Client experience of e-counselling

By

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DECLARATION

Student number: **31123198**

I declare that CLIENT EXPERIENCE OF E-COUNSELLING is my own work and that

all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by

means of complete references.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand clients' experience of the e-counselling service provided by the Directorate: Counselling and Career Development (DCCD) at the University of South Africa. The research questions focused on clients' expectations and experience of the e-counselling service. A sequential mixed methods design was employed to collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative data in two phases. Data for phase 1 of this study were collected with an online survey (n = 669) and data for phase 2 were collected with interview questions completed by e-mail (n=10). Quantitative data analysis employed frequency counts and qualitative data analysis was based on procedures outlined by Auerbach and Silberstein (2003). The study shows clients' preference for text-based electronic services and regard the e-counselling service as a valuable addition to services. Factors that contribute to clients' positive and negative experiences of e-counselling were identified. Findings and recommendations of this study may be implemented by the DCCD to enhance the e-counselling service.

Keywords: e-counselling, student counselling, higher education, open and distance learning, client experience

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

There is a lack of research focusing on understanding the experiences of electronic counselling (e-counselling) clients, specifically within the South Africa higher education context. This study investigates the experiences of clients who make use of the e-counselling via the e-mail service provided by the Directorate: Counselling and Career Development (DCCD) at the University of South Africa (Unisa). It is anticipated that the findings and recommendations of this study be implemented by the DCCD to expand and enhance the support services offered to clients by e-mail. By employing mixed methods of enquiry, I attempt to illuminate the experiences and expectations of clients who receive counselling by e-mail.

The research context

Unisa is an open and distance learning (ODL) institution that offers higher education opportunities to almost 400 000 students. The student population is mainly in South Africa (300 221) and Africa (26024), with a small number of students (1746) studying from other countries (University of South Africa, 2012).

The University has accepted an open distance learning model that emphasises the provision of student support to all students regardless of constraints, such as geographical location and with an increasing emphasis on the facilitation of teaching and learning, including student support services through information and communications technologies (ICTs) (University of South Africa, 2008). The implementation of this model has also

required the re-imagining of counselling services provided to students to be relevant within this context.

The DCCD, also referred to from this point as the Directorate, is tasked with the provision of career, academic and personal counselling services to all prospective and registered students. It does so through a network of counsellors who are placed at the various regional hubs and centres of the university across South Africa. The Directorate consists of two main sections, namely Counselling and Career Development and Academic Development. A range of services is offered at the various centres depending on student needs and resources available. Services include face-to-face counselling, workshops, e-mail counselling, online resources and social networking, careers fairs, messages by Short Message System (SMS), telephonic counselling, and responding to counselling enquiries by letter or fax.

The integration of the open resources available on the DCCD website and various printed publications enable the Directorate to provide career and counselling interventions to a large number of students, as well as the broader community. The Directorate's first website was launched in 1997 and contained self-help information to assist users to make career choices and manage their careers more effectively, as well as study skills development. From 1994 to 2007, staff at the DCCD also communicated with clients via e-mail. The use of technology to provide counselling services to students was formalised with the appointment of an e-counsellor in 2008. This role requires conceptualisation and implementation of e-counselling services that encompasses the use of e-mail and web-based interventions. In order to affect economy of scale and render a

service to the largest possible number of clients, use is made of mass-based counselling interventions (available online and offline) that act as self-help materials with the option of making contact with a counsellor, either by e-mail, telephone or in person. Web-based interventions includes the DCCD website and participation in social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The influx of e-mail enquiries together with the changing identity of Unisa as an open distance learning institution necessitated the professionalisation of the e-counselling service. The number of students with access to online services increased annually and with increased numbers, came increased expectations of the type of services that students would want to be able to access online. The Unisa Open and Distance Learning policy (University of South Africa, 2008) emphasises the student-centred nature of interactions with a diverse group of clients. The policy also further underlines the access to learning and services that should be context specific for the student, as well as provide an equal chance for all students to access services normally provided at physical centres. Another important aspect of the policy is the imperative to provide multi-modal student-centred support for students to access how they want to, when they want to, and where they want to.

The role of the researcher as practitioner

While conducting this study between 2012 and 2013, I was employed as the e-counsellor at the DCCD. I was responsible for the implementation of digitally enhanced counselling interventions, including the counselling by e-mail service. Training,

supervision, research and professional development are also related to this responsibility. In order to provide an effective, ethical and responsive service, the undertaking of research projects such as this study, is vitally important. A realistic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the e-counselling service offered by the DCCD informs training and supervision practices that the e-counsellor is responsible for.

Description of e-counselling at Unisa

The main e-counselling service offered during the time of the study is e-mail enquiries sent either directly to the counselling e-mail address (counselling@unisa.ac.za) and enquiries sent from the "Ask a counsellor" form on the DCCD website (http://www.prospectsnet.com/questtime/servlets/GradquestServlet?mode=question&instID=145). The DCCD also makes use of online social networking spaces, namely, Facebook and Twitter, to connect with clients. The nature of these spaces guides the type of content and interaction with users. The DCCD collaborates with the Corporate Communication and Marketing section at Unisa to participate in the Unisa Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/UniversityOfSouthAfrica) and Twitter (https://twitter.com/unisa) pages. These platforms are mainly used for short messages to share information and resources available on the DCCD website and elsewhere, and to inform users of DCCD events.

The e-counselling services are managed by an e-counsellor. Counsellors and assistant student counsellors (ASCs) respond to e-mail enquiries received by clients. The ASCs attend to the majority of e-counselling enquiries with training and supervision

provided by the e-counsellor and a senior student counsellor responsible for training. Responding to e-mail enquiries is the responsibility of all counsellors at all centres. It should however be noted that responding to e-mail enquiries either sent directly to the counselling e-mail address and online enquiries are centralised on the Sunnyside, Pretoria campus. The ASC positions are advertised annually and the minimum requirements include at least 72 hours practical counselling work.

An e-counselling community of practice has evolved over a number of years at Unisa where practitioners actively engage with each other to develop skills needed for this work and to constantly reflect on aspects related to e-counselling within an open and distance learning context. ASCs are appointed for a maximum of two years and this leads to the cyclical nature of training and supervision of practitioners. All ASCs are recruited from peer help volunteers who have been involved with the DCCD for at least one year, and in some cases two. These practitioners receive training and supervision related to basic counselling and referral skills, as well as areas such as employability and study skills assistance to students.

While individuals volunteer as peer helpers, they are provided with relevant training and supervision to explore aspects related to e-counselling. This facilitates an easier transition for peer helpers who are then successful in terms of being appointed as ASCs and expected to deliver the e-counselling service. E-counselling training would usually commence with obtaining a baseline to indicate what kind of training interventions would be needed to develop the skills and competencies needed to provide e-counselling. This baseline is obtained by the completion of a *Competencies for*

Asynchronous E-counselling self-assessment and a number of case studies. The case studies are examples of enquiries received from clients and ASCs have to respond to these enquiries. These case studies are then evaluated and ASCs receive individual and group feedback. Possible further development activities could include more case studies or focusing on specific training in terms of identifying the problem, asking questions or providing specific information. The ASCs who manage to complete these training activities then start responding to client enquiries within the Prospects e-guidance management system, discussed in more detail in the next section.

During the first phase, ASCs save responses on the system leading to peer discussions and are supervised by the e-counsellor or the senior counsellor as part of their training. Individual supervision is provided on a case-by-case study until the ASC functions independently. Further training and supervision takes place in groups or per individual and regular quality checks are completed by the e-counsellor to identify specific issues. Appropriate training interventions then take place to improve practice.

Over a number of years, frequently asked questions have been identified and these questions together with sample responses are placed on an e-guidance Frequently-asked Questions website hosted on Google Sites. All counsellors that provide this service have access to this website. The primary aim of this website is to reduce the time that it takes to answer routine questions since counsellors could copy and paste relevant information from the wiki for a specific individual response. The second aim is to improve quality of responses since the specific answers have been edited to ensure correct language usage. Counsellors are encouraged to contribute arising questions to this website so that all

counsellors could learn from each other. All ASCs are required to complete reflections on their work at the DCCD and these reflections assist practitioners to think about how their work impacts on them, what they learn from specific experiences and how to move forward in terms of development. ASCs also form part of peer teaching groups that form a further support for this community of practice.

Prospects e-guidance management system

The Prospects e-guidance management system is used to manage responses to online enquiries that clients submit on the DCCD website. This service is developed and hosted by Graduate Prospects Ltd (United Kingdom) and allows clients to send online enquiries that are responded to by counsellors. The advantages of this system include keeping track of and responding to online enquiries and the generation of various reports related to the provision of this service. The system also incorporates the collection of data from clients about the effectiveness of the service, both before and after receiving a response from a counsellor.

The DCCD implemented this service in November 2009 and a total number of 7 958 enquiries have been received by the system from that date to end of October 2013. An analysis of the enquiries received from 29 November 2012 to 31October 2013 through the Prospects system (Deyzel, 2013) highlights salient aspects regarding the nature of the service:

- Most enquiries (67%) are related to career information and planning.

- A total of 32% of enquiries are sent during the week after hours or on a Saturday or Sunday.

- ASCs respond to most enquiries (83%).

- Current and previously registered students (35%) send the most enquiries.

- A majority (85%) of e-mails are first-time enquiries.

- Most enquiries (33%) are related to the College of Economic and Management Sciences.

An analysis of client feedback in 2013 revealed that 75% of the participants (n = 130) indicate complete or partial satisfaction with the service (Deyzel, 2013). What is encouraging is that most of the reasons cited by participants for poor service (including vague and impersonal response styles and level of information provided) could be addressed in terms of counselling staff training and supervision. However, it is clear from these results that there are a number of issues in terms of the quality of the service that need to be addressed in order to align the DCCDs service with the expectations of clients. There are also increasing external and institutional imperatives to show the effectiveness and impact of various student support services being provided and as such, it would be important to study clients' experience of the e-counselling service provided.

Rationale for the study

The delivery of professional student counselling, career and development services in South Africa plays in important role in terms of helping learners' transition from secondary to higher education and are seen as important in terms of redressing past

inequities in terms of access to higher education (Government of South Africa, 1997). In most higher education institutions, these services are provided on an individual case basis, in addition to the provision of group sessions and the facilitation of workshops. Recent years have shown that there has been a shift in moving from individual, face-to-face counselling services, to the development of self-help services designed by counselling professionals, with personalised support being available should the need arise (Barnard, Deyzel & Kodisang, 2010; Watts, 2007). The provision of decentralised, technology-enhanced guidance and counselling services forms an important part of the achievement of Unisa institutional goals, as captured in the Open and Distance Learning Policy (University of South Africa, 2008). The ethical provision of these technology-enhanced guidance and counselling services depends on reflective best practices based on research. This Open and Distance Learning policy adopted has significantly shaped the way in which counselling services need to be rendered in this context, and in fact how students are expecting these services to be rendered. Students are encouraged to access learning material and opportunities online and an increasing number of Unisa students are choosing to join Unisia's online learning platform (*myUnisa*) to interact with other students and lecturers. It is therefore increasingly important for the student counselling service to acknowledge the needs of these students to access support services, including career-, academic- and personal guidance online.

Although the DCCD has responded to client and institutional needs in terms of providing a counselling service through e-mail, no systematic study has been undertaken to describe the service and its clients or clients' expectations related to the service and

how that shapes their perception of the service provided. Boyd et al. (cited in Cilliers, et al., 2010) are of the opinion that the undertaking of evaluation studies in terms of measuring the effectiveness of counselling service is a responsible response to the increasing number of students accessing counselling services in general and the changing nature of presenting concerns of students. Watts (2007) urged evidence-based practice for guidance and counselling services that can be achieved with research focusing on user profiles, client needs, service provision costs and the outcomes and impact of these services.

Problem statement

This study explores client expectations and experience of the Prospects e-counselling service provided by the DCCD.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to understand:

1. How clients perceive the e-counselling service, specifically how the e-counselling service met their expectations; and

2. How clients experience the e-counselling service in terms of the nature of the concern, being understood and being provided with relevant support by the counsellor.

Aims of the study

The aims of this study are to:

1. Identify clients' expectations of the e-counselling service;

2. Identify the critical factors that shape clients' perceptions of the service provided; and

3. Contribute to the growing body of literature that addresses various aspects in terms of the use of technology in student counselling within an ODL context.

Research questions

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are clients' expectations of the e-counselling service provided?

2. How do clients experience the e-counselling service provided?

Research objectives

The following research objectives contribute to an understanding of the central research question:

1. To identify factors that contribute to a client's perception of the e-counselling service.

2. To explore how these factors relate to the clients' experience of the e-counselling service provided.

Research methodology

A mixed methods sequential explanatory design was used to first obtain and analyse quantitative feedback from clients and then obtain and analyse qualitative feedback from clients. The rationale for selecting the sequential design for this study was to obtain data from participants about their experience of the e-counselling service provided (phase 1). These results could then be used to identify further individuals to follow-up with in order to gain a better understanding of the factors that contribute to specific perceptions related to their experience of the e-counselling service provided (phase 2). The sample for phase 1 of the study included all clients who had an e-counselling interaction with a counsellor for the duration of the study. The findings from phase 1 informed the selection of participants for phase 2 of the study.

Data collection for phase 1 of this study took place by means of a structured, online survey. The data for phase 2 of the study were collected by means of an e-mail interview.

Data analysis for the study took place in each phase of the study. Data analysis for the first part of the study included a descriptive analysis of the quantitative data and a thematic content analysis for the open-ended questions on the survey. The data analysis of the text for phase 2 of the study employed a thematic content analysis.

Operational definitions

Counselling

The DCCD (Directorate: Counselling and Career Development, 2012, p. 1) defines counselling as follows:

> Counselling is a helping process that takes place in an atmosphere of acceptance, respect, and trust. Counsellors work with students to help them understand themselves, their behaviours, feelings, and relationships. The purpose of counselling is to help students identify their personal strengths and develop ways to deal with their problems

E-counselling

Electronic counselling (e-counselling) within the context of the Unisa DCCD is defined as the "provision of career, academic and personal counselling on digital platforms, including the internet (websites and e-mail) and electronic products (such as CD-ROMs and DVDs)" (Directorate: Counselling and Career Development, 2012b, p. 5).

Clients

Clients refer to individuals who make use of the e-counselling service. These individuals may be Unisa students or not.

Students

Students refer to individuals who are registered for formal or informal programmes at Unisa (unless specified otherwise).

Chapters of the dissertation

Chapter 1: Situating the research problem. This chapter introduced the study and included a background description of the context within which the study takes place. The purpose, aims and objectives of the study were discussed. Operational definitions of key terms were provided.

Chapter 2: Literature review. This chapter provides an overview of the literature related to the use of technology to facilitate counselling and therapy as well as the conceptualisation of definitions of e-counselling together with the benefits and concerns regarding this mode of counselling. A discussion is provided of the findings of previous studies that have explored the perceptions of e-counselling clients.

Chapter 3: Research methodology. This chapter focuses on the mixed methods research design of the study and discusses the sampling strategies used for both phases of the study. This section explains the data collection tools and analysis techniques used for both phases of the study, including measures of trustworthiness, validity and reliability. This chapter also contains an indication of the ethical principles considered for the study.

Chapter 4: Presentation and discussion of findings. This chapter contains the research findings related to the perceptions of clients regarding the e-counselling service provided.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations. This section describes the conclusions in terms of the objectives of the study together with a discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of the study. Recommendations for e-counselling in an open and distance e-learning are made together with possible further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter focuses on a review of the literature related to e-counselling. A diverse range of national and international publications, including academic journals and books was consulted to position this study within the broader field of e-counselling, and specifically e-counselling in a higher education context. The chapter starts with definitions of e-counselling, including the nature of synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication, and then continues with a consideration of the changing role of counsellors and the ethical considerations involved with e-counselling practice. The role of technology in counselling, and specifically, student counselling is reviewed. Previous efficacy studies of e-mail guidance services are examined as part of the theoretical framework for the study, together with Bordin's working alliance model and Roger's person-centred counselling model.

Definitions of e-counselling

Definitions for online counselling or e-counselling can be categorised as inclusive or limited in terms of what kind of online services are included. Boer (2001, p. 29) defines online career counselling as:

> individualised e-mail career counselling, a specialty of WebCounseling, integrating professional career counselling and career planning services and utilizing electronic resources to communicate and deliver services when the client and the counsellor are in separate or remote locations.

This definition focuses on the establishment of a one-to-one relationship between the client and counsellor with the only difference that communication takes place via e-mail. The importance of this client-counsellor relationships is echoed by Kraus, Stricker and Speyer (2010) who emphasise the importance of the therapeutic relationship as more important than the mode of interaction – which may be technology-driven through the choice of the client or through need, based on the circumstances and preferences of the client. Efstathiou (2009, p. 243) uses the term "psychological web consulting" and defines it as "the provision of individually customised information and advice on psychological difficulties".

Electronic guidance and counselling (or e-guidance and e-counselling) within the context of the Unisa DCCD has been defined as the provision of career, academic and personal guidance and counselling on digital platforms, including the internet (websites and e-mail) and electronic products (such as CD-ROMs and DVDs) (Barnard et al., 2010). This definition also serves as the operational definition of e-counselling for this study, as indicated in Chapter 1.

There are different ways in which the Internet could be used to provide guidance services to clients. Barnes and La Gro (as cited in Bimrose, Barnes & Attwell, 2010) identify three uses of the Internet in guidance, namely as a means of communicating, sharing information and developing online resources. Means of communicating include use of social networking services to communicate with clients, as well as the use of e-mail. Sharing information could focus on sharing important event information, and on-

line resources usually focus on self-help resources that clients could download to read offline.

Synchronous and asynchronous modes

Evans (2009) distinguishes between the use of synchronous and asynchronous technologies to facilitate the counselling process. Synchronous technology enables communication in real time and would include instant messaging, voice and/ or video chatting (e.g., through *Skype*), virtual environments (such as *Second Life*) and videoconferencing. A number of advantages related to synchronous counselling sessions have been suggested, namely, the immediacy of the communication leading to increased intimacy between the client and the counsellor, together with the ability to schedule a specific date and time for the conversation (Kraus et al., 2010). Disadvantages to synchronous communication include the loss of a reflective space since both the client and the counsellor need to respond immediately (Kraus et al., 2010).

Asynchronous technology (such as e-mail and online message boards) refers to delayed communication, where there is a delay between exchanges of the parties involved. Kraus et al. (2010) highlights the advantages of asynchronous communication in online counselling, such as the feeling of the availability of the counsellor at any time – even though the response is delayed, the client can sit and send an e-mail when he or she has an immediate need. The delay in terms of the communication should also be seen as an advantage in that both the client and counsellor have time to think and reflect on the process (Kraus et al., 2010).

The disadvantages related to asynchronous modes of counselling include creation of a distanced relationship between client and counsellor (Evans, 2009; Kraus et al., 2010); uncertainty regarding receipt or non-receipt of communication (Jones & Stokes, 2009); boundary issues in terms of limits with regards to the number of interactions that may take place in a given time period (Kraus et al., 2010) and the possibility of changing circumstances for the client (or the counsellor) due to the time delay (Jones & Stokes, 2009).

Why e-counselling?

The reasons why clients either choose or are obliged to access counselling services online have been discussed extensively in the literature (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Evans, 2009; Jones & Stokes, 2009; Kraus et al., 2010). These reasons include limited or non-specialised or no services available in geographical location of client (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Jones & Stokes, 2009; Kraus et al., 2010); client physical constraints such as disability; lack of transport or money; and health issues (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Jones & Stokes, 2009); client need for anonymity (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Evans, 2009; Jones & Stokes, 2009; Kraus et al., 2010); challenges related to multiple responsibilities at home (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Jones & Stokes, 2009); and a preference for online work due to familiarity with the medium (Jones & Stokes, 2009).

From a practitioner perspective, the following reasons have been cited for using online platforms as the counselling medium: the creation of an on-going therapeutic space – the client has a sense of the counsellor always being "there" since clients can

send message to share challenges at any time and do not have to wait until the next

meeting (Kraus et al., 2010); the time delay in asynchronous communications as well as

the availability of all the written communication (e.g., by e-mail) create time for the

counsellor and client to reflect (Jones & Stokes, 2009; Kraus et al., 2010).

Changing role of counsellors

Even though cost benefits could be realised with the use of e-guidance, Barnes

(2008) proposes that although clients will make use of computer-mediated career

resources, there would then be an increased demand in personal services (either by e-mail

or in-person) to help clients to make sense of the online material. The role of the

counsellor or facilitator could therefore shift from the traditional role of in-person

counsellor, to someone who would have to assist clients with using and incorporating

online information into their career decision-making and career planning and

management activities.

Bridle (2010) coined the term "information contextualizer" to describe the role of

mediator between clients and information overload. He indicates how this individual is

able to help clients make sense of information as it pertains to specific problems they

need to solve. This role has become increasingly important to counsellors in terms of

facilitating how clients make sense of an overwhelming amount of information in terms

of making career and life decisions. Boer (2001) discusses the importance of the

practitioner ensuring that he or she is familiar with a broad range of resources online and

offline to link these resources to the specific needs of a client.

Training and supervision of practitioners

The adoption of technology within the realm of counselling has necessitated a new approach to the training and supervision of counsellors. It is the responsibility of practitioners to ensure that they are competent in terms of using various techniques and to be cognisant of the ethical guidelines related to their practice, including the use of technology to mediate counselling and psychotherapy (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Evans, 2009). Within the context of the DCCD, this includes the development of various technological skills, including use of various computer software programmes and online platforms and ethical considerations in terms of online work.

Counsellor experience and perceptions of online counselling

Bambling, King, Reid and Wegner (2008) studied the experience of counsellors who provide online counselling compared to telephone counselling with young people. The authors found that counsellors reported a lower emotional intensity of sessions; a more equal power distribution perception of clients and counsellors spent more time thinking about responses to clients. These counsellors indicated that clients felt emotionally safer to state their concerns. Bambling, et al. (2008) reported challenges to communication (lack of non-verbal feedback and greater potential for misunderstandings) and suggested strategies for managing these challenges (counsellor clarification of misunderstandings and use of text and icons to express emotions). These authors stated

the time delay experienced by both counsellor and client as one of the major disadvantages of the use of asynchronous communication services.

Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, and Gee (2008) conducted a study to gain an understanding of how counsellors-in-training experience their provision of online counselling. Counsellors who participated in this study reported the following challenges related to the provision of on-line counselling: difficulties related to technology (hardware, software and counsellor competency) and connectivity; lack of visual and verbal clues; and the importance of establishing professional boundaries (e.g., limiting the potential for distractions) when interacting with clients online (Haberstroh et al., 2008). Benefits mentioned included greater client freedom because of anonymity of online environments, development of basic clinical skills for the counsellor and more time for the counsellor and the client to reflect on responses (Haberstroh et al., 2008). The counsellors in this study reported that they used cognitive-behavioural counselling and the client-centred approach most often when engaging with clients online.

A study conducted by Hanley (2009) focused on the strength of the relationship between client and counsellor in an online environment (working alliance). The findings from this study supported findings from other studies in terms of why clients find on-line counselling effective. Clients commented on the degree of anonymity provided by online therapy and ease of access (the ability to access services when and where needed). These clients did not report increased miscommunication and some commented on how their counsellor understood them. There is also a greater degree of control reported by clients, for example, the right to tell or not tell the counsellor when one is crying. This study

used the Therapeutic Alliance Quality Scale to determine the quality of the working alliance and found that over 75% of the participants (n = 46) experienced a medium to high level working alliance with the counsellor (Hanley, 2009).

Ethical considerations with regards to e-counselling

The ethical concerns regarding the use of technology in counselling include boundary transgressions in terms of contact that is not contracted (Jones & Stokes, 2009) and interacting with clients on other online platforms (Evans, 2009); ensuring effective client-counsellor relationships that do no harm (Boer, 2001); client anonymity (Kraus et al., 2010); confidentiality and privacy issues (Kraus et al., 2010); informed consent (Anthony & Nagel, 2010); equal access to services (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Boer, 2001); and practitioner competence (Anthony & Nagel, 2010). These risks could however be negated by subscribing to ethical codes as relevant for the context within which the service is provided.

In South Africa, the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) provides some guidance in terms of the use of technology in counselling and therapy in the form of rules of conduct pertaining specifically to the profession of Psychology as captured in the Health Professions Act, 1974 (Act no. 56 of 1974). Additional guidance in terms of the provision of ICT-enabled counselling services could be sought from organisations such as the *Practice of Internet Counseling guidelines* provided by the National Board of Certified Counselors (2013), the American Counselling Association's

Code of Ethics (2005), as well as the Online Therapy Institute's *Ethical Framework for the Use of Technology in Mental Health* (2009).

Boer (2001) argues that clients need to be trusted in terms of indicating with what they feel comfortable with in terms of confidentiality and the ethical issues involved in online counselling. In order to do so, service providers can analyse their clients' responses in terms of the level of confidentiality that they require and how they feel about other ethical issues as relevant to the provision of counselling services (Boer, 2001).

Student counselling services in South Africa

Student counselling, career and development services in South Africa have been defined as "guidance, counselling and therapy to support adjustment, problem solving and decision making with regard to personal, psychological and vocational issues" (Beekman, 2001, p. 6). Cilliers, Pretorius, and van der Westhuizen (2010) highlight the valuable role that student counselling centres in South Africa play in terms of student support and their contribution to the student success and throughput rates. These services are rendered by student counsellors and academic development practitioners at institutions of higher learning and are seen as essential in terms of redressing past inequities in terms of access to higher education (Government of South Africa, 1997).

Most student counselling centres in South Africa are members of the Southern African Association for Counselling and Development in Higher Education (SAACDHE), a professional organisation that provides a platform for discussions and training regarding effective best practice and quality assurance within the field of student

counselling and development services at Higher Education institutions in Southern Africa. SAACDHE defines the role of Counselling and Development Services in higher education as to "provide a comprehensive range of counselling, career and development services to empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st Century individually and corporately" (van Schoor et al., 2007). Specific services rendered by student counselling services include: wellness promotion; development of study, work, skills and guidance; counselling and therapy with regards to career, academic and personal issues (van Schoor et al., 2007).

A study conducted by Cilliers et al. (2010) to benchmark student counselling services in South Africa, found that the focus areas of South African student counselling centres are as follows: crisis intervention (100%); followed by substance abuse counselling; career counselling; psychotherapy; study skills; and generic workshop skills (91% each). The concerns that clients presented with most often were found to be academic problems (64%), relationship problems, and career development issues (55% each), and anxiety (45%) (Cilliers et al., 2010). Student guidance and counselling services play an important role in terms of decreasing student attrition, motivation, and preventing ineffective study choice (Crosier, 2007).

There has also been a shift in conceptualising student counselling services as individual, face-to-face counselling services, to the development of self-help services designed by counselling professionals, with personalised support being available should the need arise (Barnard et al., 2010; Watts, 2007). Flederman (2008) states that the expansion of web-based careers services in South Africa, together with increased access

for users because of national, provincial and local government initiatives provides greater access to information and communications technologies (ICTs).

Technology in counselling

Evans (2009) identified several contexts where online support is offered, including: counselling and therapy; supervision and consultation services; life coaching; careers guidance services; crisis support; employee assistance programmes (EAP); and community resources and support networks. Several reasons for the delivery of online counselling have been posited, including the expansion of services to clients in underserviced rural areas and providing services for clients with disabilities, work and family commitments (Jones & Stokes, 2009).

Concerns regarding the use of technology in counselling

A number of issues have been raised in terms of the practice of online counselling and there is ambivalence towards the use of technology in counselling and psychotherapy. Boer (2001) mentioned several aspects that seem to be salient: the impact of lack of visual cues on the counselling relationship; maintaining confidentiality; lack of research in terms of efficacy of online counselling; and technology issues and training of counsellors. Other concerns that have been mentioned include lack of non-verbal communication cues that may lead to inaccuracies in perceived meaning and misunderstandings (Evans, 2009; Kraus et al., 2010; Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004); reported lack of interaction with the client with the resultant challenge of clearly

identifying the need(s) of the client (Madahar & Offer, 2004); time delay where the

counsellor or the client cannot know what has happened in the time between e-mails

(Jones & Stokes, 2009; Rochlen et al., 2004); confidentiality and privacy concerns (Jones

& Stokes, 2009; Rochlen et al., 2004); and how to manage emergency situations

(Rochlen et al., 2004).

Advantages related to use of technology in counselling

Fletcher-Tomenius and Vossler (2009) found that the anonymity of online

relationships enabled both clients and counsellors to establish trust-based relationships at

a faster rate than in face-to-face counselling situations. Users have reported that

asynchronous ways of communication has allowed for deeper expression of feelings and

thoughts, and facilitated personal disclosure because of the distance and anonymity of e-

counselling services (Efstathiou, 2009; Richards, 2009). These observations have been

linked to the disinhibiting effect (expressing oneself without holding back) that has been

observed in relation to online behaviour (Kraus et al., 2010; Rochlen et al., 2004). The

creation of a reflective space where both the counsellor and the client have time to reflect

on and re-read communications is also suggested as an advantage of especially online,

asynchronous communications (Boer, 2001; Jones & Stokes, 2009; Rochlen et al., 2004).

Practical advantages for accessing online counselling that have been proposed

include accessibility for clients in remote areas and clients with disabilities (Anthony &

Nagel, 2010; Evans, 2009; Jones & Stokes, 2009; Rochlen et al., 2004); overcoming

personal barriers to accessing counselling due to lack of confidence or other barriers

(Evans, 2009; Jones & Stokes, 2009); and time management in terms of balancing work and other commitments (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Evans, 2009). Rochlen et al. (2004) propose that the multimedia capabilities of online communication (i.e., the ability to include links to other information, video and images as well as online assessments) provide the online practitioner with a virtually unlimited number of resources to support the provision of counselling.

Jones and Stokes (2009) also make the point that being online is the new normal – it is where people live and choose to communicate. This links to the observations from practitioners such as Boer (2001) that clients are already online and prefer to access a number of services, including counselling online. Accessing online counselling services should therefore increasingly be seen as a choice or preference and not necessarily due to having no other option.

Technology in student counselling

The use of technology to provide guidance and counselling services to students at institutions of higher learning is widespread and some studies have been conducted to investigate various aspects related to these services, such as, features and benefits of online counselling (Richards, 2009); evaluating the outcomes of web counselling (Efstathiou, 2009); and students' preferred method of receiving career services (Venable, 2007).

Efstathiou & Kalantzi (as cited in Efstathiou, 2009) state that the reasons provided by users and institutions for the use of electronic guidance include appreciation by users

for the usability and speed of the service. Offer (2004) adds that it provides counselling services to under-served users who cannot access services otherwise. Clients have cited several reasons for preferring online counselling, including convenience, the potential for daily contact, affordability and the ability to discuss sensitive issues sooner than in a face-to-face session (Bambling et al., 2008). King et al., (2006) reported that clients felt safer within an online environment to disclose information because of the nature of online communication that provides a greater sense of privacy in contrasted with a telephone call. It has been reported that students at higher education institutions use e-counselling services to address a diverse variety of needs, including career development, academic skills and personal issues (Deyzel, 2010; Madahar & Offer, 2004). Venable (2007) found that most first year students preferred e-mail to any other method of delivery for career choice interventions regardless of their level of e-mailing experience.

It has been found that university students often present concerns that could be addressed by brief, once-off interventions (Efstathiou, 2009; Madahar & Offer, 2004). This is confirmed by the experience of the DCCD, where the majority of clients who make use of the e-counselling services (through Prospects) are once-off communications. Efstathiou (2009) suggests a number of best practices in terms of providing e-guidance.

Answers to concerns could be published anonymously on a website for future users to read. It is further recommended that users should understand whether or not they are eligible for the service and if their concern is appropriate for this type of intervention. Furthermore, users should be notified of emergency contact details for other mental health services; users should be informed of the service provider's details and credentials

and a secure method of submitting data should be used to ensure user anonymity and confidentiality. Response time to enquiries should preferably be within 48 hours. In terms of referrals, the author recommends that practitioners should make use of a network of other service providers to be able to refer users effectively, that other forms of service provision should be available (for example in person counselling or groups) and that links to external websites should be provided with a disclaimer. Users should also be given the opportunity to provide feedback so that the service could be evaluated.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks related to this study

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011, Chapter 2, Theoretical foundations header, para. 1) define a theoretical framework (or foundation) in mixed methods as a "stance (or lens or standpoint) taken by the researcher that provides direction for many phases of a mixed methods project". Evans, Coon and Ume (2011) assessed the use of theoretical frameworks in mixed methods research and conclude that these frameworks play a role to provide results based on existing theories, increase the credibility of studies and advance the transfer of results to practice.

In this study, I employed different theories to guide the study, namely working alliance theory, person-centred counselling and evaluation studies of online counselling. A description of the major variables and concepts of each theory, together with an indication of how these informed the questions and procedures of the current study follows.

Bordin's Theory on the Working Alliance

The working alliance is a term used to describe the nature of the relationship between the client and the therapist and "represents interactive, collaborative elements of the relationship (i.e., therapist and client abilities to engage in the tasks of therapy and to agree on the targets of therapy) in the context of an affective bond or positive attachment" (Constantino, Castonguay & Schut, 2002). Bordin (1979) conceptualised three dimensions of the working alliance, namely, agreement on the goals and tasks in therapy, as well as the development of a bond between therapist and client. The working alliance as a foundation for change, regardless of therapeutic approach, is well acknowledged within the psychological community (Bordin, 1979; Castonguay, Constantino & Holtforth, 2006). The strength of the working alliance is also seen as a strong determinant for the effectiveness of any therapeutic approach (Bordin, 1979).

Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2001) presented a summary of the behaviours of therapists that lead to a breakdown in therapy. The behaviours are divided in two distinct categories, namely, the therapist does something that the client does not want (e.g., unwanted advice, not focusing, misinterpretation or the client expects something that the therapist does not do, misreading the importance of issues). The personal attributes of a therapist that seem to contribute negatively to the working alliance include uncertainty (does not structure therapy), being distracted (superficial interventions) and rigidity (provide too much structure) (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2001).

The positive therapist behaviours that seem to strengthen the therapeutic working alliance include: engendering trust and confidence; being dependable and trustworthy;

expertness; and the ability to understand and relate to the client (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003). Duff and Bedi (2010) found that specific counsellor behaviours such as asking questions, identifying and reflecting on client feelings, making positive comments about the client and validating the experience of the client contribute to an effective working alliance.

Several studies have been conducted to explore the relationship between client expectations before therapy and how these link to the working alliance. Patterson, Uhlin and Anderson (2008) found that clients who expected to take responsibility to work in therapy and commit to the therapeutic process established a more effective working alliance with the therapist. A client who expects an egalitarian relationship with the therapist is more likely to work with the therapist, as opposed to being passive due to an expectation of an unequal relationship (Al-Darmaki & Kivlighan, 1993).

There is a growing body of research that has confirmed the establishment of effective working alliances in online therapeutic relationships. Cook and Doyle (2002) found that a strong working alliance was established between clients and therapists after online sessions and that participants (n = 14) found online counselling to be a positive experience, with particular advantages (as compared to face-to-face counselling) where empathic relationships could be established and nurtured. Hanley (2009) reported a 76,1% medium or high satisfaction rate with the working alliance established during online counselling (n = 46). Studies have also confirmed a working alliance rating for online counselling or therapy equivalent to those for face-to-face sessions (Prado & Meyer, 2003; Reynolds, Stiles & Grohol, 2006).

The working alliance theory contributed to the conceptualisation and approach of this study, specifically in terms of the development of the survey used during data collection and for the interpretation of the findings as discussed in Chapter 4.

Person-centred counselling (Carl Rogers)

Person-centred counselling is an approach developed by Carl Rogers and the goal is to help the client deal with problems more effectively with an emphasis on self-directed change (Gladding, 2000). Rogers identified three core conditions of counselling to bring about change, namely, empathy, unconditional positive regard (accepting the client as he or she presents themselves) and congruence (genuineness) (Gladding, 2000). Corey (2005) further proposes that change in person-centred counselling is also effected through the therapist showing realness and genuine caring, being respectful and illustrating non-judgmental understanding. The role of honesty in all interactions with the client, including listening, accepting, respecting and responding is emphasised in person-centred counselling (Corey, 2005).

Evans (2009) emphasises the importance of empathy in any counselling relationship (including counselling facilitated by technology) and provides guidelines on how a practitioner may encourage empathic understanding via e-counselling. This effective practice is supported by Jones and Stokes (2009) who concludes that e-mail counselling interactions should convey "warmth, genuineness, empathy, unconditional positive regard and psychological contract to establish an appropriate working relationship" (p. 17).

The person-centred approach forms the basis for the training and further supervision of the volunteer peer helpers for the DCCD. Most of the ASCs who are appointed to assist with e-counselling are previous peer help volunteers who have been trained according to the person-centred model. The person-centred counselling approach therefore informed the development of the survey used for data collection, as well as framing the analysis of the data to explore the participants' experiences of the e-counselling service provided.

Evaluation of e-mail guidance services

The question is not whether or not student counselling services should be provided electronically, but rather how it can be done more effectively and appropriately in terms of clients' expectations and needs. To this end, a number of studies have been undertaken to develop an understanding of the efficacy of online counselling programmes, including determining client expectations and needs. Michaud and Colom (2003) used two self-administered online questionnaires to evaluate users' satisfaction with an online health education website, as well as whether the information provided has led to changes in behaviour. The authors found that clients were satisfied with the content of the responses provided to them (83%), felt understood by the practitioner who responded to them (92%) and that their interactions with the service have led to changes in behaviour (55%) (Michaud & Colom, 2003).

Efstathiou (2009) reported an evaluation of a web-based consulting service by Efstathiou and Kalantzi in 2006 for students at the University of Greece. Two

anonymous surveys were used to determine the efficacy of the service for users of the website and users who submitted a question. Users were asked to provide information about the response received or the information accessed online in terms of quality of information or answer received; usefulness of suggestions provided and the response time; whether or not they would use the service again and/or recommend to others; the characteristics they consider important when choosing the service and the outcomes of the intervention. This study found that users of the consulting service rated the quality of the answers as well as the counsellor's understanding of the issues favourably (more so than participants who only used the self-help information on the website) and that users of the consulting service were less concerned about misunderstandings than those who only visited the website. Furthermore, users provided the following reasons for using the online service: ease of use, speed, anonymity and hesitation with regards to traditional counselling services.

Richards (2009) reported findings from two studies to explore the features and benefits of a mental health service for students at Trinity College. The first study consisted of a content analysis of the questions sent by clients through the online service and the second study used an established client satisfaction survey (Client Satisfaction Survey – Short Form) to measure clients' satisfaction with the service provided. The first study found that clients presented with similar concerns online and face-to-face; that clients view writing as therapy and value the establishment of anonymity for online interactions. The second study found that the mean satisfaction rate with the service overall was 58% (n = 7).

Madahar and Offer (2004) reported the customer service feedback methods used by five higher education institutions in the United Kingdom that have made use of the Prospects e-guidance management system. Evaluation of customer service was through online questionnaires that were sent to clients through the Prospects system after receiving a response. The aspects of customer service that were evaluated included: usefulness of responses and resources provided; comprehensiveness of responses; user-friendliness of the system; reasons for using the online service; use of system in future; preferred method of communication with a counsellor; response time and overall value of the service. As part of the same study, Madahar and Offer (2004) analysed the content of e-counselling sessions and found that guidance outcomes were achieved in these sessions, namely the narrowing down of options (focus); obtaining information about options (information); being more informed (realism); awareness of more options (scope); and knowing what to do next (tactics).

Analyses of client feedback related to the e-counselling service at Unisa take place on a quarterly basis. A recent analysis of client feedback (Deyzel, 2013) found that most participants (78%) agreed that the e-counselling service is valuable. Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with the resources provided in the response and 63% of the participants were satisfied with this aspect (n = 190).

An analysis of the mentioned studies provided me with guidance in terms of compiling the survey items for collecting data during phase 1 of the study and informed the discussion of the results.

Summary

In this chapter, this study was located within the context of the broader field of e-counselling and the use of technology in counselling. Two different modes of online interaction, namely synchronous and asynchronous, were discussed, together with the advantages and disadvantages of each. The importance of ethics and counsellor training and readiness, and counsellor perceptions in terms of provision of online counselling was identified. Finally, the use of technology in counselling, and the use of technology in student counselling, together with related advantages and disadvantages were considered. The next chapter focuses on a description of the research approach.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH APPROACH

In this chapter, the mixed methods research design and methods of enquiry employed for this study are discussed. This chapter focuses on the research design description, rationale, ethical considerations, and the data collection and analysis methods employed for phases 1 and 2 of the study.

Chosen approach and research design

Creswell (2003) defines research design as "plans and the procedures for research that span the decisions from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis (p. 3). The nature of the problem or topic to be investigated or explored determines the design that the researcher will choose.

Definitions of mixed method research

Several authors have suggested definitions of mixed methods research. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007, p. 123) conducted an analysis of mixed methods research definitions provided by researchers who use this approach, and proposed the following definition:

> Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g. use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) suggest that the definition of mixed methods research include the core characteristics of this type of research, namely, collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data; integration of both of these forms of data either concurrently, sequentially or one embedded in the other. Following this, choosing which form of data will take preference, given the research question; research from a specific worldview and theoretical approach and use of a research design that incorporates these aspects and acts as a plan to implement the research study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Collins, Onwuegbuzie and Sutton (2006, p. 69) discuss the following steps in mixed method studies: determine the goal of the study; formulate research objective(s); determine the rationale for using mixed methods; determine the purpose of using mixed methods; formulating the research question(s); decide on sampling design; select the mixed methods research design; collect data; analyse data; validate data; interpret data; write the report and reformulate the research question(s).

Advantages of mixed methods research

Some of the advantages associated with mixed methods research include enhanced findings due to how the deficiencies associated with one approach (quantitative or qualitative) could be offset by the other approach; the ability to answer research questions that only one approach cannot answer and the incorporation of different philosophical world views to create a multidimensional understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Yardley & Bishop, 2007). Bergman (2008) proposes that

mixed methods provide opportunities for researchers to develop skills in multiple methods and that the pragmatic philosophy of mixed methods research fits in well with the requirements of donor organisations' needs for practical answers to research problems.

Challenges related to mixed methods research

According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), the following challenges are associated with mixed methods research: need for advanced researcher skills; considerations in terms of resources such as extended study time and the associated costs; and managing the "advocacy role" of the researcher in terms of convincing others of the value of mixed methods approaches, regardless of the challenges In addition, Yardley and Bishop (2007) discuss the challenge of finding an integrated framework for mixed methods research that acknowledges how to integrate findings from the qualitative and quantitative components of a mixed methods study, especially in the case of contradictory findings. For the purposes of this study, the theoretical frameworks discussed enabled me to integrate the findings from phases 1 and 2.

Characteristics of sequential explanatory design

The sequential research design involves two distinct phases. During phase 1, the researcher collects and analyses the quantitative data. The quantitative data collection and analysis that takes place during phase 1, guides the researcher in terms of selecting further cases for phase 2. Phase 1 therefore informs the design for phase 2. The

quantitative phase provides the researcher with a broad understanding of the topic and the qualitative phase allows for further exploration of the themes identified from the quantitative phase (Ivankova, Creswell & Stick, 2006).

This process can also be reversed whereby, qualitative data collection and analysis is completed before quantitative data collection and analysis (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The identification of broad themes from phase 1 (qualitative phase) then informs the structuring of questions for a survey that will be conducted during phase 2 of the study.

The choice of design depends on various aspects, such as the timing of the phases, the weight allocated to each phase and the "mixing" of the two phases (that is, how the quantitative and the qualitative phase will connect) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Ivankova et al., 2006). Ivankova et al. (2006) proposed some of the issues involved with this type of design include: the weight that is assigned to the quantitative and qualitative collection and analysis; how the data and results are connected; and at which stage of the research process. The decision regarding the prioritisation of which phase of the study (quantitative or qualitative) can be made by the researcher either before the study commences, or could be made during the study based on the research questions as well as the scope of the research.

Ivankova et al. (2006) indicated that a researcher could decide to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative questions in terms of the first stage of the data collection. The findings from phase 1 of the study could also inform the development of phase 2 of the study. In this case, the interview questions used during phase 2 of the study would be

based on the outcomes of phase 1. One of the advantages of using this particular research design is that the phases are distinct and therefore relatively easy to implement. Some of the disadvantages include the length of time and resources needed to conduct two phases of data collection and analysis (Ivankova et al., 2006). Further challenges related to specifically the sequential design include, extended time to collect data for first the quantitative and then the qualitative phase; ethical clearance may be difficult to obtain due to unknowns related to the qualitative phase (for example, who the participants for this phase will be); how to choose what findings from the first phase to expand on during the second qualitative phase and which participants to select for the second phase (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011).

Research design for this study

The sequential design employed in this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Ivankova et al., 2006) first allowed for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data with a survey that could address the research questions related to the study. Phase 2 of the study allowed for further exploration of the aspects related to findings from phase 1, and to explain and expand on findings from phase 1. The findings from phase 1 enabled me to formulate specific aspects related to phase 2 of the study, namely, to design the questions for the interview by e-mail (data collection for phase 2) and to sample participants for phase 2 of the study. The quantitative and qualitative methods carried equal weighting in that both methods allowed me to address the research problem.

Visual representation of sequential mixed methods research design

      Ivankova et al. (2006) recommend that researchers provide a graphical

representation of how a mixed methods research study will be conducted and at what

points the data collection and analysis of the data will take place. The graphical

representation that follows provides a valuable structure for conducting this type of

research.

Phase   **Procedure**   **Product**

Phase 1: Quantitative and qualitative data collection

- Web-based survey (n=669)
- Numeric data in tables

Phase 1: Quantitative and qualitative data analysis

- Data screening
- Frequencies
- Coding and thematic analysis
- Excel for Mac 2011

- Descriptive statistics
- Codes and themes
- Visual model

Connect phase 1 and phase 2

- Purposeful selection of participants based on "value of service" rating
- Develop interview questions

- Cases
- Interview protocol

Phase 2: Qualitative data collection

- E-mail interviews with 10 participants

- Text data (e-mails)

Phase 2: Qualitative data analysis

- Coding and thematic analysis
- Dedoose web application

- Codes and themes
- Visual model

Integration of phase 1 and phase 2 results

- Interpretation and explanation of the quantitative and qualitative results

- Presentation and discussion of results
- Implications
- Recommendations for future research

Figure 1. Visual representation of research design.

Rationale for research design

Researchers have different rationales for using a mixed methods approach, including expanding on inadequate data sources provided by only one approach (either quantitative or qualitative); further explanation of the data results of only one approach; expanding exploratory findings to make generalisations to the population; enhancing a study with a second method and being able to integrate research for longer-term and multi-method projects (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Collins et al. (2006) identified a further number of rationales for mixed method research studies, namely, to specifically recruit an enriched sample; to maximise the appropriateness of an instrument for a study; to increase treatment integrity (the extent to which the treatment is implemented as planned); and to enhance the significance of research findings.

The rationale for selecting the sequential design for this study was to obtain data from participants about their experience of the e-counselling service provided and to use these results to identify further individuals to follow-up with. The aim is to better understand the factors that contribute to specific perceptions related to their experience of the e-counselling service provided. The sequential design was chosen due to the advantages related to this design, namely easier implementation due to two distinct phases that can be managed separately by an individual researcher (as opposed to more complex designs that are better implemented by a team of researchers); a research report with a separate section for quantitative and qualitative phases, making it easier to read for the audience; and allowing for a second, qualitative phase that is determined by the outcome of the first phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Research approach

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011, Chapter 2, Philosophy and Worldviews section, para. 2) propose: "researchers bring to their inquiry a worldview composed of beliefs and assumptions about that knowledge that informs their studies" and identify four possible worldviews that are relevant to conducting mixed methods studies. These four worldviews are postpositivist, constructivist, participatory and pragmatist.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) propose that the pragmatist worldview is specifically relevant to mixed methods research since the focus is on using multiple methods to obtain answers to questions that encourage implementation in practical contexts. I chose the pragmatist worldview to frame this study since this facilitated the collection of data from multiple sources and provided a strong link between the study and the context in which it was performed and where the results will inform practice directly.

<center>**Ethical considerations**</center>

For the purpose of this study, it was important to consider ethical research principles as indicated by the HPCSA and the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics. The research was conducted by a Master's level student who has experience in the research methods used under the supervision of a supervisor from the Department of Psychology, who has experience in the principles of research methodology and practice.

All participants were provided with a description of the purpose of this study and what the information will be used for; benefits of the study in terms of this particular

community and in the broader context of psychology; and that their right in terms of confidentiality will be respected. Participants were referred to the DCCD should they have any further specific counselling enquiries. The Unisa Professional and Administrative Research Group (PARG) provided ethical clearance for phase 1 of the research (see Appendix F) and the Unisa Department of Psychology provided ethical clearance for phase 2 of the study (see Appendix G).

Data was kept confidential in a password-protected encrypted file and participants' identifying information stored separately. All data was aggregated before reporting so that no individual could be traced through his or her responses.

Procedures for Phase 1

Phase 1: Data collection

Data collection for phase 1 of this study was completed by means of an online structured, self-administered survey. The purpose of survey research is to be able to collect data from a sample of a population with the intention of extrapolating the findings from the survey to the broader population. Goddard and Villanova (2006) cite some reasons for conducting survey research including, evaluation of programmes and policies, gathering information about a specific topic and evaluating decisions. The rationale for using a survey for this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of e-counselling provided by the DCCD, as well as explore information related to the provision of this service.

Advantages of online surveys. Some of the advantages related to online research data gathering include access to participants who might not be able to participate

because of distance; access to larger groups of participants and richer information because of the nature of synchronous communication that allows for greater reflection (James & Busher, 2009). Further advantages of conducting online surveys include reduced costs, the potential for collecting large amounts of data in a relatively short time and reduced data input errors since participants complete the questionnaire in an electronic format (Ritter & Sue, 2007; Russell & Purcell, 2007). It has also been reported that participants tend to write more, and more openly for open-ended questions when completing an online questionnaire (James & Busher, 2006; Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). Another advantage mentioned by Russell and Purcell (2007) is that participants have 24-hour access to the questionnaire, meaning that they could complete the survey at their own convenience.

Disadvantages of online surveys. Challenges related to online research methods include little control over extraneous variables, such as the environment of the participant and varied computer hardware, software and reliable access to the Internet; lower response rates and maintaining rapport with participants especially with asynchronous e-mail interviews (James & Busher, 2009). Further disadvantages identified by Ritter and Sue (2007), include limiting the population and a computer as well as non-completion due to technical difficulties or unfamiliarity with the technology (Ritter & Sue, 2007). Russell and Purcell (2007) also mention the lack of control of the researcher over the environment of the respondent, which could have an impact on how they respond to the questionnaire and therefore on the internal and statistical validity of the study. For this

study, it was reasonably assumed that participants would be able to access and complete the online survey since this is the mode in which they accessed the e-counselling service.

Survey instrument. The instrument used to collect the data was designed for the Directorate's e-counselling service, namely the Prospects e-guidance platform. This online survey instrument is based on the literature reviewed by Efstathiou (2009); Madahar and Offer (2004); and Richards (2009), as discussed in Chapter 2. I also relied on my experience and theoretical knowledge as an e-counsellor to evaluate the questions used previously in similar studies.

The online survey (see Appendix C) has been used as a data collection tool by the DCCD since the inception of the Prospects e-guidance service and has been revised several times on the basis of feedback from Unisa e-counselling practitioners, as well as previous participants. The survey consists of ten Likert-type items and three open-ended questions. The Likert-type items ask participants to rate each item on the following scale: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree or strongly disagree, where strongly agree equals a value of 5 and strongly disagree a value of 1. Specifically, the following items were covered in the survey:

Section A: Background information regarding the student type (e.g., current or prospective student) and nature of the original enquiry (e.g., career planning, study counselling or personal counselling).

Section B: This section contained closed- and open-ended questions to measure the participants' experience with aspects related to the e-counselling interaction, namely, to what extent the response helped them to: gain clarity with regards to the original

concern; understand the next steps to be taken; and understand their concern better.

Participants were also asked to indicate the helpfulness of resources provided or referred

to, as well as their satisfaction with the response time and the overall value of the e-

counselling service as an addition to the counselling services already offered. The

researcher also thought it relevant to explore participants' preference for the mode of

counselling service. Therefore, the participants were asked to rate their preference for

various modes of counselling (e.g., e-mail, telephone, face-to-face etc.).

The open-ended questions asked participants to share what additional information

they would have appreciated, their reason for the rating of the value of the service, as

well as additional comments about their experience and perception of the e-counselling

service. The on-line survey was designed on the Prospects e-guidance management

software. Appendix B contains a table with details for each item in the survey. The

invitation to participate was sent within two days to all clients that received a response

from a counsellor. Data for this phase were collected from 11 August 2012 to 10 August

2013.

Phase 1: Population

The population for the study are clients that used this particular e-counselling

service for the period of 11 August 2012 to 10 August 2013. During this period, 6 785

responses were sent in response to enquiries received. The characteristics of this

population that is known are the registration status, College of interest or registration, and

nature of the concern. These characteristics are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3 below.

Table 1

Registration status of population (n=6785)

Registration status	Frequency	Percentage
Currently registered at Unisa	22 096	30.89%
Prospective student	1309	19.29%
An applicant	1256	18.51%
Previously registered at Unisa	1075	15.84%
An interested party	880	12.97%
Currently registered at another tertiary institution	669	2.49%

Table 2

College related to enquiry of population (n=6785)

College related to enquiry	Frequency	Percentage
College of Economic & Management Sciences	2288	33.72%
College of Human Sciences	1586	23.38%
Other	1219	17.97%
College of Science, Engineering & Technology	685	10.10%
College of Law	566	8.34%
College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences	204	3.01%
Short Learning Programme	154	2.27%
Graduate School for Business Leadership	83	1.22%

Table 3

Presenting concerns of population (n=6785)

Presenting concern	Frequency	Percentage
Career-related enquiry	4875	71.85%
Other	1392	20.52%
Personal issues	242	3.57%
Study skills	226	3.33%
Numeracy skills	30	0.44%
Reading and writing skills	20	0.29%

Phase 1: Sample

The sampling design for phase 1 of the study was a single stage design in that data was collected at a specific point in time. A non-random, convenience sample was selected, based on the availability of the participants. All clients who submitted an enquiry to and received a response through the Prospects e-counselling service between 11 August 2012 to 10 August 2013 were invited to participate in the research study about their experience of the e-counselling provided. All responses received (n = 669) were included in the sample for this study.

Convenience sampling is one form of nonprobability sampling and is mostly used where easy access to a sample is required (Battaglia, 2008). There are several reasons for the use of nonprobability sampling, including reduced costs, the nature of the research

that does not need to extrapolate findings to the population and a population that may be less defined (as for online surveys) (Battaglia, 2008).

Phase 1: Data analysis

Data analysis for the quantitative data of phase 1 of this study employed descriptive statistics, specifically the use of frequency counts to analyse the demographic data and the participants' answers to separate items on the questionnaire. Data analysis for the qualitative data of phase 1 of this study was based on procedures outlined by Auerbach and Silberstein (2003). These procedures start with the identification of text that is relevant to one's research concerns. Then, words or phrases that participants use to express similar ideas are identified and named, followed by the identification and naming of themes through the grouping of repeating ideas (Auerbach & Silberstein, 2003).

For this study, I created extracts from the data in the Dedoose web application (SocioCultural Research Consultants, 2013). Text was selected when relevant to the research questions and study objectives. These extracts were then exported to Microsoft Excel for Mac 2011. Next, repeating ideas were recorded by grouping the extracts that were related to each other and themes identified from the grouped repeating ideas.

Phase 1: Validity

Validity in survey research can be measured in terms of content validity, criterion-related validity and construct validity (Knapp, 2008). According to Knapp

(2008) content validity is the extent to which experts agree to the validity of items in the survey and these items measure what the survey measures; criterion-related validity is measured by comparing a survey with established surveys; and construct validity refers to the extent that scores obtained on a measurement relates to what is expected, based on established literature.

Content-related validity was employed for this study. When the Prospects e-guidance service was first implemented, content-related validity was used to create and select items for the survey. Firstly, previous questionnaires used for the Prospects e-guidance management system in other higher education contexts were consulted. Specific attention was paid to items in these questionnaires that would enable the DCCD to gather feedback about the service in order to effect changes to the training and supervision of practitioners. Furthermore, a literature review of measurement of e-counselling outcomes for clients was conducted to identify aspects to be evaluated. A number of style guidelines suggested by James and Busher (2006) were included in guiding the design of the online questionnaire. This included the use of only a few questions per screen, using matrix-type questions sparingly, and using restrict response choices sparingly (James & Busher, 2006). Refer to Appendix C for a screenshot image of the online survey for this study.

Procedures for Phase 2

Analysis of the data for phase 1 of the study informed phase 2 of the study in terms of selection of participants and phrasing of questions for the e-mail interviews.

During phase 2 of the study, participants were interviewed by e-mail to explore their expectations of the e-counselling service.

Phase 2: Data collection

Data for phase 2 was collected via structured interview questions completed by e-mail. These questions were structured once the data of the qualitative survey was analysed so that the interview questions could focus on the aspects that need to be explored further. This included understanding what clients expect from the e-counselling service, as well as a further exploration of the value of the service in terms of contributing to the study's success.

The data collection for this phase focused on further exploring participants' experiences and expectations and as such semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were used to explore these perceptions. The questions were developed by me to expand on the findings of phase 1 and to explore the expectations of the e-counselling service. Appendix E contains the questions that participants were asked to comment on. Participants were requested to complete these questions via e-mail, giving them time to think and reflect on how they would want to structure their responses. It is assumed that since participants made use of the e-counselling service (that takes place via e-mail), they were familiar with the e-mail medium of communication and will be comfortable in terms of responding to questions in writing.

Phase 2: Selection of participants

Teddlie and Yu (2007) emphasise that both purposive and probability sampling aim to answer specific research. Purposive sampling aims to select smaller number of cases that can provide greater depth of information and can collect the most information for the topic (Patton, 1999; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). For phase 2 of this study, purposive sampling was used to select participants who could reasonably provide information about the topic. The rationale for selecting purposive sampling was that it was expected that the research question will be addressed by the data collected from this sample of participants.

This sampling method also links with sequential mixed methods sampling, where the results for the phase 1 informs the selection of the sample for phase 2. Initially, only those participants who indicated on the online survey that they strongly agree or disagree with the item, "Ask a counsellor is a valuable addition to the counselling service provided by Unisa" were invited to participate in phase 2 of the study. Due to the low response rate (only one participant replied), the researcher then extended the invitation to all participants who replied to the survey employed in phase 1 from May-October 2013. This led to ten participants completing the interview questions by e-mail for phase 2 of this study.

Phase 2: Data analysis

Data analysis for the interview data for phase 2 of this study was based on procedures outlined by Auerbach and Silberstein (2003). I started with creating extracts

from the text based on the relevance to the study's objectives and research questions in

the Dedoose web application (SocioCultural Research Consultants, 2013). Next, these

excerpts were exported to Microsoft Excel for Mac 2011. Finally, repeating groups were

identified and named, followed by the identification of themes from the repeating groups.

Phase 2: Validity

Yeh and Inman (2007) define validity or trustworthiness in qualitative approaches

as "authenticity and consistency of interpretations grounded in data" (p. 386). Creswell

and Miller (2010) identify a number of strategies used to ensure validity in qualitative

research, including member checking, triangulation, thick descriptions, peer reviews and

external audits. The choice of validity approach can furthermore be related to the "lens"

through which the research is viewed (researcher, participants and external audiences), as

well as the paradigm of the researchers (Creswell & Miller, 2010, p. 125).

I relied on triangulation and the audit trail as procedures for validity for this study.

These validity procedures have been proposed for studies grounded in the postpositivist

or systemic paradigm (Creswell & Miller, 2010).

Triangulation. Patton (1999) proposes triangulation by using different data

collection methods as one of the methods to verify qualitative analysis. The mixed

methods approach applied to this study provided me with quantitative and qualitative data

collected during the two phases of the study. Quantitative and qualitative data were

connected in phase 1 of the study. The data and findings from phase 1 were further

connected with data and findings from phase 2 of the study.

Audit trail. The audit trail is the researcher's careful and clear indication of the research completed and how research decisions were taken. Creswell and Miller (2010) suggest the use of a research log, and documenting all research procedures accurately as ways of establishing an audit trail. The use of the Dedoose web application (SocioCultural Research Consultants, 2013) for this study enabled me to generate metadata about the analysis of the data for this study. These are the categories and themes that were assigned for this study, together with memos about themes and sub-themes identified.

Summary

This chapter focused on the research procedures employed for this study, including a discussion of the sequential mixed methods research design and the rationale for selecting this design for this study. A description of the data collection and analysis procedures followed for phase 1 and 2 of the study was provided, together with procedures for ensuring validity and trustworthiness. The chapter that follows contains the findings and discussion of the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter contains the study's findings and the discussions thereof. The first two sections focus on the findings from phase 1 of the study. Here, the background characteristics of the participants are presented and discussed first. This is followed by the findings related to the participants' experience of the e-counselling service provided.

The second section centres on the findings for phase 2 of the study and provides a synthesis of the findings of this phase. Here, the results of the e-mail interviews with key informants are described in terms of the background of the informants; and the interviewees' general views of the e-mail services provided by Unisa for study-related support and purpose of a counselling service. Throughout the chapter, excerpts from the participants' feedback are provided as they appeared in the text electronically as submitted by the participants. Participants are not identified to ensure anonymity.

Background characteristics of the participants

Registration status

Many of the participants (35%) indicated that they were registered students at the time of the study (11 August 2012-10 August 2013). This indicates that 65% of participants were not registered Unisa students, but prospective students, applicants, previously registered students, alumni or registered at another institution. Table 4 that follows provides an overview of the participants' registration status.

Table 4

Registration status (n=669)

Registration status	Frequency	Percentage
A currently registered student	235	35.13%
A prospective student	164	24.51%
An applicant	136	20.33%
A previously registered student	86	12.86%
Other	28	4.19%
An alumni	11	1.64%
A currently registered student at another university	9	1.35%

Presenting concerns

Table 5 (below) shows that most participants indicated a need for career planning (39%) and career information support (31%). The "Other" category relates to non-counselling matters such as student admissions and registration enquiries. The frequency of career-related presenting concerns is in keeping with the overall population for this study. The tabulated concerns raised by participants follows.

Table 5

Presenting concern (n=669)

Presenting concern	Frequency	Percentage
Career planning	257	38.42%
Career information	208	31.09%
Other	105	15.70%
Study skills	52	7.77%
Personal issue	37	5.53%
Job-searching	6	0.90%
Numerical skills	1	0.15%
Reading and writing	3	0.45%

Province where participants reside

An overview of the geographical location of participants is provided in Table 6.
Most participants (11%) indicated Gauteng as their place of residence, followed by
KwaZulu-Natal (4%) and Western Cape (4%). Unfortunately, the residing province
question was not made a compulsory question and therefore a large number of
participants opted not to indicate where they reside.

Table 6

Residing province (n=669)

Residing province	Frequency	Percentage
Not indicated	504	75.34%
Gauteng	72	10.76%
KwaZulu-Natal	30	4.48%
Western Cape	24	3.59%
Outside SA (Rest of the world)	8	1.20%
Mpumalanga	8	1.20%
Eastern Cape	7	1.05%
Outside SA (Africa)	5	0.75%
Limpopo	4	0.60%
North-West	3	0.45%
Free State	3	0.45%
Northern Cape	1	0.15%

Participants' experience of e-counselling service provided (quantitative findings)

The participants' experience of the e-counselling service provided is discussed in this section. I focused on the participants' experiences of the e-counselling service with specific focus on the following: clarity with regard to the enquiry; clarity in terms of knowing what to do next; helpfulness of the resources provided; comprehensiveness of the response; having a better understanding of the participants' problem; satisfaction with

the response time; the value of e-counselling; and preference in terms of counselling platform for future interactions.

Clarity with regards to enquiry

Participants were asked to indicate to what extent the e-counselling response received helped them to be clear about the main issues relating to their enquiry – in other words, do they know what the problem is? Most participants (83%) strongly agreed and agreed that this was the case. Table 7 (below) provides a further indication of participants' responses to this item.

Table 7

Clarity with regards to enquiry (n=669)

I am clear about the main issues relating to my "Ask a counsellor" enquiry	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	293	43.80%
Agree	259	38.71%
Neither agree nor disagree	56	8.37%
Disagree	38	5.68%
Strongly disagree	23	3.44%

Clarity in terms of next steps

Item 2 asked participants to indicate to what extent they know what to do next. Table 8 (below) shows that most participants (69%) strongly agreed and agreed that they understand the next steps to take in terms of their enquiry.

Table 8

Understanding of next steps to be taken (n=669)

I understand the next steps I should take in terms of my enquiry	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	226	33.78%
Agree	237	35.43%
Neither agree nor disagree	79	11.81%
Disagree	70	10.46%
Strongly disagree	57	8.52%

Suggestions for further support needed

Participants were asked to provide an indication of what else they needed in order to have an understanding of the next steps to be taken. As shown in Table 9 (below), two main categories of further information needed are further career choice support and Unisa information. Participants who indicated a need for further career choice support mentioned needs such as, needing more information regarding study and career choices;

exploring alternative options; confirming a choice; and dealing with the challenge of anxiety regarding making a choice.

The second category of information that participants indicated, was a need for Unisa information. The information needs were mainly related to the application and registration processes, as well as information about financing one's studies. In terms of applying, participants indicated a need to know the outcome of the application, or were concerned about not receiving feedback. Some other participants required assistance with regards to registration processes, including, how to register; how to get feedback about credit applications; and knowing how to understand curriculum changes. It is important to note that a number of these needs may be classified as counselling-related, including study choice assistance (choosing between different qualifications and choosing a qualification related to career choice); career planning and career information; and study support (coping with studies). These needs as articulated by participants point to further training and supervision interventions for counsellors in terms of how to facilitate these types of discussions to be more effective.

Table 9

Suggestions for additional information needed (n = 669)

Category of additional information needed	Frequency	Percentage
Admission confirmation	16	2,39%
Study choice	14	2,09%
Registration	13	1,94%
Career planning	9	1,35%
Credits from previous qualification	8	1,20%
Application information	5	0,75%
Course information	4	0,60%
Module choice	3	0,45%
Career information	3	0,45%
Study support	2	0,30%
Subject choice	2	0,30%
Financial aid	2	0,30%
No further information need indicated	588	87,89%

Helpfulness of information resources provided

Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed that the additional resources provided in the response were helpful. As indicated in Table 10 (below), most participants (55%) indicated that the resources recommended were helpful. A further 6%

indicated that no resources were provided, and 3% of participants acknowledged that even if resources were provided they did not make use of said resources.

Table 10

Usefulness of resources (n=669)

I found the resources recommended to me in the response helpful	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	195	29.15%
Agree	238	35.58%
Neither agree nor disagree	89	13.30%
Disagree	53	7.92%
Strongly disagree	37	5.53%
No resources were provided	40	5.98%
I did not make use of the resources	17	2.54%

The provision of further resources to explore is an accepted practice within the Unisa counselling context. Clients may be asked to, for example, read more about a specific topic related to the presenting concern before the next discussion, complete specific activities, or be provided with resources to facilitate specific processes, such as career choice and academic skills. A client may also be referred to other departments or a colleague within the University, or an external organisations should the enquiry be beyond the scope of practice of the counsellor.

The skilful provision of online and offline referrals to resources appropriate to the needs of the client has been emphasised by Boer (2001). The relatively low agreement of participants with the usefulness of the resources provided may be due to several factors. Firstly, it could be due to challenges with resources, such as, readability, accessing the information, making sense of the information in relation to the challenge. Secondly, it may also be related to challenges in terms of managing the information needed to make an effective choice prior to registration. Thirdly, it could be managing the Unisa process information once registered as a student. Further discussion about participants' views on the resources provided follows in the qualitative discussion findings for phase 1.

Comprehensiveness of responses

Participants were asked to rate their experience of the comprehensiveness of the response. The aim of the question was to determine the extent to which all the questions that were asked in the counselling request were attended to by the counsellor. The majority of the participants (61%) agreed that the reply received covered all the points raised in the enquiry sent. Table 11 that follows contains a summary of the remaining responses.

Table 11

Comprehensiveness of response (n=669)

The reply I received covered all the points I raised	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	191	28.55%
Agree	220	32.88%
Neither agree nor disagree	94	14.05%
Disagree	94	14.05%
Strongly disagree	70	10.46%

Contribution of response to better understanding of presenting concerns

Participants were asked the extent that the response they received helped them to understand their concerns better. From the data in Table 12 it is evident that most participants (63%) strongly agreed and agreed that the response helped them to understand their concerns better.

Table 12

Better understanding of central concern (n=669)

The response I received helped me to understand my concern better	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	195	29.15%
Agree	229	34.23%
Neither agree nor disagree	87	13.00%
Disagree	90	13.45%
Strongly disagree	68	10.16%

Satisfaction with response time

Clients who submit a question through the "Ask a counsellor" service receive an immediate e-mail acknowledging receipt of the enquiry, together with an indication that the response time is within 7 working days. Survey participants were asked about their satisfaction with the response time. As indicated in Table 13 (below) most participants (79%) agreed that the reply was provided in an acceptable period.

Table 13

Satisfaction with response time (n=669)

The reply was provided in an acceptable period of time	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	300	44.84%
Agree	228	34.08%
Neither agree nor disagree	47	7.03%
Disagree	48	7.17%
Strongly disagree	46	6.88%

Response time is important in any service environment, and even more within an environment such as the one at Unisa, reason being that enquiries are received from prospective and registered students regarding processes at Unisa with specific closing dates (for example, application, registration, study cancellation and applying for special or aegrotat examinations). Therefore, a late response in these instances could potentially have a severe impact in terms of the client's motivation to study, in addition to the financial implications for students and sponsors of missing a particular closing date.

Value of e-counselling service

Participants were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with the e-counselling service by indicating to what extent they agree or disagree that the "Ask a counsellor" service is a valuable addition to the counselling service provided. Table 14 shows that

most participants (81%) agreed that this e-counselling service is a valuable addition to the services provided by Unisa.

Table 14

Perception of value of e-counselling service (n=669)

"Ask a counsellor" is a valuable addition to the counselling service provided by Unisa	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	343	51.27%
Agree	199	29.75%
Neither agree nor disagree	54	8.07%
Disagree	28	4.19%
Strongly disagree	45	6.73%

Participants' experience of e-counselling service provided (qualitative findings)

Survey participants were asked to share their reasons for providing a specific rating for the e-counselling service they received. In addition, participants could also provide further comments about their experience of the e-counselling service in a separate survey item. Data analysis for these was based on procedures outlined by Auerbach and Silberstein (2003) and discussed in Chapter 3. These findings are discussed in the section that follows.

Firstly, participants' understanding of the utility value of e-counselling is discussed. Secondly, a discussion of participants' expectations of the type of services that may be delivered by e-counselling is unpacked. In the third section, participants' views regarding the timing associated with e-counselling are discussed. Fourthly, the perception of the counsellors' role is discussed, followed by participants' view on the role of information and resources in the e-counselling interaction. The final section discusses the participants' views on the outcomes of the e-counselling interaction and the need to be acknowledged as a person.

Utility value of e-counselling

Participants commented on the utility value of e-counselling: why is this service useful to them? The following advantages of communicating via e-mail with a counsellor were offered: saves time and money, convenience (one does not have to travel to the campus); ease of use; and working prevented visits in person and e-counselling as a way to avoid frustration related to telephone calls to Unisa and standing in queues at a Unisa centre.

It is interesting to link the idea of "saving time" to e-mail communications where there may be a waiting period ranging from a few minutes to days (and even weeks). It is suggested that "saving time" is linked to participants' views on e-counselling as a way to negate the need to visit a campus in person, either due to geographical location or lack of time. Participants also felt that e-counselling is a way to avoid frustration with regards to telephonic and in person communications with Unisa. For example,

I think the telephone is so frustrating as you get to hold until your airtime is finished and when you phone back you are made to hold some more and you end up being frustrated by not only your problem but by the service received.

And

I didn't have to hang on the phone for ages trying to find someone to help me.

Participants talked about saving money due to no transport costs to visit a campus, as well as the issue of saving money on telephone calls.

In addition, participants who are in employment expressed appreciation for the possibility of contacting a counsellor by e-mail due to challenges related to having to travel during work hours (when the face-to-face counselling service is available) to see a counsellor. For example, "*it is every hard for me to come in to see a counsellor as I am working fulltime*" and "*sometimes I don't have time to call during work and it is helpful to send through my question and have it answered in a few days time!*"

The service was also mentioned as valuable due to its accessibility to students who stay outside of South Africa. These students are therefore not able to make use of face-to-face counselling services or telephone counselling due to the inhibitive costs, distance and in certain situations, the time difference between other countries and South Africa.

As discussed in Chapter 2, clients access online counselling services for various reasons, including lack of services in a geographical area (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Jones & Stokes, 2009; Kraus et al., 2010) and lack of transport or money (Anthony & Nagel,

2010; Jones & Stokes, 2009). Challenges related to multiple responsibilities (e.g., working and studying) also contributes to the decision to access counselling services online (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Jones & Stokes, 2009). Disability and personal challenges have also been mentioned as a reason for accessing counselling services online (Anthony & Nagel, 2010; Jones & Stokes, 2009). A couple of participants in this study discussed a preference for online services due to these challenges:

> *I'm a bit socially awkward, what I mean with that is I don't express myself to well with direct contact so to me sending an e-mail letter is excellent because I have time to think and rethink my query.*

And:

> *Because I am a hearing impaired person, I would prefer my counselling done via mail/website or other electronic way, that is to my advantage.*

Participants' expectations with regards to the range of services e-counselling should provide

It was highlighted in Chapter 1 that most enquiries to the e-counselling service relate to career guidance and planning. It is therefore not surprising that participants view the career guidance and planning service as a very important component of the e-counselling services, especially in the context of a lack of comprehensive career counselling services (or knowledge of such services) elsewhere:

I was looking for career advice and finding the correct path to a career in a

specific field. It is difficult to find someone to talk to about such things and I

found this method a great way of getting advice.

Some participants alluded to the provision of this service as a public service that could prevent study choices that are not brought to fruition – the service as a way to prevent people from making choices that costs time, money and leads to the misapplication of human potential: "*other people end up really giving up in studying because they are not getting good advice about their careers*" and "*a lot of people enter into wrong careers without identifying their capabilities first*". Other participants felt that this service is a way to avoid "wrong" decisions and to get a good return on one's investment of time and money into one's studies:

If you take the time and money spent on obtaining a degree, talking to a

counsellor before and during your studies is always a wise choice, even if only to

clear up some matters.

The provision of study choice assistance by the e-counselling service was stressed by participants – a matter that creates tension in terms of service delivery within this specific context, since "study choice assistance" was defined by participants as "*helps students with career choices and with decisions regarding their choice of study*" (within the counselling scope of practice), but also as "*we need correct advice to make an informed choice of subjects to enrol for*" (within the domain of student advising provided by another department in the University).

The role of the e-counselling service in terms of orienting prospective students to the Unisa system emerged as one of the roles that this service fulfils for participants. Some participants were concerned about studying through Unisa for the first time, or studying again after a break in formal studies. They view this service as important in terms of helping them deal with feeling overwhelmed by the Unisa system and the various processes involved: "*I am new to distant learning and found the whole process rather intimidating (registering, choosing subjects and getting organised)*". This suggests the perception of the counselling service as a "compass" to point clients in the right direction due to their understanding of the Unisa system and counselling processes. It also implies an expectation of more intense step-by-step support before and during the application and registration process that creates uncertainty for participants.

Some participants mentioned e-counselling as a mechanism to support students to manage their studies more effectively through a motivating and supportive approach. Linked to this, participants also view the service as a way to help them generate options to solve their own problems. For example:

When I submitted my query, I was at the verge of cancelling 4 out of 5 modules for the semester, but the counsellor asked me open-ended questions that helped be to think and take a few steps backwards and discuss/find possible solutions.

And:

If you study alone in long distance sometimes you want to throw in the towel because there is no one to get advice from.

One of the practices that created challenges for some participants is when different counsellors attend to one client. For example, one counsellor responds to the first enquiry and a second counsellor responds to a follow-up enquiry. This practice made some participants to feel like they had to interact with too many different counsellors. Linked to this concern is the experience of receiving different information from different people: "*Once you are answered you deal with different counsellors and get different answers*" and "*I have only discovered that the counsellor tell you different things and I wonder if they are not trained in the same things*".

Participants' views on the time-delay in e-counselling

The quantitative findings for phase 1 showed an overall satisfaction with the response rate of the service (i.e., 79% of participants strongly agreed and agreed that the response time is satisfactory). However, there were participants who viewed the response time as too slow. As one participant succinctly stated: "*The world moves fast, Unisa also has to...*" The uncertainty and related anxiety that accompanies waiting for a response emerged as one possible challenge related to e-mail communications: "*the quicker you get a response the quicker you will be able to move on with your life*". The delayed e-counselling response also resulted in creating doubt in the decision to study: "*I must say waiting for a response took forever and made me more nervous as to whether studying was a good thing for me right now in my life*".

For others, the time delay between messages created a space to read and understand the information at a pace that matches their preference. As an example, one

participant commented that, "*you can read the information many times until you understand it*", whereas another one found it useful to be able to process the information when he or she was ready: "*A response indicating where the info can be found was sent through. This enables one to assist themselves at their convenience*".

As described in Chapter 2, the time delay in asynchronous communication can benefit both the client and the counsellor, as they both have time to reflect on the problem being discussed, creating a further therapeutic space (Kraus et al., 2010). However, this time-delay could also create uncertainty with regards to whether or not a message was received and not knowing when it will be responded to (Jones & Stokes, 2009).

Perceptions on the attributes and ideal behaviour of the counsellor

Kraus et al. (2010) proposed that counselling benefits the client when he or she feels understood by the counsellor, together with the belief that the counsellor is an expert helper, and shows concern and empathy. Bordin's theory on the working alliance, as discussed in Chapter 2, suggests that the strength of the working alliance (how the client and the therapist have negotiated to relate to each other) plays an important role in determining the success or failure of any therapeutic approach (Bordin, 1979).

Participants for this study echoed the importance of the attributes and actions of the counsellor in terms of establishing a relationship with a client by e-mail. As one participant states: "*Regardless of the channel however, it is important that – as I mentioned before – a real person, knowledgeable and dedicated, looks at the question(s) and that the counsellor thinks about the answer, before sending*".

Participants suggested that there are specific counsellor behaviours that contribute to an effective e-counselling interaction and relate to the concept of specific therapist behaviours proposed by Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2001) (as discussed in Chapter 2), that contribute to either a strengthening of or a breakdown in the working alliance between client and therapist. The effective attributes of the counsellor as suggested by participants included: showing concern, interest and a willingness to assist; being knowledgeable; being polite, encouraging and welcoming. Ineffective counsellor behaviours identified by participants included: not showing empathy; misunderstanding the concern; and not answering direct questions.

Participants mentioned things that counsellors did not do – it would seem that these can be turned into suggestions for effective practice and are ways to counteract the challenges related to e-counselling as discussed by Jones and Stokes (2009); Kraus et al. (2010) and Evans (2009b). These challenges include: potential for misunderstanding; the inaccuracy with which meaning may be interpreted online; and ambiguity that is created by the absence of non-verbal behaviours. There are various types of ineffective behaviour mentioned specifically by participants that contributed to an ineffective working alliance. Firstly, the lack of counselling skills, e.g., "*if these student counsellors want to help by working with the ask a counsellor system, they need to apply some counselling skills they should have learnt*". Secondly, the perception that they were not being heard, e.g., "*it appears that the person responding gives the quickest response they can without actually reading further than the first few sentences and having insight into the query*". Thirdly, not clarifying further what is needed, e.g., "*because they assumed I*

am not clear of what I was enquiring about. It would help to call rather than providing info that is not required".

The quantitative stage in phase 1 of this study found that participants moderately agree that the e-counselling response was comprehensive, that is, that it covered all the points they raised. Related to this finding, the importance of the role of the counsellor to provide answers to questions was emphasised by participants: "*I would like for the counsellor to answer my questions – if they do not understand it, they should reply and ask for a re-phrasal*", and "*the feedback I got from the counsellor did not answer my question at all*". In some cases, participants felt that the counsellor did not answer their question(s), or did not understand the question asked, and therefore leading to misunderstandings. The following two participants shared their experiences of misunderstandings in the counselling process:

I got the answers I was looking for, but it required quite a bit of guesswork on my part, as I found it to be more focused on career advice which I didn't need, and less on the degrees offered, which is what I was looking for.

And:

It was a bit annoying and disconcerting that even though I mentioned this, (though the counsellors were very helpful and gave me the correct information) they kept on asking me what my career goals are. I mean I am a career professional, I know my career goals (and it wasn't relevant), instead I got treated like a child/ matriculant.

It would seem that when the counsellor did not answer a direct question, participants felt that the question was not properly read and understood in the first place: "*...think the person didn't take the time to read my question thoroughly*". Information and guidance is then provided that does not relate to the need of the client due to a misunderstanding on the part of the counsellor. This may then be further exacerbated by the nature of the communication medium that does not allow for immediate checking of information provided by the client or the counsellor.

Perceptions on the role of information and resources

As discussed by Boer (2001), one of the core skills needed by online career practitioners, is the ability to provide information that is relevant to the needs of the client. The participants in this study emphasised the importance of the role of the e-counselling service as an information provider.

When mentioning the role of information in the e-counselling exchange, participants emphasised the importance of the role of the counsellor as "information contextualizer". As discussed in Chapter 2, the role of the counsellor as mediator between the client and information overload ("information contextualizer") is becoming increasingly important. Participants mentioned feelings of being overwhelmed by the amount of information on the Unisa website and not knowing how to make sense of the information in terms of their needs:

The amount of information on the Unisa website is staggering, to say the least and it is easy to get lost in all the detail, or spend lots and lots of time going through all the relevant information.

These participants viewed the counsellor as a resource to help interpret the information and to act as a guide to understand the various systems and processes related to studying through Unisa. For example, "*my query was simplified because I just couldn't understand the brochure*" and

It's good to have that human element that can help point you in the right direction to the information you need. And in the case that you truly don't know where to start, they can help give you some direction.

The quantitative findings for the survey in phase 1 of this study indicated that participants find referrals to additional resources moderately helpful (55% agreed and strongly agreed that the resources they were referred to are helpful). It is suggested that the discussion above provides some insight in terms of this finding in that the problem, according to participants, is not always the content of the resource (e.g., e-brochure or online information) itself, but that there are affective factors that impact on the ability to interpret the information and to link it to one's needs: "*It's very disconcerting to work through all the information around you*" and "*I am overwhelmed at the amount of info available, and appreciate the counsellors assistance in sorting through it*".

Views on the outcomes of e-counselling interactions

Participants gave an account of the effect of the e-counselling interaction on them and their decision to study. The outcomes identified and discussed below are provision of direction or focus, enabling informed decision-making, providing a sense of relief and inspiration.

Participants described the e-counselling session as an experience that has helped *"to think and focus"*, *"choosing the right path"* and *"knowing what the next step is for me"*. Some related the sense of direction and focus to their career planning: *"I finally have direction with my career after two years of struggling"*. Others however found the interaction to be helpful in choosing what to study: *"…it assisted me positively to choose my study path"* and *"…found it useful to get guidance to what I should do next in my registration period"*. The interaction also provided structure for some in the form of specific guidelines ("steps") to take (or not to take): *"it's easy to go through something knowing what steps to take out. So someone guiding you and answering all your questions is a great help"* and *"I was given the proper steps to follow and the way forward after making my decision"*.

Participants shared how the e-counselling session contributed to inform decision-making. This theme also relates strongly to the concept of the e-guidance service as an information service, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Participants linked the provision of the information to informed decisions, in that it helped them to understand themselves better: *"It is valuable because it made me realise a lot of things about myself my strong points and weaknesses as what I'm passionate about but I'm unsure about the outside*

world", as well as being able to make changes in terms of their studies: "*I am able to make changes in my course after making some reflection*".

The informed decision was further encouraged by information that helped participants to think beyond their initial thoughts: "*I found the information generally very informative especially the information on the type of questions I should ask when enquiring about my career choice*" and "*I want to make a career change and I got quick assistance, was given a lot of information and other aspects of my prospective career that I didn't consider*".

It is applicable here to return to the discussion presented in Chapter 2 related to the study conducted by Madahar and Offer (2004), who found that guidance outcomes were achieved as a result of e-guidance sessions. They identified these outcomes as the narrowing down of options (focus), obtaining information about options (information), being more informed (realism), awareness of more options (scope), and knowing what to do next (tactics). The findings discussed above relate to these findings in that participants experienced the e-counselling session as an opportunity to focus and find direction, gather more information to make informed decisions and could gain a better sense of direction, and focus in terms of their choices.

Participants' perception on the human element in e-counselling

As discussed in Chapter 2, counselling (including e-counselling) should convey "*warmth, genuineness, empathy, unconditional positive regards and psychological contract to establish an appropriate working relationship*" (Jones & Stokes, 2009, p.17).

Participants in this study commented on the impact of being responded to by a "real person": "*it is reassuring to get a 'real' answer from a 'real' person*" and "*I received an informative letter written by a real person (as opposed to a template-driven pre-formatted response)*". One participant mentioned having "*a feeling of listening ears to my challenges*" and being understood by the counsellor. Interestingly, one participant spoke about the counsellor who, for her, had just the right level of empathy:

> *After my recent interaction with e-counselling my hope in obtaining a qualification has been restored. The advice given proved that counsellors take interest in an individual's welfare without being over empathetic.*

The e-counselling service provides comfort for some participants in that they have a sense of somebody always being there to listen: "*It gives one more comfort to know there is someone 'close by' who can answer/address queries/concerns*", and "*it helps knowing that there is a counsellor always there, on standby... to assist me in times of need*". These positions relate to the observation of Kraus et al. (2010) who discussed clients' perception and feeling of the availability of the counsellor at any time in that a client may sit and write an e-mail when the need arises, even though the response is then delayed.

In sharp contrast to this, some participants linked the feeling of receiving a generic, impersonal response to their need for a more personal response: "*mostly the responses are generalising as if a counsellor is responding to 10 similar queries*" and "*it seems you have fixed response you give to all queries*". These observations are relevant in this context since the counsellors have access to a frequently asked questions website

where edited paragraphs with correct information are available. Although the aim is to integrate and link these paragraphs with the needs of the client, it is a skill that is frequently mastered by more experienced counsellors. It would therefore seem that this time-saving quality assurance mechanism is creating challenges for the e-counselling service in that some clients may feel that they are not being attended to on a personal, individual level.

Concerns about some of the challenges related to e-counselling translated into a need for "in real time" interactions either by telephone or in person. One of the reasons offered for this preference was based on the opinion that the counsellor would be able to "see" and understand the person more clearly, as indicated by this participant: "*I feel that face-to-face counselling is the best method of helping students because then the counsellor will be able to assess the person on a more personal basis*". Some participants mentioned the ease of communicating by telephone where one could immediately ask and answer follow-up questions instead of the "stop and go" nature of e-mail communications:

> *I find communication over the phone much easier. E-mailing is not always helpful, as the communication does not flow. Often not all questions asked in an email are answered and another email is required for confirmation. This takes extra time for both parties involved.*

Time constraints (e.g., looming closing dates for registration, application or examinations) was offered as another reason for other forms of counselling: "*If there are time constraints then the best method would be telephone or face-to-face.*" It would also

seem that the nature of the interaction (i.e., electronic or face-to-face) would have an impact on the quality of the relationship with the counsellor. One participant shared her preference: "*I would like to be contacted by cellphone or in person. That would make me have a better relationship with the counsellor.*"

Participants' preferences for counselling service platform

Participants were asked to rate different modes of counselling in terms of their preference for accessing counselling services. It can be seen from Table 15 that follows, most participants (85%) indicated a preference for direct e-mail. If the preference for the "Ask a counsellor" service (76%) is also taken into consideration, one could deduct that for this sample, then most participants prefer a text-based asynchronous counselling service. Strong preferences were also shown for services provided in person (70%) and telephonically (66%). What is interesting in the data is that the instant message option on Skype (synchronous and text-based) showed a slight preference of 42% in contrast with the Skype video and voice options that showed an interest of 39% and 38% respectively. Facebook (35%) or Twitter (24%) as platforms for delivering and receiving counselling services were least preferred.

Table 15

Preferred counselling mode (n=669)

Counselling mode	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
Direct e-mail	341	51%	229	34%	37	6%	33	5%	29	4%
"Ask a counsellor"	245	37%	262	39%	65	10%	52	8%	45	7%
In person	287	43%	181	27%	128	19%	43	6%	30	4%
Telephone	246	37%	192	29%	124	19%	63	9%	44	7%
Self-help resources on web	136	20%	262	39%	141	21%	74	11%	56	8%
Skype instant message	128	19%	151	23%	208	31%	105	16%	77	12%
Skype video	115	17%	148	22%	206	31%	120	18%	80	12%
Skype voice	110	16%	145	22%	223	33%	115	17%	76	11%
Facebook	91	14%	143	21%	216	32%	132	20%	87	13%
Twitter	51	8%	110	16%	243	36%	162	24%	103	15%

Synthesis of the findings of Phase 1

Phase 1 of this study yielded insights as to how clients experience the e-counselling service and enabled me to gain an understanding of the factors that play a role in terms of how individuals experience the e-counselling service provided. The findings indicate that clients have expectations of what the e-counselling service should provide and how the counsellor should interact with them. In addition to this, the utility value of e-counselling for participants and the role of timing and provision of information and resources were described. Overall, the findings of this phase of the study indicate that the e-counselling service is viewed as a valuable addition to the range of counselling service already provided. The e-counselling session helped participants to gain clarity with regard to their enquiry (or problem), provided guidance in terms of next steps and that they found the response time satisfactory. Aspects of the service that participants were less in agreement with are the usefulness of the information resources provided and the comprehensiveness of responses.

Within the framework of Bordin's working alliance theory, the outcome of any counselling endeavour is shaped by the strength of the working alliance between the client and the counsellor. This working alliance "represents interactive, collaborative elements of the relationship (i.e., therapist and client abilities to engage in the tasks of therapy and to agree on the targets of therapy) in the context of an affective bond or positive attachment" (Constantino et al., 2002). Building on the work of Bordin, Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2001) presented summaries of the behaviours of therapists that either strengthened or lowered the working alliance.

The person-centred approach developed by Carl Rogers (and implemented in counsellor training and practice at the DCCD) provides further core conditions for effective counselling, namely, empathy, unconditional positive regard (accepting the client as he or she presents him- or herself) and congruence (genuineness) (Gladding, 2000). Jones and Stokes (2009) concluded that e-mail counselling interactions should convey "warmth, genuineness, empathy, unconditional positive regards and psychological contract to establish an appropriate working relationship" (p.17).

I draw on this framework to present the following summary of the findings discussed above, namely, counsellor attributes and actions that strengthen the working alliance; counsellor attributes and actions that impact negatively on the working alliance; and client perceptions of how they are acknowledged in e-counselling sessions.

Counsellor attributes and actions that strengthen the working alliance. The findings of phase 1 of the study show that specific counsellor attributes and actions contribute to a positive experience of the e-counselling interaction. These are: showing concern, interest and a willingness to assist; being knowledgeable; being polite, encouraging and welcoming.

Counsellor attributes and actions that impact negatively on the working alliance. Ineffective counsellor attributes and behaviours that were shown to impact on the working alliance negatively include a general lack of counselling skills (not listening, "hearing" or understanding), not showing empathy, misunderstanding the concern, not showing empathy and not clarifying what is needed.

Client perceptions of how they are acknowledged in e-counselling sessions.

Participants in this study found it comforting to be able to access the counselling service by e-mail and had the sense of interaction with a real human being who is listening and understanding. The use of generic responses was shown to contribute to a perception of the service as being impersonal. Overall, the findings reflect that most of the participant's expectations with regards to what the e-counselling service should offer are in line with the service offering of the counselling service at Unisa. The expectations are that the e-counselling service should assist with career guidance and planning, study choices, orienting prospective students to the Unisa system and providing student support.

In line with the findings of Madahar and Offer (2004), the following guidance outcomes were found to have been achieved as a result of e-guidance sessions: focusing and finding direction, gathering more information to make informed decisions, and the sense of greater direction in terms of their study- and career choices. Finally, the findings derived from this phase also indicate that there is a clear preference for e-mail-based counselling above other modes of counselling. These findings echo those by Venable (2007) who found that most first year students preferred e-mail to any other method of delivery for career choice interventions.

Results of the e-mail interviews (Phase 2)

The findings from phase 1 of the study and the research objectives for the study, provided input for phase 2 of the study. Follow-up regarding the overall expectations of

the service, together with the perception of the value that e-counselling may add to the student journey was made. The background of the participants are provided, followed by discussions about views on counselling attributes and ideal behaviours, perceptions on range of services to be provided and perceptions on service delivery. Finally, a synthesis of the findings of phase 2 is presented.

Background of the participants

Participants in phase 1 of the study were invited to participate in phase 2 of the study. These participants were invited since they had experience of the e-counselling service in that they have submitted a question and received an answer through the service. Ten interviewees completed the interview questions that were used to collect data for phase 2 of the study. No other interviews volunteered for this phase of the study. Data analysis for this phase of the study was based on procedures outlined by Auerbach and Silberstein (2003) and as previously discussed in Chapter 3.

Interviewees were asked to relate their expectations of the Unisa e-counselling service (what would they expect, how they would want it to be), as well as how they view the contribution of such a service to their own current and future study success. Three main themes were identified in this phase of the study: views on counselling attributes and ideal behaviours, perceptions on range of services to be provided and perceptions on service delivery.

Expectations regarding counsellor attributes and ideal behaviours

Interviewees expressed their perceptions on what they would view as ideal counsellor attributes and/or behaviours. The interviewees for this phase of the study mentioned the expectation of guidance, care and a need for acknowledgement by the counsellor for client efforts of information search.

Expectation of guidance and care. For one interviewee, it was important that the counsellor makes the best effort to provide guidance and links this to personalised responses (in contrast with generic responses): "*care about the students and to provide them with the best guidance they can to steer them in the right direction and not just give them a computer generated response to their queries or questions*". This quotation draws attention to two important aspects related to effective counselling interactions by e-mail: a personalised response creates the perception of care for the client and the need for direction. Another interviewee mentioned that "*I expected a bit more guidance than just referring me to a website*". For this interviewee, the interaction would have been more effective with guidance from the counsellor in addition to the referral for further information. This view is also emphasised by another interviewee that if the counsellor does not provide guidance, it creates the sense of being "*brushed off*".

A need for efforts of information search to be acknowledged. Interviewees commented on the practice of referring clients to think about searching for information online, without necessarily checking with them about the relevance of this referral. In addition, not having an understanding for the effort that the client has already invested with regard to thinking about their problem. As one interviewee states: "*By the time you*

ask a counsellor, you have already tried to find the information you need". Another interviewee pointed out her exasperation with the counsellor when being asked to do further research, whereas she has tried to do that already: "*You ask a question cause you're stuck and you're told to go to the internet to get more info. I mean really, do they really think you didn't try?*"

Expectations regarding range of services to be provided

   Interviewees expressed their disappointment in other services at Unisa and provided insight into the challenges they are experiencing that they are hoping student counselling would be able to support them in. Interviewees also provided insight into the impact of service delivery challenges in terms of clients' expectations of counselling services.

   Services outside the scope of practice of student counselling (e-counselling as "one-stop"). Specific services that interviewees expected from e-counselling were assistance with understanding the application process, as well as the choice of modules when needing to register. One interviewee commented on the role of the e-counselling service to "fill in the gaps" in terms of information needed to choose modules to register for: "*Information regarding modules on the net is not always sufficient to make a precise decision when selecting modules to take in a given semester*". While another expressed the need for support with regards to choosing a study direction and also to how to study: "*The kind of service expected is one that helps to make decisions in terms of what to study and how to go about it*".

Some interviewees had very specific requirements for the e-counselling service: "*I expect them to know about educational qualifications in the region. For example, I am based in Zimbabwe and it is good if your counsellors acquaint themselves with our local qualifications, so that they tailor make some of their answers*". Another interviewee expects the counsellor to be able to provide information about a broad range of topics: "*As a student studying for the first time at Unisa it would have been nice if an e-counsellor could have answered questions relating to topics not covered in the booklets provided*".

Need for conversations. Three interviewees mentioned the preference for a telephone or face-to-face discussion, either in the place of e-counselling or together with e-counselling. One interviewee prefers a telephone call and linked it to more effective ways to reduce the response time, as well as the perception that more understanding may take place: "*I need feedback telephonically, this will improve understanding and time management*". Another shared the satisfactory experience of having received a telephone call together with e-mails, even though their preference is telephonic or face-to-face interaction: "*I prefer telephone/ FTF – at the moment I have received a phone call and emails which suit me well*". The suggestion was also made that after e-counselling, a real-time discussion with one counsellor could help to make final decisions: "…*maybe after a few forward and back emailing an appointment can be set-up to speak to a counsellor directly for final decisions and ideas*".

The above quotations are interesting in two ways. Firstly, they point out the importance of acknowledging the preference of the client in terms of counselling (e.g.,

that of telephonic or face-to-face counselling that takes place in real time). Secondly, the quotes indicate a need for flexibility in terms of the counselling service and the counsellor to be able to assess how comfortable a client is with a specific mode of counselling and then to accommodate this level of comfort as far as possible.

E-counselling service as "connector" to other services. The e-counselling service was pointed out as a way for students to be referred to for additional help outside of the scope of the DCCD. One interviewee expressed the need as follows: "*I need to finish 6 modules to complete my degree – the service I would appreciate is to assist in relating me to help*". Another felt that the counselling service will help her to manage the application process more effectively: "*The support I need from the counselling service is direction and aid in navigating the bureaucratic structure necessary for me to begin studying*".

In contrast to these requests for support, one interviewee felt disappointed in the referral process in terms of how it was done as well as the resultant further delay in the challenge being resolved: "*the only problems I have experienced is the constant referrals of my query up to 4 people which seemed as if my query was not understood and during this, time had lapsed*".

The above views show the importance of the e-counselling service as the "connector", however it is important to reflect on how this referral is done to minimise the time needed for the client to be supported in terms of his or her challenge.

Suggestions for additional e-counselling services. Two interviewees offered suggestions as to additional services that the e-counselling service may provide. One of

these suggestions is to "*send informational emails to students in certain faculties or specialisations*" and the other the availability of an e-counsellor "*to advise within a few hours or instantly telephonically*". It is relevant to note that these two services are currently offered to current and prospective students. These suggestions therefore point out that these services are not made visible enough for students to be able to identify them.

Expectations regarding service delivery

Interviewees disclosed a preference for and challenges related to the referral processes and made suggestions for service delivery outside the scope of practice of the DCCD. In addition, interviewees commented on the issue of response time and the impact of late responses are discussed.

Referral processes and interdepartmental interdependencies. Interviewees highlighted that the process of referral leads to frustration and disappointment. For example, "*I am still awaiting feedback on my credits application, for over a year. I did get an email or two, but no responses in the last few months*" and "*the phone numbers provided for the colleges are unanswered or the person on the other line just doesn't want to discuss things, they just want to answer simple questions in an unfriendly manner*". One interviewee expressed general discontentment with the service delivery at Unisa: "*the frustration is not getting answers to emails or not being able to get hold of anyone telephonically*".

The issue of multiple points of service for students and prospective students is challenging from a student perspective due to a number of issues, including response time at each point of service, complex challenges that require a multi-departmental intervention (e.g. academic, administrative and counselling), as well as differences in terms of staff (and student) competencies and attitudes. Referral is however an ethical response to student needs when the presenting concern is not within the counsellor's scope of practice.

Suggestions for additional services. Interviewees offered suggestions for additional services that are not within the scope of practice of the DCCD. However, these suggestions also indicate a broader discontentment with service delivery at Unisa: "*a suggestion would be getting the call centre back, I know it has nothing to do with this department but its affecting it overall, and it will continue to get worse if people don't know where to go*". Another expressed a need for information related to the outcomes of a qualification, further study options and suggested that this information should be readily available on the qualifications section on the Unisa website: "*There should be a section on the qualifications link where you could actually select a degree and see how you could use the qualification, as well as what could be a great higher qualification and the option thereafter*".

The third suggestion was that e-tutors change the way in which they interact on *myUnisa*: "*e-tutors to be more active with discussion forums from the beginning of the semester with relevant topics related to the subject without having to fill in time consuming forms which are repetitive and of no use to the topic*". The last suggestion

relates to the creation of "*a forum where new and current students can interact and share ideas and experiences*". This suggestion also indicates the importance of sharing with students the various opportunities (online and offline) they have of interacting with fellow students.

      Dissatisfaction with response time. Some interviewees indicated a dissatisfaction with the response time: "*The response time is not very great, surely a day or two is ideal*", whereas two other interviewees stated that no response has been received from counselling service. The importance of timeous feedback was stressed by another interviewee: "*give feedback timeously so that you can actually register for your next course*". These quotations highlight the importance of a reasonable response time as one of the important factors that determine how the e-counselling service is experienced and then evaluated by clients.

Synthesis of the findings of Phase 2

      The findings from this phase of the study provided an understanding of clients' expectations of the e-counselling service. The expectations were found to be related to the counsellor attributes and behaviours, the range of services to be available, as well as expectations regarding service delivery. Returning to the Bordin's working alliance theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 2, the interviewees for phase 2 of the study emphasised the importance of the role of the counsellors' attributes and behaviours in shaping their experience of counselling. The findings of this phase show that the interviewees value the counsellor's role as one who provides guidance.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2001) presented a summary of two main categories of therapist behaviours that lead to a breakdown in therapy, namely, the therapist does something that the client does not want (e.g., unwanted advice, not focusing, or misinterpretation) or the client expects something that the therapist does not do (e.g., misreading the importance of issues). The results of phase 2 of this study first show that counsellors recommended to them to search for further information online, whereas they would have preferred the counsellor to acknowledge their search for information already undertaken. Second, participants expected guidance and care from the counsellor, but this was not always experienced.

The findings from this phase of the study also drew attention to the important role that participants ascribe to the counselling service as one that needs to "connect" students with other services within the University. It is however concerning that some participants had expectations of the counselling service that cannot be met within the existing organisational and professional boundaries. As described in Chapter 2, specific services rendered by student counselling services include wellness promotion, development of study, work and skills and guidance, counselling and therapy with regards to career-, academic- and personal issues (van Schoor et al., 2007). Furthermore, it is expected of professionals to refer clients to other practitioners when this concern is not within the scope of practice of the practitioner. Two aspects to manage expectations of clients may be relevant: the role of client education in terms of the scope of practice of counsellors who provide online services, as well as further counsellor training and supervision with regards to effective referrals to other colleagues and outside services.

One of the major client expectations in this phase of the study related to the provision of the e-counselling service within a reasonable response time. Here, the majority of interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the response time to their original enquiry. Other recommendations for improved service delivery include more proactive services, as well as the creation of online forums for current and prospective students to meet and exchange information.

Synthesis of the findings of Phases 1 and 2

The findings of phase 2 strengthened the findings from phase 1 of the study in several ways. Firstly, the results from both phases indicate the central role of the counsellor's behaviours and attitudes in terms of the client's experience of an e-counselling interaction. Both phases 1 and 2 show that specific counsellor attributes and actions contribute to a positive or negative experience of the e-counselling interaction. The positive attributes that were identified are: showing concern, interest and a willingness to assist; being knowledgeable; being polite, encouraging and welcoming. In contrast to these, a general lack of counselling skills (not listening, "hearing" or understanding), not showing empathy, misunderstanding the concern, not showing empathy and not clarifying what is needed, impacted negatively on participants' experience of the e-counselling interaction.

Secondly, findings from phase 1 and 2 of the study emphasised the importance of acknowledging clients as human beings. Based on the results of both phases, it would seem that responses that are viewed as "generic" or formulaic are not seen as counselling.

Thirdly, the findings for both phases of the study drew attention to the importance of timeous responses to e-mail enquiries. In both phases, the need for face-to-face and/or telephonic counselling was found to be related to challenges with regard to the response time. Here, a late response impacts on decision-making that needs to take place by closing dates such as for registration and application.

Lastly, results from both phases of the study highlighted the expectations of the e-counselling service in terms of the range of services that should be offered. Phase 1 of the study found that participants' expectation of the counselling service are mostly in line with what the counselling services offered, namely, career guidance and planning, orienting prospective students in terms of studying at Unisa, and supporting students throughout their studies. Findings from phase 2 of the study highlighted a broader dissatisfaction with Unisa service delivery in general and suggested that it is expected that the e-counselling service should also be able to assist with other concerns, such as, choosing modules for a qualification and admission requirements.

Conclusion

The findings from phases 1 and 2 for this study were presented and discussed. It was concluded that the findings from phase 2, strengthened and expanded on the findings from phase 1. Overall, the findings outline the strengths and areas of development of the e-counselling service provided and points a way forward for training and supervision practices to improve the service offered. An indication of the findings' relationship to the two research objectives is provided in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand how clients perceive the e-counselling service and how they experience the e-counselling service. In order to do so, a sequential mixed methods study was undertaken to identify specific factors that contribute to clients' perceptions of the e-counselling experience. In addition, the study explored how these factors relate to the clients' experience of the e-counselling service provided. Here, the conclusions relating to each of the study objectives are discussed below, followed by a review of the limitations of the study. I propose recommendations for e-counselling in an ODL context, as well as recommendations for further research.

Objective 1: Identification of factors that contribute to a clients' perception of the e-counselling service

During the phase 1 of the study, participants were asked about their experience of the e-counselling service related to a number of aspects. This current study found that the response time and helping clients to be clear about the issue relating to their concern were the highest rated items. In the current study, it would seem that the e-counselling service provided somewhat help in terms of assisting clients to determine what the next steps are.

Surprisingly, the usefulness of the resources provided in the responses was not rated as high as could have been expected. It cannot be ascertained whether this finding may be attributed to clients not knowing how to use the resources to answer their questions , either due to affective factors or to expectations not being met.

Another important finding was that the preferred mode of counselling was text-based (i.e., by e-mail and through the "Ask a counsellor" service), followed by face-to-face services and then by telephone. Several reasons for this result were provided through the qualitative findings including: accessibility, convenience, saving time and money; personal challenges (such as disability or difficulties to communicate); avoiding frustration due to challenges accessing face-to-face and telephone services; having time to think; trusting the service provided; and feeling free to talk to a counsellor by e-mail.

The results of this study show that, overall, the "Ask a counsellor" service is a valuable addition to the counselling services already rendered, even though the comprehensiveness of responses was rated as only somewhat satisfactory. An exploration of the factors that contribute to this perception of the "Ask a counsellor" service is provided in the next section.

Objective 2: Exploration of how these factors relate to the clients' experience of the e-counselling service provided

The results of this study show that there are several factors that relate to the experience of e-counselling as either a positive or negative experience. This study found that the following factors contribute to a positive e-counselling experience: provision of specific support (e.g. career counselling, study support); achievement of guidance outcomes (e.g. help with planning and decision-making); timeous responses; receiving effective referrals to internal and external organisations and resources; receiving relevant information; and being treated as an individual. This study also found that the following

factors contribute to a negative client experience: feeling dehumanised (generic, impersonal responses); misunderstanding due to unclear and vague responses; information not provided (due to questions not being answered); and ineffective referrals or no referral when needed.

The role of the counsellor in terms of shaping the experience of the e-counselling experience was found to be related to the attributes of the counsellor, the actions of the counsellor, and how the client/counsellor relationship is established. Counsellor attributes that contribute to a positive experience are: showing concern, interest and willingness, and being knowledgeable, polite, encouraging and welcoming (establishing rapport with the client). The following counsellor attributes were found to contribute to a negative experience of the e-counselling experience: not being empathic; perceived rudeness; and not showing a willingness to help.

Limitations of the study

A number of important limitations need to be considered. Firstly, the results of this study are not generalisable to the general population since the sample of participants was not randomly selected. Although care was taken during phase 1 of the study to receive completed questionnaires over an extended period, the sample is a convenience sample, in that clients were sourced from those who made use of the service and self-selected to participate in the study.

Secondly, the duration between phases 1 and 2 of the study could have been shortened. Participants who were contacted for phase 2 could potentially have memory issues with regards to their initial encounter.

Thirdly, it should also be noted that the context for this study is very specific in that it refers to services provided at an open distance learning higher education institution in South Africa. The findings for this study should be applied with caution in other contexts.

Lastly, my involvement with the service being evaluated also needed special consideration and reflection throughout the study. As the researcher, I was aware of the potential concerns in terms of the dual role of practitioner and researcher, and adhered to ethical guidelines such as informed consent and voluntary participation. In addition to these provisions, I also limited interactions with clients on the Prospects service for the duration of the data collection period.

Recommendations for e-counselling in an ODL context

The findings of this study may be used to stimulate conversations among counsellors about the effective and ethical practice of online conversations with clients, specifically text-based conversations (as per e-mail, instant messaging and social networks). These conversations, together with the findings from this study, may inform the re-development of an e-counselling training module for counsellors and influence future guidelines for e-counselling. The contents of this module can focus on the effective and ineffective facilitation of digital conversations with clients, together with

the ethical awareness that needs to be in place, as with all counselling practice. This

training module may be available online as an independent learning opportunity and be

used by counsellors to train ASCs in the various regions. The outcomes of this study, as

stated, can also inform the *Guidelines for digital counselling interventions* document that

serves as best practice guidelines for counselling content and facilitation that is available

on digital platforms, such as, e-mail, social networks and on the DCCD website.

Recommendations for further research

There are various recommendations that stem from this research. Firstly, the

monitoring and evaluation of digital counselling interventions should be an on-going

project for the DCCD to effect a rapid cycle of improvement in terms of the provision of

e-counselling services. Secondly, it is envisaged that the design and methodology for this

study can serve as a benchmark for future evaluation efforts within the DCCD. Thirdly,

further areas of research related to this study include: the nature of the online relationship

between the client and the counsellor and how this relationship leads to specific

outcomes; the value of synchronous and asynchronous modes of counselling; as well as

effective training and supervision practices for counsellors who engage in on-line work.

Conclusion

There is impetus from both clients and the institution in terms of providing

effective and efficient support to clients, enabled ICTs. It was shown in this study that

clients do prefer e-mail as the mode of communication with a counsellor that includes

receiving support with regard to their career-, academic- and personal choices and challenges. Unisa, through it's Open Distance Learning Policy, has emphasised the need for a "decentralised, technology supported, guidance and counselling service will be provided to assist students in making appropriate career decisions and in choosing study programmes that will help them realise their career goals". The provision of support to students through digital media (including e-mail) is therefore here to stay and it is the responsibility of practitioners to engage in learning and research opportunities that will enhance the e-counselling service provided, have conversations about effective and ethical practice so as to contribute to the University's vision that is to "be *the* University in the service of humanity". One of the participants in this study indicated that he or she had "a feeling of listening ears to my challenges". It is therefore important in this process of developing the e-counselling service that care is taken to preserve the human element.

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Appendix A: Invitation to participate in online survey

Many thanks for recently using our "Ask a counsellor" service. I am currently conducting a study to explore how clients' perceive the e-counselling service provided by the Directorate for Counselling & Career Development (DCCD).

I would be most grateful if you could spare 5-10 minutes to complete our online client feedback form. Your participation in this study is voluntary - any information you share will be kept strictly confidential. Your information will be kept confidential in a password-protected encrypted file that will only be accessed by the researcher and any information provided by you will be included in research reports without identifying you specifically.

The results of this study will be used to inform the DCCDs training and supervision of counsellors who are providing the e-counselling service, so that this service can be relevant to all your needs. There is also a lack of research about e-counselling services, especially within the South African context and your participation will help counselling practitioners understand how e-counselling services are rendered at Unisa.

Kindly do not ask any questions in your response - if you have further counselling-related questions, please send to counselling@unisa.ac.za.

You are welcome to contact me should you need to clarify any aspects related to this research study.

Kind regards,

Leza Deyzel

E-counsellor

Directorate for Counselling, Career & Academic Development

Tel: +27 12 441 5485 Fax: +27 12 441 5456

E-mail: deyzel@unisa.ac.za

Website: http://www.unisa.ac.za/counselling

Ask a counsellor: http://bit.ly/askcounsellor

Appendix B: Design of survey (description of survey items)

This document provides an overview of the design of the survey with information about item number, question title, the type of question, the options provided to participants and whether or not the question was compulsory to complete. Compulsory questions indicate that the participant would not be able to submit the survey without answering each compulsory question.

Table B1

Design of survey

Item number	Question title	Type	Options	Com-pulsory?
1	Are you:	Drop-down menu	a currently registered student	Yes
			a currently registered student at another University	
			an applicant	
			a prospective student	
			a previously registered student	
			an alumni	
			other	

Item number	Question title	Type	Options	Com-pulsory?
2	What was your enquiry about?	Drop-down menu	career planning career information study skills personal issue reading and writing numerical skills job-searching other	Yes
3	I am clear about the main issues relating to my "Ask a counsellor" enquiry	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
4	I understand the next steps I should take in terms of my enquiry	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes

Item number	Question title	Type	Options	Com-pulsory?
5	If you disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above question, what additional information do you feel you needed?	Text box (large)	No options (open-ended question)	No
6	I found the resources recommended to me in the response helpful	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
7	The reply I received covered all the points I raised	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes

Item number	Question title	Type	Options	Com-pulsory?
8	The reply was provided in an acceptable period of time	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
9	The response I received helped me to understand my concern better	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
10	"Ask a counsellor" is a valuable addition to the counselling service provided by Unisa	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes

Item number	Question title	Type	Options	Com-pulsory?
11	Why would you say so?	Text box (large)	No options (open-ended question)	No
12	Which method would you prefer to use to access our guidance and counselling services in future?	Label	No options (Label for questions 12.1-12.10)	Yes
12.1	Self-help resources on counselling website	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
12.2	Direct e-mail to counselling@unisa.ac.za	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes

Item number	Question title	Type	Options	Com-pulsory?
12.3	"Ask a counsellor" services via our website	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
12.4	In person	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
12.5	By telephone	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes

Item number	Question title	Type	Options	Com-pulsory?
12.6	Facebook	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
12.7	Twitter	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
12.8	Skype video	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes

Item number	Question title	Type	Options	Com-pulsory?
12.9	Skype voice	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
12.10	Skype instant message	Radio button set	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree	Yes
13	Please share any additional comments about your experience and perception of e-counselling in the text box provided below:	Text box (large)	No options (open-ended question)	No
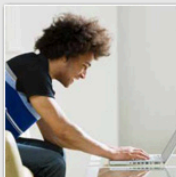
Item number	Question title	Type	Options	Com-pulsory?
14	Where do you reside?	Radio button set	Eastern Cape Free State Gauteng KwaZulu-Natal Limpopo Mpumalanga North-West Northern Cape Western Cape Outside SA (Africa) Outside SA (Rest of the world)	Yes
15	Your e-mail address (you may be contacted again for further information. If you do not want to be contacted again with regards to this research, then kindly do not provide your e-mail address)	Text box	No options (open-ended question)	Yes

Appendix C: Screenshots of online survey for Phase 1

Which method would you prefer to use to access our guidance and counselling services in future?

Self-help resources on counselling website ⭘ Strongly agree ⭘ Agree ⭘ Neither agree nor disagree ⭘
⭘ Disagree ⭘ Strongly disagree

Direct e-mail to counselling@unisa.ac.za ⭘ Strongly agree ⭘ Agree ⭘ Neither agree nor disagree ⭘
⭘ Disagree ⭘ Strongly disagree

"Ask a counsellor" services via our website ⭘ Strongly agree ⭘ Agree ⭘ Neither agree nor disagree ⭘
⭘ Disagree ⭘ Strongly disagree

In person ⭘ Strongly agree ⭘ Agree ⭘ Neither agree nor disagree ⭘
⭘ Disagree ⭘ Strongly disagree

By telephone ⭘ Strongly agree ⭘ Agree ⭘ Neither agree nor disagree ⭘
⭘ Disagree ⭘ Strongly disagree

Facebook ⭘ Strongly agree ⭘ Agree ⭘ Neither agree nor disagree ⭘
⭘ Disagree ⭘ Strongly disagree

Twitter ⭘ Strongly agree ⭘ Agree ⭘ Neither agree nor disagree ⭘
⭘ Disagree ⭘ Strongly disagree

Skype video ⭘ Strongly agree ⭘ Agree ⭘ Neither agree nor disagree ⭘
⭘ Disagree ⭘ Strongly disagree

Skype voice ⭘ Strongly agree ⭘ Agree ⭘ Neither agree nor disagree ⭘
⭘ Disagree ⭘ Strongly disagree

Skype instant message ⭘ Strongly agree ⭘ Agree ⭘ Neither agree nor disagree ⭘
⭘ Disagree ⭘ Strongly disagree

Please share any additional comments about your experience and perception of e-counselling in the text box provided below:

Where do you reside? | choose from list ⇕ |

Your e-mail address (you may be contacted again for further information. If you do not want to be contacted again with regards to this research, then kindly do not provide your e-mail address)

✓ SUBMIT MY CLIENT FEEDBACK

powered by Prospects

Appendix D: Invitation to participate in Phase 2 of study

Many thanks for providing feedback regarding your experience of the Unisa "Ask a counsellor" service earlier this year. You indicated that I may contact you again for further information. I am currently conducting a study to explore how clients' experience the e-counselling service provided by the Directorate for Counselling & Career Development (DCCD), as well as what their expectations are of this service. The first questionnaire that you completed was to provide feedback about your experience of the service, whereas this request is related to what you expect from this service.

I would be most grateful if you could spare another 10-20 minutes in the next four days to answer the questions listed below my e-mail signature. Reply to this e-mail and then type your responses before sending the e-mail back to me.

Your participation in this study is voluntary - any information you share will be kept strictly confidential. Your information will be kept confidential in a password-protected encrypted file that will only be accessed by the researcher and any information provided by you will be included in research reports without identifying you specifically. By providing feedback, you acknowledge that you understand these aspects related to your participation in this study.

The results of this study will be used to inform the DCCDs training and supervision of counsellors who are providing the e-counselling service, so that this service can be

relevant to your needs. There is also a lack of research about e-counselling services, especially within the South African context and your participation will help counselling practitioners understand how e-counselling services are rendered at Unisa.

Kindly do not ask any questions in your response - if you have further counselling-related questions, please send to counselling@unisa.ac.za.

You are welcome to contact me should you need to clarify any aspects related to this research study.

Kind regards,

Leza Deyzel, E-counsellor

Directorate for Counselling, Career & Academic Development

Tel: +27 12 441 5485 Fax: +27 12 441 5456

E-mail: deyzel@unisa.ac.za

Website: http://www.unisa.ac.za/counselling

Ask a counsellor: http://bit.ly/askcounsellor

Appendix E: Questions for e-mail interviews (Phase 2 of study)

Question 1:

What do you expect from the Unisa e-counselling service? (Think of the kind of support you need from the Unisa counselling service, how you would want counsellors to communicate with and support you, and the kinds of information you need; response time?)

Question 2:

How would you want the e-counselling service to contribute to your study success? (Whether you are a current student or future student – think of additional services/ recommendations you wish to make in terms of the service?)

Appendix F: Ethical clearance certificate 1

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15 April 2013

ETHICAL CLEARANCE OF RESEARCH PROJECT

This is to declare that the Ethics Workgroup of the Professional and Administrative Research Committee (PARC) of the University of South Africa considered and granted ethical clearance to Mrs Leza Deyzel (Tuition and Facilitation of Learning: UNISA) in respect of the research project:

"Client experience of e-counselling"

The current application was approved in 2011 under a class approval enjoyed by the DCCD but no letter was issued at the time. The original application was reviewed recently by the current PARC Ethics Work Group. The application represents Phase 1 of the research project. An application in respect of Phase 2 of the project will need to serve at the appropriate ERC within the College of Human Sciences where the applicant is enrolled for her MSc Psychology (Research Consultation).

_____
Prof A E Kotzé
Convenor: PARC Ethics Workgroup

1

Appendix G: Ethical clearance certificate 2

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Department of Psychology

24-04-2013

ETHICAL CLEARANCE OF A RESEARCH PROJECT INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

Project: Client experience of e-counselling

Researcher: Leza Deyzel

Supervisor: Prof. M E Fourie (Psychology Department, Unisa)

The proposal was evaluated for adherence to appropriate standards in respect of ethics as required by the Psychology Department of Unisa. The application was approved by the departmental Ethics Committee without any conditions.

Prof P Kruger

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