfaction levels.

The qualitative data was analysed through thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness. The researcher then engaged in a process of familiarisation with the data by reading and rereading the transcripts while noting initial impressions relevant to the research questions. Initial coding was conducted using an inductive approach. Each transcript was examined line by line, and meaningful segments of text were assigned codes that captured participants' meaningful narratives. At this stage, codes were kept close to the data and remained descriptive rather than interpretive.

The generated codes were reviewed and grouped into potential themes by identifying patterns and relationships across codes. Similar or overlapping codes were clustered together to form broader categories representing recurring aspects of students' experiences with academic advising. These preliminary themes were then reviewed against the original transcripts to ensure coherence and consistency, with some themes refined, merged, or discarded as necessary. Finally, the themes were defined and clearly named to reflect their central meaning and relevance to the study's aims. Representative excerpts were selected to illustrate each theme. Throughout the coding process, the researcher engaged in reflexive review to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data. The finalized themes were later integrated with the quantitative findings at the interpretation stage to support triangulation.

Table 3 illustrates how inductively generated codes were clustered into broader themes and grounded in participants' own words.

Table 3: Examples of themes, codes, and representative quotes

Theme	Example codes	Quotes
Personal connection	Feeling cared for Emotional support Being listened to	<i>When I meet my advisor in person, I feel like they really care about me as a person, not just my grades.</i>
Advisor-student rapport	Trust in advisor Comfort communicating Relationship building	<i>Even through Zoom, my advisor listens carefully and asks about my goals, which makes me trust their advice.</i>
Comfort in digital communication	Reduced anxiety online Confidence in writing	<i>I feel nervous to ask questions in person, but online I can take time to think and write more carefully.</i>
Perceived limits of text-based advising	Lack of interaction One-way communication	<i>Through email, I get lists of courses, but I miss the chance to ask why one is better than another.</i>
Effectiveness in course selection	Clarifying electives Career alignment Reducing confusion	<i>I often get confused about electives, but my advisor explains which ones match my major and career path.</i>
Effective academic planning	Long-term planning Future preparation	<i>My advisor helped me map out all the semesters until graduation, so I know what to expect.</i>

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Faculty of Foreign Languages at TDMU prior to data collection. All procedures complied with internationally recognized ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, including principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, and established standards for educational research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained by removing identifying information and securely storing all data, which were used only for research purposes.

4. Results

Beginning with a section on the background information, the results section integrates the quantitative and qualitative findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences with academic advising. The analysis was organised into two major areas, including the relational aspects of advising and functional effectiveness in academic planning. These findings highlighted how face-to-face and digital modes influenced the students' perceptions of connection, trust, and planning support.

4.1 Background Information

This section provides contextual details about the participants. This data establishes the foundation for interpreting the subsequent findings, highlighting the limited frequency of advising sessions and the dominance of familiar digital tools.

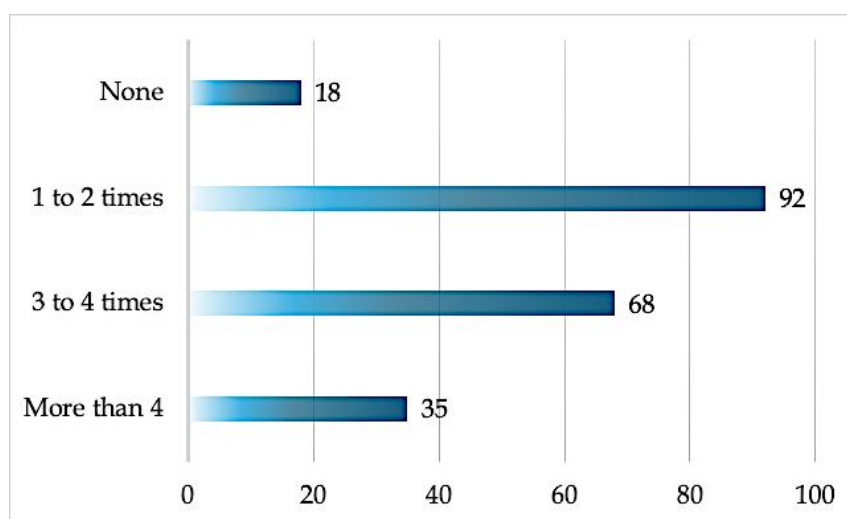


Figure 1: Interaction frequency with an academic advisor last semester

The majority of the students reported interacting with their academic advisor once or twice last semester (semester 6) (43.2%), while nearly one-third engaged three to four times (31.9%) (Figure 1). A smaller proportion indicated more frequent contact, with 16.4% meeting their advisor more than four times, and 8.5%

reporting no interaction at all. These figures suggest that advising interactions are generally limited, with most students experiencing only minimal engagement.

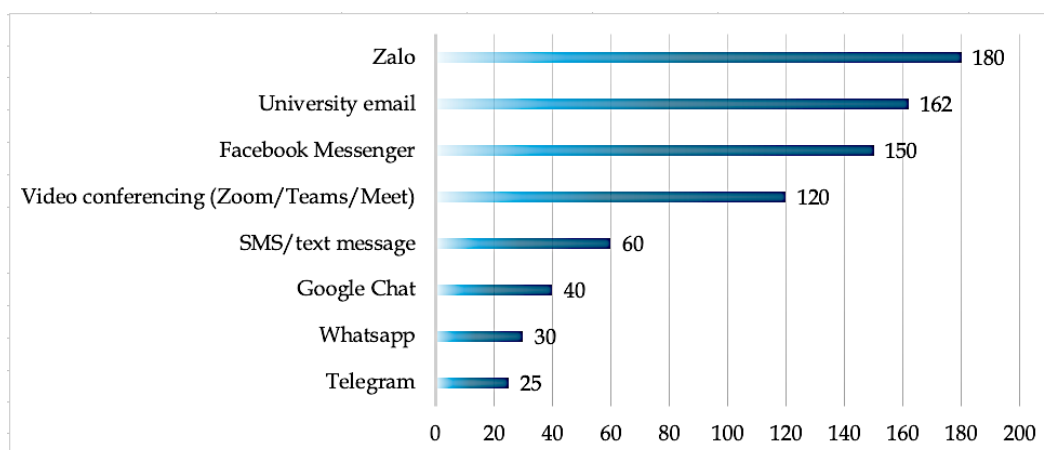


Figure 2: Digital platforms and messaging apps used to communicate with advisors

The students predominantly relied on Zalo (84.5%), university email (76.1%), and Facebook Messenger (70.4%) for communication, reflecting both institutional practices and local preferences (Figure 2). Video conferencing tools such as Zoom, Teams, and Google Meet were also widely used (56.3%), whereas international messaging apps like WhatsApp (14.1%) and Telegram (11.7%) were less common. These findings suggest that students' choice of advising communication platforms is largely shaped by institutional norms and local digital habits. The high reliance on Zalo, university email, and Facebook Messenger suggests a preference for platforms that are both used by the university or embedded in the Vietnamese context, while the lower use of WhatsApp and Telegram reflects limited familiarity with these tools. At the same time, the substantial use of video conferencing platforms indicates growing acceptance of digital advising when such tools are normalized within the institutional environment.

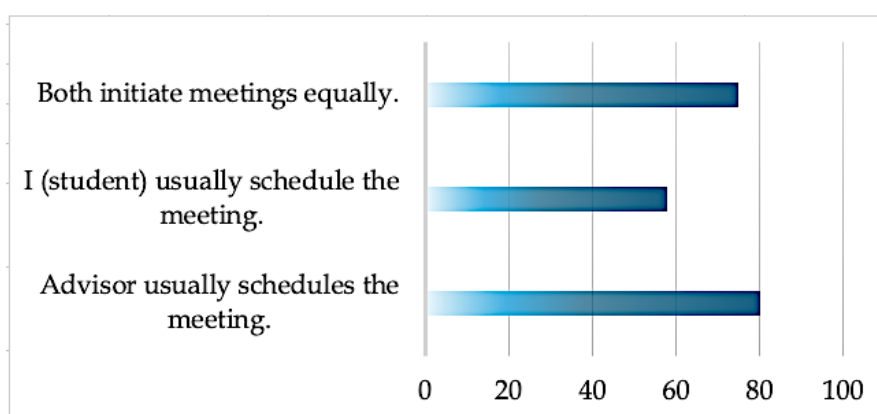


Figure 3: Initiation of academic advising meetings

Advising sessions were most frequently initiated by advisors (37.6%), although a considerable proportion of students reported shared responsibility (35.2%) (Figure 3). Only 27.2% indicated that they typically schedule meetings themselves.

These findings point to a predominantly advisor-led approach, with some evidence of collaborative initiation emerging among students and advisors.

4.2 Personal Connection

This section explores the relational aspects of advising, focusing on the students' perceptions of personal connection and advisor-student rapport. The quantitative data reveals a strong preference for face-to-face meetings to foster emotional closeness, while the qualitative themes highlight why in-person interactions feel more supportive and dialogic. Despite this preference, the students reported trust in the digital guidance and acknowledged that rapport can be maintained online when advisors adopt empathetic strategies.

Table 4: Advisor–student rapport

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD
I feel more connected to my advisor in face-to-face meetings than through apps.	5 2.3%	10 4.7%	28 13.1%	90 42.3%	80 37.6%	4.08	1.05
Communication with my advisor through communication apps allows me to build a good rapport despite being remote.	12 5.6%	25 11.7%	45 21.1%	86 40.4%	45 21.1%	3.60	1.15
Email or text-based advising feels impersonal compared to face-to-face meetings.	8 3.8%	15 7.0%	35 16.4%	100 46.9%	55 25.8%	3.84	1.10
I trust the guidance I receive from my advisor via digital platforms as much as that given in person.	5 2.3%	20 9.4%	35 16.4%	103 48.4%	50 23.5%	3.81	1.08

An analysis of relational aspects (Table 4) highlighted a complex student perception of digital versus face-to-face advising. The 213 students strongly affirmed the relational benefits of in-person interactions. The vast majority agreed that they feel a stronger personal connection in face-to-face meetings ($M=4.08$, $SD=1.05$), with 79.8% ($n=170$) agreeing or strongly agreeing (Table 2). This sentiment was reinforced by the strong agreement that text-based advising feels impersonal ($M=3.84$, $SD=1.10$).

However, this preference for face-to-face connection did not equate to a lack of trust in digital guidance. Students reported a high level of trust in the advice received via digital platforms ($M=3.81$, $SD=1.08$), with 71.8% ($n=153$) agreeing that this advice was as trustworthy as that given in person. Furthermore, a majority (61.5%, $n=131$) agreed that they can still build good rapport remotely ($M=3.60$, $SD=1.15$). These findings suggested that while face-to-face advising is generally preferred for fostering personal connection, digital advising is not perceived as inferior in terms of credibility or trustworthiness. Students largely viewed advice delivered through digital platforms as reliable and authoritative, indicating confidence in advisors regardless of modality. This highlighted the potential of digital advising to effectively support students when interpersonal

elements are intentionally incorporated, reinforcing the value of blended advising models.

The interviews revealed two prominent themes that shape the students' experiences with academic advising, including (1) personal connection and (2) advisor–student rapport. These themes reflect the students' perceptions of relational quality and trust in advising interactions, in both face-to-face and digital contexts. While the quantitative data indicated a preference for in-person meetings, the qualitative insights deepen our understanding of why these relational aspects matter and how they influence satisfaction and engagement.

Theme 1: Personal connection

Personal connection refers to the sense of closeness and relational warmth students experience during advising interactions. It encompasses feelings of being understood, valued, and supported beyond transactional exchanges. One student shared:

“When I meet my advisor in person, I feel like they really care about me as a person, not just my grades or academic performance. Being able to talk face-to-face makes me feel listened to and supported in a more personal way.” (Participant 8)

This quote highlights the emotional dimension of advising. Face-to-face meetings allow for the non-verbal cues and empathetic gestures that strengthen the students' sense of belonging and care, which digital platforms often struggle to replicate.

Another student reflected:

“Online messages are helpful for getting information quickly, but they often feel more like instructions than a real conversation. I receive the answers I need, but there is little interaction or opportunity to discuss my concerns in depth.” (Participant 5)

Here, the student contrasted the functional nature of digital advising with the relational depth of in-person interactions. While online communication meets their informational needs, it lacks the dialogic quality that fosters personal connection.

Theme 2: Advisor-student rapport

Rapport refers to the mutual trust, respect, and openness that develops between advisor and student, enabling effective communication and collaborative problem-solving (Kalamkarian & Karp, 2017). One participant explained:

“Even through Zoom, my advisor asks about my goals and listens patiently. That makes me trust their advice.” (Participant 1)

This suggested that rapport could be improved through digital communication when advisors employed active listening and personalised engagement strategies, coping with the limitations of remote communication.

Another student noted:

"I feel nervous to ask questions in person because I worry about saying the wrong thing, but when I communicate online, I can take time to think and write more carefully. This makes me feel more confident in expressing my questions and concerns." (Participant 3)

This perspective reveals that rapport is not solely dependent on physical presence. Digital platforms can empower students who prefer reflective communication, suggesting a nuanced view of modality and comfort.

While the students generally favour face-to-face advising for emotional connection, rapport can transcend modality when advisors adopt empathetic and student-centered approaches. As such, advisors should attempt to utilise both in-person and digital channels to maintain relational quality and trust.

4.3 Effectiveness in Academic Planning

In this sub-section, the emphasis shifts to the functional dimension of advising. The analysis showed that digital platforms are considered effective for discrete tasks such as course selection and degree requirement clarification, but face-to-face sessions are preferred for comprehensive academic planning and goal setting. The qualitative insights reinforced this distinction, illustrating the students' desire for interactive dialogue and structured planning when mapping long-term academic trajectories.

Table 5: Students' perceived effectiveness of academic planning

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	SD
My advisor helps me set clear academic goals during online advising sessions.	10 4.7%	20 9.4%	45 21.1%	100 46.9%	38 17.8%	3.71	1.10
I receive helpful advice on course selection via digital advising channels as I would in person.	7 3.3%	15 7.0%	40 18.8%	101 47.4%	50 23.5%	3.85	1.05
I receive helpful advice on the degree requirements via digital advising channels as I would in person.	5 2.3%	13 6.1%	35 16.4%	105 49.3%	55 25.8%	3.92	1.00
Face-to-face advising is more effective for planning my academic program than digital advising.	8 3.8%	12 5.6%	33 15.5%	95 44.6%	65 30.5%	4.01	1.12

The analysis (Table 5) indicated that while digital advising is seen as functional for specific tasks, students perceived face-to-face interaction as more effective for comprehensive planning. Students reported high agreement that they receive helpful advice comparable to in-person sessions for tasks like degree requirements ($M=3.92$, $SD=1.00$) and course selection ($M=3.85$, $SD=1.05$). As seen in Table 2, 75.1% ($n=160$) and 70.9% ($n=151$) of students respectively agreed or strongly agreed with these items. Agreement was slightly lower for the broader task of setting academic goals online ($M=3.71$, $SD=1.10$). These findings suggest

that digital advising is effective for tasks such as course selection and degree requirement clarification, but may be less suitable for activities like academic goal setting. This highlights the value of blended advising models that use digital platforms for transactional guidance while reserving richer interactions for holistic planning.

Despite this high functionality, there was a strong consensus that face-to-face advising is more effective for overall planning ($M=4.01$, $SD=1.12$), which had the highest mean in the set and 75.1% ($n=160$) agreement. This suggests students differentiate between the convenience of digital channels for information retrieval and the perceived effectiveness of face-to-face meetings for holistic academic planning. The qualitative analysis revealed three interconnected themes that shape the students' perceptions of advising effectiveness in academic planning, including (1) goal setting and clarity, (2) course selection guidance, and (3) holistic program planning. These themes reflected how students experience advising support in defining academic trajectories, making informed choices, and integrating long-term planning strategies.

Theme 1: Goal setting and clarity

This theme captured the students' experiences of how advisors help them articulate their academic goals and align them with their career aspirations. One student shared:

"My advisor asked about my future plans before suggesting courses, which made me feel more confident about my choices. By understanding what I want to do after graduation, the advice felt more relevant and personalized rather than just based on program requirements."
(Participant 5)

This quote highlighted the importance of personalised advising that begins with understanding the students' aspirations. Goal-oriented conversations foster clarity and confidence, reinforcing the advisor's role as a developmental guide rather than a mere information provider.

Another student reflected:

"Online sessions are okay for quick questions, but for setting goals, I prefer face-to-face because it feels more serious. Being in the same space helps me think more carefully and engage more deeply in the discussion."
(Participant 7)

This suggests that while digital platforms serve transactional needs, many students perceive in-person meetings as more conducive for meaningful discussions about long-term goals, emphasizing the relational depth required for strategic planning.

Theme 2: Course selection guidance

This theme relates to the students' perceptions of the advisor's role in helping them choose courses that fit the degree requirements and their personal interests. One participant explained:

"I often get confused about electives, but my advisor explains which ones match my major and career path. Their guidance helps me understand how different choices fit into my long-term goals, rather than just selecting courses randomly." (Participant 6)

This underscores the advisor's critical role in reducing uncertainty and ensuring informed decision-making. Effective guidance on electives not only supports academic progress but also enhances the students' sense of control over their learning journey.

Another student noted:

"Through email, I get lists of courses, but I miss the chance to ask why one is better than another. Without a real discussion, it is harder to understand the reasons behind the recommendations or how the courses fit my goals." (Participant 3)

This reflected a limitation of text-based advising, where information is provided without interactive dialogue. Students value opportunities to discuss rationale and implications, which are harder to achieve through asynchronous communication.

Theme 3: Holistic program planning

This theme addresses the students' experiences with comprehensive planning that integrates timelines, prerequisites, and career alignment. One student shared:

"My advisor helped me map out all the semesters until graduation, so I know what to expect. Having a clear plan makes me feel more prepared and less anxious because I can see how each semester fits into my overall program." (Participant 5)

This illustrates how structured planning reduces anxiety and promotes persistence. A clear roadmap empowers students to anticipate challenges and manage their workloads effectively.

Another student reflected:

"Digital advising is fine for checking requirements, but for planning the whole program, I need that face-to-face discussion. Meeting in person helps me think more clearly, ask follow-up questions, and feel confident about long-term decisions." (Participant 4)

This indicated that students differentiate between functional and strategic advising tasks. While digital tools sufficed for discrete queries, holistic planning is perceived as requiring richer, synchronous interaction.

The students appreciated advisors who provide clarity, interactive guidance, and structured planning. While digital platforms offered convenience for specific tasks, face-to-face advising remains preferred for complex, goal-oriented discussions. As such, blended approaches that combine digital efficiency with opportunities for personalised engagement should be considered.

5. Discussion

5.1 Personal Connection and Advisor-Student Rapport

The findings indicated that students strongly value face-to-face advising for fostering personal connection, with 79.8% agreeing or strongly agreeing that in-person meetings create stronger relational bonds. This aligns with the previous research emphasising the role of interpersonal communication in building trust and rapport (Afzal et al., 2024; Alsabhan et al., 2025). While digital platforms were perceived as functional for maintaining rapport, the students described these interactions as helpful but impersonal, echoing Ismail et al.'s (2021) observation that asynchronous communication often lacks the dialogic quality needed for relational depth.

Interestingly, despite the preference for in-person interactions, the students expressed high trust in the advice received via digital platforms, suggesting that credibility is not modality-dependent when advisors demonstrate responsiveness and clarity. This finding resonates with Wang and Houdyshell (2021), who reported that synchronous online advising can replicate the sense of support found in face-to-face sessions when advisors employ active listening and personalised engagement strategies. These results underscored the need for blended advising approaches that combine the relational benefits of in-person meetings with the convenience and accessibility of digital channels.

The study's findings aligned closely with developmental advising theory (Crookston, 2009; O'Banion, 1972), which emphasises that meaningful advisor-student relationships supported students' academic and personal growth. The students' strong preference for face-to-face meetings reflected this theoretical view, as they described feeling more understood and cared for during in-person interactions. These responses suggested that developmental advising principles, such as empathy, active listening, and collaborative dialogue, were more fully activated in physical settings where advisors could engage more personally and responsively.

The students' perception of digital advising as functional but less personal also supports social presence theory (Short et al., 1976), which posits that communication media varies in its ability to convey warmth and interpersonal cues. Their comments that online messages felt more like instructions illustrated the lower social presence of text-based platforms. Although the students trusted digital guidance, their preference for in-person interaction aligned with the theory's expectation that richer media better facilitates rapport and relational depth.

5.2 Effectiveness in Academic Planning

Students perceived digital advising as effective for discrete tasks such as course selection and degree requirement clarification, but strongly favoured face-to-face meetings for comprehensive academic planning. This distinction reflects Mathew and Ibrahim's (2023) findings that strategic planning requires a richer interaction than transactional advising. The interview data reinforced this pattern: the students valued online platforms for quick queries but preferred in-person

sessions for goal setting and holistic program mapping. These insights align with Feygin et al. (2022), who advocate for integrating technology-driven tools with personalised advising to optimise planning efficiency.

However, the perceived limitations of digital advising for complex tasks suggest that institutions should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, as Peters et al. (2023) argue, offering multiple modalities can increase overall engagement and advising contact hours, thereby improving student persistence. In the Vietnamese context, where hierarchical norms may inhibit open dialogue (Le, 2024; Ngo et al., 2024), face-to-face advising remains critical for fostering trust and encouraging students to articulate their long-term goals. At the same time, digital channels can complement these interactions by providing timely information and reducing practical barriers.

The students' preferences in academic planning are consistent with media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), which argues that complex tasks require richer and more interactive communication channels. Academic planning involves uncertainty and requires immediate clarification, making face-to-face meetings more effective for students. Their preference for in-person guidance during long-term planning reflects the theory's prediction that richer media is better suited for tasks requiring nuanced discussion and real-time feedback.

At the same time, the students' positive evaluation of digital advising for routine tasks is aligned with technology-mediated advising models (Kalamkarian & Karp, 2017), which frame digital tools as effective for quick and information-focused interactions. Students found messaging apps and email convenient for checking requirements or receiving course information. This supported the theoretical view that digital platforms complement rather than replace in-person advising by enhancing the accessibility of transactional tasks while reserving richer modalities for planning.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the Key Findings

The study revealed that the students strongly value face-to-face advising for building personal connection and rapport, with nearly 80% agreeing that in-person meetings foster stronger relational bonds. While digital platforms were considered functional for maintaining rapport and providing trustworthy guidance, they were often perceived as impersonal. Regarding academic planning, the students reported that digital advising is effective for discrete tasks such as course selection and degree requirement clarification, but face-to-face sessions were preferred for comprehensive planning and goal setting. These findings suggest that students differentiate between transactional and strategic advising tasks, favouring blended approaches that combine digital convenience with relational depth.

6.2 Practical Recommendations

The findings of this study offer important implications for improving academic advising in higher-education contexts. The strong student preference for

face-to-face interactions in fostering personal connection underscored the importance of relational advising, particularly for complex tasks such as academic goal setting, long-term program planning, and career discussions. In-person advising opportunities should be available and advisors should spend time developing meaningful relationships with students. At the same time, students' positive perceptions of digital advising for course selection and degree-requirement clarification suggest that digital platforms can be useful in enhancing advising efficiency. Institutions may benefit from clear guidelines as to which advising functions are best handled through digital channels and which require in-person interaction. Such differentiation can help optimise advisor workload while maintaining advising quality.

The high level of trust students reported in digitally delivered advice suggests that digital advising is a useful mode of support when advisors communicate clearly and empathically. As a result, professional development strategies should focus on strengthening advisors' communication skills and culturally responsive practices, particularly to support students who may be hesitant to initiate contact due to hierarchical or cultural norms. The findings highlight the value of blended advising models. Institutional investment in integrated advising systems can support accessible advising while preserving opportunities for sustained relational engagement. This can enhance student satisfaction and academic success.

6.3 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that student experiences with academic advising are shaped by both relational and functional factors. While digital platforms provide convenience and efficiency for routine tasks, face-to-face interactions remain essential for fostering personal connection, trust, and comprehensive academic planning. In the Vietnamese context, cultural norms such as the high power distance further reinforce the value of in-person advising for meaningful dialogue and goal setting. By addressing these dimensions, universities can enhance the effectiveness of advising and contribute to improved student outcomes.

This study was limited by its reliance on convenience sampling and the relatively small qualitative sample of eight interview participants, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, the research was conducted within a single Vietnamese university, limiting cross-institutional comparisons. Cultural factors such as hierarchical norms and particular communication styles were acknowledged but not deeply explored, which could influence advising perceptions. The sample consisted of undergraduate English majors, and their preferences for advising communication modes and rapport may not fully represent those of students in other fields.

Finally, the study focused primarily on student perspectives, without incorporating advisor viewpoints or institutional policy analysis, leaving gaps in understanding systemic constraints. Future studies should employ larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions to enhance generalisability. Comparative research between Vietnamese universities and international

contexts should provide insights into cultural influences on advising practices. Longitudinal studies examining how rapport and planning effectiveness evolve over time should deepen the understanding of the advising's developmental role. Additionally, integrating advisor perspectives and institutional policy analysis should offer a more holistic view of the challenges and opportunities in academic advising.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that no potential conflict of interest exist relating to the authorship or publication of this article.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Dear student,

You are invited to take part in a research study exploring university students' experiences and satisfaction with academic advising, especially through digital communication platforms such as email, video conferencing tools, and messaging apps.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how students interact with their academic advisors through online tools and how these experiences compare with traditional face-to-face advising. Your responses will help identify areas for improving academic advising services at universities.

This questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary, and all responses will remain anonymous and confidential. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your honest opinions and experiences.

If you agree to participate, please proceed to the next section.

Thank you for your valuable input!

1. Demographic Information

Gender:

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Your current GPA:

- 9.0 - 10.0
- 8.0 - below 9.0
- 7.0 - below 8.0
- 6.0 - below 7.0
- 5.0 - below 6.0
- 4.0 - below 5.0
- Below 4.0

2. Interaction frequency with academic advisor during last semester:

- More than 4
- 3 to 4 times
- 1 to 2 times
- None

3. Which of the following digital platforms or messaging apps have you used to communicate with your academic advisor? Select all that apply.

- University email
- Google Chat
- Video conferencing (e.g., Zoom, Teams, Google Meet)
- WhatsApp
- Zalo
- Facebook Messenger
- SMS/text message

Other (please specify): _____

4. Who usually initiates academic advising meetings?

- The academic advisor usually schedules the meeting.
 I (the student) usually schedule the meeting.
 Both the advisor and I initiate meetings equally.

5. The following statements ask about your experiences with digital academic advising. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement based on your personal experiences with digital advising tools at your university. Use the following scale to rate each item:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

There are no right or wrong answers. I am only interested in your honest opinions.

Items	1	2	3	4	5
Advisor-student rapport					
1. I feel more connected to my advisor in face-to-face meetings than through apps.					
2. Communication with my advisor through communication apps allows me to build a good rapport despite being remote.					
3. Email or text-based advising feels impersonal compared to face-to-face meetings.					
4. I trust the guidance I receive from my advisor via digital platforms as much as that given in person.					
Students' perceived effectiveness in academic planning					
5. My advisor helps me set clear academic goals during online advising sessions.					
6. I receive helpful advice on course selection via digital advising channels as I would in person.					
7. I receive helpful advice on the degree requirements via digital advising channels as I would in person.					
8. Face-to-face advising is more effective for planning my academic program than digital advising.					

Thank you for your cooperation!