

**Experiences of student peer helpers in an open distance learning institution**

By

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at the

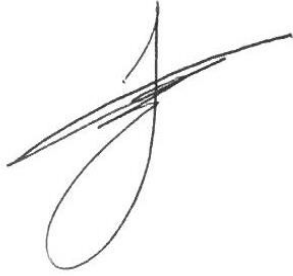
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I declare that **Experiences of student peer helpers in an open distance learning institution** is my own work and that all the sources that I have utilised or quoted are referenced and acknowledged as such.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

SIGNATURE

DATE

(Mr S E Mabizela)

08 February 2015

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## SUMMARY

The primary aim of this study is to explore and describe experiences of peer helpers at an Open Distance Learning institution since the start of their joining the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. This study was conducted with the intention of granting the peer helpers an opportunity to reflect on their individual experiences and in so doing in laying the foundation for future studies, intended to steer the Unisa peer help volunteer programme to new frontiers, while simultaneously highlighting the contribution that has been made by the Unisa Peer Help Voluntary Programme. An intrinsic case study design has been utilised in order to gain comprehensive insight into peer helpers' experiences. A sample of seven peer helpers were interviewed using the semi-structured interview technique. The main findings from this study can be categorised into four distinctive themes namely: (a) the peer helpers' goals for joining the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme; (b) construction of roles as peer helpers at an open distance learning institution; (c) positive experiences of participating in the Unisa peer help volunteer programme; and (d) the negative experiences of participating in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. The findings have painted a positive picture of how the Unisa peer help volunteer programme has contributed in shaping the lives of the peer helpers.

**Key words:** academic guidance, lay counselling, Open Distance Learning, Peer help, Peer Help Volunteer Programme, student learning, University of South Africa (Unisa), vocational guidance.

## **ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS**

ASCA:	American School Counsellor Association
CEL:	Community Engaged Learning
CHIPS:	Child-line in Partnership with School
COTIL:	Community Outreach Through Institutional Linkage
CPUT:	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
DCCD:	Directorate: Counselling and Career Development
DCSF:	Department for Children, School and Families
KASS:	Kagan Affective Sensitive Scale
MBF:	Mentorship and Befriending Foundation
NAPPP:	National Association of Peer Programme Professional
NAPP:	National Association of Peer Programs
NPHA:	National Peer Helping Association
NMMU:	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
NPHA:	National Peer Helpers Association
ODL:	Open Distance Learning
PHTP:	Peer Helping Training Programme

PR: Peer Resources

SET: Social Exchange Theory

SSCSA: Society for Student Counselling in Southern Africa

UPHVP: Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme

WSU: Walter Sisulu University

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study was conducted at one of the institutions of higher education in South Africa, namely The University of South Africa (Unisa). Unisa is an Open Distance Learning Institution and is often described in terms of the unique ways in which it presents its educational programmes. Terms like; Open Distance Learning (ODL), distance education, open learning, correspondence and part-time institution, are some of the terms often used to refer to the Unisa method of tuition.

Described by in the Unisa (2008), **Open Distance Learning** is a multi-faceted concept aimed at bridging time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communicative distances existing between student and institution, student and academics, student and series of lectures and student and peers. Open Distance Learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, provide flexibility of learning provision; supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectations that students can succeed (Unisa, 2008).

According to Unisa (2008) **Distance Learning** is described as a set of methods or processes for teaching a diverse range of students located at different places and physically separated from the learning institution, their tutors, teachers, as well as from other students.

**Open learning** is described as an approach to learning that gives students flexibility and choice over what, when, where, at what pace and how they learn. Open learning encompasses all of these factors, including Distance Education, Resource-based Learning, Correspondence

Learning, Flexi-study and Self-paced Study (Unisa, 2008). All the above-mentioned methods comply with Unisa-policies.

One of the drastic measures taken to support students in such a university was to implement a Unisa Peer help Volunteer Programme (UPHVP) which falls under the direct supervision of Directorate for Counselling and Career Development. The Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programmes (referred to as UPHVP in this study) has been initiated and is being maintained for three ultimate purposes:

- To develop a network of support for the Unisa student population. Peer helpers, acting as first contacts and initial support structures in their own social environment, use communication skills to facilitate decision making in others. This service provides a proactive, preventative guidance programme where personal and academic problems are being identified timeously with the aim of preventing students failing and increased retention.
- To extend the range of guidance services to schools and the broader community. Peer help volunteers are empowered with knowledge in terms of the career decision-making processes and, subsequent to this training, conduct career guidance and information outreach activities to school and in communities.
- To empower the peer helpers to develop critical personal and employability skills. Participating in the peer help volunteer programme allows the peer helpers to develop critical employability skills. Skills such as effective communication and listening skills, teamwork, leadership, decision-making and problem solving and project management skills are developed because of involvement in the programme. In addition, the peer



helpers are trained to and encouraged to develop individual career portfolios of the skills developed through participation in the programme (Van Schoor & Mill, 1998).

The peer helpers, according to Barnard and Kruger (2010), are volunteers. They are senior students majoring in psychology, and are committed to the process of volunteering at the department, whilst assistant student counsellors are appointed and involved as contract workers after having been selected from the pool of peer helpers. In this study, the researcher has made no distinction between the peer helper and the assistant student counsellor, on the basis that both are usually referred to as peer helpers. The researcher only wanted to sample only the participants who have served as peer helpers for no less than a year because they can better inform the research questions. The literature yielded many terms when referring to students who are appointed to help other students (Carr, 1993). To avoid confusion, the researcher opted to use the peer help term.

## **Rationale**

The rationale for conducting this study is to give the peer helpers a platform on which to reflect on their experiences as students appointed to help other students. There are in fact two profound reasons instigating the researcher to conduct the study. To narrate the first reason, the researcher has to take a personal retrospective journey to his first days as the student at the University of South Africa. On my arrival at Unisa I had to address two main concerns; financial and career concerns. I joined the registration queue, indecisive as to the course I will take. On my way to the registration desk, I was served with the College of Human Science Brochure to help me select the essential qualifications and modules available. I opted for the National Diploma in

Nursing, blissfully unaware that I did not meet the admission requirements. I then went to pay the compulsory registration fee. After two weeks of receiving no feedback whatsoever, I went back to Unisa to enquire. At that stage, I realised that I was neither registered, nor met with the essential admission requirements for entering for the selected course. I was then referred to the Unisa Main Campus in Pretoria. On arrival, I was provided with numerous college brochures, which were freely available at that time. I remember standing alone behind the OR Tambo building paging through the brochures in order to decide on the course I can take. After an hour, I went back and asked for assistance. At that stage, I was referred to the peer helpers who assisted me in exploring the numerous courses available at Unisa. Together we explored various options, the career opportunities and financial assistance and options available for students who cannot afford to make payment. Admission requirements for studying at an Open Distance Learning Institution, my goals and achievements, and many other aspects one should contemplate when choosing a career. In fewer than twenty minutes, I had come to a decision, went to registration and all my concerns were sorted. Since that moment, the peer helpers have inspired the researcher, and that spirit drives me still. Eventually, I, the researcher, decided on becoming one of the peer helpers, with the intention to reach out to other students experiencing similar challenges.

The second reason for conducting the study stems from the paucity of literature based peer helpers particularly at Unisa as an ODL institution. Notwithstanding the positive contribution made by the peer helpers in assisting both prospective and registered students over the past eighteen years, the dearth of published research outputs based on the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme virtually nullifies the existence of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. The researcher argues that the significant contribution made by UNISA peer helpers

can be enhanced if the UPHVP is given the unique research attention it deserve to reflect on their experiences as sources of support. The researcher is also confident that the findings of the study has put the UPHVP on the map and will give the project leaders fresh insights. This study is not envisaged to evaluate, but to shed light on the peer helpers' experiences, which, in turn might pave the way for other researchers to conduct more rigorous studies, aiming at improving the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme and sustaining notable areas of its excellence.

### **Problem statement**

From the researcher's perspective, the implementation of the Unisa peer helper volunteer programme during the past eighteen years has played a key role in helping many students with various inquiries ranging from career choices and selection of modules, adapting at the Open Distance Learning Institution and examination preparation, to mention but a few. The UPHVP could also be seen as one of students support organs of UNISA that stretches counselling services to embrace a significant number of students. The researcher argues that such a programme should be backed by research that can achieve new milestones, and respond to the developing concern of students. Moreover, the peer helpers should also feature strongly in research projects to share their experiences. In other words, the research was conducted to further capacitate the UPHVP to respond effectively to the counselling needs of the students. Research should explore the experiences of the students assigned to assist others, thus giving the full details concerning the peer helpers and all those involved in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. In a study conducted by Mill (2005), it became evident that, although UNISA peer helpers have been empowered through an extensive programme, UNISA project leaders reported

that many peer helpers remained passive, lacked initiative, did not reflect on their own experiences and did not take responsibility or ownership for on-going learning and development. It is of the utmost importance that this study will contribute to the literature of peer helping programmes in higher education institutions, and especially in an Open Distance Learning Institution.

Encapsulated in the findings are four distinctive themes. The first theme contains aspects that drew the participants to engage in the Unisa Peer Help Voluntary Programme and convince them to become peer helpers. The second theme presents the manner in which the participants make sense of their roles as peer helpers at an Open Distance Learning Institution. The third theme namely positive experiences has four subthemes which captures the unique positive aspects of peer helpers involvement in the UPHVP. On the other hand, the findings contain aspects of the peer helpers' negative experiences, which are, in essence, more like stepping stones than negative experiences. Although this study is still a drop in the ocean, the researcher is convinced that by this study, a contribution to the literature has been made and it will certainly serve as the foundation for future studies.

### **Concept of experience**

The concept of a true, real life experiences is open to different interpretations; consequently, it is important to state explicitly how it is conceptualised in this study. Although Hornby (2005, p. 513) in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary provides at least five definitions of what experience entails, only the first four will be considered. *Firstly*, experience

is defined as the knowledge and skill that one gains by doing something over a period of time; *secondly*, the experience is defined as the thing that happens to one that influences the way he/she think and behaves; *thirdly*, experience is defined as an event or activity that affects one in some way. *Lastly*, experience is defined as events or knowledge that is shared by all the members of the particular group in society and that influences the way in which they think and behave (p.513). This conceptualisation of experience is also echoed by other researchers who stated that experience may be understood as the abilities or information that a person has acquired from engaging in something (Driscoll, Parkers, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill and Bannister, 2008; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Riley, 2009). The research output of the abovementioned researchers revealed that experiences may be positive or negative as experienced by the participants. In the present study, holistic experiences of the peer helpers is viewed as; the situation that made them consider joining the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme, skills and benefits they gained from the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme, their perception of their roles as peer helpers, their positive experiences during the course of the programme and the challenges they encountered as peer helpers.

### **Aims of the Study**

The primary aim of this study is to explore and describe experiences of peer helpers at Open Distance Learning Institutions since joining the Unisa Peer Help Programme. This study intends to present the peer helpers with an opportunity to talk about their experiences, lay the foundation for future studies intended to steer the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme into

unchartered directions, highlight the contribution made by the Unisa Peer Help Voluntary Programme and benefits as well as the challenges of being a peer helper.

### **Primary research questions and sub-questions**

This study is intended to shed light on the experiences of students as peer helpers, by giving a more unmitigated picture of the peer helpers' experiences, the researcher deems it important to start from the onset of the idea of joining the Unisa peer help programme. The researcher holds the view that not all students participate in university programmes and activities and there was something unique for each student that triggered them to want to participate in the Unisa peer help volunteer programme. This was done to lay a foundation of the peer helpers' experiences. Therefore, the main overarching question is what are the experiences of student peer helpers at an ODL university and why did they join the Unisa peer help volunteer programme in the first place. To answer these question four sub-questions were developed.

1. What motivated peer helpers to join the Unisa peer help voluntary programme?
2. How did they make sense of being peer helpers at an ODL institution?
3. What are the positive experiences of being a peer helper at an ODL institution?
4. What are the negative experiences of being a peer helper at the ODL institution?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative approach was selected as being the most suitable approach to conducting the study. The qualitative approach was decided on as the most effective method as this is a form

of social inquiry that “focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences in general and the world in which they live” and the basis of qualitative research rests on the interpretive approach to social reality (Holloway, 1997, p.2). The interpretive paradigm was used as the epistemological position on the bases that it will guide the researcher to take the peer helpers’ experiences as the essence of what is true to them, understand their experiences through interacting with them; listening to their stories; and making use of qualitative techniques to collect and analysed data (Terre Blanche, Kelly & Durrheim, 2006, p. 273-274).

Among the research designs that fall under the wing of qualitative approach, an intrinsic case study was used on grounds that it helps the researcher to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a particular individual case, such as a specific programme, particular programme or agency (Yin, 2003, p. 3). Purposive sampling was used to sample the willing participants who were in the better position to give accounts that answers the research questions. Data were collected by using semi-structured interviews. The underlying reason for using the semi-structured interviews technique is that they guide the researcher, but are not restrictive as they allow the researcher to explore interesting areas that arise and can follow the participant’s ideas, interest or concerns more closely (Smith, 2003). The data were recorded, transcribed and analysed by the researcher using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis method fitted in with the study as, by utilising it, the researcher can identify, analyse and report patterns and themes within the data (Boyatziz, 1998).

## **Theoretical framework**

In this study, the researcher has made use of three theories namely the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1977), Astin's student involvement theory (1984) and the social exchange theory. The ecological theory is based on the interdependence between different organisms and their environment, with every part important to ensure the survival of the whole system (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2009). Four systems of ecological theory were applied in this study. These are micro systems, meso systems, exo systems and macro systems. All these systems were used to explain the themes that emerged in the study and they have provided different perspectives explaining the peer helpers' experiences. The researcher has also borrowed from the theory of student involvement in order to view and explain the findings from a different angle. Student involvement theory refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. The student involvement theory has been applied widely in the context of higher education in order to explore various aspects of students' lives in colleges and universities, (Berger, & Milem, 1999; Kuh, 2009; Milem & Berger, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In this study, the student involvement theory was used to understand the peer helpers' motive for investing their time in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme, how being involved enhances their engagement in and retention in the programme, as well as the gains, highlights and the challenges that come with involvement in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. Lastly, the researcher has also made use of the social exchange theory, which, according to Cropanzano and Mitchell, (2005), is one of the fundamental theories for understanding behavioural patterns between individuals and within groups on basis that it explains why people help each other, why they exchange information, encouragement, and love among other commodities. In this study, the social exchange theory was used to be to explain the



peer helpers' reasons for joining the UPHVP, explicating how do they make sense of their roles as supporting structures, to understand the possible gains emanating from all social exchanges that they engage in and how do they make informed decision to make sense of their challenges they encounter. The purpose for using the theory, stems from the researcher's view that not all students considers partaking in the university activities and those who do so, are motivated by the benefits that they may attain from partaking in university programmes.

### **Breakdown of dissertation chapters**

**Chapter 2: International perspective on Peer Help Programmes.** The Peer Help Programmes have a long, engaging and contradictory history. According to Varenhorst, (1984) the peer help programme emerged and became popular in 1960s. On the contrary, Pitts (1996) argues that the peer help programme dates as far back as in 1935, commencing with the introduction of the Alcoholic Anonymous organisations. In addition to this statement, literature offered many definitions of what peer helpers are and that the peer help programmes definition tends to be aligned with the intervention they are implemented for, leaving it open to different interpretation. The focus of this chapter is aimed at providing a historically detailed explanation of the peer help/peer counselling programmes, the development of the peer help programme/peer counselling programme from its inception in 1960's to date. In addition, the term peer helpers will be used throughout the dissertation and additional clarification will be provided as to who the peer helpers are and the potential strength of using peer helpers in different settings.

**Chapter 3: South African Peer Help Programmes.** The purpose of this chapter is to give a reader an understanding of the peer help programmes in the South African context. The

inception of the peer help programme in South African institutions of higher education in 1996 will be highlighted. Furthermore, the focus will also be on the origin and the development of the peer help programme at the University of South Africa (Unisa), its aims, objectives and values, the peer helpers, the process of recruitment, selection, training, roles, responsibilities of and supervision of peer helpers. During the course of this chapter, the researcher will also pay attention to research in peer help programmes or related programmes to establish the baseline for the study. In conclusion, the theoretical frameworks used and their relevance in this study will be discussed in this chapter.

**Chapter 4: Research methods.** The chapter will orientate the reader to visualise the research approach, techniques the researcher employed to undertake the research project. As common to most research studies using qualitative approach, the research designs are not cast on a stone, but are continuously adapted to more successfully achieve the goals of the study and the researcher follow the similar track. The aims of the study were the guiding reference for the approach and all the techniques the researcher used or plan to use. In this chapter, the researcher start off by reiterating the research questions, the aim of the study, then proceeded by orienting the reader about the epistemological position and the qualitative approach. Furthermore, the research discussed qualitative aspects like thick description, triangulation and trustworthiness. In this study, the researcher used case study, a detailed discussion in given in that regard. All aspects pertaining to ethical considerations are discussed and the purposive sampling method and utilisation of thematic data analysis technique used in the study is discussed in terms of how it was used.

**Chapter 5: Findings.** The findings chapter contain the participants' reflections and has already been discussed in the findings previous section. The researcher invites the reader by

reiterating data collection methods and changes there were made along the way. The researcher also orientates the reader about how data were managed from the stage of collection, transcription and analysis. After the interview, audio recordings of data were transcribed, interview transcripts were shared with the participants to correct and possibly expand on their reflections. This enabled the researcher to be confident that he had acquired detailed accounts of participants' experiences and the findings and discussion will be based on sufficient data. Moreover, in this chapter, the researcher also includes the participants' verbatim quotations extracted from the interview transcripts. The following sections are based on the participants' profiles and the identified themes as described above.

**Chapter 6: Discussion.** The discussion chapter present the findings against the backdrop of three aspects: three theories ecological theory, student involvement and the social exchange theory, literature review and the extent to the research questions were answered. The theories are used to explain data from different standpoints. This helped the researcher to describe the peer helpers experience from different lenses provided by these theories.

As it is widely accepted that there is no research study that exist in the vacuum, the literature review is used to contextualise the study not only in higher education institution, but to describe the experiences of the peer helpers in comparison to the previous studies on peer helpers, peer help programmes and related programmes. The research questions were used to determine the extent to which the findings answered the research questions and as well as to explore whether the aim of the study has been achieved. Moreover, the researcher describes the strengths and the limitations of the study and provides a concise conclusion that serves to conclude and summarise the research project.

**Chapter 7: Conclusion.** The aim of this chapter serves to provide a detailed summary to the context within which the study was conducted, the reasons that instigate the researcher to perform the study, the overview of the research questions and the critical goals of the study. The researcher inducts the reader as to the approach and designs employed throughout the study, theoretical frameworks used and the findings. Lastly, the outline of dissertation chapters is given to brief the reader about the content of each chapter.

## **CHAPTER 2: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON PEER HELP PROGRAMMES**

### **Overview**

The peer help programme has a long and rich history. Although many peer help programmes were initiated in the late 1960's, there appears to be no consensus on what the peer help programme constitutes. Current literature also yielded no consistent definition. However, each peer help programme's definition is closely connected to the type of intervention that the programme offers. According to Varenhorst (1984) peer helping programs (sometimes called peer counselling), which began in the late 1960s, involve training young people to serve in helping roles with their peers. The focus of this chapter will be centred on providing detailed explanation of the peer help/peer counselling programmes, the development of the peer help programme/peer counselling programme from its inception in 1960's to date. In addition, the term "peer helpers" will be used throughout the dissertation.

### **The origin of the peer help programmes**

The peer help programme has its origin in Europe and America. Literature consulted, indicated discord among researchers regarding the inception of the peer help programme. According to Pitts, (1996), the modern mutual help or peer help programme originated in 1935 with the introduction of the Alcoholics Anonymous. This paraprofessional helpers movement has escalated as a viable means of helping others to a more productive movement. Pitts (1996), stressed that, despite the fact that peer helpers are known to be without any requisite and formal training within the helping profession, they are often used in hospitals, prisons, retirement

centres, community based organisations, and schools, in which they are effective in providing support as well as enhancing the environment in which they work. Furthermore, literature demonstrated that a peer mentoring programme, as a didactic education strategy, was implemented at the University of Nebraska around 1950's. The success of this programme led to the expansion of peer educating as a mechanism for improving, withholding and academic success (Sawyer, Pinciaro, & Bedwell, 1997; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Contrary to Sawyer et al. (1997), and Pitts (1996), Varenhorst (1984) on the other hand stated that very little, if any, reference to peer counselling would be in publication on counselling psychology printed in the beginning of the 1960's. Varenhorst (1984) further stated that initial peer counselling activities has first been introduced with the development of the paraprofessional movement in the mid-1960's, and emphasised that peer counselling established its identity in the late 1960's. According to Lawson (1989), the earliest investigations into peer helping in an educational institution was conducted by Zunker and Brown in (1966). Although there are no sufficient studies that can support the existence of the peer helping programmes in 1930's and 1950's, the researcher assumes that peer helping programmes existed in some form but was not given the same research attention it has received from the early sixties onwards.

The peer counselling movement is growing and seems to be a viable method of meeting the needs of students in universities and colleges. Lawson (1989) has viewed it as a movement gaining momentum, rather than as a temporary trend. According to Carr (cited in De Rosenroll & Dey, 1990) peer counselling programmes in Canada have increased from only ten programmes in 1979, to more than 1000 in 1986 and most of which were implemented in schools. At the beginning of the 1990's, this number has increase beyond 3 400 programmes (Carr, 1993). Varenhorst, is a researcher who is regarded by de Rosenroll as an expert on this subject and has

contributed a substantial amount of literature on peer counselling, states that peer counselling, as a recognised counselling intervention, has had a brief past, an active current existence, and a potentially strong future “if supported by adequate research” (de Rosenroll, 1989, p. 75).

Reviews of other studies conducted on the peer help programme, seems to depict that the scarcity of qualified professionals paved the way for the use of peer helpers. Brown (1974) asserted that the emergences of non-professionals were the direct results of both an increased demand for counselling services and the inability of professionally trained personnel to provide all of those services. This is a view supported by Tan (1991), who stated that the demand for mental health professionals would always exceed supply thereof. This shortage of professional mental health workers, has led to an increase in the employment of lay counsellors to providing health services to the millions who need it. An example of this can be seen in support groups, Alcoholics anonymous, and other non-government organisations (NGO’s) such as those that combat gender abuse. De Rosenroll and Dey (1990) also stressed that people tend to seek out those similar to them or probably those who might have experienced the same hardships. In addition to this statement, Varenhorst (2002) suggests that the growth of human potential movement has also paved the way for the apparent value of paraprofessionals in the field of counselling. According to Brown (1974), employing layperson in the place of the professional practitioners, was gaining popularity because of the rapid growth in the demand for counselling services and the dearth of professionally trained personnel available to provide such services within North Americans.

One of the milestones of using peer helpers was noted when Carkhuff (1969, cited in Pitts, 1996), who is regarded as the founder of the peer helping movement, conducted a study by using housewives in mental health intervention and published his findings in his book “The art of

Helping”. He claims that lay trainees function at levels equally high or even higher than those achieved by professional trainers. Carkhuff (1969) claimed that people of all ages most often seek advice regarding everyday dilemmas from a peer rather than a professional counsellor. He argues that the development of peer help relationships and the creation of more efficient interaction among individuals provide a solution to the scarcity of resources. The research findings, which have been obtained from the study conducted by Carkhuff (cited in Pitts, 1996), indicated that:

- a. A lay person could be trained to function at levels related to constructive changes, even within the confines of short-term helping relationship,
- b. A helper is capable of taking an active part in the helpee’s total life situation,
- c. Empathising more effectively with the helpee’s style of life,
- d. Teaching the helpee, within his/her frame of reference, more successful actions, and
- e. Able to provide the helpee with an effective transition to higher levels of functioning within a social system.

These findings have led Carkhuff to advocate for the training of paraprofessional counsellors to assist professional counsellors in dealing with non-crisis situations (Steinbauer, 1998).

### **Peer counselling/helping: Diverse route to the same point.**

The concept of peer counselling seems to mean different things to different people. Literature regarding the essence of what the is peer helping is not only contradictory but also overlapping and in some instances complementary. The most crucial common aspect that can be pointed out from most of the definitions is the helping services rendered by peer helpers to their



target populations (researcher's opinion). From this it could be deduced that the fundamental principle that underpins peer help programmes is help rendered and this assistance finds expression in counselling, interacting, and so forth. Houlston Smith and Jessel, (2009, p. 105) described peer counselling as, "the provision of support to students through relatively formal structured sessions". Although there seems to be on-going debates about the most appropriate term that can be assigned to students who assist others, Downe, Altman and Nysevold (1986), argue that the actual work performed is of far greater importance than the label attached to the individual trained in the interpersonal relationship.

The following section provides a detailed explanation concerning peer counselling/helping. In addition, the new peer help identity that emerges from the paraprofessional and other related peer helpers' terms were given attention.

The Peer counselling is an activity, which occurs under the umbrella term of peer helping which covers a variety of services and activities, which occurs in various settings with diverse populations (Varenhorst, 2004). She further suggests that peer help is an informal, spontaneous form of pro-social behaviour and that this becomes formal through organised programmes and activities, which may include education and preventative programmes. Literature depicts that peer helping is used as a generic term to include all types of peer programmes (Peer Resources, 2013, para. 1-2-3-4). This concept of peer helping, tend to be flexible and appears under a variety of terms such as: peer tutoring, peer support, peer facilitator, peer mediation, peer conflict resolution, peer counselling, peer education, peer ministry, peer health workers, peer ambassadors, and peer leadership. Other examples of different forms of peer helping include peer tutoring for academic support, peer mediation for conflict resolution, peer counselling for one-to-one helping with personal or social issues, peer counselling for prevention of health

related issues. The use of different terms employed when referring to peer helpers echoed by Carr (1993), who states that more than thirty terms, ranging from peer helpers and/or - counselling are often used to refer to peer helpers. Peer helping can take place anywhere, such as in schools, universities, colleges, hospitals, clinics, community centres, unions, business, and corporation (Morey, Miller, Rosen & Fulton, 1993; Sawyer et al., 1997; Sprinthall & Hall, 1992).

The researcher has encountered numerous terms in the literature used to refer to peer helpers or peer counsellors and these caught the attention of the researcher. Consulted literature indicates that definitions of peer help vary; some definitions focus on the identity of the peer helpers are, and other definitions focus on what they do and for whom. Of greater importance was the fact that all definitions serve to form a broader understanding of the peer helpers and their interventions. Gray and Tindall (1995, p. 5), define peer counselling as: “a variety of interpersonal helping behaviours assumed by non-professionals who undertake a helping role with others”. This sort of intervention offered by peer counsellors included one-to-one helping relationships, group leaderships, discussion leaderships, advisement, tutoring and all activities of an interpersonal human helping or assisting nature. D’Andrea and Salovey (1983) describe peer counselling as the use of active listening and problem solving skills, along with knowledge about human growth and mental health, in order to counsel people who are our peers – in age, status and knowledge. The basic premise behind it assumption is that people are capable of resolving most of their own problems of daily living given the opportunity. Contrary to Gray and Tindall (1995) who stated that peer counselling has an advisory element, D’Andrea and Salovey (1983) declared that the purpose of the peer counsellor in counselling, is not to solve people’s problems

on their behalf, rather to assist them in discovering their own solutions. They hold the view that peer counsellors do not advise people on what they “should” do.

Other researchers like Myrick, Highland and Sabella (1995) perceive peer helping as a process in which trained, supervised students help others with personal and academic issues for the purpose of offering supportive relationships, clarify other students’ thoughts and feelings, explore options and alternatives, provide them with coping mechanisms and facilitate them in finding their own solutions. Forster- Harrison (1995) view peer helping as a classic case of deliberate psychological education, because it purposefully focuses on the psychological and healthy development of individuals.

The use of peer counsellors in higher education institutions tends to deviate when compared to peer counselling in therapeutic counselling. According to Scheepers (1997) peer counselling within the tertiary student community, refers to the support and assistance provided by the trained peer counsellor, a student-to-student relationship. In addition, the peer counsellor applies acquired listening, communication, interpersonal and helping skills to facilitate personal development, exploration of alternative and decision making for the fellow student seeking assistance, however, counselling in the therapeutic sense is not implied and little, if any advice is imparted (Scheepers, 1997). The above definitions exclude a professional counsellor, but can be understood to include all paraprofessionals when they function as interpersonal helpers towards their peers. The term peer denotes a person who shares related values, experiences, life styles and is of approximately the same age Gray and Tindall (1995).

What can be drawn from the above definitions of peer helping/counselling is that the focus of the intervention rendered by peer helpers is on assisting peers in rising above the

circumstances they face in their lives. However, this concept of helping is broad and can be open to many different interpretations. Gray and Tindall (1995) stated that helping has many ramifications, in peer counselling literature helping refers to one person giving assistance to another person who is in need of personal psychological assistance. Furthermore, succinct clarification was given that the helper is the counsellor who provides assistance and the helpee is the one who receives help.

### **The premise for implementing the peer help programmes**

The development and implementation of peer help programmes, and specifically in educational settings, are based on the notion that students approach other students when they are experiencing difficulties or have concerns (de Jager, 1995). In order to equip peer helpers with necessary counselling skills, knowledge drawn from different counselling theories serve as the guiding framework to train peer helpers. According to Gazda, Childers and Brooks (1987) the six major and most widely utilised theoretical approaches to counselling and therapy, are those of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, Adlerian Counselling and Psychotherapy, the person-centred approach, behavioural therapy, rational-emotive therapy and reality therapy. Furthermore, Gazda et al. (1987) suggested that the helper practices his/her skills within a framework, or theory, containing assumptions about human nature, the helping relationship and how intervention and change are effected through the qualities and climate of the particular helping relationship. The development and implementation of peer help programmes have been effective in helping students, but there were shortcomings in the subsequent section. This section will provide the overview of the development and implementation of the peer help programmes, counselling

theories underlying peer help programmes, challenges encountered in the implementation of the programme and attempts to control and address emerging challenges.

### **The rationale for implementing the peer help programmes**

Receiving help from an external significant others is part of everyday life. Each developmental period and transitions usually requires some form of outsider help to make life more effective and satisfying (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003). Therefore, peer helping programmes are interventions allowing for critical opportunities for practice and reflection, serving as a means of supporting psychological development (Forster-Harrison, 1995). This section aims to provide a detailed account of the reasons for implementing peer helper programmes in colleges, universities and other institutions.

The key aspects encouraging the formation of peer help programmes, particularly at higher education institutions involve the facts that students are more likely to seek out the services of a peer when experiencing problems (Carr, 1991). Various issues may inspire students to seek assistance from other students. Several studies have indicated the efficacy of peer helpers when assisting other students to adjust to the demands of higher education. Ware and Millard (1987) have pointed out some of the demands facing the students. They stated that students need advice on careers, on establishing a general sense of direction, on adjusting to the institution and other information that might be shared with students. In addition, there is a belief that peers provide one another with an important source of influence and support (Robinson, Morrow, Kigin, & Lindeman, 1991). Pitts (1996), noted a strong and steady growth of the use of peer leaders as counsellors, stating that one of the reasons for the popularity of peer leadership

programmes in higher education is that they "satisfy our four basic human psychological needs; to belong and love, to gain power, to be free, and to have fun" (p. 12).

According to Downe et al. (1986) the development of an effective peer counselling program can provide a school with a cost-effective vehicle for broadening the range and variety of sources of help offered in a school counselling services since peer counsellors are well equipped to handle routine questions about school, vocational information, and interpersonal relationships. College and university administrators have long believed that peers can play a uniquely effective role in encouraging their peers to consider, discussing openly, and develop responsible attitudes and lifestyles concerning a number of topics and dangers they are exposed to, from alcohol to multiculturalism. The strength of peer related influence has several benefits on the outcomes of student learning, attitudes, and behaviours. In fact, peers play the most significant role in an undergraduate's growth and development during college (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Peer- education programmes gained popularity on college campuses (Gould & Lomax, 1993) as peer educators are in a position to communicate with other students in ways that faculty and administrators can but aspire to. Peer education programmes continue to grow exponentially because college-age students often feel more comfortable talking to peers when it comes to sensitive issues such as sexuality and abuse of drugs (Sawyer et al., 1997). According to Erickson (1968), peer leadership is an effective intervention strategy due to the power that peer groups exert over individuals. Furthermore, Harter (1999) observed that adolescents are more disposed to consult close friends or peers, than they are parents or faculty when addressing personal issues as these involve issues of trust. In addition to the efficacy of peers assisting other students, educational programmes by peers are economical and provide copious leadership

opportunities for students (Nichols & Lumley, 1999). Consequently, peer educators quickly become valued and respected student leaders on many college campuses and peer guidance relationships promote student empowerment by reinforcing a belief that they are active participants in planning their own future. (Carter & McNeill, 1998).

Kuh, Schuh, and Whitt (1991), in their book “Involving Colleges” reveals that the best way of adjusting to the college, was to participate in the activities within the college. They emphasise that those students who get involved in campus activities, perform better academically and as leaders. The efficacy of the undergraduate’s training experience is related to the quality of campus life and is a direct result of the time spent by the students on campus and the extent of their involvement in activities. They also found that, in order for students to develop a sense of self-esteem as well as physical and psychological wellbeing, there is a need to experience personal development.

This personal development includes those attitudes, skills, and values that enable one to:

- Understand and reflect on one’s thoughts
- Recognise and appreciate personal differences
- Manage one’s personal affairs successfully
- Care for those less fortunate
- Determine the importance and outcome of social and personal responses that are preferable in various situations
- Relate meaningfully and responsibly with others in friendship, marriage, civil and political situations
- Be economical self-sufficient (Kuh et al., 1991, p. 7).

Other researchers have echoed the like advantages and positive contributions emanating from implementing peer help programmes (Downe et al., 1986; Rockwell & Dustin 1979). They stated that peer helpers increase the accessibility of counselling services to students and are of assistance to professional school counsellors; creating a possibility for students to obtain help more readily; and an opportunity to reach the largest number of students. The contribution made by peer helpers tend to have a positive influence on other students, thereby motivating them to become peer helpers themselves D'Andrea and Salovey (1983) stated that students are strongly motivated to become peer counsellors. They note that an undeniable advantage using students as peer leaders is that they have the coping skills that are essential to helping their peers finding solutions.

### **Theoretical framework underpinning the peer help programmes**

From consulted literature, it appears that most if not all peer help programmes are constructed from the framework of psychology and counselling theories. The body of literature shows that there are many theories that have been used to develop peer help programmes and in training peer helpers. According to Gazda et al. (1987) the six major, most widely utilised, theoretical approaches to counselling and therapy are those concerning psychoanalytic psychotherapy, Adlerian counselling and psychotherapy, the person-centred approach, behavioural therapy, rational-emotive therapy and reality therapy. Despite the theories listed above, other researchers like Salzer and his associates (2002; cited in Solomon, 2004) describe five theories that accommodate peer delivered services, including social support experiential knowledge, helper-therapy principle, social learning theory and social learning theory.



On the other hand, Varenhorst (1984, p. 723) disputes this assumption with Gazda et al. (1987) and Salzer and associates, as is also cited in Solomon (2004). She holds the view that the theoretical roots of peer counselling are not based on a formal theory, but rather on a theoretical position advocated by certain professionals to promote a method for enhancing psychological development. Varenhorst (1984) additionally stated that this position developed in America in the 1970's, because of growing dissatisfaction with the educational development at that time. Notwithstanding Varenhorst viewpoint that theoretical roots of peer counselling are not based on a formal theory, there is sufficient evidence that indicates that psychology theories are used as the benchmark for peer help programmes. Although there are numerous theories that underlines peer help programmes, the researcher, for the present study explained three theoretical approaches namely, the Adlerian theory by Alfred Adler, developmental theories and the social learning theory of Bandura.

### **The role of Adlerian individual theory in the peer help programmes**

Alfred Adler (1964) perceives human nature to be a socially based entity. He perceived the counselling relationship as an educative process created in order to assist the counsellee to correct certain erroneous thinking patterns, which have been created during childhood (Gazda et al., 1987). These cognitive distortions are, in reality, feelings of inferiority and social disinterest, originating from the individual's specific familial orientation and aura (Gazda et al., 1987). In another study (Barkley, Wilborn & Towers, 1984) the value of the Adlerian concept of "social interest" was considered in explaining the role of peer counselling training. Social interest is one of the of Adlerian (1964) theoretical cornerstones. Social interest is conceptualised as act of

taking an interest in the interest of others (Ansbacher, 1968). Adler holds that social interest is not an inborn quality; instead, each person has an innate potential to develop a strong social interest. In conjunction, peer counselling is postulated as one of the most effective methods by which to teach people to help other people (Myrick & Erney, 1978; Samuel & Samuel, 1975).

In accordance with the present study, the concept of social interest is of great relevance to Unisa peer helpers, as they have acquired the skills to serve Unisa's diverse student community in various areas. The literature reveals that little research has been undertaken to determine whether or not social interest as a mental health barometer can be impacted by some type of developmental program or social experience. This study was designed to help bridge that gap in research and to specifically investigate the effects, if any, of the experience of a peer counselling training program on the development of the social interest of high school juniors and seniors. The results of this study have important implications for other school counsellors working with young people. This study suggests that the mental health of adolescents is positively impacted on by helping others. This action-oriented approach to therapy is consistent with Adler's view that sooner or later an individual must do something in order to precipitate growth, and it could well be that getting involved with others in a helping relationship is one of the most powerful forms of therapy (Barkley et al., 1984).

### **The role of developmental psychology in the peer help programmes**

Peer help programmes accumulated knowledge and insight from developmental psychology. The influence of developmental psychology in peer helping stems from the fact that peers play a pivotal role in encouraging the healthy development of individuals. Development of

individuals is marked by different stages and at each stage the individual receives support from relevant significant others. According to Aladag (2005) the family is considered especially influential in shaping the social experiences during infancy and childhood and this is achieved by providing a social network with primary multipurpose support. During adolescence, however, the developmental tasks of forming identity, independence and a lack of fear of separation, suggests a shift from family members to peers, who then serve as prominent members of social network. Adolescence is a developmental transition between childhood and adulthood, entailing major physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2006). Adolescence predominates over a period of a decade, its onset being from the age of 10 or 11, or even earlier, until the late teens or early 20s (Papalia et al., 2006). Brown and Prout (1983) suggest a number of issues and challenges confronting the adolescent in his or her development:

“The adolescents are expected to achieve at school, perhaps even hold down a part-time job, and planning a career. Their social contacts and male and female friends are often under close surveillance. This age group is often still exploring the intricacies of responsibility and purpose of life. Because a large number of external values are often imposed upon them, it is important to help adolescents in developing their own values, thus boosting their self-esteem and their ability to cooperate with others” (pp. 306-307).

Adolescent’s relationship with their parent/s may become one of seemingly everlasting conflict. This is ascribed to various issues. Adams and Laursen, (2001); Barber, (1994) stated that most arguments concern day-to-day matters and trivialities like chores, school work, fashion, money, curfew, dating, and friends; which are not always fundamental values. Moreover, Arnett (1999) argues that some of these minor issues may be proxies for more serious ones, such as substance abuse, safe driving and sex. This accumulation of choices and the need

to grow independent, can contribute to a stressful family atmosphere (Arnett, 1999). The tension between parent/s and adolescents tend to make adolescents seek self-assurance, comfort and the warm embrace offered by peers. Santrock, (1997) stated that peer acceptance, peer approval and peer conformity are considered to be crucial and that adolescents strongly identify with their own generation, believing that some ideas and experiences cannot be properly understood or appreciated by adults as the opinions of those are out dated.

Peer friendships tend to give rise to both positive and negative outcomes. Positive outcomes relate to peer friendships offering adolescents an opportunity to grow and to establish their identity. Wassef, Mason and Collins, O'Boyle and Ingham (1996) stated that peer or friendships relationships provide a prolonged supportive environment for adolescents and this environment encourages independent decision-making. Jackie Robinson views a young person's growing involvement with peers as an important source of emotional support during the complex transition from adolescence to maturity is. The peer group provides a source of affection, sympathy, understanding, and moral judgement, a place for experimentation; and a setting for achieving autonomy and independence from parents (Papalia et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, over involvement with peers may have far-reaching implications where the adolescent person disobeys family rules, and shows aggression and disrespect to parents and guardians. Fuligni, Eccles, Barber and Clement, (2001) argue that attachment to peers does not forecast troubles unless the attachment with undesirable peers is so strong that the young person is willing to confront parents, reject household rules, starts neglect school work, and is set singularly on developing his/ her own talents in order to win peer approval and achieve popularity.

Several other researchers (Foster-Harrison, 1995; Myrick & Folk, 1999; Tindall, 1995; Varenhorst, 2004;) also agree that peer help can have a beneficial outcome in emphasizing and developing positive qualities and that it equipping young adults (as well as other peer groups) with the basic skills of providing caring, support, and guidance. The influence of developmental psychology on peer helping programmes seems to extend beyond adolescence to late adolescence and adulthood. Although there is not sufficient literature to support this, it has been experienced and observed that students who are late adolescents and have not reached adulthood, rely on each other in various aspects. The relevance of developmental psychology in Peer Helping Programmes has had and will always exert a pronounced effect. In a study to develop peer help programme university students who presented late adolescent period were sampled and their need and expectation were considered in the light of developmental principle (Aladag, 2005).

### **Influence of the social cognitive learning theory on peer help programmes**

According to Beitel, (1996) most early research peer counselling studies are constructed from behavioural and social-learning principles, employing modelling and vicarious learning methods with a view to explicate the actions of peer counselling. Modelling and vicarious learning methods are some of the hallmarks of the social learning theory of Bandura. According to the social cognitive learning theory, individual behaviour is determined by the interaction of three entities: the individual, the situation and the behaviour that takes place in that situation (Bandura 1986). Bandura regards behaviour as the result of continuous interaction between personal, environmental and behavioural determinants. He describes this as reciprocal

determinism. The other crucial aspect of the social learning theory is that people are viewed as active participants who can influence their own learning process in a number of ways. Social learning theorists postulate that there are three forms of learning, namely learning through direct experience, observational experience and learning through self-regulation.

- Learning through direct experience entails that the individual behaviour changes resulting from performing a behaviour which results in punishment or reward.
- Observational learning is one of the most important forms of learning which entails that the individual learns by observing the behaviour of others.
- Self-regulation refers to the individual's ability to regulate their own behaviour, in particular their individual learning processes, (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 2003).

Over and above the abovementioned forms of learning, there are other key aspects concerning the social cognitive learning theory that are centred on reinforcement. These are direct reinforcement, vicarious reinforcement and self-reinforcement.

- Direct reinforcement occurs when an individual receive rewards from others for the behaviour performed.
- Vicarious reinforcement occurs when one person observes another being rewarded for his/her good behaviour.
- Self-reinforcement occurs when individuals reward their own behaviour by praising themselves or boosting their own self-esteem (Meyer et al., 2003).

## **The challenges encountered**

Despite notable areas of significance that emerged as the consequence of using peer helpers, problems were encountered and which are still protruding as far as the peer help involvement is continuously growing. Varenhorst (cited in Mill, 2005) conducted research on many of the peer help programmes developed during the 1970's and identifies a number of limitations:

- The programmes consist of a variety of designs to be applied in different settings and with different groups.
- Many programmes lack a sound theoretical foundation and are construed on “hunches” (p.723), and intuition
- A variety of training models are experimented with, and
- Evaluations are mostly subjective and research findings tend to be descriptive.

Despite these impediments, Varenhorst (1984) states that these programmes collectively contribute to the formation of a theoretical foundation on which future programme can be based. Other areas referred to as the sources of shortcomings, are that peer help programmes fail to comply with the principle and standards of the National Association of Peer Programmes (NAPPP, 2013, para. 6) which is a non-profit corporation whose mission is to help adults establish, train, supervise, maintain and evaluate peer programs using the NAPPP standards and ethics as a guiding principle. In addition, problems concerning the adequacy of training and the efficiency related to supervision, as well as problems brought into play when referring to defining and limiting peer helpers' roles, have also been highlighted in this regard (Black, Tobler & Sciacca, 1998; Downe et al., 1986; Fennell 1993; Lewis & Lewis 1996; Morey

et al., 1993; Myrick & Folk 1999). Additionally, the peer help programmes has been the subjected to criticism, which originates from the fact that peer help evaluation programmes have been dominated by qualitative methodology in which subjective comments are the main means of evaluation (Downe et al., 1986; Morey et al., 1993; Steinbauer, 1998). Other concerns noted, were the failure to evaluate programme's impact on students and the absence of formal and frequent programme evaluation resulting from the lack of clear-cut, measurable objectives Ender and Winston (1984, as cited in Fennell, 1993).

According to Grey and Tindall, (1995) the helper (peer counsellor) has the skills and the psychological strength to provide the helpee with the assistance. Thus, the helpers must communicate in some manner, which involves the concerns, feelings, problems, or other human needs for which the helpee applies for assistance. As a result, the helping process is understood to refer to the synthesized activities associated with the helpers assisting the helpee.

### **The effectiveness of using the peer helpers**

Literature consulted depicts that peer helping programmes are generally effective. Trainees (peer helper) benefit not only from learning how to assist other better, but from also gaining new insight into their individual resources and their relationships with peers. In addition, the peer programme help peer counsellors to improve their communication skills as well as to be able to assist others. The training undergone by peer counsellors is not so extensive as to cause major changes in the values, experiences and life style of the counsellor. As a result, the peer counsellor will retain those values to be shared with other peers.



Research into the efficacy of adolescent peer programmes in schools recognise that they are cost-effective and represent comprehensive approaches, warding off alcohol and other drug abuse, bringing about a reduction in campus violence, generating respect for racial and ethnic diversity, increasing school attendance and academic performance, and improving overall student health and self-esteem (Forouzesh, Grant & Donnelly, 2001). Peer help is said to be beneficial to any age group, including children, adolescents, young and older adults (Bratter & Freeman 1990; Morey et al., 1993; Myrick et al., 1995; Sawyer et al., 1997; Sprinthall & Hall, 1992). The body of literature indicates that peer help programmes present several advantages, not only benefitting counsellors and counselling departments, but also serving to the advantage for peer helpers themselves in developing their interpersonal skills and self-growth which, in turn, will benefit peer helpers (Myrick & Folk, 1999; Tindall, 1995).

D'Andrea and Salovey (1983) reported that students were quite satisfied with the peer help programme. The peer counsellors considered the experience of being part of a peer help programme as an important milestone on the way to adulthood. It presents them with an opportunity to practice openness, self-acceptance, and honesty and discloses their vulnerability, by means of supporting each other and fulfilling a valued role in the group. Additionally, the peer help training was viewed as "intimacy training" that might be of important to one's own personal life (D'Adrea and Salovey, 1983). Others suggest that it teaches social skills that might prove useful in one's work situation. Some participants are convinced that the training present peer counsellors with the opportunity to achieve a better understanding of individual psychology, of group processes, of ways of facilitating communication and of interaction.

The positive results of being peer helpers are not only limited to students who receive help, however, as peer helpers themselves benefit hugely from participating in peer help

programmes. Research suggests that college students who participate in peer education displays significant improvement in leadership, gain interpersonal communication skills, increase the peer educator's relevant knowledge, develops a higher level of self-esteem, and creates advanced personal health behaviour; all of this when measured before and after their peer education experiences and sessions (Brack, Millard, & Shah, 2008; Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000). Moreover, the conflict resolution and communication skills acquired by peer mediators have been seen to be valued outside the education system, and to prepare pupils to become good citizens (Baginsky, 2004).

Peer helpers also benefit from the specialised human relations training as well as from the opportunity to help others, gain skills, which contribute to their own personal growth and development (Frenza, 1985). As a result of the prestige of being selected and the satisfaction of personal involvement in the needs of others and being asked to contribute to another person's wellbeing, the helper's status is increased and his or her self-esteem is boosted, confidence in the helper's own psychological well-being is increased, positive self-regard is enhanced (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003).

According to Foster–Harrison (1995), when peer help programmes are appropriately planned and implemented, they have the capacity to provide a framework that engages students in a process of growth, teaches students new ways of dealing with issues and problems and promotes new structures of thinking. Although this statement excludes instances where peer help programmes are not appropriately implemented, the researcher assume that the current standard of significant contribution could not be achieved, should the peer help programme have been implemented in a haphazard manner.

## **Who are the peer helpers?**

The concept of peer helping tends to denote different things as it has been indicated previously. In similar vein, peer helpers are understood differently and there seems to be no consensus among scholars as to what/who is a peer helper. According to Gray and Tindall (1995) the peer counsellor refers to a person who assume either by choice or conscription, the role of a helping person with contemporaries.

## **Selection of the peer helpers**

People are imbued with different talents and their potentials cannot be underestimated. Additionally, people are capable of developing talents and improving personal qualities to be what they want to be. For this very reason, people are selected to fill vacant positions or to perform different roles, and recruiters take careful consideration when selecting those they deem fit for that position. Accordingly, the same rules are often used when selecting peer helpers. According to Downe et al. (1986), Myrick and Folk (1999), the selection of peer helpers has long been considered as one of the most important determinants guiding a peer help programme. Keller (1999) states that, for the programme to be effective, certain criteria have to be used when selecting peer counsellors. Moreover, academic performance is viewed as an important determinant in the selection of peer counsellors and a student should be able to succeed in his studies, so that peer counselling is not used as an excuse for failure (Keller, 1999).

## Recruitment

According to De Rosenroll (1986) recruitment is an important aspect that needs to be carefully planned in advance of starting a peer counselling programme. In recruiting peer helpers, various strategies are employed. It is common to invite students to apply, making their own recommendations on why they would like to be chosen as peer counsellors (Diver-Stammes, 1991; Hill, 1990; Stokes, Gonzalez, Rowe, Romero, & Associates, 1988). In some instances, recruitment is conducted through a variety of advertising approaches including posters and flyers, bulletins, school assemblies, announcements, campus media, word-of-mouth messages, memos to the faculty and selection polls. Staff meetings, programme speakers, in-class recruiting, lunches, peer counselling events and information sessions should be a regular occurrence. Direct recruitment by means of recommendations from faculty members, counsellors and peer also takes place (Carr, 1981; de Rosenroll, 1986; Lawson, 1989; Nassar & Collins-Eaglin, 1994; Robinson et al., 1991). The body of literature reveals that other researchers explore, with the group, the characteristics conveyed by good helpers and then allow students to indicate names of students who meet a particular number of characteristics (Down et al., 1986; Miller, 1989; Tsengiwe, 1998). The ability of students to select peer helpers is also pointed out by Ozer, Weinstein, Maslack, and Seigel (1997), they stated that students can also select peer counsellors according to the school network theory, which states that members of the teenager peer group, especially those regarded as “cool “or popular members, are the ones showing credibility and possess the power to influence other adolescents’ perception of peer counsellors.

## Criteria for short listing the peer helpers

The preliminary selection for short-listing of peer helpers is decided on by principles that are essential in choosing a peer helper as these helpers should have the necessary qualities.

According to the Tindall and Black (2009) a clear, systematic, and careful procedure for the screening and selection of peer helpers should be put to use in the peer help programme. This procedure typically includes the following:

1. Establishing appropriate criteria as to the characteristics being a requirement among prospective peer helpers; including helpfulness, trustworthiness, concern for others, ability to listen, and potential to serve as a positive role model.
2. Conducting a formal and informal survey into the programme setting, in order to determine which individuals possess the desired characteristics to be successful helpers.
3. Making application to the programme, soliciting recommendations from others in the setting, and structuring and interview with the programme staff (Tindall & Black, 2009, p. 232).

Other peer help project coordinators employ various psychoanalytical tests in the selection of peer helpers. Carr (1992) refers to the Kagan Affective Sensitive Scale (KASS). The KASS is designed to discriminate between students with exceptional potential to give guidance and those with low counselling potential (Jackson, 1986). According to Keller, (1999), recruitment tends to be supported on the Rogerian model of good counselling. The criteria include genuineness, unconditional positive regard, warmth, empathy, openness and a non-judgemental attitude (Rogers, 1951). On the other hand, Down et al. (1986) identified three criteria frequently used for the selection of peer counsellors. These are:

1. Likeness to the target group
2. Recommendation to the target group and teaching staff
3. Psychometric testing

Down et al. (1986), further points out that a single criterion for selection of peer counsellors may not always suffice and suggests that a combination of certain features of each criterion should be taken into consideration. In addition, other researchers state that the applicant (prospective peer helper) must fit the demographic needs of the clients that would make use of the counselling services (Greenstone, Dunn, & Leviton, 1995). Motsabi, (1999). Also added to the selection procedure, “he stated that peer counsellors should be students who are already familiar with the institution and its setting. These students should also be familiar with the rules and regulations and the expectations of the faculty from the students at large. The personal qualities of the peer helpers are of great importance in the selection process. Tindall and Salmon-White (1990) state these personal qualities as five characteristics that should be looked for in identifying and selecting peer helpers for peer help programme. These are:

- Caring and sharing,
- Listening,
- Genuineness,
- Being liked and respected by others, and
- Ability to resolve conflicts.

Myrick and Folk, (1999) also define some desired characteristics, such as potential leadership, friendly disposition, positive attitude about concerning self and others, willingness to make personal time and space available to others and being conscientious and enthusiastic. Add

to all this is that, although self-confidence and self-esteem are desirable traits, these, as is the case with many other traits, often develop as part of the training programme.

A closer look at the selection procedures used when selecting peer helpers from the literature search, it is apparent that various methods are put to use during the selection process of peer helpers. Not a single method can be seen as preferable to the other, however, different methods postulated by different researchers, tend to work in unison. The researcher assumes that the decision rest with the peer help project leaders to develop an appropriate method that can be used in selecting peer helpers that are capable of rendering expected counselling services.

The final decision when selecting the most appropriate peer helpers, follows after an attempt has been made to take into consideration all the recruitment procedures. The literature suggests that smaller groups, ranging from six to fifteen peer counsellor trainees, prove to be more manageable, dynamic, interactive and compatible with a variety of training activities (Bowman, 1986; De Rosenroll & Dey, 1990; Du Toit & Winfield, 1994; Garner, Martin & Martin, 1989; Gougeon 1989; Letsebe, 1988). Smaller groups allow for quality training and appropriate supervision (Carr, 1981; Tindall & Salmon-White, 1990). Myrick and Folk (1999), also support the idea of initially starting with a small number of students who are accessible, likeable, and easy to work with and suggest that this may lead to a successful program. A number of at least six students, or more, ranging from 15 to 20 students are recommended, depending on the training methods and curriculum. Tindall and Salmon-White (1990) also suggest that the normal number assisting one trainee, may be six to twelve participants. The final selection is of utmost importance in the peer help programme. According to Bratter and Freeman (1990) the success of the peer counselling programme is dependent on careful interviewing, as this method permits the interviewers to perceive, conduct and hear the responses, which cannot

be taken into account during the written application. As a result, the final decision is one of the professional trainer's responsibilities. There are two very important reasons for which the trainer is to assume this responsibility; (a) public apprehension is reduced concerning possible peer helpers' inappropriate behaviours if a responsible professional makes their selection, and (b) ultimate responsibility for peer helping rests solely with the trainer (Tindall, 1995).

The body of literature indicates that the life of the peer counselling programmes rest on the suitability and responsible behaviour of selected peer helpers. There appears to be no guarantee that following all selection procedures, will result in the success of the peer help programme. Bowman, (1986) who stated that there is little evidence to prove that selection procedures necessarily result in the selection of more responsible peer counsellors. In addition, there is no specific method desirable for selection of peer helpers that is preferable to another (Pitts, 1996).

### **Training of the peer helpers**

According to Keller, (1999), Peer-counselling training programmes vary in duration, approach and content, depending on the maturity of the trainees, the goals of the programme and the peer-counselling roles and the functioning that the training intends to prepare the participants for. The National Peer Help Association (NPHA) as cited in Aladag, (2005) also suggested that the training program should (a) be reflective of the nature and the goals of the program, (b) it should take into account the age, needs and characteristics of the population to be served, (c) it should utilise appropriate curricular resources and training strategies and, (d) be consistent with local conditions and national guidelines on ethics and standards. Peer help programmes are



tailored for various conditions and purposes. These may include topics on drug and alcohol abuse, family feuds, peer relationships, peer pressure, prevention of suicide, controlling gangs, sex and sexism, teen pregnancy, violence, death and dying, stress management, assertiveness and trust (Diver-Stammes, 1991). In this section the researcher attempts to provide broader descriptions on peer help training programmes involving duration thereof, content of training and activities taken part in during the training.

The duration of the peer help training programmes tends to vary; in as far as, these programmes are different. This difference stems from the aim of the programme, the skills that peer counsellors should acquire, and what the project leaders deem as important. This is supported by Down et al. (1986) who stressed that the duration and intensity of training and the number of skill-training sessions included, vary considerably from one program to the next and these are related to the actual skills being taught, the purpose of the program, and the priorities of the program co-ordinator. Other researchers seem to show less concern for the duration of the training. According to Robinson et al. (1991) peer counselling training needs to be focused and brief, especially if it is not part of the curriculum. They emphasise that a three-day training camp at the outset of counsellors' careers helps to make them confident based on the skills they gain. Myrick (1993) stated that ten to twelve hours is the minimum time required for a peer counselling training programme. On the other hand, Morrill, Leach, Radebaugh, Shreeve, Colby and Johnson (1987) stated that at least thirty hours of training is required.

The content of peer help training is of paramount importance, as it entails the skills that should be mastered by peer counsellors. Kehayan, (1992) and Myrick et al. (1995) stated that the training programmes are usually designed with a view to address user needs and to prepare and facilitate the trainees for specific peer counselling roles and functions. According to Keller

(1999) and Morrill et al. (1987), the peer counselling training programme should be adapted to fit the context in terms of user needs and to prepare counsellors and fully equip them for the problems and the concerns that they will have to deal with in a specific setting.

In keeping with the core of content of the peer help training, Carr (1981) states that a student-centred rather than an agenda centred approach should be followed. This indicates that the focus is on the needs of the population targeted, rather than on being limited to all the aspects of the training. Motsabi, (1999) states that peer counsellors are trained in communication skills with special emphasis is placed on listening skills, on the ability to generate change, and on helping with relationship problems. Examination of literature depicts that, although peer helpers are trained in listening skills and problem solving skills, peer counsellors are warned not to give advice to students (Downe et al., 1986). Literature consulted fails to reveal the negative implications of giving advice to students. This could be resulting from the fact that most peer help programmes draw elements from psychological counselling theories, which discourage providing helpees with advice.

Embedded in the core content of the peer help training system, are the skills that trainers intend to impart to the peer helpers. Imparting and acquisition of skills are pivotal in the peer help programme, as the results of the intervention of peer helpers is measured by their skills. In a study conducted by Frenza, (1985) it became evident that trainers aim to equip peer counsellors with the following skills:

- Good listening skills
- Greater awareness of verbal and nonverbal behaviours on the part of the self and others
- Strategies for establishing a non-threatening environment

- Ways of responding, such as feedback and classification, to encourage the client's self-growth
- Recognition of signs when professional counselling is needed
- Resources of referrals or general information (educational, personal-social, or occupational).

Motsabi (1999) stated that knowledge and skills needed by peer counsellors include the development of a support system among themselves, awareness of administrative policies and procedures, and interpretational relationship or job specific skills. In addition to abovementioned skills, Cowie and Wallace (2000) argued that an important aspect of peer counselling training is that of establishing "boundaries". They stress that, whilst peer supporters may intervene helpfully on a wide range of issues, there are some problems that should never be handled by peer supporters on their own. These usually involve situations where there is a serious possibility of harm being done to the person seeking help or to another person. In addition to the issue of establishing boundaries, Newton and Ender (2010), also vehemently argue that one important aspect of training as a peer educator, will be learning where the level of competency to assist others ends, and where the knowledge and skills of the professional must be resumed with.

Most peer help training programmes tend to direct the focus to the helping relationship, which is the actual engagement between peer helpers and their peers and all the issues that might emerge during those interactions. Geldard, (2005) postulates that most programmes devote some time to exploring the helpers' values and attitudes differences and ethical issues of confidentiality. A Peer Counselling Starter Kit developed by Carr and Saunders (1980) incorporates topics related to awareness of others and non-verbal communication, road-blogs to effective communication, listening and empathy, reflective listening skills, self-disclosure,

clarification of values, decision-making, problem solving and the review of ethics, confidentiality and sources.

### **The roles of the peer helpers**

Peer help programmes are established for specific people and are often intended to find a solution to certain issues. Likewise, peer helpers are trained to assume responsibilities and render services that are covered by what the peer help programme has been developed for. While rendering their services, peer helpers encounter various issues that they can deal with as well as issues that they cannot deal with. Clients with issues or problems that fall outside of peer helper's expertise are referred to additional centres for further assistance. That is the reasons for which the roles of peer helpers are of paramount importance; they set the limits for peer helper's intervention. This serves the purpose of preventing peer helpers from being tempted to undertake issues that are beyond their scope of practice, experience and knowledge.

The roles of peer helpers are explicated in the peer help programme. Researchers tend to employ different strategies when determining peer helpers roles. D'Andrea and Salovey (1984) embarked on a research involving 200 colleges and university counselling services, and published a slope of typical issues that often brought to the attention of peer counsellors. These issues vary in terms of frequency in which they are presented to the peer counsellors. Table below shows these typical problems (D'Andrea & Salovey, 1984).

**Table1: Summary of types of problems that peer counsellors deal with**

1	Academic difficulties	4	Career/ future anxieties	7	Monetary problems
2	Friendships relationships	5	Depression	8	Sexual problems
3	Romantic relationships	6	Parental issues	9	Suicide

According to Lawson (1989), peer counsellors render a variety of services in colleges and in universities, namely through walk-ins-service as opposed to making specific appointments, by managing a telephone hot line, by providing general information about the institution, and by supporting peers with personal issues. The roles of peer helpers find expression in service delivery and are of crucial importance as they determine the success and failure of the peer help programme. The American School Counsellor Association (ASCA) cited in Aladag (2005) defines the peer helper's role as one of providing a variety of useful and helpful services for schools as are stipulated:

- a) One-on-one confidential assistance: Talking to students about personal or school problems, referring them to community resources, or providing information on the school's counselling programme.
- b) Group settings: Services as group leaders, teachers of helping skills to other students, communication skills trainers, peer helpers trainers.
- c) Educational function: Tutoring in academic areas, assisting special education consultants in working with learning and behaviourally disabled students.
- d) Hospitality: Welcoming and guiding new students and their parents around the school.

- e) Outreach: Helping the services of the school counselling programmes, services as listeners or as resources for population that may feel uncomfortable talking with the school counsellors, reducing crisis situations by alerting professional school counsellors to problems of a serious nature.
- f) Growth: increasing the personal growth and becoming more functional at higher levels, becoming students that are more effective.

In addition to the role of peer helpers, Dowe et al. (1986) recommended that peer counsellors should be exposed to the ethical issues related to their support roles and the dilemmas relating to confidentiality during training. In keeping with ethical considerations, Giddan (1988) stated that, although peer counsellors are not professionals, they still need to collaboratively develop their own codes of responsibility, standards and ethical guidelines relevant to their limited support activities and roles. Moreover, Giddan (1988) also stated that careful recruitment, selection, training and supervision may prevent the ethical problems which arise from peer counsellor lack of accountability and responsibility, incorrect advisement and breach of confidentiality

### **Supervision of the peer helpers**

After all prerequisites have been met with in a satisfactorily manner, the peer helpers may start rendering services. Whilst rendering their services, it is pertinent that they should receive on going supervision from trainers for further development. Supervision serves many purposes in grooming peer helpers to be effective in delivering their services. Support and supervision structures are essential for the maintenance, development, quality and success of the peer

counselling service (Carr, 1981; Cowie & Sharp, 1996). According to NPHA cited in Aladag (2005), supervision includes the following goals:

1. Enable programme staff to monitor programme-related activities and services,
2. Enhance the effectiveness of and personal growth of peer helpers,
3. Encourage peer helpers to share with, learn from, and support each other in the performance of their helping roles.

The role of the supervisor is critical in capturing and maintaining the continued involvement of the peer helpers (Bratter & Freeman, 1990). McIntyre, Thomas, and Borgen, (1982); Letsebe, (1984), and Kehayan, (1992) hold the view that support and supervision may be provided by the trainer, who should be suitably qualified, and appointed resource persons, should be helping professionals and the peer counsellors themselves. Consulted literature depicts that researchers' opinions regarding supervisory roles seems to vary, however, the ultimate goal is that of grooming, guiding and empowering peer helpers in delivering services and trying to strengthen the peer help programme and ensuring that it is successful in attending the needs of its target population. Keller (1999) consulted various researchers' opinions about supervisory functions and integrated them in the following:

- It creates regular opportunities for the peer counsellors to reflect on their their experiences, explore concerns and problematic areas of their roles, reflect on case work, improve their responses and skills, consult with appointed resource persons, to support one another and to promote positive group feelings,

- It encourages exploration and regulation of ethical issues, referral procedures, observation of limitations and boundaries of the peer counselling roles and functions monitoring user progress,
- It serves to transfer information, additional and continuous training and skills development, problem solving and strategy discussions,
- It assists with counselling assignments and planning of peer counselling, activities and events,
- It ensures assessment, review and feedback by the organisers, supervisory and resource helpers on the impact of peer counselling programme, peer counsellor performance and programme activities and developments.

Sherman, Sanders, and Yearde (1998) perceive supervisors as persons who perform multiple roles and at different times may serve as the administrators who encourage accountability, the teachers who improve skill and competencies, or the therapists who facilitate personal and paraprofessional development. The supervisor's responsibility is to help paraprofessional with the following:

- Understand the limits of their role and responsibility,
- Learns effective ways to work with peers,
- Remain objective and non-judgmental,
- Recognise how their own feelings and experiences may influence their work (Sherman et al., 1998).

The above-mentioned aspects of supervision show that effective supervision is vital in peer help programmes. It also enhances the service delivery, keeps peer helpers trained and



abreast with latest information and maintains the quality of the peer help programme in meeting the needs of its population.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the researcher attempts to give a reader detailed discussion on the history of the peer helping programmes. For an in-depth understanding, attention was first channelled to the origin of the peer helping programme and its development over the years. Diversity of terms used to refer to peer helpers were considered, in this study however, two terms would be used interchangeably, namely peer helpers and peer counsellors. The rationale for using peer helpers was discussed with specific reference to higher education context. Moreover, the researcher also strives to pay undivided attention to the effectiveness and the challenges that were encountered when peer help programmes are implemented. The aim is not to suggest that the challenges and effectiveness of peer help programmes have a universal application, but to provide a reader with an idea of what transpires when peer help programmes were launched. This may still be evident even today. Given that peer helpers are trained to help their peers with various issues and are taught to be good listeners, most of the knowledge used in training is drawn from psychological theories. As a result, the researcher deems it invaluable to consult literature and ascertain theories that are often used when training peer helpers. A number of researchers emphasise that the success of a peer help programme rests on the selection of peer helpers who have a potential to be good peer helpers. The researcher also attempts to look at the processes involved in the advertising, recruitment, selection and training of peer helpers. Finally, focus is directed at the role of supervision of peer helpers in order to enhance their performance in assisting their peers.

## **CHAPTER 3: SOUTH AFRICAN PEER HELP PROGRAMMES**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to give a reader an understanding of the peer help programmes in the South African context. Attention is directed at the inception of the peer help programme in South African institutions of higher education in 1997. Furthermore, the focus is also directed at the origin and the development of the peer help programme at the University of South Africa (Unisa), the aims, objectives and values of the peer help programme, the peer helpers and the processes of recruitment, selection, training, roles, responsibility and supervision of peer helpers. Despite the support of a peer help programme at the South Africa context and at Unisa in particular, the researcher critically examines the literature on peer helpers' experiences in both international and South African context to establish what has been achieved thus far and how peer helpers make sense about their involvement in the peer help programme. Finally, the researcher seeks to elucidate the ecological theory as a theoretical framework and its applicability in the study.

### **Peer helpers: South African institutions of higher education**

According to de Jager (1998) the development of formal peer help programmes in South African institutions of higher education is a response to the speech delivered by the first democratic president of South Africa, Nelson Holihlahla Mandela and the South African government's White Paper on Higher Education, which calls on institutions of higher education to transform higher education. Nelson Mandela, cited in (de Jager, 1998), in his opening address

to parliament, shared his vision by stating that South Africa should commit itself to its achievement through a system of values which are interlinked and interrelated, being concerned for the empowerment of the people through education, accessibility and transparency, co-cooperativeness, commitment and passion for service, innovativeness and critical engagement, and efficiency and efficacy in delivery. South African government's White Paper on education supported Mandela's vision by calling on institutions of higher education to transform higher education. Higher education institutions were challenged to develop, put into practice and refine policies and procedures, which would enhance equal opportunities, equity of access and fair chances of success for all (de Jager, 1988).

One of the significant measures taken to align institutions of higher education taking into consideration the issues raised by Mandela and those stipulated in the White paper were complex and required a constructive, empowering and enabling strategy, which changes education from something that is forced on students, to a co-operative enterprise. As higher education institutions are constantly challenged to perceive the academic wellbeing of fast growing diverse students' communities with fresh perspectives, the subsequent and divergent moves, included the implementation and the development of peer help programmes (de Jager, 1998). Literature illustrates that peer help programmes in South Africa were initiated at the Port Elizabeth Technikon, which is now known as Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (Mill, 2005). It was during 1995 and 1996 that PE Technikon sent Marina de Jager (staff member at the Department of Students Counselling) to Canada, to participate in the basic and advanced training workshop for peer helpers' trainers. On her returns, a peer help training programme was introduced to staff and students at the PE Technikon during 1995, (de Jager, 1998). As a result, the peer help programme in South Africa is based on the Canadian programmes developed by Carr and

Saunders but has been adapted for South Africa and has been introduced to the members of the Society for Student Counselling in Southern Africa (SSCSA) and funded by the Community Outreach Through Institutional Linkage (COTIL) (Mill 2005).

The rationale for the formation of peer help is constructed on the notion that newly enrolled students are required to make major adjustments to the demands of higher education. The students' needs vary and so do the effective means of assistance that serve to make these adjustments and to help students achieve their academic and personal potential (de Jager, 1998). Despite major adjustments that face students when entering the context of higher education, Majosi (1994), states that previously disadvantaged students who are often older students and they experience difficulties when making the transition from disadvantaged backgrounds in a challenging and diverse multi-cultural university environment". Furthermore, Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) also argue that most students are under prepared for higher learning as the consequence of on-going legacy of apartheid and predominant substandard schooling system, which emanates from a disadvantaged background and faces deeply rooted socio-economic challenges, which, in combination threaten their success.

At this stage, many South African higher education institutions have embraced the idea of using peer helpers to reach out to students who may be out of reach when depending on other means of support services. According to de Jager (1998), after the peer help programme was established at the Port Elizabeth Technikon, other higher education institutions joined hands and the consortium for peer help was established. De Jager (1998), states that the consortium is represented by a major distance education provider in South Africa, an institution with well-established peer help programmes as well as with several historically disadvantaged institutions with newly established peer help programmes. The aim of the consortium was to form well-

established collaborative links, networking to upgrade and strengthen existing peer programmes and their support structures at the institution. In addition, the consortium was intended to form a foundation for the extension of peer help programmes to other educational institutions, (High schools, technical schools and teachers' colleges) and communities. Listed below are higher education institutions that have signed up as members for the consortium for peer helping: (Some of these institutions have changed names and merged with other institutions).

- The Port Elizabeth Technikon, currently known as the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (2013), uses the peer help programme to serve as a fine example of the institution's upliftment of the student community, as well as of the broader community. The peer help programme at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) is one of the units under the department of Student Counselling, Career and Development Services (SCCDS), which is described as a pro-active approach to guidance and counselling. (<http://counselling.nmmu.ac.za>). According to NMMU's first year orientation guide, (2013) the ultimate aim of peer helping is to assist students in creating a beneficial living and learning environment, making their university life as meaningful and enjoyable as it is meant to be. In addition, it is interesting to note that NMMU states that the peer help programme equips students to further develop and refine their natural helping skills, as the present study aims to uncover the experiences that peer helpers obtain from partaking in peer help programmes.
- Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) has a well-established peer help programme (2013). The peer helpers at CPUT are active in organising wellness programmes on campus and in the student's residence. They are also trained to help students reflect on and resolve personal problems or frustrations that they may be

experiencing. Furthermore, in the document, it is stated that the peer helpers are involved in a number of DVD presentations and discussions on wellness and mental health issues in the residences. However, very little is available about the scope and responsibilities of peer helpers at CPUT. It is also alarming that over the period of thirteen years, CPUT, being the founding member of the peer help consortium and having a well-established peer help programme, seems to have published no research indicating progress of peer help programmes and achievements of peer helpers themselves.

- The Rand Afrikaans University and Gauteng Technikon have joined the consortium for peer help before merging to form what is now known as University of Johannesburg (UJ). According to Naicker, Boshof, Maritz and Fourie (2014), the peer buddies play a pivotal role in rendering services to their respective peers. Their youthfulness, energy, knowledge of campus life, and their understanding of challenges experienced by young people of their own generation makes them invaluable to the students studying at the University of Johannesburg. UJ Peer Buddy programme, as it is known at UJ, is based on the concept that peer interaction has a powerful influence on a person's development. Crucial life skills like social skills, creative and critical thinking, relationship and friendship skills, as well as attitudes and values are being cultivated through peer interactions ([www.uj.ac.za](http://www.uj.ac.za)).

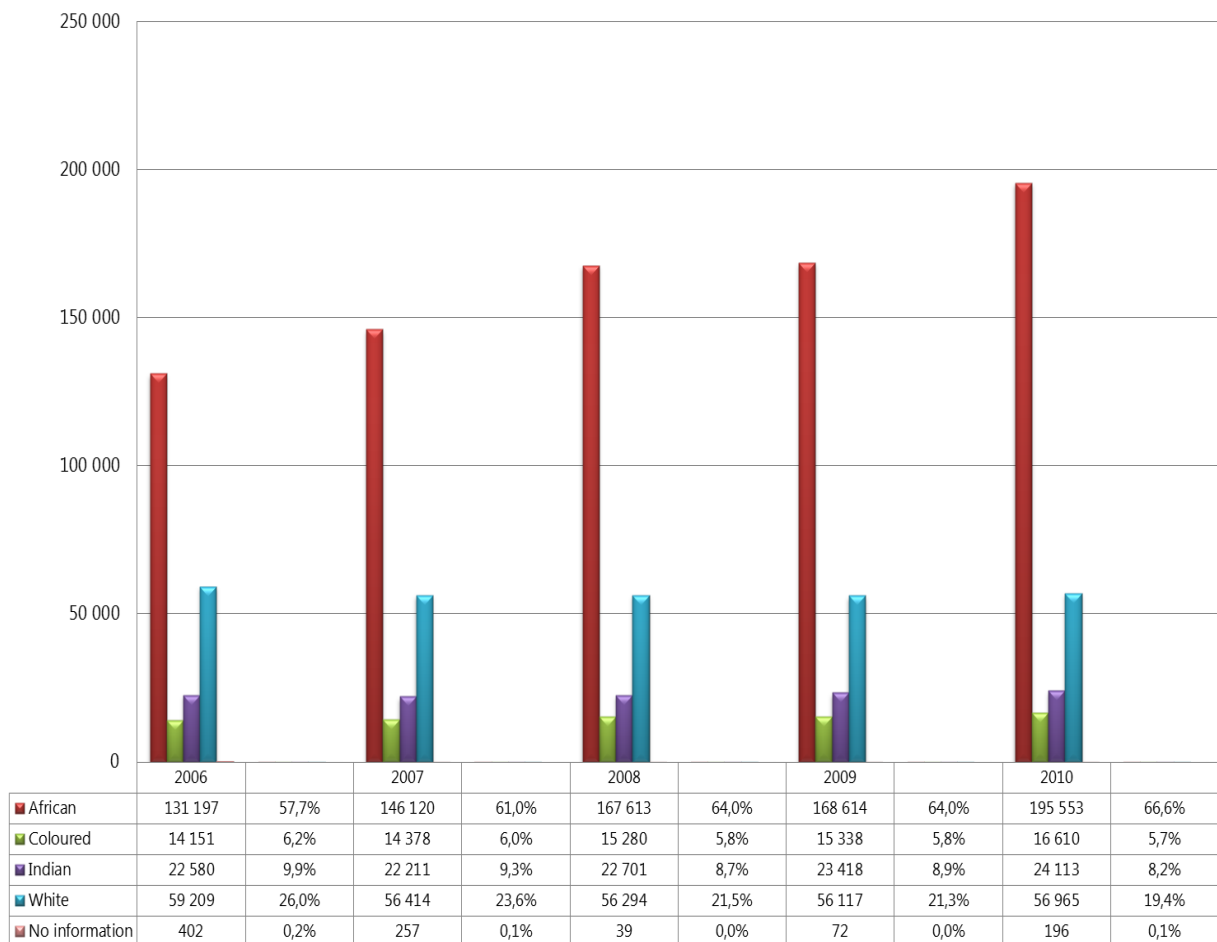
In a study conducted by Motsabi (1999), to investigate the prevalence and the use of peer help programmes in South Africa, Motsabi found that of fourteen Technikons that were surveyed, nine of them indicated that they have well developed peer help programmes. This growth in the use of peer help programmes in South Africa since its formal inception, in 1996 seem to be far below that of Canada where they increases from ten peer help programmes in

1979, to more than 1000 in 1986 (De Rosenroll & Dey, 1990). There are also other higher education institutions that have joined or are utilising similar programmes to enhance students' wellbeing, like the University of Pretoria, which utilises the mentoring programmes. Lastly, Unisa is also a member of the consortium for peer help programme; however, more details on the Unisa peer help programme are discussed in the subsequent section.

Keller (1999) posits that higher education institutions in South Africa are increasingly rendering service to students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Mill (2005), who further emphasises that in 2004 alone, 70% of the student body of the merged institutions were from disadvantaged backgrounds (Unisa statistics, 2004), supports this notion. According to the Unisa Department of Institutional Statistics and Analysis (2012), the number of active (registered) students at Unisa, in 2010 were 293 437 compared to 263 559 in 2009. It has been estimated that in 2013, the number of active students will reach 329 893. However, these statistics shed no light on the background of the students in terms of socio economic status. What is more alarming, is that in 2010 academic year, 17% of students registered at Unisa were first time students and 66% of those students were African by race group. The researcher assumes that there is a possibility that the majority of those students may be coming from a disadvantaged background, given the history of South Africa. However, foreign black students could be excluded from the previously disadvantaged groups. The age groups of students' enrolment, depicts that 26% of students were between the ages of 25-39. With reference to Unisa's institutional character as a mega-university mandated to promote open access to higher education with lower study fees when compared to contact universities, it is inevitable that most of the students are disadvantaged in various ways and that they consider Unisa as a means to further their studies against the background of their socio-economic circumstances. That being said, peer

helpers are assigned to assist many students who come to the counselling offices with not only different, but also unique concerns ranging from career choices, adapting at an ODL institution, financial assistance etc.

**Figure 1: Student enrolments (active headcounts) by race group, 2006 – 2010**



The growing body of students and the efficacy of using peer helpers presented some of the reasons that accelerated the formal development and implementation of peer help programmes. The researcher postulates that this flow of students, especially first time students,



should be welcomed by effective supporting structures to ease transition of students at an ODL institution and to continue to play a vital role in supporting them throughout their studies. According to Calder (2004), peer interaction plays a central role in the successful transition process. Peer assisted learning involves active or interactive mediation which encourages learning by students with the support of other students (Topping & Ehly, 2001).

### **University of South Africa: Unisa peer help volunteer programme**

Listed under service department is the Directorate for Counselling and Career Development (DCCD), which supports prospective and registered students before, during and after their registration. Various support services which are rendered by the DCCD include, but is not limited to career, academic and personal guidance and counselling to prospective and registered students, in person, by telephone, e-mail, letter or fax or printed publication. There are many ways in which DCCD achieves its mandate by offering support to students. Some of these are the use of peer helpers, assistant student counsellors, academic literacy facilitators etc. For the purpose of this study, the focus is on peer helpers only. According to Mill (2005), the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme (UPHVP) was initiated in Pretoria as well as at the Cape Town regional campus in 1996. At this stage, the UPHVP peer help programme has grown exponentially, as it has expanded to other provinces, which include Kwa-Zulu Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and Johannesburg regional centre. In addition, the peer help programme is currently being implemented in fourteen regional centres.

Unisa has a diverse student population, not just in terms of racial and socio-economic status, geographical and ethnicity, but also in terms of talents and abilities. A significant number

of students study under very difficult circumstances. Some are fulltime employees, who study part-time, while others are fulltime students, who are largely underprepared for distance education. Many are isolated and physically removed from their fellow students, lectures and counsellors thus make it difficult to capitalise on pre-registration career guidance and support (Van Schoor & Mill, 1998). The introduction of a peer help volunteer programme has been quite effective in assisting students regarding some of the concerns mentioned above. Van Schoor and Mill (1998) stated that the peer help volunteer programme is maintained for three specific purposes:

- To develop a network of support for the Unisa student population. Peer helpers acting as first contacts and form initial support structures in their own social environment, use communication skills to facilitate decision making in others. This service provides a proactive, preventative guidance programme where personal and academic problems are identified in time, with the aim of preventing student failures and increased retention.
- To extend the range of guidance services to schools and the broader community. Peer help volunteers are empowered with knowledge in terms of the career decision-making processes and, subsequent to this training, conduct career guidance and information outreach activities to school and in communities.
- To empower the peer helpers to develop essential personal and employability skills. Participating in the peer help volunteer programme, allows the peer helpers to develop critical employability skills. These skills include effective communication and listening skills, teamwork, leadership, decision-making and problem solving and project management skills resulting from involvement in the programme (Van Schoor & Mill

1998). In addition, the peer helpers are trained and encouraged to develop individual career portfolios of the skills developed through participation in the programme.

Although there are many researchers, who support the notion that participating in the peer help programme equips peer helpers with various skills, (Bratter and Freeman 1990; Forouzes et al., 2001; Morey et al., 1993; Myrick et al., 1995; Sawyer et al., 1997; and Sprinthall & Hall 1992). There is paucity of local research that can account for skills obtained by peer helpers by participating in the peer help programme.

Furthermore, the significant role played by peer helpers at Unisa seems to receive very little research attention despite the services they render. While it may broaden our perspective to consider the peer help literature from abroad, the researcher assumes that this may perpetuate dependence on literature from abroad, when we have to speak about local peer helpers.

### **Aims and objectives of the Unisa peer help volunteer programme**

The UPHVP aims to empower Unisa peer help volunteers to support fellow students while they adjust to the demands of tertiary and distance learning (Van Schoor & Mill, 1998).

This empowerment enables the peer help volunteers to:

- Act as first contacts and initial support structures on the Unisa campuses, in person capacity and via telephone and internet
- Act as first contacts and initial structures in their communities
- Make support readily available through various delivery forms of assistance

- Act as sensitive listeners who use communication skills to facilitate self-exploration, decision making, growth and development in other students,
- Provide information about career prospects and study possibilities,
- Support fellow students on an academic, personal and career level during the academic year,
- Provide support structure from where most complex cases can be referred to professional counsellors
- Extend the range of guidance services to schools and the broader community where such services currently do not exist. (Van Schoor & Mill, 1998)

These points echoes de Jager (1995) who states that many students tend to contact fellow students for help and support when they are experiencing difficulties or frustrations on a personal, career, or academic level.

### **Unisa peer helpers and the selection process**

According to Barnard and Kruger (2010), Peer helpers are volunteers. They are senior students majoring in psychology, and are available to be committed to the process of volunteering at the department. Their developmental task is to learn from their experiences by ‘doing’ and to integrate their experiences by reflecting. The task of reflective practice is in line with their career vision – a career in a psychology field. Their scope of practice is learning how to use university resources in order to contextualise the open and distance learning (ODL) experience for clients (prospective and registered students) and to refer students to the student counsellors when required. After their initial training, they learn by ‘shadowing’ permanent and

contract staff members to assisting other students, in order to become familiar with the functioning of the department and student needs. Their learning is consolidated by writing reflections after every shift (three hours a week from February to August). These reflections, which submitted to their supervisor to comment on and support, track their growth over a seven-month period. The reflection-in-action is concluded when they identify and summarise the themes evolving from the reflections and include them in the developmental portfolio for evaluation purposes.

Despite peer helpers, DCCD department is staffed with assistant student counsellors. Barnard and Kruger (2010) stated that assistant student counsellors are appointed as contract workers, and are selected from the pool of peer helpers after the August evaluations each year. They are appointed at the university on a one-year contract that may be renewed only twice and that stipulates that they may not work over a period of more than 96 hours a month. Their developmental task is to deepen their reflective practice by integrating learning experiences meaningfully. They are required to integrate the theory they encounter with the practical experiences they attain from the student- counselling environment. This developmental opportunity requires them to be committed to on-going supervision via case studies and training sessions; mentoring the new peer helpers; and participating in joint supervision sessions via video conferences between the student counselling offices in the regional centre and the main campus. Additionally, they are required to write reflections every time they have been on duty, and to submit these via e-mail to the supervisor for comments and support. Their scope of practice is the skilful and effective use of UNISA resources to contextualise the ODL experience for clients (prospective and registered students) and to refer them when required. They assist students personally, telephonically and electronically.

The rationale for the inclusion of assistant student counsellors in the present study rests on grounds that this study is envisaged to take a retrospective route in the sense that the participants at the time of data collection may be assistant student counsellors who have served as peer helpers for a year. As a result, selected participants will be interviewed to reflect on their experiences as former peer helpers at Unisa. The researcher holds the view that assistant student counsellors may be suitable participants for the study, given that they have served as peer helpers for a reasonable time.

According to Mill (2005) the recruitment and selection of peer helper takes place via campus media through posters being put up, inviting senior students, who are interested in helping fellow students, to apply. Interested students apply for selection and are shortlisted after the screening of the application forms (Mill, 2005). Shortlisted candidates are afterwards invited for interviews where they are asked to reflect on their motivation to be peer helpers, discuss past experiences, reflect on personal difficulties, and share thoughts on activities that they have initiated and are involved in (Mill, 2005). The selection of peer helpers tends to vary from one institution to another. Motsabi (1999) found that there was no single criterion used in the selection of peer helpers by South African higher education institutions, who participated in her survey. However, due to withdrawal of peer help volunteers, Unisa has developed a specific selection criterion (Mill, 2005). The current selection criterion entails that to be selected for peer help volunteer programme: (1) prospective peer helpers must be registered Unisa students and have passed ten modules or the equivalent thereof; (2) have effective communication skills; (3) people centred and a helping orientation; (4) the ability to take ownership for own learning, and (5) sound academic performance.

The researcher holds the view that the selection of peer helpers is a critical phase, especially when perceived from the lens of the role and responsibilities usually assigned to peer helpers. This is especially true as they tend not only to represent the face of Unisa, but as they disseminate information and facilitate decision making regarding crucial issues like career choices to name but a few duties. Based on the grounds postulated by the researcher namely that the selection of peer helpers should be approached from the vantage point of the goals, values and the vision of the institution they represent to the community. Moreover, the researcher assumes that selected peer helpers equipped to accommodate unconditionally, student's uniqueness in terms of ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, circumstances in terms of socio-economic status and level of academic literacy, to name but the few.

### **Training of the Unisa peer helpers**

Review of literature illustrates that there are a handful of written resources regarding peer help programmes. The widely used written resources for training includes: The Peer Counsellor Starter Kit (Carr & Saunders, 1980) Caring and Sharing: Becoming a peer Facilitator (Myrick & Erney, 2000), as well as peer counselling training programme for black youth in Soweto, developed by M. Letsebe (1988). The Unisa Peer Help Volunteer training is founded on the Peer Counselling Starter Kit developed by Carr and Saunders (1980) and adapted to South African conditions by M. J. de Jager of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, (de Jager 1995). Noting that peer help training is adapted to South African conditions, raised questions on the processes followed when adapting the training starter kit for the South African context on the part of the researcher. Unfortunately, there appears to be no published research outputs, or

documents detailing the process of adapting the Peer Counselling Starter Kit for South African conditions. De' Andrea (1987) stated that peer help training programmes are tailor-made for the situation at a particular college or university. Taking into consideration Unisa's institutional character, method of tuition and the ever-growing body of student community whom the peer helpers are trained to serve, the researcher deems it fit to have a published document, which explicitly explains how the training has been adapted in line with above-mentioned key aspects.

Unisa peer help training is conducted by Student counsellors who serve as members at the DCCD conduct Unisa peer help training. In total, the training consists of 20 sessions, presented over three full days (Barnard et al., 2003). The training sessions usually amount to 24 hours. In addition to the three days training, peer helpers also receive training on the Unisa curriculum and they must pass the curriculum test before they can consult students who turn up for counselling. The table below shows the content of the training over three days.

**Table 2. Unisa peer help training curriculum**

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
1. Overview of the programme, 2. Expectations and ground rules, 3. Awareness of others and self, 4. Pre-testing of counselling knowledge	1. Empathic listening- structural and natural leads 2. Questioning skills and decision making 3. The full bore "I" message and the facilitative feedback message,	1. Ethics and referrals, 2. Post-testing of counselling knowledge, 3. Glossary of terms, 4. Evaluation: format and criteria and, 5. Discussion of a plan for the next six months.



5. Introduction to decision making	4. Decision making,	
6. The experiential learning cycle (ELC),	5. Role-plays and,	
7. Attending and non-attending behaviour,	6. Values and diverse contexts	
8. Roadblock to effective communication and,		
9. active listening		

(Barnard et al., 2003)

Unisa peer helpers are trained to listen effectively and to provide support to others, explain the Unisa system to fellow students, facilitate growth and development in others, discuss alternatives and facilitate decision-making, provide referrals to other sources of help and help students overcome study loneliness (Barnard et al., 2003). As the training of peer helpers is broken down into 20 sessions, all these sessions are fundamentally important as each session is constructed on the other session. Resulting from this, missing one session tends to obstruct the opportunity of mastering following sessions (Barnard et al., 2003).

### **Roles and responsibilities of Unisa peer helpers**

The roles and responsibilities assigned to peer helpers are more in line with the aims of the peer help programme and are more associated with the training received by peer helpers. For example, roles and responsibilities of peer helpers trained to raise awareness about negative

results of using drugs in community contexts are likely to differ from peer helpers trained to assist fellow students in university contexts. Unisa peer helper's roles and responsibilities are the results of integrated key aspects of Unisa's institutional character as a leading ODL university in South Africa. According to a study conducted by Motsabi (1999), the results depict that in higher education institutions peer helpers are involved in helping new students during registration (79%), study skill counselling (62%), supervision in dormitories (14%), serving as house committee members (24%), helping students with subject choices (48%), interpreting standardised test (3%), helping students master contents of academic work (41%), religious counselling (7%), counselling for social and personal problems (72%) and HIV/Aids counselling (72%). These findings give us a glimpse of the involvement and the roles of peer helpers in South Africa and in higher education institutions. The potential to transfer these findings to Unisa are limited because institutions were not studied individually, and the roles could have changed over the years. However, the paucity of research on peer helpers instigated the researcher to deem these findings important to shed light on peer helpers' involvement.

According to Mill (2005) Unisa peer helpers assume the roles and the responsibilities after they have attended a three-day training, after having attended supplementary training sessions, and after having achieved a pass mark of (70%) in the curriculum test. Having met the above mentioned requirements, means that the peer helpers can now assume the roles and responsibility of being peer helpers. According to the Van Schoor and Mill, (1998) peer help volunteer responsibilities entails that they should:

- Make the students population and the university environment aware of the availability of the peer help volunteer Programme and promote the role of peer helping in general,

- Assist in the day-to-day running of the Peer Help Office by ensuring that they are part of the attendant roster for service delivery,
- Provide a service to their fellow students by staffing the Peer Help Office, answering telephones and replying to internet request for help,
- Establish positive helping relationships with all fellow students by attending to them, listening empathically and responding skill fully during interviews,
- Actively participate in the expansion of their individual knowledge bases about academic, personal and career matters by attending supervision sessions regularly and completing assignments aimed at empowering the Peer Help Volunteers,
- Work effectively with fellow students by providing information about careers, subjects and study possibilities,
- At all times be aware of administrative procedures and deadlines and that is registration dates; cancellations; examination procedures;
- Be familiar with the location of academic and administrative departments and support structures on the campus to promote effective referrals,
- At all times be aware of their personal limitations, recognised boundaries of their individual competencies, training and experience. The peer helpers should also be aware of the risk should these boundaries be transgressed,
- Understand what an emergency entails and be familiar with the referral procedures to expedite referrals to professional counsellors,
- Manage voluntary activities and,
- Maintain records of all contacts (Van Schoor & Mill, 1998).

In addition, peer helpers' responsibilities are centred on three categories. These are academic problems, emotional problems and career issues. The most common academic problems that peer helpers assist students with, pertains to time management and planning, reading, writing and study techniques and examination preparation. Emotional problems include support and referral of issues like lack of confidence, dealing with failure, personal and interpersonal problems, anxiety and depression. Lastly, career issues involve aspects like information on career opportunities at Unisa, career information, course and subject choice, job hunting, CV writing and interview skills (Van Schoor & Mill, 1998).

## **Supervision**

Supervision forms a crucial aspect of any peer help programme. Unisa peer helpers are no exception to supervision. In the letter written to invite prospective peer helpers, it is stated clearly that the students who consider joining the Unisa Peer Help Programme should be aware that they are bound to be supervised on a weekly basis. This does not necessarily mean that the peer helper will be subject to scrutiny that will keep them reviewing their decision to the programme. However, the supervision sessions are intended to help the peer helpers to develop further skills. According to Cowie and Wallace (2000), supervision is often mistakenly linked to someone senior in the hierarchy watching and criticizing others work, however, in peer helping, they need supervision to be associated with positive learning, guiding and supportive functions.

Supervision is a crucial aspect of any peer help programme. According to Varenhorst (1984) training is the area of peer counselling in need of the most attention in future research.

The training referred to, goes beyond the core of training and supervision aspects to include the personal growth of the trainees.

According to Mill (2005) Unisa project leaders reported that many peer helpers remain passive, lacked initiative, did not reflect on experiences and did not take responsibility or ownership for further development. She further stressed that dedication, commitment and motivation amongst the peer helpers varied considerably, fluctuating during the academic year due to a variety of reasons such as personal and academic commitments. These circumstances hinder the processes of monitoring the growth and development of peer helpers. According to Mill (2005) the response of project leaders provides the development mechanism to (1) allow peer helpers to provide proof of any learning that has taken place since the core and the supplemental training; (2) monitor the individual development of each peer helper; (3) determine the level of competency based on the portfolio presented; and (4) provide individual feedback to the peer helpers with regard to their development. As a result, the development of portfolio was initiated as a measure to achieve these goals. In conclusion, supervision is conducted on on-going bases and the portfolios are usually presented towards the end of the year.

### **Research on the peer help programme: international and African perspective**

While examining literature on peer helpers at the South African institutions of higher education, the researcher has observed that there are quite a few published research studies. The paucity of research to this degree raises eyebrows when considered against the background of roles assigned to peer helpers and the invaluable contribution they make through the peer help programmes. This signals that students' views on services rendered by peer helpers, have not

been properly investigated and little is known on peer helpers' experiences on performing their duties. The researcher assumes that this could pose a threat in the peer help programme's growth and further development in the sense that the possibility of improving the peer help programme is hindered by the lack of research, which would be able to inform strategic interventions to steer the programme to new frontiers. Moreover, the researcher also posits that the dearth in literature of peer helpers at Unisa in particular may have far reaching implications in so far as the enrolment of new students is continuously growing. Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature on how students perceive the services rendered by peer helpers and feedback could have served as a benchmark for future studies. In addition, such a lack of research output has the potential of shifting the focus of researcher to consider anecdotal evidence as the contextual bases of research. Therefore, without the necessary research it is impossible to establish the experiences of peer helpers at such a mega university. Additionally, it is impossible to establish how students perceive the services rendered by peer helpers and whether counselling services meet student's needs. On the other hand, international countries with well-established peer help programmes like Canada and USA, favour research as a tool for the improvement of their peer help programmes. De Rosenroll (1989) stated that peer counselling has a promising future if supported by adequate research. Despite the dearth of literature, there are a handful of studies conducted in South Africa and this section is dedicated to critically review local and international literature, erect the foundation for the present study and serve as a benchmark to discuss the findings.

Mill (2005) conducted a study to explore how Unisa peer helpers managed their individual portfolio development in order to provide evidence of their learning and skills development that has taken place during their peer help involvement. This study appears to be

more focused on establishing the level of commitment of each peer helper in compiling his/her portfolio, the level of responsibility that was accepted by each peer helper, including self-directed learning and the depth of reflection on experiences that was conducted to enable peer helpers to become aware of their self-knowledge and skills that have been developed. Although the study was conducted within the confines of the discipline of psychology, there appears to be no psychological theory that was used to guide and explain peer helpers' views on how they manage their individual portfolio. This is alarming as Montgomery (2002) asserted that theoretical framework in research serves not only to guide a single research study, but also to link previous and future research that is guided by the same framework. The lack of a theory as the fundamental guide in this study, leaves readers in the dark about common theories used in previous studies, as to how data could have been collected and explained in the absence of a theory.

Notwithstanding the lack of a guiding theory, the themes that emerged in that study; (taking charge of the process, positive and negative attitude toward portfolio management, reflection on goals and goal-directedness, reflection and experiential learning, monitoring of skills development and growth and using the portfolio as resource for life), show that there are numerous benefits that come with involvement in peer help programmes. Various researchers the likes of (Bratter & Freeman, 1990; Morey et al., 1993; Myrick et al., 1995; Sawyer et al., 1997; Sprinthall & Hall, 1992), posits that peer helping is beneficial across age groups. In addition, in a study conducted by McWilliam (2010) he found that peer mediators in Australian school reported an increase satisfaction with school processes, their sense of belonging in a school environment had increase and they also they also felt proud and responsible for helping others. The passion shown by the peer helpers, peer counsellors and all other students to partake in

programme to help others is described by Savishinsky, (1992) as the “perfect symmetry” of altruism that allows one to offer one's time, which is “a gift that can never be reclaimed, in exchange for other people's gratitude, which is a reward that can rarely be bought”.

Ntakani (2011) conducted a study at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) to investigate the effectiveness of student support programmes at a tertiary institution and peer support programmes also featured in the study. The sample consisted of (n=198) undergraduate students trained to offer various support programmes at different campuses of WSU. The findings regarding the participant's perception of effectiveness of the support programmes showed that 67% were relatively satisfied with the support programmes. This is yet another good example of the invaluable contribution made by peer helpers through peer help programmes; however, the major drawback of this study is that the actual number of students who have assisted, have been selected to the exclusion of students who are the recipients of support services. The researcher of the present study argues that the study could have yielded fruitful results about the effectiveness of support programmes if the participants were students who are the recipients of the support services. Moreover, the absence of a theoretical framework was also discovered in this study and raises questions about the perspective according to which the results were viewed. Despite the lack of theory in Ntakama's study (2011), the researcher believes that the study has shed light on the efficacy of peer support programmes, which is also echoed by other researchers (Astin, 1993; Brack et al., 2008; Carter & McNeill 1998; Good et al., 2000; Gray & Tindall, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005;). The researcher postulates that replication of this study where general students are selected as participants and adopting a theoretical framework more could be understood about peer helper's effectiveness in assisting fellow students through research as a tool to understand social phenomena.



Voyles, Kowalchuk, Nicklow and Ricks (2011) at the Southern Illinois University examined the effects of residential peer mentoring programme on mentors. They argue that previous research has shown that mentees benefit from mentoring programs; however, there is a paucity of research on the effect of mentoring on mentors. They have found that the mentors have been consistently reporting positively on all aspects relating to academic and social integration. The mentors also indicate that they have improved their understanding of the basic course and have improved their social skills resulting from their role as mentors. It will be interesting to ascertain how the UPHVP benefits the peer helpers and what the positive outcomes of being a peer helper in such a mega University could entail.

According to Varenhorst (2004), who has contributed significantly in the literature of peer counselling, there are three basic components of necessity for a healthy self-esteem. These are (1) a sense of unique attributes, or that awareness of what is special about me that make me different and valued by others, (2) secure membership in a group or groups that one values and (3) feelings of participating in meaningful roles that make a lasting contribution to others or to society as a whole. Varenhorst (2004) argues that these elements are difficult to experience in our present society, yet all are potentially available through peer helping. Taking into consideration the rationale behind the formation of the UPHVP, it will be interesting to ascertain how the findings of the present study coincide or differ from what Varenhorst (2004) stated in her article. A study that supports the third component of self-esteem achieved through peer helping by Varenhorst (2004) has been conducted in the United States of America through Mediator Mentors Programme (Lane-Garon and Richardson, 2003; Lane-Garon, Ybarra-Merlo, Zajac, & Vierra, 2005). The peer mediators showed significantly higher gains on social-cognitive

development and empathy measures when compared to non-mediators, and reported less conflicted home lives.

Varghese, Boeswald, and Campbell (2013) from the University of Guelph department of Sociology and anthropology, used two undergraduate peer helpers from a Community Engaged Learning (CEL) Peer Helper Unit to learn qualitative methods via experiential and service learning. When reflecting on their experiences from a peer helper perspective, they realize that the experiences can be viewed as happening at two levels: the course and the individual peer helper. Benefits to the course range from direct support to the student to using their insider perspective to make recommended changes to the current course offering. On the other hand, benefits to the peer helper focus on personal and professional skills development. These findings point to the significant contribution of the role of peer help programme in grooming peer helpers and affording them a unique opportunity to learn and acquire skills.

The aspect of growth acquired by peer helpers receives support from the literature as other researchers like (Houlston, et al., 2009; Smith & Watson, 2004) share the same sentiments that the peer programmes benefits the whole school environment, helping to target (vulnerable) pupils and to benefit those acting as peer supporters. Even though peer helpers benefit significantly from the peer help programme, there are some critical skills needed from the peer helpers and some of those skills may be obtained from completing the training. Cowie and Wallace (2000) and Cowie and Hutson (2005), mentioned that the peer helpers should have skills and that the peer helpers should be trained to help others outside the friendship groups, and that training should them with communication skills and conflict resolution skills (James, 2011). Lastly, the use of peer helpers is not entirely intended to benefit the school or university, but the peer helpers also acquire skills that are useful in all domains of life (James, 2011).

To ascertain the experiences of peer helper and staff involved in the peer support services, Cowie (1998) conducted a study to capture the experiences of peer supporters and the members of staff in charge of the peer support services. When she asked her participants about the benefits of the peer support scheme, the participants claimed that, from the peer support scheme, they gained personally. Their breakdowns of their benefits were an increase in self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, and a belief that they were contributing positively to the life of the school community. These findings concur with Varenhorst (2004), discussed in this section. The researcher will be keen to explore the personal benefits of the Unisa peer helpers and how the experience of being peer helpers contributed to them developing positive self-images.

A profound study was also conducted by Dorrian (1998) to investigate the changes that occurred to the self-concept of the female adolescents undergoing interpersonal skills training courses incorporated into a peer counselling pre-selection training programme. The results indicated that there were positive gains to the self-concepts of the experiential group. In addition, members of the experiential group felt that they had gained useful helping skills. Although the focus of Dorrian's study (1998) was limited to the self-concept of participants, her study reflects some components of the present study in the sense that the aim has been to look at what is gained from participating in peer helping groups. Moreover, the aim of this study seems to converge partially with the study conducted by Carr (1999) where he interviewed six peer counsellors to explore their perceptions and evaluations of the programme. He found that the peer counsellors were confident in their ability to put training into practice and career problems have been the most typical issues that peer counsellors dealt with.

Racz and Lacko (2008) have conducted a study to explore the motivation for and the process of becoming a peer helper in Hungary, a country they describe as having no tradition of peer helping. Although the participants in their study were peer helpers involved in projects other than education, this supports the notion that peer helping can take place anywhere such as at schools, universities, colleges, hospitals, clinics, community centres, unions and corporations (Morey et al., 1993; Sawyer et al., 1997; Sprinthall & Hall 1992). The findings in the Racz and Lacko study (2008) showed that there was an element of professional motivation in becoming a peer helper as five out of eight participants were studying psychology, two were studying to become social workers and one participant stressed the wish to become a psychologist. Furthermore, participants indicated that the training offered them new knowledge and skills and they have realised what their own restrictions and limitations on their competencies are.

Critical examination of literature illustrates that the positive outcomes of implementing peer help programmes result from conducting evaluation studies to assess the impact of the peer help programme on people the peer help programme is tailored to serve. Several studies have been conducted to evaluate various aspects of the peer help programme (Aladag & Tezer, 2009; Fennell, 1993; O'Shea, 2003). In her study to evaluate the peer-counselling programme at a South Africa secondary all-girls school, O'Shea (2003) focused her evaluation on three aspects. These aspects were programme co-ordinator, the learners, teachers body and peer counsellors themselves. The results of the study suggest that the majority of learners (both users and non-users) and the teachers perceive the peer-counselling programme positively. The programme appears to be influencing the school environment by providing additional support to the learners at the school. In addition, the peer counsellors acknowledge the positive impact of their role on their sense of self-worth.

A paper that has been presented at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit of the African Educational Research Network at North Carolina State University Raleigh, United State of America Odirile (2012), it is stated that peer counselling can be effective as professional counselling and that is why some institutions have placed it at the heart of their pro-active counselling programmes. Unlike Unisa, peer counsellors at the University of Botswana, come from years of study when peer helpers were of great assistance, so that there is a peer counsellor from each level of study (Odirile 2012). In addition, this paper provides convincing evidence that peer help programmes have positive effects both on students and peer helpers. One of the students from the University of Botswana states that.

*“I lived at Block 474 and have had the opportunity to listen to peer counsellors presenting on time management and study skills. Their presentations challenged me to apply what they were sharing and since then, my academic record has improved greatly” (peer counsellor).*

Another peer counsellor states that:

*“I landed in Finland due to skills from peer counselling where I had exposure and growth. Had it not been of the intensive training we have as peer counsellors, maybe I would have failed the interview for international placement (Kele)”.*

This continues to indicate that the significant role played by the peer help programme is that of grooming and capacitating students on many levels with many skills.

Another study that emphasises the contribution made by the peer help programme, has been equipping the peer helper with the skills was conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2011). They stressed that, when the peer leaders apply their skills and

capabilities such as self-direction, leadership, oral communication, intercultural skills, civic engagement, teamwork, and critical thinking, peer leaders are honing abilities that have been identified as twenty-first century learning objectives for college and that are also highly desirable skills among employers.

Aladag and Tezer (2009) have conducted a study to develop a Peer Helping Training Programme (PHTP) for university students in Turkey and examine its effectiveness in improving skills and self-growth of peer helpers. Prior to the understanding of needs, goals, and rationale for the PHTP, needs assessment has been conducted on a sample of 316 students from the Faculty of Education of Ege University. The aim of the assessment was to understand students' (a) preferences for different kinds of helpers, (b) preferences for different helping styles, and (c) reactions to the peer helping program as evidenced by their belief in its helpfulness, willingness to apply themselves to the program, and interest in learning more about specific helping topics. This approach raises important questions about on-going assessment that should be conducted at Unisa by DCCD to have a broader understanding of students' counselling needs, more so as Unisa is shifting towards online learning which may be associated with its own unique challenges from students' perspectives. Specifically, results gained from this needs assessment suggested that peer helpers should be trained to provide support and friendship through empathic listening, as well as be equipped to assist peer helpees in solving specific problems and making decisions. Aladag and Tezer (2009) found that there was no significant difference between the control group and treatment group regarding communication skills. These findings contradict other researchers' findings that have indicated that peer helping training programmes improve communication skills (Diver-Stamnes 1991; Robinson et al., 1991; Steinbauer 1998). Viewed from a different perspective Aladag and Tezer (2009), also found that PHTP has been more

effective in improving specific skills like empathy and reflective skills in the treatment group when compared to the control group.

Colvin and Ashman (2010) from the Utah Valley University undertook the study to demonstrate that students, instructors and mentors have different opinions about a mentor's role and how that role should be constructed. They have discovered three areas important for mentoring: roles, benefits and risk, and powers and resistance. Of particular importance is the issue of benefits where the peer helpers indicate the aspect of dual benefit in peer mentor relationships. They mention three benefits to being a mentor: being able to assist students, reapplying concepts in their own lives, and developing connections themselves.

Data from the Peer Leadership Survey administered by the National Resource Centre (2009) for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition offer empirical evidence of peer leaders' perceived outcomes of the experience. Responses from nearly two thousand students to peer leader roles at 145 colleges and universities across the country provided insight into the experiences and outcomes of these positions. These peer leaders have also reported self-rated changes in the development of six skill areas: interpersonal communication (94%), organization (81%), time management (80%), presentation (79%), written communication (61%), and academic outcomes (51%).

As it has been indicated in the previous chapter, there are many terms used to refer to students who assist other students. A former mentor at the University of Pretoria, Tsebe (2010), has conducted a study to describe and understand the experiences of mentors during the implementation of a mentorship programme at a Higher Education Institution. He has discovered that mentors have some negative experiences while they implement a mentorship programme.

These negative experiences have indicated harmful correspondence between mentors and mentees, irregular mentee attendance in mentorship meetings, gender and racial issues, mentors' uncertainties about content of the programme and feelings of lack of guidance. The most interesting about this study, has been the use of the ecological theory in formulating interview questions and the analysis of data through the vantage point of the theoretical framework, which has been neglected in most studies, consulted for the literature review section.

Although it is widely acknowledge that the peer help programme benefits peer helpers in many ways (Cowie & Hutson, 2005; James, 2011; Karcher, 2008; Myrick & Folk, 1999; Thompson & Smith, 2011; Tindall, 1995; Varenhorst, 2004), there are also instances where the role of being a peer helper has resulted in negative experiences. To support this statement, James, Smith and Radford (2013) argue that interpersonal benefits have been found for people who offer support to others but there is little research in the experiences of being a peer helper. In a study conducted by Varghese et al. (2013), cited above at the university of Guelph department of Sociology and Anthropology, two undergraduate peer helpers from a Community Engaged Learning (CEL) Peer Helper Unit to learn qualitative methods via experiential and service learning have been used. They found that the peer helpers have encountered challenges related to facilitating learning while they have been learning themselves. The peer helpers have reported that they realised the importance of patience in their interactions with the other students so that learning can take place. The peer helpers stated that rather than simply offering answers they helped their peers create their own experiences to facilitate their learning. They also experience the challenges regarding managing our own time.



*“We served as peer helpers while taking a full course load, and so there was not always time to review what we had learned the previous year prior to meeting with students in their workshops”.*

In the present study, the researcher is also keen to ascertain the negative experiences of the Unisa peer helpers.

In conclusion, consulted literature clearly stated that there are numerous positive and negative experiences that come with involvement in peer help programmes. The following section is dedicated to explaining the theoretical framework that the researcher will employ for the present study.

### **Ecological theory and its application in the present study**

A theory is a framework or system of concepts and propositions that provides causal explanations of phenomena within a particular domain (Giere, 1988; Hempel, 1965; Miller 1987; Suppe, 1977). The purpose of the theory is to provide a set of linkages for observations and lower-level models or theories of those observations. Henning, Gravett, and Van Rensburg (2004) are of the opinion that a theoretical framework positions the research in the discipline or subject in which the researcher is working, enabling the researcher to theorise about the research and make explicit the assumptions of the researcher about the interconnectedness of the way things are related in the world. Furthermore, Merriam (1998) argues that a theoretical framework forms the “scaffolding” or the underlying structure of the study and assists in answering the question. Therefore, the aim of this section is purposefully intended to give a detailed description

how ecological theory as a theoretical framework will be used as a lens to explore the experiences of peer helpers at an ODL institution.

The ecological theory is based on the interdependence between different organisms and their environment, with every part important to ensure the survival of the whole system (Donald et al., 2009). Ecological theory has been used in various settings such as in university living units, psychiatric wards and high school classrooms. Barker (1968) has been advocating for the importance of utilising ecological theory in order to understand how ecological phenomena affect the experiences and development of children and youth. In peer help literature, there appears to be no evidence suggesting the use of ecological theory, with the exception of the study conducted by Tsebe (2010), on the experiences of mentors during the implementing of a mentorship programme. The overall aim of using the ecological theory has been to understand the people being studied in relation to their surrounding contexts. Although there is no single theory that can capture the full complexity of life or provide a detailed explanation of human behaviour, the researcher holds the view that human experiences can be better understood with reference to the environment that impacts directly or indirectly on them, thereby influencing their experiences. This results in the ecological theory being the most suitable theory as it embraces contextual influences on various human spheres. In this study, UNISA as an open distance learning institution constitutes an important environment, as it is the context where peer helpers render their supportive services to students. The researcher will be curious to understand the experiences associated with being a peer helper at an ODL institution like Unisa. In summary, Unisa as an ODL institution will be viewed as an ecological system. Insofar as relationships on various levels are an integral part of the peer help programme, the Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory offers a multi-dimensional way of understanding experiences that have

emanated from such relationships through different levels of systems. This theory offers a platform to holistically understanding peer helpers' experiences at an ODL institution through a macro system level, the exo- system, the meso-system and the micro-system.

### **Macro System (Unisa institutional character)**

The macro system includes settings such as the family, school, peer group and workplace. The macro system consists of the overarching pattern of micro, meso, and exo-systems characteristic of a given culture or subculture, with particular reference to the belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, lifestyle, opportunity structures, hazards and life course options that are embedded in each of these broader systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Macro system is the larger system that encapsulates all other systems. In the present study, the macro system will refer to UNISA as an ODL institution. It represents the cultural, ideological, and institutional context in which all the systems are embedded (Landsberg, Kruger & Nel, 2005). At this level, the researcher will be keen to understand how the peer helpers make sense of their roles as the students responsible for assisting other students at the open distance learning institution. As mentioned, the peer help programme originated in Europe and America, and as there is a paucity of literature from South Africa, the researcher will explore international literature of peer helpers' experiences and report on the similarities and differences against UNISA peer helpers' experiences. The researcher acknowledges that there are various names given to students who help other students in higher education institutions and he will consider those when analysing data.

### **Exo-System (Challenges that crop out after the peer helper join the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme)**

The exo system comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing individual but in which the event that indirectly influences the processes within the immediate settings in which the developing person lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Landsberg et al. (2005) define exo-systems, as comprising one or more environments in which an individual is not necessarily directly involved as an active participant, but may influence or be influenced by what happens in the settings. According to Yorke (2008), exo-systems are characterised by several problems and challenges, which include the education system, social development, health services, the media, parents' workplace, community organisation, and resources of either human or financial origin that are not readily available and may delay service delivery. This level will provide a blueprint to look at the experiences of peer helpers with regard to issues that impact on them but in which the peer helpers are not directly involved. In other words, this level will be used to explain the challenges that the peer helpers encounter since joining Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme and indicate how they deal with such challenges. Both the findings of the present study as well as the literature will be used as the point of reference and the researcher hopes this has a potential to yield rich and detailed descriptions of peer helpers experiences.

### **Meso-System (Unisa peer helpers' interactions with students and supervisors.)**

The meso comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person. This could include the settings like relations between

school and home, school and workplace and so forth (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The meso system is a system of micro systems. Landsberg et al. (2005), define meso systems as the relationships that develop and exist between the micro-systems and influence the relationship between the school, districts and as they interact with and modify one another. According to this system, all the systems are seen in the context of mutual influence. This means that what happens at the micro system might have a direct influence on the macro system. In keeping with peer helper's responsibility of supporting other students, the researcher will use the meso system to explain the peer helpers' experiences that evolve from the linkages between the various settings containing them. This could be the peer help programme, interactions with students and supervisors and other settings. The ultimate goal will be to understand how these settings contribute to shape the experiences of the peer helpers.

### **Micro System (University setting and the psychology studies)**

According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), a micro system is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in the immediate environment. The micro system concerns the peer helpers as individuals. The goal is to understand peer helpers holistically. Micro systems are described as the immediate environments in which an individual develops, characterised by those individuals and events closest to one's life, and involving continual face- to-face contact, with each person reciprocally influencing the other (Landsberg et al., 2005). Through the lens of the micro system level, the

researcher will look at how the peer helper relates to the university setting and how to studying psychology at the open distance learning institution inspired them to consider joining the Unisa peer help volunteer programme.

### **The student involvement theory**

Astin's theory of student involvement (1984) refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. He argues that a highly involved student devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organisations and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. In direct contradiction to this, the uninvolved student neglects studies, spends little time on campus, abstains from extracurricular activities, and has infrequent contact with faculty members or other students. To clarify the concept of involvement, Astin (1984) compared it to the Freudian concept of *Cathexis*, which entails that people invest psychological energy in objects and persons outside of themselves. To qualify this, people may cathect on their friends, families, schoolwork and jobs. The involvement may find expression in behavioural activities that in which the person devotes him/herself. Astin's theory of student involvement relies on five points of departure.

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be completely generalised (the student experience) or very specific (preparing for a chemistry).

2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.

The student involvement theory has been used widely in the context of higher education to explore various aspects of students' lives in colleges and universities, (Milem & Berger, 1997; Berger, & Milem, 1999; Kuh, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to Junco (2011), Astin has renamed the theory of student involvement to student engagement. However, in this study the researcher prefers referring to the theory as the theory of student involvement. The concept of involvement is multifaceted and open to different interpretations. Despite that, a considerable number of researchers agree that the students who are involved in the campus and who identify with the campus are more likely to have positive outcomes such as cognitive gains, satisfaction and retention, (Berger & Milem, 1999; Kuh, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to Kuh (2009), the outcomes of student involvement are closely related to multiple desired outcomes of college education such as cognitive development, psychosocial

development, self-esteem, focus of control, ethical development and persistence. In similar vein, when synthesizing literature of higher education, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated that the impact of college is largely determined by individual efforts and involvement in the academic, interpersonal and extracurricular offerings of a campus” (p. 602). The premise of the student involvement theory when compared to other traditional pedagogical approaches reorganises the focus away from subject matter and resources and focuses on the non-academic aspects of the students’ lives like their motivation and the behaviour and attitudes of students. The Unisa peer helpers who are students at the University of South Africa are engaging in extracurricular activities in order to help their fellow students with various concerns. The student involvement theory will be used as one perspective in an attempt to comprehend the motive for investing their time in the UPHVP; how being involved enhances their engagement and retention in the programme and the university, and what positive gains they have achieved from engaging in the university activities. The researcher will also look at the challenges resulting from their involvement. The possibility exists that gains may differ from what the previous researchers have found, resulting in achieving more or less than have been anticipated, the researcher will be interested in using the theory of student involvement in order to explain the positive experiences of student peer helpers at an open distance learning institution.

### **Social Exchange Theory**

According to Cropanzano and Mitchell, (2005) the social exchange theory (SET) is one of the fundamental theories for understanding behaviour between individual and within groups on basis that it can explain why people assist one another, why they exchange information,



encouragement and love among other commodities. The social exchange theory has a multidisciplinary background as its roots can be traced back to anthropology, social psychology and sociology Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005). Resulting from this, a diversity of opinions on the social exchange theory have emerged, however, Emerson, (1976) and Blau, (1964) argue that the majority of theorists agree that the social exchange theory involves a series of interactions that generate obligation and that these interactions are often perceived as interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person.

Cropanzano and Mitchell, (2005) argue that one of the basic tenets of the social exchange theory is that people develop and then are constrained by certain rules of exchange, norms that serve as guidelines for people's interactions. These norms are established as people engage in exchange or observe other people interact (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005). On the other hand, Chibucos, Leites, and Weiss, (2005) stated that a number of key assumptions govern the social exchange theory. Firstly, the social exchange theory operates on the assumptions that individual are generally rational and engage in cost and benefits in social exchange. This entails that the social exchange theory considers the aspect of decision-making. Secondly, social exchange theory builds on the assumption that those who engage in interactions are rationally seeking to maximise the profits and benefits to be gained from those situations, especially in terms of meeting basic individual needs. In the light of this, social exchange theory views interactions as mean to fulfil basic needs. Thirdly, exchange processes produce payoff or rewards for individual leads to patterning of social interactions. These patterns of social interactions, not only serve the individuals' needs, but guide individuals as to how they should seek to meet those needs. In essence, individuals seek relationships and interactions that fulfil

their needs, but also assist others to meet their own personal needs. Lastly, the social exchange theory assumes that individuals are goal oriented in freely competitive social systems.

Meeker, (1971) has offered other dimensions of the social exchange theory which, according to Cropanzano and Mitchell, (2005) provides a fertile ground for theory development. Meeker's points of departure are that interpersonal exchange can be treated as individual decisions and postulates six dimensions of interpersonal exchange: reciprocity, rationality, altruism, group gain, status, status consistency, and competition. *Reciprocity* is equity in the sense that people tried to get out of an exchange what they think they deserve based on what they have put into it. More attention has been channelled into reciprocity in the literature of social exchange theory. Cropanzano and Mitchell, (2005) and Gouldner, (1960), described it as a kind of behaviour that can either be direct when help is between two people and indirect when help is exchanged with an entire group (Flynn, 2005). This norm of reciprocity is congruent with third assumption as mentioned above by (Chibucos et al., 2005). The second dimension of interpersonal exchange: *rationality* refers to the use of logic, which entails determining likely consequences and how one should achieve those valued outcomes. To qualify this dimension, Meeker (1971) argues that a person who bases a decision on considerations of Wertrationalität will be rational in the sense of his/her applying logic to figure out what the consequence of his decisions will be and he will evaluate consequences. However, a person may not choose to maximize his benefits if he/she views the act itself as illegitimate. *Altruism* refers to behaviours that aim to benefit others even at our own disadvantage. *Group gain* refers to the rule that assigns maximum value to the pool where individual takes what they need from the pool regardless of their contribution. *Status consistency or rank equilibration*, according to Meeker (1971) is where people try to distribute rewards proportionally to status based on an external dimension like race

or gender. Finally, *competition* is well explained by Thibaut and Kelley (1959) where the aim of the exchange is to obtain greater reward than another person gets, even at absolute cost.

The key assumptions postulated by Meeker (1971) and Chibucos et al. (2005) points to the multidisciplinary nature of the SET. The suggested basic tenets seem to be complementary and the bottom line lies in coming to a decision to engage in action, with the aim of gaining success or profit from it. Despite the fact that the social exchange theory is considered to be a profound conceptual paradigm for understanding workplace behaviour, the potential application of the theory in the present study will be to explain, the peer helpers' reasons for joining the Unisa peer help programme and how do they make sense of their role and supportive structures. Furthermore, the SET will also be used to explain the possible gains emanating from all social exchanges that they engage in and how do they make informed decision to make sense of their challenges they encounter. The purpose for using the SET stems from the researcher's assumption that not all students consider participating in the university activities and those who do so, are motivated by the benefits that they may attain from participating in university programmes.

## **Conclusion**

The primary aim of this chapter is to discuss peer help programmes in South Africa. The chapter discusses how peer help programmes have been initiated in South African higher education institutions and covers all aspects relevant to peer help programmes. UPHVP has been discussed in detail with the purpose of informing the reader concerning the aims and objectives, processes followed when selecting peer helpers, training, roles and responsibilities of Unisa peer

helpers and supervision. The researcher has also tried to contextualise the study by providing an international and local literature review section. In the literature review section, the researcher has taken a positive-critical stance by acknowledging and constructively pointing out limitations identified in some of the studies. The researcher also discusses the theories (ecological theory, theory of students' involvement and social exchange theory) as a theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. These theories will be used explain the findings and will be applied and the researcher will keep in mind that the there is no single theory can fully explain the human experiences holistically.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Overview**

Research design constitutes the route that a researcher takes to answer the research questions. This section is inviting the reader to visualise the journey employed by the researcher in attempting to answer the research questions. The research design of most qualitative research is not necessarily planned in advance as is usually the case in traditional quantitative research. More often than not, in qualitative studies, research design seems to unfold during the research process. Resulting from this, the researcher is required to respond skilfully to new developments as the research process unfold.

The researcher will, at the outset, start by stating the research questions and the aims of the study, explaining the researcher's epistemological position in this study, explain what qualitative approach is as an approach used in the study, briefly look at types of qualitative designs and explain the applicability of using a case study research for the present study. The subsequent sections will embody the characteristics of a case study research by stating the research context, the role of the researcher, ethical considerations and sampling methods used. Other key aspects of qualitative research will be adapted from other research design during the process of research in order to achieve the aims of this study in the best possible way.

### **Research questions**

The purpose of the present study is to explore and describe the experiences peer helpers at the Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution. As the concept of "experience" is open to

different interpretations, the researcher deems it important to clarify what experiences are sought to be uncovered by the study. Hornby (2005, p. 513) in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary explicates at least five definitions of what the concept of experience entails only the first four are considered in this study. *Firstly*, experience is defined as “the knowledge and skill that one gains by doing something over a period of time” (p.513); *Secondly*, the experience is defined as “the thing that happens to one that influences the way he/she think and behaves” (p.513). *Thirdly*, experience is defined as “an event or activity that affects one in some way” (p.513). *Lastly*, experience is defined as “events or knowledge that is shared by all the members of the particular group in society and that influences the way in which they think and behave” (p.513). This conceptualisation of experience is also echoed by other researchers who state that experiences may be seen as the skills or knowledge that a person has accumulated over a period of time during which they have engaged in a particular activity (Driscoll, Parkers et al., 2008; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Riley, 2009). The research outputs of the abovementioned researchers reveal that experiences are either positive or negative as experienced by the participants. Drawing from these definitions of experiences, the present study is envisaged to unpack the wide range of peer helper's experiences through the following research questions. Thus, the overarching questions are what the experiences of student peer helpers at an ODL university and why did they join the Unisa peer help in the first place. To In order to answer the research question four sub-questions were developed.

1. What motivated peer helpers to join the Unisa voluntary peer help programme?
2. How did they make sense of being peer helpers at an ODL institution?
3. What are the positive experiences of being a peer helper at an ODL institution?
4. What are the negative experiences of being a peer helper at the ODL institution?

## **Aims of the study**

The primary aim of this study is to explore and describe experiences of peer helpers at Open Distance Learning Institutions since joining the Unisa Peer Help Programme. This study intends to present the peer helpers with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, lay the foundation for future studies intended to steer the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme into uncharted directions, highlight the contribution made by the Unisa Peer Help Voluntary Programme and benefits as well as the challenges of being a peer helper.

## **Researcher's stance: Interpretive paradigm**

The researcher postulates that the aims/goals of the research project prescribe the epistemological stance a researcher ought to take when initiating the research approach. This indicates that there should be some sort of coherence between the research questions, aims and the research approach if the aims of the study will be achieved. This statement raises questions of what is a methodology in research. What are the research methods? What is an epistemological position and how do all these aspects are synthesised in a research project. To clarify this issue, the researcher embraces Silverman's (2006), suggestion that methodology is the general approach of studying research topics (qualitative or quantitative), and methods refer to specific research techniques like case studies, phenomenology and so forth. Taking into cognisance the aims of the study mentioned above, the researcher has adopted an interpretive paradigm as an epistemological position. According to Terre Blanche et al. (2006) an interpretive paradigm involves taking people's subjective experiences as the essence of what is real to them (ontology). It also includes the sense-making of people's experiences by interacting with them and listening

attentively to what they share (epistemology). In addition, it involves “making use of qualitative research techniques to collect and analyse information” (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). In keeping with interpretive paradigm, the researcher will be exploring peer helpers’ subjective experiences at the ODL institution. Such experiences will be unpacked through interacting with them and attentively listening to what they have to say. The following section is devoted to discuss the qualitative approach that is used in the present study.

### **What is qualitative research?**

The roots of qualitative research approach are comes from the works of anthropologists and sociologists in their quest to fully understand people’s lives, the social and cultural context in which they live and the ways in which they interpret their worlds (Merriam, 2009). In the field works that anthropologists and sociologists embark on, they embrace observing interaction, interviewing people in the setting, and collecting and analysing the artefacts, personal and public documents relevant to understanding what they were studying. According to Merriam (2009) the written accounts of these studies were of a qualitative nature. Merriam (2009) stated that two published works have paved the way for what is presently known as qualitative research. The first was a book by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss titled “*The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*” published in 1967. The book explicates how the discovery of theory from data systemically collected and analysed in social research can be enhanced. This book provides both a theoretical framework and practical strategies for conducting grounded theory which is now regarded as one of qualitative designs by Creswell



(2013). A second publication was a monograph by Egon Guba, titled “*Toward a methodology of naturalistic inquiry in educational evaluation*” which was published in 1978.

According to Merriam’s (2009, p. 7) perspective, the study was “naturalistic” in the sense that it took place in a real-world setting rather than in a laboratory, and whatever was being observed and studied was allowed to happen naturally.

There seems to be no single definition that covers the whole spectrum of what qualitative research is. Descriptions and definitions of qualitative research postulated by researchers are not only unique but they tend to complement each other in various ways. On the one hand, Van Maanen (1990) describes qualitative research as an umbrella term covering a wide array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain or more or less natural occurring phenomena in the social world. On the other hand Halloway (1997, p. 2) describe qualitative research as: “a form of inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live” and that the basis of qualitative research lies in the interpretive approach to social reality. Nelson, Clarke, Febraro and Hatzipantelis, (2005) describes qualitative research as an approach that has as its goal describing and understanding rather than prediction, generalising and explanation. In reality, qualitative research is interested in developing a depth of knowledge about a particular subject within a particular context.

The challenge of defining qualitative research approach is also complicated by epistemological stance researchers take when conducting research. Under the wing of qualitative research approach, the researcher may employ interpretive, critical, feminist-post structural and constructive, phenomenological and other epistemological position, which in one way or the

other influences how they define qualitative approach. The issue of epistemological position is slight emphasised by Denzin and Lincoln (2011a; 2011b) who stated that qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This presumes that the qualitative researcher study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret the phenomena in terms of the connotations and interpretations the study object brings to them. Thus, the interpretation of various phenomena's rests heavily on the researcher's epistemological position.

The other challenge to be considered when defining qualitative research is that it often cuts across disciplines. In his book, Yin (2011, p. 7) states that because of its relevance to different disciplines and professions, qualitative research challenges the researcher to arrive at a succinct definition. He continues by stating that too brief a definition will seem to exclude one discipline or another and too broad a definition will seem uselessly global. This statement is also stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 183-190) who also described qualitative research as: "an interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that crosscuts the humanities and social sciences with its paradigmatic focus".

Despite the use of qualitative research in various disciplines and professions, it retains some of the key features that make it a distinct and favourable tool in social research. Yin (2005) suggests five key features of a qualitative research approach.

1. Studying the meaning of people's lives, under real-world conditions;
2. Representing the views and perspectives of the people (participants);
3. Covering the contextual conditions within which people live;

4. Contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behaviour; and
5. Striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than singularly relying on one source.

### **The strengths and characteristics of the qualitative research approach**

The qualitative approach offers researchers a wide array of techniques to use in their engagement with participants. In this subdivision, the researcher will not only be discussing some of the techniques, but he will additionally state according to what manner such techniques informed his approach in engaging with the participant in this study.

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is of critical importance. According to Terre Blanche et al., (2006) the researcher is a primary instrument for both collecting and analysing data. This may appear simple and easy as it entails interacting with people in an empathic manner in a naturalistic, everyday setting. However, this involves more than what meets the eye. Terre Blanche et al., (2006, p. 276-277) argue that skills such as listening and interpretation are difficult to describe, and doubtlessly more difficult to develop. Listening involves greater skill than simply paying attention to the realities in which the participants are entangled. The researcher is required to be an empathic listener who can grasp participants' views from their frame of reference. Empathy is a concept often associated with therapeutic practices where the therapist puts him/herself in the shoes of the clients in order to develop an all-embracing understanding of the client's concerns. More often than not, empathy and sympathy appear to coexist in our daily interactions and as a result, these two terms are often misunderstood as meaning the same thing. According to Stake (2010) empathy is different from

sympathy, which is a feeling of personal closeness, endearment, and solace and emotional accord. Empathy is described as more clearly a matter of perception than one of emotion. On the other hand, empathy is “the ability to take and understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences, and worldview of others”, (Patton (2002, p. 52).

While it is important for the researcher to empathise with the participants in order to better understand their feelings, experiences, thoughts and actions, it is also important to point out that some semblance of distance between the researcher and the participants is required. This distance is often referred to as “distanciation”, providing for a level of critical analysis on the part of the researcher, where the words of the participants are placed within their broader ecological context (Keller, 1999). The researcher’s engagement with participants will embody both empathy and distanciation with the aim of developing deeper understanding of the experiences peer helpers. Ricoeur (1981), who suggests that the situation needs to be approached from both the perspective of being in the context (empathy) and the perspective of distancing, using interpretation, supports this unique approach of a researcher’s orientation. Moreover, distanciation is the process through which an emotional and intellectual distance is created between the researcher and the selected participants. This process aims to create a critical perspective between the researcher and the entire research context, allowing for reflection and analysis to take place more objectively (Keller, 1999 and Patton, 2002).

### **Thick description**

The term thick description originates from the work of Gilbert Ryle (1949) *Concept of the Mind* where he discusses in great detail “*the description of intellectual work*”. Soon followed

thick description, borrowed by Geertz (1973) in order to describe the work of ethnography. Many qualitative researchers in various disciplines have embraced the adoption and continuous use of the term thick description (Ponterotto, 2006). Thick description as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicates as way of achieving external validity. By describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail to enable the researcher to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people. On the other hand, (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010) states that thick description is an interpretive approach to comprehending the various layers of what is occurring in the social world. However, they warn that although thick descriptions are intended to take into account the experiences and the perceptions of research participants, these perceptions are often both partial and contradictory, as they inevitably become interwoven with the experiences and preconceived ideas of the researcher (2010). This raise questions as to how much of the thick descriptions involved in a study are a subjective interpretation by a researcher. Hollway, (1997) defines think description as detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context. In the present study, the researcher will provide thick descriptions of the peer helpers' experiences by sending the interview transcript to the participants in order for them to expand on their answers, correct mistakes and add more information. This will ensure that the findings and discussion are based on a detailed account of the participant's reflections. The researcher assumes that this approach seems to converge with that of Mills et al. (2010), in the sense that the aim of thick description is not to provide a definitive account, but to venture a suggestion regarding the range of possibilities. Take into account that, in case studies, which is the research design employed in the study, thick

description is an essential part of the process of determining what the particular issues, dynamics, and patterns that make the case distinctive.

## **Triangulation**

Triangulation is a multifaceted key concept in qualitative research. According to Guion (2002) triangulation refers to the idea that multiple sources contribute more credibility to an investigation. Triangulation features strongly in qualitative case studies, as the aim is to “strengthen the depth and the breadth of the case study findings by using many different sources of evidence” (Mills et al., 2010, p. 749). According to Denzin (1978), there are four types of triangulation to which he refers to as multiple triangulations.

- *Data triangulation*: This entails the use of more than one data source (interviews, archival materials, observational data, etc.)
- *Investigator triangulation*, more than one researcher is involved in the research project.
- *Theory triangulation*, more than one theoretical point of view is used to collect and interpret data.
- *Methodological triangulation*; Use of multiple methods to study a single topic (combining quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study).

Janesick (1994) added a fifth type of triangulation *called interdisciplinary triangulation*, which involves the use of more than one discipline in a single study. In the present study, the researcher will employ investigative and theory triangulation. The investigative approach will include my dissertating supervisor and as regards theoretical triangulation, interpretive paradigm

and ecological theory, student involvement theory and social exchange theory, will provide a framework for interpreting and analysing data.

### **Trustworthiness**

The quality of research outputs is always the subject of scrutiny. More often than not, researchers face the responsibility of convincing their audience that their research output represents the best scientific inquiry. The researcher in the present study is no exception to this rule. To ensure that this study represents the true experiences of peer helpers, the researcher will employ the technique of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the researcher tries to convince and persuade the audience that the findings of the study are worth paying attention to (Mouton, 2001). The rigor of qualitative research is judged against the background of trustworthiness, which encapsulates four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Credibility refers to the plausibility of the study findings. According to Pitney and Parker (2009) credibility addresses questions such as; did the researcher depict what actually occurred in the research setting? The researcher will undertake to enhance the credibility of the outcome of the study by member checking where each participant will receive the transcripts of the interviews for review. This will help in the sense that errors made during transcription will be corrected promptly and the participants will also expand on their responses. Transferability is defined as the ability to apply the findings of a study to similar environments (2009). Daymond and Holloway (2010) state that transferability as a qualitative research, replaces external validity and is concerned with how the principles or models that emerge during the study, may be applicable in other situations, basing

the comparison of findings with outcomes of previous studies. Dependability is one of the criteria essential to determining the trustworthiness of the research study. Dependability refers to the study being carried out in a stable and consistent manner (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). According to Stringer (2004) dependability is achieved through an inquiry audit, whereby details of the research process, including processes of defining the research problem, collecting and analysing data are, and constructing reports are available to participants and other audiences. In this study, the researcher will attempt to achieve dependability by continuous engagement with the participants throughout the research project, engaging with the supervisor. Confirmability is also associated with trustworthiness. Confirmability entails that the findings and conclusions achieve the aim of the study. To achieve this, the researcher will state how the conclusion is drawn from the findings and the extent to which the aims of the study have been achieved.

### **Types of qualitative research designs**

According to Creswell (2007) there are five qualitative designs that fall under the umbrella of qualitative approach. These are narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case studies. These designs will be briefly explored, however the focus will, be directed on case studies as it is the design chosen for this study. While examining literature, unique definitions of qualitative designs emerge which, according to the researcher, construct a diverse and multi-faceted view of reality as observed from different perspectives.

Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) postulated that “narrative” might be the term assigned to any text or discourse or it might be text used within the context of a mode of inquiry in a qualitative research. Not far removed from Daiute and Lightfoot (2004), Czarniawska, (2004, p.



17) defines narrative research as a specific type of qualitative research, in which narrative is understood as a spoken or written text, giving an account of an event, action or of series of events/actions, that is chronologically connected. The core of narrative research from the researchers' perspective is the type of inquiry that seeks to understand a person's life from their spoken and written words. The focus of this study is not to infer understanding from the peer helpers spoken words. However, the researcher aims to take the experiences of the peer helpers as the essence of what is real to them by employing the interpretive paradigm as an epistemological position. Therefore, attaching text to peer helpers' reflections is in contradiction with the aims of this study and as such, narrative design has been considered unsuitable for this study.

On the other hand, a phenomenological study describes the meaning of several individuals' of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common, as they experienced a phenomenon (e.g., grief is universally experienced). According to van Maanem (1990, p. 17) the primary aim of phenomenological study is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. Phenomenological design has some of the elements that fit in with what the researcher wanted to achieve in the sense that the potential participants will be students who have been Unisa peer helpers for no less than year and have underwent the Unisa peer help volunteer programme training. However, reducing the peer helpers' experiences to a description of universal essence is not in line with what the researcher aims to achieve with this study. As a result, the researcher decided not to use it for this study.

While phenomenological studies focus more on the experiences of people who experience a certain event, grounded theory is purposefully intended to go beyond description

and to generate or discover a theory, (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this type of research participants would have all experienced the process and the development of the theory might help explain the practice or provide the framework for further research. Of greater importance than that which Strauss and Corbin (1998) states, is that theory does not come out of the shelf but it is generated in the data from participants who have experience the process. Grounded theory does not fit in with aims of the study, as it is used to develop theory from the data, while the present study is intended to explore and describe the peer helpers' experiences and present their reflection as true to them without going beyond that.

Ethnography is best defined as a qualitative design in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group (Harris, 1968). Prior the interpretation of peoples experiences, ethnographic researchers assume that they must discover what people actually do and the reasons they give for doing it before they can assign to their actions interpretations drawn from our personal experiences or from our professional or academic disciplines (Le Compte & Schensul, 2010). Clearly, this design does not present the researcher with an angle by which to present the experiences of peer helpers, as he would prefer to.

As the purpose of this study is to explore and describe the experiences of peer helpers in an ODL institution a case study design has been selected as the most suitable method. Creswell (2007) regards a case study research as a methodology, a subdivision design of qualitative research approach, or an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry. Yin (2009, p. 19) on the other hand, emphasises that it goes beyond being simply a type of qualitative research. Literature on case study designs, depict that researchers have distinctive yet overlapping views on the true meaning of case study research Creswell additionally classifies a case study as a

qualitative approach employed by the investigator to explore a bounded system (case studies) over a period of time, through detailed in depth data collection involving multiple sources of information. These would include observations, interviews, audio-visual materials, and documents and reports. Additionally, it would report on a case description and case based themes. In addition, Yin (2009, p. 2) also defines case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a detailed contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not evident. A case study design provides a deeper understanding of the phenomena, and acknowledges the impact of the context on the cause and effect of a situation (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2008). The focus is on the bounded system and the emphasis is on arriving at a complete description and understanding of the constructs being studied, despite the small numbers of persons involved (Struwig & Stead, 2001). None of the mentioned definitions of case study design are set far apart from the rest and resulting from this, these definitions are considered important, as they create the principal element of this study.

### **Case studies**

By default, almost all research studies have an implicit blueprint or design that is used to carry out the study. In the present study, a case study design was selected as the most suitable method available for exploration of the experiences of peer helpers at an ODL institution. A case study involves an in-depth, intensive and well-focused exploration of such an occurrence (Willig, 2013, p. 101). According to Cohen et al. (2008), a case study provides a deeper understanding of phenomena and acknowledges the impact of such context on the course and the effect of the

situation. The focus is on the phenomena of some sort occurring in a bounded context and the emphasis is on arriving at a complete description and understanding of the construct being studied (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Struwig & Stead, 2001). This raises a question of what presents a case in the case study. To offer an immediate clarity in the present study, the units of analysis are the experiences of Unisa student peer helpers. Each peer helper (research participant) will reflect on his/her experiences of being peer helpers at an ODL institution like Unisa.

As it has already been indicated that there are many research designs which falls under the umbrella of qualitative approach, Yin (2009, p. 18) presented guidelines as to when researchers should consider utilising a case study. *Firstly*, the focus of the study is to answer as to “how” and “why” questions. *Secondly*, you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study. *Thirdly*, you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study. *Lastly*, the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. In the present study, the researcher is interested in exploring and describing the experiences of peer helpers, as such, experiences cannot be understood from an outside in perspective and the ODL context is assumed to have a profound influence on peer helpers’ experiences given its institutional character and the roles and responsibilities assigned to peer helpers.

The flexibility and strength of a case study design have seen it being used in both qualitative and quantitative research approaches and have also been applied in many disciplines like sociology, history, education, social anthropology, psychology, etc. (Willig, 2013, p. 101). A case study design is built upon the premises which are the benchmark for its multidiscipline

application. This paragraph will focus on looking at five identifying features of a case study as described by (Willig, 2013, p. 111).

*Idiographic perspective.* This entails that researchers are more concerned with the particular rather than with the general. The aim is to comprehend an individual case in its particularity. In the present study, the researcher will focus more on each peer helper as an individual. The main goal will be to understand his/her experiences and the interpretive paradigm used in this study, fits in well with what the study is envisaged to achieve.

*Attention to contextual data.* This entails that a case study takes a holistic approach in that it considers the case within its context. This approach will be embraced in the sense that all contextual aspects that the research assumes to have an influence on peer helpers experiences will be taken into consideration. These aspects include, but are not limited to peer helper-students' interactions, peer helpers-supervisors' interaction, motivations to join the peer help programme and their roles the institution.

*Triangulation.* Although triangulation has already been discussed as one of the key aspects of qualitative approach, it also features in case study design in the sense that it enriches the case study as it allows the researcher to approach the case from a number of perspectives. The types of triangulation that will be employed in this study are already discussed.

*A temporal element.* Case studies involve the investigation of occurrences over a period of time. The focus is on establishing the how and why of a complex human situation Yin (1994, cited by Willig, 2013, p. 111). This means that the focus is on change and that development is an important feature in case studies. With reference to the case study and with what has been

discovered in literature, the researcher is keen to explore the changes and development encapsulated in the experiences of peer helpers.

*A concern with theory.* Case studies play a key role in the development of theories. A detailed exploration of a particular case can generate insight into the social and psychological processes, which can constitute the starting point for theoretical formulations and hypothesis. The researcher hopes that this study will inspire other researchers to replicate the study using different approaches, larger samples that may perhaps give rise to theories and speculation. Moreover, discussion regarding development of theory and hypothesis appear in the recommendations section after data has been analysed and discussed (Willig, 2013, p. 111).

### **Philosophical underpinnings of a case study**

Designs employed in research studies are develop from something, so is the case study design. According to Stake (1995) the principal element of using case studies emanates from the paradigm of constructivism. Constructive paradigm involves that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one's perspective (Baxter & Jack, 2008). On the other hand, the generation of case studies appeared in 1990s within the discipline of anthropology. This was through accounts of journeys; systematics of investigations of other cultures in the form of emerging studies, with the observations of participants as the predominant method of data collection (Johansson, 2003). The case study design gained momentum in the Chicago School of Sociology in which the anthropologist's field study method was practised on contemporary society in university surroundings (Platt, 1992; van Maanen, 1988).

According to Johansson (2003), positivism dominated the philosophy of science after the Second World War and the social science has favoured the positivism and quantitative methods. During this period, surveys, statistical methods, opinion polls, experiments and quasi-experiments have been considered scientifically and qualitative case studies were criticised for being unscientific. This marked a distinction within the social sciences when there were two cultures: positivist and anti-positivist, and this give rise to the development of social sciences within the context of tension filling a gap between natural sciences and the humanities (Johansson, 2003). Although the emphasis on positivism within the social sciences was established around 1950s, it was only in the 1960s that a second generation of case study methodology has begun to emerge and it bridged the gap between positivism and hermeneutics as a philosophical foundation of the social sciences. The first method within the second generation of the case study is the utilisation of grounded theory and Robert Yin (1984-1994) has expanded this experimental logic into the field of naturalistic inquiry and combines it with qualitative methods. As a result, case study methodology has developed into the direction of eclecticism and pragmatism (Johansson, 2003).

On the other hand, Patton (1990) is advocating for this development as he argued that, rather than believing that one must choose to align with one paradigm or the other, a paradigm of choices is often appropriate. He further stated that a paradigm of choices rejects methodological orthodoxy in favour of methodological appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality. Despite the history and the development of a case study, I, as a researcher, submit that a case study is a method of inquiry, not a methodology. In the present study, the case study design is a qualitative method chosen to explore the experiences of peer helpers.

## **Determining the units of analysis**

The widespread notion that determining the unit/case of analysis is a challenge to both novices and established researchers, proved accurate as I also struggled to figure out what the unit of analyses are. However, the literature on case studies uncomplicated the challenge and has given the researcher fresh insight as to what represents the unit of analysis in the present study. Miles and Huberman (1994) define the unit/case of analysis as, a phenomenon of some sort occurring within a bounded context. Willig (2013) differentiates between the object of the study and the case of the study. The object of the study constitutes the phenomenon of interest to the researcher while the case is its concrete manifestation. Thinking about what I want to analyse gives rise to the conclusion that the unit/case of analysis in the present study are the experience of Unisa peer helpers.

## **Binding the Case: Placing boundaries**

Binding the case is analogical to cordoning off the area of concern and then focus solely on what is happening in that area to the exclusion of what is happening outside of it. This is what Yin (2003), and Stake (1995) called placing boundaries on the case study. To bind this case study I employed suggestions from Creswell (2003), Stake (1995) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Their suggestion entails that a case can be bounded by, “time and place”, “time and activity”, and “definition and context”. Initially the plan was to look for peer helpers who have served as peer helpers for no less than a year. This means that some of them might have been appointed as an Assistant Student counsellor or might have been offered job opportunities elsewhere. However, as the research process unfolds not all participants who volunteered to



participate in the study, have served as peer helpers for a year. Some of them have been in the peer help programme for eight months, some have joined the programme for two years and other others are approaching their third year in the peer help programme. The researcher has accepted all of them on the basis that the time they have spent in UPHVP is sufficiently enough for them to be eligible to participate in the study. More details regarding the selection of participants are discussed in the sample section.

### **What type of a case study is this?**

There are many types of case study designs and the most common are intrinsic, instrumental and collective case studies. When scrutinising these types of case studies and taking into consideration what the researcher aims to achieve, an intrinsic case study was selected as the most suitable case study. In the intrinsic case study, the researcher's aim is to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a particular individual case, such as of a specific programme, a particular programme or agent (Yin, 2003). Stake (1995) states that the case study is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because in all its particularity or established normality, the case itself is of interest. This type of design fits in with the researcher's interest in the sense that understanding the peer helpers' experiences from their frame of reference, is the ultimate goal of this study.

## **Generalising from the case study: What are the possibilities?**

In most instances, research findings are often judged against the background of how well they hold in other contexts and that this is achieved through generalising. Analytical and statistical generalisations are two types of generalising common to case studies. In statistical generalisation, an inference is made about the population based on empirical data collected on a sample from that population (Yin, 2009, p. 38). This method of generalizing is commonly recognized, as research investigators already have access to quantitative formulas for determining the confidence with which generalizations can be made, depending on the size and internal variation within the universe and sample (Yin, 2009, p. 38). Analytical generalization, on the other hand, entails the use of a well-established theory with which to compare the empirical results of a case study. A clearer understanding of these types of generalisations in case study, promotes guarding against the error of using statistical generalisation, as cases are not sampling units and they vary in many aspects. Although the plausibility of generalising from the case study is limited, Yin, (1994) argues that theoretical generalization is the domain of case study in the way that statistical generalization is to the true experiment. Taking into consideration the type of a case study employed in the present study, the qualitative nature of the study and the possibility of generalising, the researcher submits that the study is not conducted to draw a generalisation, however, it will be interesting to note how the findings in the study can hold true in subsequent studies conduct to explore peer helper experiences at the ODL institution or elsewhere.

## **The strength and weaknesses of the case study design**

Research designs are not without their strengths and weaknesses and case studies are no exceptions to this rule. Both strengths and limitations are discussed individually. According to Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) in a paper presented at the Learning and Skill Development Agency conference, some of the strengths and weaknesses of case studies were identified.

They can help us understand complex inter-relationships. The most salient characteristics of case studies, is that they operate with a severely restrictive focus. One of the prime reasons for such restricting the scope of the research, is that it facilitates the construction of detailed, in depth understanding of what is to be studied. Case studies are grounded in “lived reality”. Case studies tend to relate strongly to the experiences of individuals, small groups or organisations. They retain more of the “noise” and interference of real life than do many other types of research. This means that all aspects of people being studied are taken into consideration. Case studies facilitate the exploration of the unexpected and unusual and this happens when the unexpected, yet significant issues, emerge during the course of research. Furthermore, case studies allow for examination of the exceptional and typical. Multiple case studies enable and promote research to focus on the significance of the idiosyncratic. This could happen when different cases are compared in terms of their uniqueness and the cases could involve individuals, groups and organisations. The uniqueness of the cases can shed light on the features that are common and those that are different. Case studies can show the processes involved in causal relationships and this could become real when cases are juxtaposed against the background of the same contexts. Last but not least, case studies can facilitate a wealth of conceptual/theoretical development, Although some case studies are not developed to generate a

theory, it is widely accepted that case studies present fertile ground for development of conceptual and theoretical framework (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001).

Despite the strength inherent in the case studies, there are also some limitations that are associated with the case study. *Firstly*, a case study tends to generate too much data for analysis. This weakness has also emerged in the data analysis method used in this study. The researcher will try to mitigate this weakness by trying to be idiosyncratic when during the data analysis stage. *Secondly*, experimenting with case studies tend to be quite expensive if attempted on a large scale, as it normally takes time to collect and analyse data. These limitations seem to be unavoidable and may have a negative impact on the credibility of the study. *Thirdly*, the complexity of the data examined, is difficult to represent simply. This holds true as the researchers are required to be brief and concise and that may result in other aspects being omitted. *Fourthly*, the findings do not lend themselves to numerical representations. This could have a reference in quantitative studies; however, in the present study this limitation would not exert any effect. Lastly, case studies are strongest when researcher expertise and intuition are maximised, but this raises doubts about their objectivity. Criticism of case study involves the researcher's expertise, intuition and the questions they ask. The researcher argues that the combination of these aspects indicates that the research can never be completely objective and these aspects are not only peculiar to case studies, but also common to all research designs.

## **Ethical Consideration**

### **Permission to conduct the study**

The permission to conduct the study was first been granted by the Department of Psychology in the form of ethical clearance, which has been obtained in December 2012. Before the data collection, the researcher has also sought permission from the DCCD head- and peer help programme project leaders. The proposal and the ethical clearance were sent to them and they have granted the researcher the permission to conduct the study.

### **Voluntary Participation**

The research topic that is under investigation may instigate the researcher to look for participants rich in information. This will help the researcher to sample only those research participants than can help him/her to collect information needed. However, voluntary participation was adhered to in the sense that research participants were not coerced to partake in the study and were free to withdraw from the study at any moment should they wish to do so.

### **Informed Consent**

Peer helpers who were willing to participate in the study were kindly welcomed. They were requested to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix B). The informed consent form requires that the peer helper has read and has agreed to voluntarily participation in the study. However, the informed consent form is not a binding contract that disallows withdrawal from the study.

## **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is one of research ethics that the researcher fully adheres to while executing this study. Confidentiality in research implies that information shared by participants will be kept confidential. Research participants were assured that everything they shared with me would be treated with utmost confidentiality; however, outcomes will be published as the research report (dissertation). Most importantly, their names will not be used in the research report in order to ensure that information shared cannot expose their identities.

## **Protection of the peer helpers**

The researcher will try to ensure that no harm befalls peer helpers for participating in this study. They were assured that the study aims to give them a platform to reflect on their experiences. If sharing their experience results in some form of discomfort that requires professional counsellors, arrangements were made with a professional therapist to assist if there was a need to do so.

## **Sample: Selection of the participants**

Purposive sampling method was chosen as the most appropriate method to select research participants. According to Creswell (2007) purposive sampling is a sampling technique that is used to select participants for the study “because they can purposefully inform the understanding of the research problem and central phenomena in the study”. Neuman and Neuman (2006) describes purposive sampling as a method of selecting participants based on the subjective judgement of the researcher, regarding the characteristic of the representative sample with a

specific purpose in mind. The initial plan was to sample Unisa peer helpers based on Sunnyside Campus who have joined the peer help programme not less than a year. The majority of peer helpers, however, who had served as peer helpers for two years or more were already employed elsewhere and those who were available had joined the peer help programme for eight months to three years. Given that qualitative research allows for emergent design, the researcher decided to consider any peer helper who has joined the programme for not less than eight months. After the researcher presented the research project, seven participants volunteered to partake of which six of them have been in the peer help programme for more than two years and one has been there for eight months. Although the plan was to sample four peer helpers, the interest shown by peer helpers to partake in the study was welcomed and as a result, three more participants were accepted to take part in the study. Furthermore, the fact that the researcher did not indicate during the presentation of the research project how many participants were needed, it was deemed harsh to deny others from participating in the study. Patton (2002) argues that the number of participants in the qualitative study should be relevant to the purpose and goal of the study, sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what is at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility and what can be done with available time and resources. The researcher assumed that aiming for four, but eventually getting seven participants who declared their interest in the study was a positive development and the possibilities of achieving saturation were higher. Saturation refers to the “condition of an interpretive account where the account is richly fed by the material that has been collected” (Terre Blanche et al., 2006, p. 371-372).

## Data collection techniques

There are several methods in which data may be collected in qualitative research. In the present study, data were initially planned to be collected by interviews, which will be recorded and field notes. However, during the research process, taking notes was stopped as it was distracting the interview process and the researcher was struggling to attend fully the participants. As a result, the researcher decided to rely on a tape recorder. Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p. 96) define interview as a “purposeful conversation usually between two or more people”. Sometimes this conversation is directed by one person (the researcher) in order to get information from the other (research participants), (Morgan cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The interview is the staple of the qualitative research process (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002; Aronson, 1994; Patton, 2002). According to Bryman (2012) the style of interview preferred by qualitative researchers tends to be more open-ended, flexible and unprompted than the style of interview common in quantitative research, such as the survey interview. The researcher assumed that the interviewing style used was more open-ended and quite flexible. Moreover, participants were offered a unique opportunity to reflect on any of their experiences that the researcher did not ask. This elicited unexpected responses, which enriched data. This type of interviewing was preferred because the researcher used semi-structured interviews. The purpose of using semi-structured interview was to keep the interview process in line with what the study aims to achieve. According to Sampson (1996) Semi-structured interviews are also referred to as semi-standardised interviews, the whole situation is carefully structured and the major areas of inquiry are mapped out, but the participants are given the freedom to express their definition of the situation as presented to them. The researcher has the freedom to explore ideas,



reasons and motives, or to probe further into directions that were not anticipated as prompted by the participant's story.

### **Interview Guide**

In this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews to collect data on UNISA peer helper's experiences. The underlying reason for conducting semi-structured interviews is that they guide the researcher, but are not restrictive as they allow the researcher to explore interesting areas that arise and can follow the participant's ideas, interest or concerns more closely (Smith, 2003, p. 57-59). The interview guide was developed in line with the way in which experiences are understood for the purpose of this study. The interview guide was developed to elicit peer helpers' views regarding their experiences as sources of support at an ODL institution. Peer helper's will also be allowed to introduce their own ideas and concerns that the researcher has not considered, furthermore, the researcher acknowledges that peer helpers are the experts in this research topic and they were offered a maximum opportunity to tell their own stories.

### **Data analysis: making sense of data**

According to Terre Blanche et al, (2006) there are various forms of qualitative analytic traditions that falls under the umbrella of interpretive analysis, for example, the phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, thematic and content analysis (Kruger, 1979; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Smith, 1992 as cited in Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The critical aspect

important in order to conduct a good interpretive analysis is to stay close to the data, to interpret it from a position of empathic understanding (Terre Blanche et al., 2006, p. 321). According to anthropologist, Geertz (1973), the purpose of interpretive analysis is to provide “thick description” which means a thorough description of the characteristic, processes, transactions, and context that constitute the phenomenon being studied, couched in language not alien to the phenomenon, as well as an account of the researcher’s role in constructing the description. The preferred method for data analysis for this study is thematic analysis.

### **Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis is a poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method (Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001) within and beyond psychology. According to Boyatzis (1998) thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns and themes within the data. It also goes beyond that to facilitate the interpretation of various aspects of the research topic. It minimally organises and describes data in detail. The themes that emerge from the data analysis can take the form of current statements, attributes or assumption which people make (Hayes, 2013). Holloway and Todrez (2003) argue that qualitative approaches are incredibly diverse, complex and nuanced, that thematic analysis should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis, and it is the first qualitative method of analysis that researchers should learn, as it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other forms of qualitative analysis. Indeed, identify “thematizing meanings” is one of a few shared generic skills across qualitative analysis.

Thematic analysis requires a researcher to take heed of some aspects. These aspects are discussed in the following section to give the reader the stance that the researcher took before the

analysis of data began. While reviewing literature, it emerged that these aspects are rarely discussed in literature where thematic analysis was used. However, an article by Braun and Clark (2006) convinced the researcher of the present study to deem it pertinent to discuss the following aspects because it would give the reader the framework used by the researcher when analysing data, using thematic analysis.

### **What counts as a theme?**

It is already indicated that thematic analysis helps in identifying themes and patterns in the data set. The question of “what counts as a theme or pattern?” has kept the researcher thoughtful for some time. In brief, a theme is described as something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within, the data set. It is also stated that a theme is not judged against the background of proportion that displays the evidence of the theme. The researchers, however, uses their discretion to decide on themes. In the present study, the researcher will be quite flexible in developing themes and will consider themes that are important in answering the research question.

### **A detailed account of one particular aspect**

The researcher will attempt to give a broader description of the peer helpers’ experiences. To achieve this, the researcher will try to make the final themes a true reflection of the whole data set. This means that developed themes will capture each data item account.

### **Inductive or theoretical analysis**

In keeping with thematic analysis, there are only two ways in which themes or patterns can be identified when using thematic analysis: an inductive way (bottom up) or theoretical-deductive (top down) approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Hayes, 2013). In the present study, the researcher will employ inductive analysis and according to Patton (1990), this approach entails that the identified themes are strongly linked to the data.

### **Semantic or latent themes**

Boyatzis (1998) strongly argues that, in thematic analysis, there are two levels at which themes are identified. These are semantic or latent themes. The semantic approach involves identifying themes within the explicit or the surface meaning of the data where the researcher is not looking for anything beyond what the participants has said or written. On the other hand, thematic analysis at the level of latent analysis, goes beyond the content of the data, and identifies the underlying ideas, assumption, and conceptualisations, ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). In the present study, the researcher will use the semantic approach. The semantic approach fits in with what the researcher aims to achieve in this study.

### **Epistemology: essentialist/realist vs. the constructionist thematic analysis**

The epistemological position that the researcher will take in the study is already discussed. However, it is important that it be briefly emphasised here, as it will guide how the researcher views the data set. The interpretive paradigm is the epistemological position that the

researcher will use when analysing data. In keeping with this epistemological position, the researcher will take the experiences of student peer helpers as the essence of what is real to them.

### **The many questions of qualitative research approach**

The overarching research question is to explore what the experiences of peer helpers are. To answer this question, experiences were conceptualised specifically for this study. This helped in developing other questions important in answering the main research question. In brief, to obtain a broader picture of the student peer helpers the researcher explored:

- Their reasons to consider joining the UPHVP;
- How they make sense of being peer helpers at an ODL institution?
- What are the positive experiences of being a peer helper at an ODL institution?
- What are the negative experiences of being a peer helper at the ODL institution?

### **Phase 1: Familiarising myself with data**

Research participants were interviewed and the interviews were tape recorded with their permission. The researcher did take some notes during the interview process, but stopped as indicated in the previous section. Some notes were taken at the end of each interview, to summarise participant's reflections. The subsequent step was to transcribe the audio data into written form in order to conduct thematic analysis. Before analysing, the interview transcripts were shared with the research participants in order to give them the opportunity to expand, comment and to correct the researcher where necessary. According to (Riessman, 1993) the process of transcription, while it may seem time-consuming, frustrating, and at times uninteresting, can be an excellent way to start familiarising yourself with the data. Furthermore,

some researchers even argue that it should be seen as “a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology” (Bird, 2005). They recognised it as an interpretative act, where meanings are created, rather than simply a mechanical one of putting spoken sounds on paper (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). As the researchers indicate above, the transcribing phase was a journey filled with mixed feelings on the part of the researcher. Although there were times when it felt irksome to start, the researcher enjoyed listening to the audio recordings and that made it easy to reconnect with the data. Finally yet importantly, the researcher tried to ensure that the interview transcript matched the audio recordings and contained all the verbal utterances.

### **Phase 2: Generating initial codes**

This phase of data analysis commenced after the researcher has immersed with the data (interview transcripts) to identify what is in the data and what is interesting about it. It is in this phase where the researcher focused more on developing codes. Codes identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst, and refer to “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998). The process of coding is described as part of analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as you are organising your data into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). Nevertheless, codes developed will not be accepted as themes, but the researcher will try to produce themes that will capture the essence of codes identified.

### **Phase 3: Searching for themes**

This phase of analysis re-shapes the analysis of data as far as thematic analysis is concerned. During this phase, the researcher took a deep look at the codes developed and tried to come up with potential themes. This motive to examine themes stems from the researcher’s

belief that doing so will be useful in identifying overarching themes or codes that may eventually be considered themes. While searching for themes, the researcher was mindful of the possibility of codes that may not fit in with any themes. Such themes were not discarded, but the researcher noted them in a separate paper. Creating of a temporal home for codes that fall outside identified themes is an idea suggested by Braun and Clark (2006). In conclusion, this phase will end with the collection of themes.

#### **Phase 4: Reviewing themes**

This phase of data analysis involves the refining of themes. Refining themes entailed a thorough analysis of themes to assess if they count as themes and if there is adequate evidence to support them or other themes will be merged to form one theme, while other will require to be divided into different themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). In reviewing themes, the researcher employed a process that involves two levels as suggested (Braun & Clark, 2006). Level one entails reviewing at the level of the coded data extracts. In keeping with this level, the researcher read all collated data extracts to establish whether they appear to form a coherent pattern. Collated data extracts that form a pattern and support a theme were be kept as such, and the researcher moved on to the next level of this phase to identify which data extracts do not seem to support the theme. All data extracts (codes) that did not seem to fit, were examined to determine if they support a problematic theme or if they should be moved to the group of codes that fall outside themes. The researcher decided on two options regarding themes identified as problematic, the first was to rework for the possibility of including them in the analysis or remove them from analysis.

### **Phase 5: Defining and naming themes**

Having developed a thematic map, the researcher will define and continue to refine the themes and analyse data within them. The definition and refinement of themes entail identifying the essence of what each theme is about and determining what aspects of the data each theme captures (Braun & Clark, 2006). For each participant, the researcher will write a detailed analysis. Following this, the researcher will identify and write a story about each theme and consider how it relates to the overarching research question “what are the experiences of peer helpers”. Furthermore Attride-Stirling, (2001) suggest that at this stage the researcher should summarise the thematic network only when the network has been explored, described and patterns characterised. The objective here is to summarize the principal themes that began to emerge in the description of the network, and to begin making explicit the emerging patterns in the exploration.

### **Phase 6: Producing the report**

According to Braun and Clark, (2006) this stage begins when the researcher has fully worked-out themes and involves the final analysis and the write up of the report. On the other hand Attride-Stirling (2001), submit that this stage brings together (i) the deduction in the summaries of all the networks, (ii) deductions and the relevant theory to continue exploring the significant themes. Moreover, during this stage the researcher should go back to the original research questions and the theoretical interest underpinning them and address these with arguments grounded on the patterns that emerged in the exploration of the texts. Borrowing from these ideas, the researcher will visit the research question and the theory used and endeavours to



come up with a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the stories inherent in the themes.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of the thematic analysis method**

Although thematic analysis is describe as a method of analysis that seeks to unearth the themes salient in the text at different levels (Attride-Stirling, 2001), there are inherent advantages and disadvantages that the researcher ought to take into consideration when using this data analysis method. These are described by Braun and Clark (2006) and the researcher will briefly explain how he will take note of them. The advantages of the thematic analysis are that it has a flexible approach that can be used across a range of epistemologies and research questions. It is a relatively easy and quick method to learn and apply. Furthermore, using the thematic analysis the researcher can summarise key aspects of data and highlight the similarities and differences in the data. One of the major disadvantages of thematic analysis depends more on poorly conducted analyses or inappropriate research questions, than on the method itself. Further, the flexibility of the method – which allows for a wide range of analytic options - means that the potential range of things that can be said about the data is broad. This makes developing specific guidelines for higher-phase analysis difficult, and can be potentially paralysing to the researcher trying to decide what aspects of their data to focus on. To guard against this, the researcher will try to make sure that data is analysed from the framework of the research question. This is envisaged to help the researcher to keep the researcher’s focus on what is more important. The inability to retain a sense of continuity and contradiction through any one individual account is considered to be one of the disadvantages of thematic analysis. Lastly, although the thematic analysis is widely

used, it has no particular prestige, which is thought to emanate from its poorly demarcated structure.

## **CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

Presenting the findings in a coherent and succinct manner was a daunting task. There were times where the researcher was at a loss as to what to do. Reconsidering the research questions and the aims of the study, however, provided stimulus to begin a dialogue with the data with fresh perspectives. Furthermore, a reconnection with the interpretive paradigm as an epistemological position that was assumed also shaped the researcher's focus in analysing and presenting findings. Following, though not sequential, was a continuous familiarisation with data, which gave rise to codes and sense started to crystallise. The patterns inherent in the data were identified, reviewed, named and the final task was presenting the identified themes.

### **Methods of collecting data**

As indicated in the previous chapter, data were collected by the researcher by using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted on different days depending on the availability of the participants. To ensure that the researcher stays in touch with the aims of the study, the researcher listens to each audio interview four times with the aim of identifying and correcting errors that may hinder the process of achieving the ultimate goals of the study. Through listening to the audio interviews, not only errors were corrected, but also, some interview questions were changed or rephrased. That helped the researcher to change and rephrase some of the interview questions and guard against errors hindering the smooth flow of the conducting interview processes.

## **Data management**

Data were recorded using the voice recorder and the researcher's smartphone as a backup plan. Audio recordings were saved in the researcher's computer notebook are still treated with utmost confidentiality to protect the identities of the participants. Seven participants interviews duration ranged between 42:05 - 66:59 minutes. The following steps were to transcribe the audio data into a word document for analysis, which was a lengthy and time-consuming process. The interview transcripts were identified by the participants' name (not real name). The transcripts were shared with both the supervisor for comments and corrections and the participants for editing and expanding the information they shared if possible. The original copies remained with the researcher. As soon as the interview transcripts were returned back to the researcher, each was compared with the original to assimilate the changes and using Microsoft words track changes function.

## **Description of participants' profiles**

The sample consisted of seven participants, two males and five females. All of them were psychology students at Unisa and at different academic levels. All the sample participants volunteered to participate in the study and signed the informed consent form indicating their interest in the study. This affirms that the researcher abided by the ethical procedures in recruiting participants. The names used here are not the real names of participants and they are going to be used throughout the chapter.

**Table 3. Participants' names and gender.**

<b>Participant's name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Participant's name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Participant's name</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>1. Warren</b>	Male	<b>2. Dirk</b>	Male	<b>3. Lufuno</b>	Female
<b>4. Tebogo</b>	Female	<b>5. Nomusa</b>	Female	<b>6. Tintswalo</b>	Female
<b>7. Katlego</b>	Female				

## **Themes**

The themes that are discussed in the following section are organized in a manner stated in the previous chapter. In the present study, four themes were identified as they appeared to be important to the research questions and aims of the study and were similar across gathered data.

### **Theme 1: Peer helpers' goals for joining the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme**

The participants reflected on the reasons why they considered joining the UPHVP important to them. They give unique yet shared reasons to join the peer help volunteer programme. The examination of the codes, which relates to the motivation why research participants joined the Unisa peer help programme, gave rise to the theme: Peer helpers' goals

for joining the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. This theme is fundamentally important in the present study as it forms the foundation on which the experiences participants are built. As it has already been indicated that the reasons to join the peer help were unique to each participant, the researcher will be discussing the themes drawing from the interview transcripts of each participant.

In summary, securing a suitable environment where they can have an opportunity for practical exposure to the field of counselling and psychology, exposure to the world of work and participate in the university activities are some of the reasons why the participants decided to join the peer help volunteer programme. The researcher will be using client verbatim to explicate the participants goals for joining the UPHVP.

**Tintswalo** stated that she applied to join the UPHVP, as she needed a practical exposure where she has an opportunity to apply what she was studying.

*“I wanted an environment where I can put theory into practice, because I felt that yes, I am studying psychology, but I am not really combining or I am not really integrating. What I am learning in the book to actually practice it and see whether I can do it or not”.*

Although there was some level of uncertainty about joining the UPHVP, she was nevertheless eager to be in an environment where she can get practical exposure.

**Tintswalo**, *“So I did not know what to expect, I just wanted to get into the practicing of what I have been learning”.*

On the other hand, Tintswalo did not only join the peer help programme because she wanted to get practical exposure, but she also wanted to explore the possibility of a career in psychology.

*“So a chance for me to put theory into practice to see if this career is for me or not, yes I have the passion for it, but I also wanted to see going further if I wanted to pursue it to post graduation, to masters and all that”.*

Lastly, her reasons to join the peer help volunteer programme stem from receiving help from the other peer helper. After being helped, she was inspired to join the peer help programme.

*“I think the other thing that makes me realise that I actually want to be a peer helper was when I came in for counselling, because I was frustrated with the degree that I was doing and I saw the (fellow peer) and he helped me a lot. You know I realised that this person is doing the same qualification that I am doing, but he is more open, he is more eloquent”.*

**Katlego** was not expressive and her responses were quite brief and to the point. However, she also expressed her experiences from when she started conceiving the idea of joining the UPHVP. Her main motivation was to get experience and interact with students.

*“,,,,,Being a Unisa student was hard and lonely, so I felt that I need to get to interact with other people and get experience and, to put what I have been studying into action. So that is why I just decided, let me join peer help programme”.*

She was also keen in helping other students, as a result, that gave her drive to join the peer help programme.

*“I wanted to assist other students so to me it was giving back to Unisa....., I am able to facilitate students in deciding on their careers, and maybe sometimes on which module to choose and also dealing with instances that as a Unisa student I felt, like the distance and isolation”.*

**Dirk** joined the UPHVP because he was looking for an environment where he can put into practice what he has been studying. In addition, being in an environment where he can apply what he has been learning will help him to make sense of the learning material he has covered.

*“(Sigh), you know a lot of things are very abstract when you are studying, they are very abstract. So one can make sense, but one can make more sense if it was practical, so what I thought about this is that if I could get an environment whereby I could put into practice what I have learned things would make more sense”.*

**Dirk** also stated that acquiring relevant experience that is linked to his career as an aspiring psychologist was important to him and joining the Unisa peer help programme was the only alternative he has at his disposal. He was hoping that the UPHVP would help him to obtain transferable skills and develop his own counselling style.

*“....what motivated me to be in this context is to gain a relevant experience for my long term goals”.*

**Warren’s** motivation to join the peer help programme stems from the willingness to get an exposure to the field of psychology and prepare him for the world of work. Furthermore, the opportunity to apply the knowledge he has acquired was also central to him and motivated him to join the programme.



*“... I remember when I came to the interview they asked me about my expectations, so one of the things that I said was that I just want an opportunity to be able to put what I am studying (in theory) into practice, just to familiarise myself”.*

For **Tebogo**, receiving an invitation to join the UPHVP helped to spark the interest in her to consider joining the programme. It is not clear on the part of the researcher, whether Tebogo knew about the UPHVP before receiving an invitation to apply, or she only got to know about it after she received a letter inviting her to apply. However, what appears to be more important to Tebogo was that she needed practical exposure to counselling and the UPHVP was seen as an environment where the possibility for practical exposure was plausible. Below are Tebogo’s quotes emphasising her reason to join the peer help programme.

*“Ok (sigh) I came for counselling, ok the first time I heard of it was when I needed to choose modules. I did not know how many module can I take, how would I managed them and all that. I went for counselling and they assisted me. Then I got the interest”.*

*“..... It was a flier that I got, more of an invitation to apply for the programme, and then I thought (sigh) I might as well go and volunteer since I was only studying”.*

**Lufuno**’s motivation to join the UPHVP was different and unique to her as an individual. All that she wanted was an exposure that would certainly benefit her in some way.

*“For me it was like, as long as it is part of what I am studying, then for sure it is going to benefit me one way or the other, I didn’t know those ways but, why not, this is how I got here”.*

In a similar vein, **Nomusa**'s motivation to join the UPHVP was different from all the other participants. She received the letters to join the peer help programme for two consecutive years, but decided to ignore them. In her case, there was no need for practical exposure until her brother who was already a peer helper encouraged her to apply.

*“I received two letters inviting me to the programme, I did not take them into consideration, and I just throw them away. Then it happened that my brother applied for the peer help programme and he told me about it and that is when I develop this interest in knowing more about the peer help programme. I applied and the application was successful”.*

However, after joining the UPHVP, she got an opportunity to be exposed in the field of psychology, which was a reality check for her in many ways.

*“That it’s an environment of growing (DCCD), you know, you are studying, learning more about the field of psychology. It provided me with a lot of information about the field of psychology, what other career are option are available in the field of psychology”.*

In addition being part of the UPHVP has helped Nomusa to map out her career and decide on a career that she is interested in.

*“So being in the peer help programme has helped me to decide on which career I want to follow”.*

In summary, the participants' viewpoints regarding their motivation to join the Unisa peer helper volunteer programme created a pattern that fit the theme, “peer helpers’ goals for joining

the UPHVP.” Although, a shared pattern response emerges from the data as the motivation to join the programme, there are cases where the participants' responses were different. This, however, did not signal a contradiction to the identified theme, but it shows that the researcher took heed of participants' responses as a reflection of their reality regarding the motivation to join the Unisa peer help programme.

### **Theme 2: Construction of roles as peer helpers at an ODL institution**

The role of being a peer helper at an Open and Distance Learning institution like Unisa tends to mean different things on the part of the research participants. The participants' responses about their roles as peer helpers seem to cross the confines of the university where they are contracted to serve the students to their communities, as they see themselves as committed servants, not only for the students but for the wider community as well. Again, using the interpretive paradigm as an epistemological position to view and analyse data, the roles of being a peer helper presented here encapsulates the essence of what is true to the participants. This represents how they perceive their roles and their reflections were taken as their reality. When the researcher asked the participants how they make sense of their roles? They stated that they perceive themselves as being in the position to disseminating information to Unisa student community and the wider community, they share similar experiences with their fellow students which makes it easy to interact with them, and they see their roles as an opportunity to learn, to grow and as an eye opener. As a result, this theme is dedicated to presenting the findings of how the research participants make sense of their roles as peer helpers at Unisa an ODL institution.

**Tinstwalo** sees her peer help role as empowering in the sense that she enjoys helping other people and that being a peer helper gives her the unique opportunity to practice what she is studying.

*“In terms of what I wanted to achieve when I enrolled for psychology, I am getting there, and it has influenced me a lot. It gives me drive to say yes I am actually getting somewhere. There is actually a light at the end of the tunnel, I am not just studying and studying”.*

Furthermore, she strongly emphasised that the role of being a peer helper fulfils her personally as an individual and keeps her motivated to render effectively the duties assign to her as a Unisa peer helper.

*“It is very fulfilling personally; it is something that I do not mind waking up in the morning to come in here, because I know that I will be helping someone who is in need of help. I do not mind sitting down (**Responding to**) doing ten emails, fifteen email in a day, because I know that if I leave those emails, there is someone who is desperately in need of a response at that moment to make a critical decision that they would otherwise not make without me responding to that email”.*

Lastly, although peer helpers commit themselves to assist both registered students and prospective students on various issues, she enjoys helping others to make informed decisions even when such decisions are incongruent with her as a peer helper, she takes pleasure is seeing that she has helped someone to make an informed career decision.

*“You know it is very fulfilling (**Sigh**) you cannot separate the selfish need to volunteer from the need to help people, because it goes hand in hand. There is a satisfaction that*

*comes with helping someone that you can only get from doing certain things, so it is very fulfilling to sit here and say, Wow I just help someone realise something about career. I just help someone make a career decision. I just helped someone, although it might not be a decision that you were hoping they would take but at the same it is a decision, nonetheless, you know”.*

**Katlego** views her role as a peer helper at an ODL institution as a great opportunity. She was not aware about the extent to which other students are eager to be part of the UPHVP. It only dawned on her when she was already a peer helper.

*“To me when I started it wasn’t a big deal, I felt people do not bother to apply, only when I started working here, seeing how many people come and ask for applications and eventually seeing a number of application forms people bringing them in. That is when I notice wow this is big, I never thought this is big, I only thought the group that was chosen were only people that apply”.*

On the other hand, receiving positive feedback from the students she interacts with as a peer helper makes her complete and boost her confidence in handling students’ inquiries.

*“It makes me feel happy and makes me have more confidence that whatever I have learned, whatever I am doing, at least I am on the right direction. Since somebody can come back and say thank you”.*

**Dirk** views his role as a peer helper as a satellite through which the community can communicate. As Unisa is an ODL institution, the role of the peer helper is not only to attend to the inquiries of Unisa students but also assist people who need information from the wider community as well.

*“A Unisa peer helper, as you know that the university is an ODL institution, a Unisa peer helper is more of a mentor, is more of a satellite for the community out there, immediately as you start having a peer helper in each and every community, for you it is more like a satellite, Unisa can communicate through this peer helper”.*

Moreover, **Dirk** also attaches a positive outlook to the role of a peer helper in a sense that peer helpers tend to have an influence on other people.

*“If you have one person who is quiet positive in a community, and who is more influential chances are that this could also be transferred to other people’s lives in general,,,”.*

**Warren** also takes pleasure in helping other students. The role of helping other students and the positive feedback that he is receiving from the students grows him as an individual. He sees his role as important in the sense that it positions him to disseminate important information to the students and the wider community.

*“So you could see from their feedback, I got a lot of complements and at certain point, one of the client once offered to buy me something, but due to ethics it quite unethical to accept that)”.*

The opportunity to practice counselling skills as a peer helper has been fundamental for his personal growth as he affirmed that the role of being a peer helper gave him an opportunity to make significant changes in his personality.

*“So in a way it makes me feel great because I am no longer the person that I was and in terms of counselling when I came here I did not have enough counselling skills, I only*

*learned about them theoretically, but having practice them and seeing the feedback it makes me feel good, it makes me feel great”.*

**Tebogo** perceives her role as a peer helper, as putting her in a positions to inform students about the support systems that have been put in place to ensure that students’ needs are well taken care of. Taking into consideration, the Unisa’s ODL institutional character, there are inherent challenges that are associated with the ODL systems. However Tebogo, constructs her role as an individual capacitated to assist other students regarding their inquiries, help them adapt to the ODL system, empowering them to use available resources and refer them to other department for further assistance.

*“(Laughs) what it means to me is that (sigh) I can talk to the students about the options that they have, the support systems you know, myUnisa, and then also you can get a list of students who are registered for the same courses or contacting your lectures, or attending tutorial classes, for some modules one can get an invite to come and attend a discussion class”.*

Motivating students that they can achieve their goals is also an important aspect that Tebogo attaches to the role of the peer helper.

*“And then the other thing is that I would encourage them that “this is possible, is doable, if you don’t understand you just communicate with other students from my Unisa, you can find a study partner, or attend tutorial classes for that specific module that you have challenges with, or visit your lecture, so that they can explain for you”.*

**Lufuno** constructs her role as a peer helper on three categories that are sharing similar experiences with the students, empowering students and is satisfied with both her role as a peer

helper and as a Unisa student. Sharing similar experiences with the students and being trained as a peer helper mean that Lufuno is equipped respond accurately to the students' inquiries.

*“I think having studied through Unisa and then again being a peer helper, then when those students come with their unique situation and all that, in the beginning, yes you (I) would be thinking, “people have these situations?” but when you (I) go back, I was there. Hence, I am still there. You know I was there; I was so isolated, I felt I was alone. I remember my friend would say I will never study at Unisa, university of studying alone, so when you actually have to interact with those students and you see how far bar back, you realise that information in this context is everything”.*

Empowering students to seek information on their own accord is one of the crucial aspects in which **Lufuno** constructs her role as a peer helper. In her interaction with the students, she empowers them to think on their own feet and help themselves should they come across challenges in future.

*“So I think doing this made me realise that, only when you get out and go find that information that is when things start making sense. Now if things are starting to make sense and you are going to find that information, and I am the one who is supposed to give that information. So it was a challenge to say I need to do it in the way that this person will understand that with this issues that they have now, and the issue that they are still going to have tomorrow, they should be able to find a way on their own and know how to access information related to their inquiries”.*

The element of empowering students again emerges as one of the ingredients of her interaction with the students and these sentiments have appeared in the responses of other



participants. **Lufuno** is satisfied with her position as a peer helper, and had asserted that her role as a peer helper puts her in the position to support students to achieve their long-term goals.

*“I am a Unisa student, be proud” say I am actually seeing progress and I am doing this on my own, because it is not really about academic performance, you tend to learn a lot of things about yourself, so you realise the difference that as much as discipline, commitment, and all that, I have to push myself. I have to decide that this is what I want and this is how I am going to get it. So I feel I (as **Lufuno**) am somewhere between that chain of helping students to realise their potential”.*

Lastly, Lufuno construct her role as a peer helper as an agent of change in the sense that she experienced challenges in her under graduate level as a student in an ODL institution unaware that there are student support structures like the Unisa peer help programme.

*“If I had known there was something like counsellors, peer helpers back, and whatever while still doing my under graduation. Things would have been different. If I am saying things would be different, it means I am the one who makes that difference”.*

**Nomusa’s** construction of her role as a peer helper signals the benefits which she acquired by joining the peer help programme. One of the most important meanings she attaches to the role of being a peer helper is that it gave her insight into the field of psychology and helped her realise that psychology is not a career she can pursue.

*“I met other peer helper who did the same modules as me, but I just realised that psychology is not my field of interest. I don’t want to be a psychologist at all, after being a peer helper that is when I realised that this qualification is not right for me”.*

Despite realising that she needs to change lanes in her career path, her roles as a peer helper sow the seeds of researching careers not only for the students she was serving but for herself as well.

*“I was not sure about the industry of psychology. I was not aware of other career options like educational psychology, forensic psychology. I did not know about such things. So being at the peer help programme helped me to get that information and knowledge and it empowered me to do more research about the careers of my interest. I also did an informational interview with another psychologist that is why I am saying that I do not see myself as a psychologist in the future”.*

Lastly, Nomusa did not only offer a construction of her own role as a peer helper, but she went further to give a rounded picture of how she sees them as Unisa peer helpers. Her view is that they have a lot in common as peer helpers, they think alike and share the same goals. Although her construction of her role as a peer helper differs from the other participants, the researcher assumed that, her construction as a reflection of her experience and decided to present it as narrated by her. This is also in keeping with the epistemological stance the researcher took throughout the study.

*“There are times whereby I would question the method that they use here at DCCD to employ or appoint peer helpers and ASC. We are like one big family; I have never met anyone who discourages anyone here at DCCD. It is as if we are programmed, we have the same mind, we do things the same way, we talk the same language, eat the same food. Therefore, that is what it is. You meet the person he would tell you the same thing that the last person you met told you”.*

In summary, the meaning, which research participants attached to their roles as Unisa peer helpers, gave rise to the theme named “Construction of their roles as peer helpers at an ODL institution”. The researcher employed the same epistemological position to view and analyse the data and this theme was inductively developed after extensive familiarisation with the data. Although the participants differed slightly in their constructions of their roles as peer helpers at an ODL institution, they nevertheless provided stimulating reflections, which did not only answer the research question, but also represent their individual reality.

### **Theme 3: Positive experiences of participating in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme**

This theme presents the detailed description of the participant positive experiences since joining the UPHVP. The theme has four subthemes reflecting the participant positive experiences namely: personal growth, attainment of skills, peer help programme as a learning zone, and interacting with fellow peer helpers and supervisors. In each of these subthemes, the researcher presented the participants accounts as expressed by them and as the essence of what is true to them. The following section is dedicated to all the subthemes mentioned above.

#### **Sub-theme-1: Personal growth**

As mentioned above, the personal growth sub-theme lies in the province of the positive experiences of the research participants. The sub-theme encapsulates the personal benefits that the research participant felt they would otherwise not have gotten if they never participated in the

UPHVP. These gains are linked to the research participants' personal and professional development.

**Lufuno's** gains from the peer help programme are directly linked to her as a person and as an aspiring professional. On the personal level, she argues that the UPHVP is an appropriate environment for growth and exploring various issues. In the past, she had no interest in ascertaining things that were not known to her. Her focus was on her studies only until she joined the UPHVP.

*“This place actually opened my eyes and I was okay with not knowing. The way I put it, I was okay with not knowing, even today, I understand that we cannot know it all. So I guess the peer help (programme) has been that knock on the door, it has been a knock on the door”.*

In addition to her gains on the personal level, she also qualifies her above statement, by saying that the UPHVP gave her access to information. Below are two quotes from Lufuno, which emphasises her personal benefits of being a Unisa peer helper.

*“It's a very nice experience, you just grow, and you can't help but grow. Let me put it that way. No matter how small, you just cannot help but grow and it makes you, it opens your eyes in so many levels. In addition, I think you are forced in this context to deal with yourself. I don't know if that is too deep, but you are forced to make friends with yourself”.*

Concerning the professional development she acquired from the Unisa peer help volunteer programme, Lufuno stated that the programme gave her career insight and being at the

close proximity with people who have achieved their goals inspired her to believe that she also stand a good chance to achieve her goals.

*“So, on the professional level, I think I am growing also as I am being surrounded by people who are on the same stream, being surrounded by people who are ahead of me somehow, you get that opportunity to talk to people, you get that opportunity coz, most of us the issue that we have is that with psychology you cannot do much if you do not do masters”.*

*“So, workings here and actually find about that information from people who made it, if you can see that Sfiso is here and is doing his masters. What is it that makes me think I would not get to where he is? Why do I not sit with Sfiso five or two to minutes and find out how he got there, it gives you that platform to say there are so many resources, there are so many people to talk to. There is so much to find out”.*

**Tintswalo** stated that participating in the Unisa peer help programme, has helped her to change the way in which she use to communicate with other people. Though she did not go into details about how she used to interact with people, she strongly believes that her interactions with other people have changed for better.

*“It has influenced me in a way that I have changed how I interact with people, I am more sensitive towards other people, and I am more concerned about how I speak to other people. So the counselling skills that I have learned here have also influenced me, I am not a counsellor at home, I am a mom and I am a sister. Nevertheless, my interactions with them have changed drastically ever since I am a peer helper and it is something that they have noticed as well. I have learned to pick my battles”.*

Notwithstanding learning how to communicate with other people effectively, she stressed that she has grown personally and career wise. The growth she sees in herself started to manifest after she joined the Unisa peer help programme.

*“It has influenced me; it has helped me grow as an individual as well as in my career. Also, as an individual in a way that I am more mature than I was a year ago”.*

**Katlego** stated that joining the Unisa peer help programme assisted her to discover herself as an individual and as a student.

*“After joining the peer help programme I have figured out myself, my journey and my study journey”.*

On the other hand, **Katlego** stated that the Unisa peer help programme assisted her to step outside the zone of no confidence and shyness to be expressive and confident in her interactions with other people.

*“,, I was a quiet person; I could not express myself in most cases, now I can. I can stand up in front of everybody, I can present whatever I have to present. Therefore, it is easy for me to interact with just anybody. And again it was not easy for me to approach people, so those are the peer help (benefits), assisted me to be able to communicate with other people and make maybe new networks with anyone I can find interesting”.*

Lastly, the most salient personal growth in Katlego’s case seem to be gaining confidence. She stated that she has been a quiet person for a long time not because it was her character, but she was lacking self-confidence to expressing herself. As a result, she resorted to lonely

activities. However, interacting with students as part of her responsibilities as a peer helper helped her to rise above her lack of confidence and function at a level where she can freely interact with anyone. Substantiating these findings are the statements quoted below.

*“I was quiet; I enjoyed maybe activities by writing not expressing myself and all that I was difficult for me to have a conversation like this (researcher-participants conversation)”.*

*“In many instances, I used to have my opinion, but I would keep them to myself because I did not have the guts or confidence to say whatever I wanted to say”.*

**Dirk** provided touching reflections regarding the gains he obtained from the Unisa peer help programme on his personal level. In his reflections it appears that although he is coming from a disadvantaged background, the UPHVP has helped him to make significant changes in his life in spite of what other people have said about him.

*“I can say when you look at the peer helper is someone who is from (for an example) a disadvantaged background and I am also that person, if people were to look at me now they would say we proudly thought that guy would not go anywhere but if you look at that person and you see that this person has made significant changes in his life”.*

In addition, there seems to be no possible and succinct answer a researcher can give to paint the picture of the extent in which the Unisa peer help programme has helped **Dirk** to grow and change his thinking patterns.

*“It has really made significant changes in my life and without it I would (sigh), I don’t know where will I be, but it has really changed my perception, how I think about things,*

*how I interact with other people, what I see, what, comes out of my mind, how do I change stereotypes when I talk to other people, without making them feel judged or somehow, and that is it”.*

The following quotes shows that not only did **Dirk** grow by helping other fellow students, he has managed to employ the same strategies he use to help others to help himself deal with the challenges he is facing.

*“,,,,,,,, personally it has made me to think about how can I also manage my own uncertainties, how can I manage my own concerns or problems personally. Transferring the career counselling methods and problem solving skills to my own personal life, so there is also a link between my profession and personal life”.*

The findings indicate that **Warren** also has positive experiences about the peer help programme. The most outstanding positive experiences on his personal level was that the Unisa peer help programme has helped him to discover himself as an individual and that he has learned more about the field of psychology.

*“It’s a great experience, because it help you to discover yourself as an individual and to also know more about the career fields in psychology as you know that career are evolving”.*

Moreover, the counselling skills he obtained from the UPHVP seem to have played a key role in shaping his interactions with people outside the Unisa peer help programme in the sense that he is now able to have a meaningful conversation with other people.



*“It is quite helpful like I said, you get to learn to have meaningful conversation with people even outside, you get to have meaningful conversation such as empowering your friends”.*

Lastly, **Warren** also stated that the Unisa peer help programme made him curious about things, which are some of the aspects he values ever since he joined the Unisa peer help programme.

*“Yeah, it grows you and grooms you in a way that you also tend to be curious about things and being curious is one of the vital things one needs to develop in this field”.*

The aspect of self-discovery as one of the positive experience emerges in many responses of the of research participants on a personal level. **Tebogo** also strongly asserts that after joining the UPHVP, she discovered things about herself that were perhaps concealed by the lack of exposure to an environment like the UPHVP.

*“I also discover that I am not introverted as I have also thought I am”.*

Finally yet importantly, exposure to the Unisa peer help programme helped to change **Tebogo** from being a reserved person to a sociable and outspoken student.

*“I am friends with everyone here”.*

On a personal level, **Nomusa** seemed to have managed to strike the balance between studies and working simultaneously. Burning the candle on both sides requires discipline and effective time management for one to achieve set goals. Nomusa believes that she will be able to transfer her time management skills even when she gets a permanent job because she has learnt to do so while she was a student.

*“I think its personal growth like I said managing my time effectively in term of being a student and an ASC. When I got a permanent job, I would also use the same strategy that I am using now on how to focus on my studies and to prioritise. Moreover, one thing that impacted positively on my personal growth is how to manage my finances. (Sign) I have learned to manage my finance”.*

The findings show that not only did **Nomusa** acquire personal growth, but also being a peer helper has helped her to make positive changes in her study patterns. It appears as if she used to delay submitting her assignments until the last day, however, she has realised that it is not effective for her to delay. As a result, she has managed to take full control of her studies by submitting her assignment on time.

*“There are times whereby, if you have an assignment you would postpone it until the last day. If the assignment is due tomorrow, you do it today, and then you (send) the assignment today? That is ineffective. I have realised that I would not benefit anything if I keep postponing my assignment and only submit them the day before the due date”.*

### **Sub-theme-2: Attainment of skills**

Attainment of skills also seems to be one of the most important aspects research participants’ value as one of the positive experience of being a peer helper. Although the skills that the research participants have acquired vary and they tend to have a definite correlation with the research participants expectations when they decide to join the UPHVP, they nevertheless reflect the positive contribution that the UPHVP plays in grooming students for the inevitable world of work ahead of them. Some of the skills, research participants acquired, include, but

were not limited to interpersonal and communication, time management, counselling, computer and listening skills.

According to **Lufuno**, being a peer helper has helped her to do introspection in order to develop good interpersonal skills. The Unisa peer help environment has helped her acquire the skill to guard against stepping on other peoples toes by taking cognisance of what they like and dislike.

*“For me in this side I felt like I had to be best friend with myself, had to reflect a lot, I had to interact with other people and learn how to do so, I had to bring their characters and personalities, in the whole issue, to say ok fine, “Sfiso does not like it when I do this, though Sfiso might have told me but, somehow I can actually see, so which way are we going to interact with Sfiso”.*

In addition, from the introspection Lufuno has done to herself and taking peoples likes and dislikes seriously, her communication skills has changed for the better ever since she joined the UPHVP.

*“So I think, when it comes to the way I communicate, it has changed a lot. I think that is the one thing I would say, the way I communicate is way different from the way I use to communicate before”.*

By virtue of being a peer helper, Lufuno has also acquired counselling skills and the most crucial aspect is that her misconceptions about counselling, that it was disseminating advice, has been corrected.

*“My counselling skills as well, I thought counselling was advising, that like most people, I thought counselling was advising, the students will come and say I want information on the 123 and the counsellor will say “ok go and apply for 123” so when I came here I was shocked, I have been doing other programmes outside am part of the pregnancy crisis centre where you get there to find that counselling skills are just counselling skills”.*

Lastly, Lufuno has not only acquired counselling skills, she believes that she is competent in applying counselling skills. In doing so, she understands herself as a talkative person, but, in a counselling session, she let the clients do the talking and she listens.

*“I am a person who talks too much , so in this context, I had to say to myself “this is the client who came all the way from where ever, let me give him or her all the time” so I was more on the lookout for that to say “let me do more listening than talking”, because in this context where it’s a client and I am a counsellor, that client may be at the place where they feel I know better, that is how things are, if I am not going to give you a chance to talk you will leave with so many unresolved issues”.*

**Dirk**, on the other hand, also acquired communication skills from participating in the UPHVP. Both Lufuno and Dirk admit they that are talkative person, but Dirk stated that there was no meaning in his speeches. However, he has learned to think before speaking and that has improved his communication skills.

*“I was a talkative person, but my challenge then was that I was not really making sense; I would just put in words. What really changed was me being able to gain those communication skills; being articulate as well, knowing what I want to say and how should I say it”.*

Furthermore, from rendering peer help duties, Dirk also acquired presentation skills and that has had a positive influence on his confidence. As a result, he can freely express himself in a more acceptable way.

*“My confidence has grown since then, I am able to communicate my needs and I am able to stand in front of the large group of people, of which then before the peer help was a challenge for me”.*

Taking into account **Nomusa**'s reflections on attaining skills, the finding indicates that she also gained communication skills from the UPHVP. Acquiring communication skills seem to appear across data as other participants have stressed that their communication skills have improved after they joined the UPHVP. Apart from communication skills, she also got the opportunity to acquire counselling skills.

*“I am grateful to be part of the peer help programme, I think in every field of work there are some skills, especially communication skills that you must have in order to work in an effective way. Communication skills are needed in all aspects of life so I am grateful for acquiring those communication skills, including counselling and other skills that you can mention”.*

Moreover, **Nomusa** also mentioned that she had lacked computer skills. She had not used the computer until she joined the UPHVP.

*“(Sign) the skills that I have acquired, when I joined the peer help programme, I did not know how to use a computer, and I did not even know what a mouse was? I have never used a computer before so I didn't know where to start”.*

Lastly, the important skill that Nomusa gained is listening. She argues that she can now not only listening to other people but she can also empathise with other people as well.

*“Listening skills that is one of the skills that I will take wherever I go, listening to whoever is presenting their issue to you, not only listening but empathic listening and listening and understanding what the next person is saying to you. Yeah”.*

**Tintswalo**, stated that she have also acquired counselling skills which is one of the skill she wanted to get when she joined the UPHVP.

*“I think the most important one is the counselling skill, which is the most important skill that coming into this environment I wanted to have, I wanted to acquire. Even to have a conversation, a counselling conversation with a client”.*

In addition to counselling skills, she has learned to handle her emotions in the sense that she can now think before she says something and that she is able to avoid unnecessary arguments.

*“I have learned to pick my battles, you know how women are. And I have learnt to pick my battles and I have learned to pick and choose what I say and to think before I say something”.*

**Katlego** strongly stated that she have acquired skills that will afford her the edge in the workplace over other prospects who have not been to programmes such as the UPHVP.

*“I could say if you take a student who has not went through a peer help programme and me, even if we have the same qualification, I could say that I can stand out to me more equipped and more experienced than that student. Even if we have the same*

*qualifications with that student, with me I have transferable skills that I got from the peer help that I can be able to use at any working environment”.*

**Tebogo** believes that being a peer helper has helped her to gain skills in time management in the sense that she is always on time to report for her duties. However, she is still struggling to find a balance between her studies and work.

*“(Sigh) time management, being punctual. I was always on time, being punctual, for example this Mandela thing is, I think you know that every morning they take his corpse to the Union building, so there is traffic on the way and I was late on Wednesday, I got here at 08:30 and it did not sit well with me. So today, I made sure that I leave the house early as I was here at 06:45. So that is me, I am just a punctual person and it is one of the things I have learned punctuality and time management which I still haven’t strike the balance between my studies and working”.*

Despite being punctual and managing time effectively, Tebogo, felt that the most salient skill, which has had the most influence on her is communication. This is so because she can now engages freely with people which was a challenge before.

*“Yeah, and then communication skills. Yeah, communication skills and just meddling with people. I used to be a very reserved person let say, I can see a difference in that now I can (sigh) relate with others easily, than before”.*

**Warren** on the other hand, believes that being part of the UPHVP has helped him to improve the way in which he relates to others. He has also gain some of the skills

*“It has also enhanced some of the skills and also my personality in relating to other people to be better”.*

Apart from interpersonal skills, Warren has also learned to handle counselling session, though he feels there is still a room for improvement and he can never say he is proficient in facilitating counselling.

*“I have learned to manage or facilitate counselling effectively, though (sigh) you never arrive, you keep on learning”.*

### **Sub-theme 3: Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme is a learning zone**

This sub-theme is dedicated to presenting the research participants’ reflections on the UPHVP as a context where there are plentiful opportunities for learning and developing. Participants’ accounts on how they perceive the UPHVP will inevitably differ and complement each other in some cases. The ultimate goal of the researcher is to present the findings that reflect the research participants’ views regarding the UPHVP. The most salient aspects shared by the research participants reflect that the UPHVP is a learning zone encapsulates things like, it is a place where one can share everything, one should be able to accept feedback in order to learn, one can make friends, one’s thinking patterns can change for the better. It is a good environment for ones postgraduate studies as the majority of them are at the postgraduate level, so they can help each other and they share similar experiences with the students.

According to **Lufuno**, the UPHVP is a place to share your worries and joy with other people. It seems that her understanding of the workplace has changed in that she used to believe that a work environment is divorced from other aspects of life. Her construction has changed and



she is happy that she is in a position where she can share her concern with other people in the workplace.

*“In this place, you bring the whole of you, from family to your social life somehow, it is that environment, I was used to “when I am at work I am at work” I am running around doing classes and nobody cares what is going on in my life at that point, but here, it is that environment where somehow people can see through you, or they give you the platform to talk about it”.*

**Dirk** described the UPHVP as a context where the ability to take criticism makes way for learning. He argues that the UPHVP is the environment where one should be open to learning and being corrected.

*“This context you can never say that you know this and this. You have to be vulnerable, allow yourself some space, allow yourself some hard moments, challenging moments. One said that if you’re being criticised, you have to know how to take criticism. If you can take criticism, then you are sorted because if someone would say that you need to improve on this you would take that as learning experience not an attack or something”.*

**Nomusa** stated that the UPHVP empowered her to know more about herself, in terms of her interest and career journey.

*“Understanding yourself as a person, understanding your interest, and empowering yourself to do more research about the career field that you are interested in, that was the most thing that I learned here at DCCD”.*

In addition, Nomusa believes that the UPHVP is the structure where there are unlimited opportunities for learning and growing. For instance, being in the peer help volunteer programme helped her to realise that a career in psychology is not for her.

**Tintswalo** holds the view that the UPHVP is an appropriate environment for learning things and acquiring skills that cannot possibly be learned by studying.

*“Yes, in a lot of ways. The first way is that although it is a Unisa environment, we are dealing with students but there are some skills that you couldn’t learn just by studying, like your counselling skills and speaking professionally”.*

Despite her view that she sees the place as conducive for learning, **Tintswalo** also perceives it as a place to share and making friends in the sense that she has been able to strike friendship relationships which was something that has shocked her mother.

*“It is something that surprised my mother and she always says you know you are one strange person, you do not have friends, you are always busy with something, books or studying, but I have never seen you bringing a friend home and now all of a sudden I am speaking of this friend. Oh, I was actually with this friend, she says ok, but now who is this? No its’ a friend of mine, and she is surprised that my child can actually make friends. She is not antisocial, so it is an environment where, like I have said, I am not only growing career wise, but I am growing as a person as I now have friends”.*

One of the most important things, which seem to stand out for **Tintswalo**, is that she now has a clear picture of her career path and the minimum admission requirement she needs to meet to progress with her studies.

*“One thing is that I have clear career knowledge; there were lot of things that I did not know before coming to this environment. First of all, I did my undergraduate degree not knowing that I would need 60% to register for honours. Fortunately, I made it through. I did my undergraduate, came here to apply for honours. I only found out later why I was busy with the honours that there is an average that you need to register for honours. I did not know there were such things as average, I just thought you do undergraduate, you move to honours and to masters”.*

**Katlego** thinks that the Unisa peer help programme is a reality check as it gave her insights, not only into her studies, but also into her social life and her thinking patterns have changed.

*“I was only studying and that was my only focus. Now I can think out of the box, I can think (sigh), this peer help programme assists you with so many things, it is not even about your qualification or about being professional, even in a social environment, you think differently, it is easier for you to think differently about things”.*

On the other hand, **Katlego** feels that the UPHVP affords the peer helper the experiences that they would not have gotten should they decided against joining the UPHVP.

*“The experience you will get from the peer help programme, you will never get it anywhere else. I did not know what they were talking about, I was so curious to know, as they would say, “I cannot explain it but you will feel it”. So I am at that stage now, I cannot really; I cannot find exact words to explain it. But there is this feeling that you won’t have if you were not a peer helper”.*

**Tebogo** believes that the UPHVP puts peer helpers in a better position to help other students because they share similar experiences.

*“The peer help programme is better in that way because its Unisa students, so they know the challenges that students go through, they have also been through the application process, it is nice when you do counselling and they are talking about the application and you talk also from the experience”.*

*“I think it also makes it easier for me to talk to students about their challenges because it would be something that I going through or something that I went through”.*

**Warren** views his interaction with the students as a solid foundation for his long-term career as a research psychologist where he will be expected to interact with clients.

*“It’s quiet goes hand-in-hand (with my career aspirations) and also having a conversation because at times you will be required as a research psychologist to have conversations with people as we are having now in order to facilitate your research”.*

#### **Sub-theme 4: Interactions with fellow peer helpers and supervisors**

This sub-theme titled “interactions with fellow peer helpers and supervisors” under the wing of positive experiences theme is intended to present the findings of peer helpers’ subjective experiences regarding their interaction at the DCCD. What emerge from the data is that supervisors are seen as useful sources of information, they are committed to their work to ensure that the services delivered by the participants is up to standards, they groom peer helpers, they understand the challenges faced by peer helpers and they continuously encourage them to keep updated with new developments.

**Lufuno** perceives her supervisors as useful sources of information that she can use to get clarity on things she does not understand in her journey as an aspiring research psychologist.

*“It seems like the supervisors have been there, have done that and are psychologist then I should be able to get more information and clarity on the things that I don’t understand. I will have easy access than when I was doing it on my own. I am sure the fears or the uncertainties that I have, someone next to me might be having the same thing, and we can openly discuss these things”.*

**Dirk’s** interactions with the supervisor (project coordinator) of the UPHVP, indicates that the supervisors are hands on and diligent in the way they manage the programme and supervising the peer helpers.

*“(Sigh) I am trying to think of a metaphor I could use for it, but there is, I describe my supervisors as two scientists in the lab that if there are two scientists in the lab they would manipulate things, they would change whatever they are creating, they would make sure that something stays in a good condition for that to become a final product”.*

According to **Nomusa** the supervisor seem to play a pivotal role in grooming peer helpers and that they ascend beyond monitoring their work to assist them in dealing with their personal issues.

*“The one role that they played in all of us is facilitating the peer help programme, supervising our work, and encouraging us to do research in terms of Unisa students, what is it that they need, what is it that we can provide them, they are always approachable, their doors are always open, in terms of, when I have a personal issue*

*impacting on my studies and on my work and I am able to go to the supervisors and say: "I have this kind of the problem, can we talk about it," then we will sit and talk about it".*

On the other hand, the peer helpers themselves are the good models to each other in the sense that they share the same academic journey and they tend to encourage each other too.

*"Like I said, it is always empowering being around with people who share the same vision as you, who also encounter the same difficulties as you do. We see them, talk to them, and I usually ask people how they get to their third years. They would reflect on their journey like "I passed matric with distinctions; it took me the minimum of three years to complete my degree, now I am doing the honours".*

**Katlego** stressed that their supervisors tend to encourage them not to overrate themselves in what they serve.

*"We are taught not to say we have arrived or we are good at it".*

To ensure that peer helpers stays abreast with new information, the supervisor encourage the peer helpers to visit the Unisa website and look at the resources, to look for new changes that might have been implemented.

*"Some suggestion from our supervisors that every morning when you come in, you must at least take few seconds to browse through Unisa website and resources to at our emails, we have, frequently asked questions(FAQ), we have taps, where we have information, so we should also update ourselves about that, you know how things are changing".*

**Warren** shares the same sentiments with other research participants, which the type of supervision they receive from their supervisors is always empowering and tailored to grow them in various aspects.

*“You come out of the supervision having learnt a lot of things and the things that you were struggling with or lacking confidence in, you goes out feeling more empowered”.*

*“With supervision as much as there were challenges, it has been helpful because if it wasn't for it, I would have not been where I am currently”*

#### **Theme 4: Negative experiences of participating in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme**

The negative experiences theme presents participants' subjective accounts of research participants' concerning the instances where they felt unhappy and challenged by the circumstances they face in their roles as peer helpers. The findings presented here were data driven and they emerge during the in-depth interactions between the researcher and the research participants. Some of the instances which emerge from the data relates to, but, not specific to adapting to the context of the DCCD, dealing with difficult clients, lack of self-confidence in handling student inquiries, and working under supervision. As already mention, these findings emerged from the data set and the role of the researcher was to identify codes that he believe fit the description of the theme presented here.

**Lufuno's** accounts of her negative experiences as a peer helper stem from her inability to consult other people for information. This resulted in her being uncertain about what she was giving out to students.

*“Yeah, I guess challenges come when you are not certain about the information that you have, when you are not certain with the information that you have and you don't consult like I said most of us, or let me say “I” didn't want to say I don't know”.*

Furthermore, **Lufuno** also did not want to admit that she does not know. However, she eventually challenge her own thinking patterns that stopped her from admitting not knowing by accepting that she cannot know everything and that should be part of the interaction processes with the student.

*“I did not want to say it, I would think “there must be another way” only to a certain point. Then I realise that this should be part of the whole interaction. This should be it. I should be comfortable to say I don't know. So it only happened after an interaction with the students, where the students can see that I do not know what I am talking about. And I am trying so hard, I am going from paper to screen to God knows what, I am sure I was heading for my handbag. I felt I can't be tortured like this; later I found out I was torturing me”.*

**Dirk** on the other hand, encountered challenges in applying ethics regarding the dress code. The working environment was a culture shock to him in the sense that it was a threat to his dress style and way of life. Similar to **Lufuno**, **Dirk** also find a way to adapt to the context of the DCCD in the sense that his dress code is now in line with what is expected of him.



*“So from also a life style, the way of doing things, the life style, the culture itself for me it was a big challenge but now things have changed, I could say I am more oriented in terms of work ethics, I have moved to a point whereby even some of my colleagues they see me as, as I am one who dresses formally in most cases, some would aspire or take note that this guy has really changed from a person who was wearing sneakers, then to formal shoes”.*

**Nomusa**'s negative experience in her role as the Unisa peer helper surfaced when she had to assist the students who brought to counselling issues that she as a peer helper was dealing with. The central issue the student shared with Nomusa was that she failed too many modules and **Nomusa** was going through the same experiences as she also failed the majority of her modules.

*“I failed the majority of the modules that I have registered for, and then I had to see a student who has experienced the same situation. I had a challenge in assisting that student because it was an emotional issue”.*

To ensure that the students receive assistance **Nomusa** tried to keep her emotions in check and referred the student to other people for further assistance.

*“It was not effective for me to say to the student that I am going through the same difficult situation, so I am going to refer you, but I had to contain my emotions and deal with what the student has put to the table. However, it was difficult, but I managed. I just felt like, I would be more appropriate and more professional to refer the student to the next person, because if a student present a problem that I am dealing with, if I take time*

*to explore that problem, it also affects me and it also opened up some of the wounds that I have, so I did not want to cry before the student or lose control of the session”.*

**Nomusa** also stressed that she also encounters challenges when she is seen wearing the peer helpers T-shirt as people stopped her on her way and asked for information.

*“Also when we are wearing T-shirts, we have peer helper T-shirts. If we go to the mall wearing that T-shirt, I remember going to Sunny Park to do some shopping. When people see you wearing that T-shirt, they greet you, they ask you questions and that thing is really exhausting. You are from work and you are on your way home and you just want to buy a loaf of bread”.*

**Tintswalo** was working independently, with little to no supervision at her previous job. Things changed, however, when she was a peer helper as there is close supervision. She struggled to get used to being supervised. Studying psychology and aspiring to be a child psychologist made it easy for her to adapt to supervision as it is part of psychology discipline.

*“I have to make sure that I do my job and everything, so being in this environment and being supervised and dealing with people has actually changed me and it was hard to adapt to, but I realised that it is something that I need especially in the profession that we are in”. (Sigh) so moving from that island, to be part of the community, and first it was challenging, but I adapted quickly because I am a social person if you can call it like that. I like to interact with people. I was not that much of a challenge; it was a matter of changing my mind set and adapting to the environment”.*

**Katlego’s** account of her negative experiences originates from to handling students inquiries. She lacked self-confidence and she assumed that the students would be threatening.

*“I was scared of dealing with students, that was the challenge I had in my mind that like they would be overwhelming and all that”.*

On the other hand, **Katlego** struggles to contain frustrated clients. If she sees clients who seem frustrated, she is unsure whether she should refer or contain the client.

*“For example, if a client comes and start crying so you don’t know how to handle it. Do I refer the person or do I contain them now and refer them later. This is one of the challenges we encounter”.*

Similar to Katlego, Lufuno and Nomusa, **Tebogo’s** negative experiences points to her engagement with the students. Tebogo’s worse experience was when she was assisting a client she describes a frustrated. Communication between them was not good, as they did not understand each other.

*“..I had that situation where the client was difficult; I could not even deal with the situation. I went out of hand, it was out of control, she did not understand what I was saying, or I don’t know”.*

Although she was sad by the incidence, she believes it is part of being a counsellor.

*“So when she got here she was very frustrated and when I told her she must go back there, she just couldn’t imagine herself queuing again, so yeah for this particular situation, it was out of my control. I think it’s also part of being a counsellor”.*

Lastly, the findings demonstrate that Tebogo is able to contain her emotions. Despite her anger, she continued with her job as a peer helper and only dealt with her emotions after work.

I was, after she left the office, I just have to contain myself but after she left I felt like packing everything and going upstairs and locking out, but, I had to see another client and I had to give the client my best. So, how I deal with that situation is that I just put it behind me, and after work, it is then when I can start crying about it, venting out my frustration. I was very upset.

**Warren's** narrations of his negative experiences reveal that he lacked confidence in cases where someone has to review his work. However, the kind of support he received from the supervisors helped him to gain confidence. Similar to Tintswalo, he also struggled to work under supervision but there is no indication that the challenge emanates from his previous employer, if there was.

*"I was not confident in some instances, such as when someone reviews my work, and yeah that is it. It is basically the confidence. However as time goes on and with the support that is there within this programme, you get to build on your confidence and one other thing of my challenges, was working under supervision".*

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the researcher's aim was to presenting the findings regarding the experiences of the Unisa peer helpers. To orientate the reader, the researcher briefly describes the methods of collecting data and explains how data were managed to ensure that confidentiality is and was not compromised. Furthermore, the researcher described the sample size, gender of research participants and confirmed that informed consent was given to all those participating in

the study. The subsequent sections were dedicated to presenting themes that did not only emerge from the data but also answered the research questions. In the following chapter, the researcher will be discussing the findings in terms of three dimensions namely, research questions, literature review and three theories used in the study.

## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION**

### **Overview**

In this chapter, the researcher will be discussing the findings against the background of three categories: three theories, literature and research questions. The three theories: ecological theory, student involvement theory and social exchange theory as theoretical frameworks will be used to explain the themes in a manner, which was explained in chapter three. The body of literature will be of paramount importance in the sense that a comparison will be done to ascertain the extent to which previous studies yielded similar findings and how much new information surfaced from the present study. Furthermore, research questions will be used to compare and discuss the findings, to establish if the findings answer what the researcher wanted to achieve in the first place. In so doing, all the themes that emerge from the data will be explained individually and the researcher will critically take cognisance of all the aspects identified above.

### **Peer helpers' goals for joining the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme**

The micro system concerns the peer helpers as individuals. The goal is to understand peer helpers holistically. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994) a micro system is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in a sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, an activity in the immediate environment. The micro system includes a setting such as the family, school, peer

group and workplace. The university is understood as the environment that shapes the participants experiences and worldviews. The university environment is also recognised as the bounded context within which, the participants are in a realm of indirect interaction. From interaction with this environment, they grow, develop insight and discover the available avenues for personal growth. Consequently, seeking opportunities for practical exposure to the fields of psychology is a response to the environment that represents the context of mutual interaction. Generally, the interaction between the students and the university is through teaching and learning where the participants acquire a large amount of theoretical knowledge. It is therefore, through such interactions that the need to balance the acquisition of both theoretical and practical knowledge as a response to the environment emanates from. This need seem to emerge from one of a relatively extended exposure to one aspect of knowledge acquisition, namely theoretical knowledge. As a result, the participants took the initiative and searched for the environment that could afford them the opportunity to acquire practical knowledge.

Borrowing from Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the students devote to academic experience. In his theory, Astin (1984) maintains that highly involved students channel substantial amount of energy to studying, spend much time on campus, participate actively in student organisation and interact frequently with faculty members and other students. On the other hand, uninvolved students tend to neglect studies, spend little time on campus, abstain from extracurricular activities, and have infrequent contact with faculty members or other students. The concept of involvement is open to diverse interpretations. From the perspective of student involvement theory, involvement describes people who invest their psychological energy to objects outside themselves, like friends and families, schoolwork, and jobs. Their involvement finds expression in the activities

that they engage in with regard to the abovementioned objects. The theory of student involvement has five points of departures, which were discussed in chapter three.

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for chemistry).
2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.

The decision of the participants to participate in the UPHVP shows that they decided to invest their energies in a programme that would help them grow and acquire practical experiences. The UPHVP offered the participants the opportunity to reach out and invest their energies through helping their fellow students. This fits in well with the first tenets of student involvement theory. When one, however, examines the goals behind the participants' involvement in the UPHVP, it emerges that they wanted to get something out of investing their



time and energy in the programme. Drawing from the findings encapsulated by this theme, the most important gain was practical exposure to the field of psychology. The researcher assumes that the participants acquired considerable practical experiences from their involvement in UPHVP.

Although, it was beyond the scope of this study to quantitatively measure the amount of practical experience acquired, the fourth basic tenet of the student involvement theory postulates a bidirectional relationship between students learning and personal development with any programme and the extent of student involvement in that programme. The researcher believes that the participants invested adequate time to acquire the experience they need prior to joining the programme. One of the purposes for the formation of the UPHVP was to empower the peer helpers to develop critical personal and employability skills (Van Schoor & Mill, 1998). Participating in the university activities and exposure to the field of psychology and counselling featured strongly in participants' responses and according to Kuh, (2009) the outcomes of student involvement are closely related to multiple desired outcomes of college education such as cognitive development, psychosocial development, self-esteem, locus of control, ethical development and persistence.

The idea of a give-and-take relationship between the peer helpers and the students infiltrates the mind as one engages with the discussion. To explain this relationship, the researcher employs the social exchange theory (SET) as indicated in section seven of chapter three. According to Cropanzano and Mitchell, (2005) social exchange theory is one of the fundamental theories for understanding behaviour between individual and within groups on a basis, which explains why people help each other, why they exchange information, encouragement, and love among other commodities. A number of researchers agree that one of

the social exchange basic tenets is that people develop rules of interacting and these rules serve as blueprint for people's interactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Postmes et al., 2005). As the social exchange theory has a multidisciplinary root, diverse yet complementary ideas about what SET has been suggested by a significant number of researchers, however, the bottom line is that the SET involve interactions that are interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person (Emerson, 1976; Blau 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). There are four key assumptions offered Chibucos, Leites, and Weiss (2005) as governing the SET. *Firstly*, social exchange theory operates on the assumptions that individual are generally rational and engage in cost and benefits in social exchange. This means that the social exchange theory considers the aspect of decision-making. *Secondly*, social exchange theory builds on the assumption that those engaging in interactions are rationally seeking to maximise the profits on benefits to be gained from those situations, especially in terms of meeting basic individual needs. In the light of this, social exchange theory views interactions as a means to fulfil basic needs. *Thirdly*, exchange processes that produce payoff or rewards for individuals, leads to patterning of social interactions. These patterns of social interactions not only serve the individuals' needs, but guide individuals on how they seek to meet those needs. In essence, individual seek relationships and interactions that promotes their need but are also the recipients of behaviours from others who are motivated by their desire to meet their own needs. *Lastly*, social exchange theory assumes that individuals are goal oriented in freely competitive social systems. On the other hand, Meeker, (1971) tabled another set of SET, which are reciprocity, rationality, altruism, group-gain status consistency and competition. In brief:

- *Reciprocity* entails that people try to get out of an exchange what they think they deserve based on what they have put into it,

- *Rationality* refers to the use of logic to ascertain likely consequences and how one should achieve those things that are valued,
- *Altruism* refers to behaviours, that aim to benefits another, even at a cost to ourselves,
- *Group gain* refers to the rule that assigns maximum value to the pool where individuals take what they need from the pool regardless of their contribution;
- *Status consistency or rank equilibration* refers to a situation where people try to distribute rewards proportionally to status on an external dimension like race or gender, and
- Lastly, *competition* occurs when the aim of the exchange is to get more reward than another person gets even at absolute cost.

Through the lens of the SET from the key assumption of Meeker (1971) the decision to consider joining the UPHVP signals that the participants' made use of logic to determine to plausible results of joining the UPHVP and what steps they can take to get the results. This is in line with Chibucos et al. (2005), first key assumption that emphasises that the individual capacity to make informed decisions are based on cost and benefits. As it has been stated what the main aim was for the participants to join the UPHVP, it follows that they commit themselves to achieving their goals. The concept of altruism has reference in the present study. One of the participants stated that she was interested in helping fellow students. She constructs capacity to help other students as a means to give back to the University. From the perspective of Meeker (1971) key assumption of altruism, people display behaviours that aim to benefit others even at the cost to themselves. In similar vein, the participants' reason for joining the UPHVP, because they want something out of it, brings forth the concept of reciprocity. The participants commit themselves to help other students with various issues, in so doing, they are achieving the goals that were impossible to achieve if they were not part of the UPHVP. Therefore, we could assume

that they are getting what they aspire to get on basis of their inputs. The complementary of key assumptions of SET from Meeker, (1971) and Chibucos et al. (2005) put more emphasis on the individual capacity to view the pros and cons of social exchange from a rational standpoint. On the contrary, Chibucos et al. (2005) second point states that the SET views social exchange as means to fulfil basic needs, none of the participants' responses pointed to fulfilment of basic needs as a reason to join the UPHVP.

One of the research questions that this study sought to answer was the reasons why the participants joined the UPHVP in the first place. In light of the findings, the researcher assumes that this research question is comprehensively answered. As the findings shows, the reasons to join the UPHVP were personal and unique to each participant. However, there was a shared view among the participants and that was the opportunity for practical exposure in the field of counselling.

What appeared from the data is that the research participants decided to join the Unisa peer help programme on grounds that they will have many opportunities to apply theory into practice. The researchers interpreted this exposure as a gateway for further training in the field of psychology. This training covers aspects like practical exposure to counselling, exposure to the workplace, an opportunity to be trained to help other students and a chance to take part in the university activities.

The UPHVP was initiated for three purposes, to develop a network of support for the Unisa student population, to extend the range of guidance services schools and the broader community and to empower the peer helpers to develop critical personal and employable skills (Van Schoor & Mill, 1998). In light of the findings, the opportunity to support other fellow

students, offers counselling services and acquires skills seems to fit in with the goals of the peer helpers on a basis assuming the role of the peer helpers indirectly offers them an opportunity to put theory into practice.

According to Barnard and Kruger, (2010) the developmental task of peer helpers is to learn from their experiences by doing and reflecting and the reflection practice is associated with a career in the psychology field. This notion converges with the findings on grounds that the participants voiced a wish to pursue careers in psychology. Moreover, the motive to join programmes like the UPHVP, because it fits with one's career aspirations, is supported by a study which was conducted by Racz and Lacko (2008) to explore the motivation for and the process of becoming a peer helper in Hungary. They found that there was an element of professional motivation in becoming peer helpers as five out of eight participants were studying psychology, two were studying to become social workers and one participant stressed the wish to become a psychologist.

### **Construction of roles as peer helpers at an ODL institution**

Macro system is the larger system that encapsulates all other systems. In the present study, macro system will refer to UNISA as an ODL institution. The macro system consist of the overarching pattern of micro, meso, and exo systems, characteristic of a given culture or subculture, with particular reference to the belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, lifestyle, opportunity structures, hazards and life course options that are embedded in each of these broader systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). It represents the cultural, ideological, and institutional context in which all the systems are embedded (Landsberg et al.,

2005). At this level, the researcher critically looked at how the participants make sense of their roles as peer helpers at an open distance learning institution like Unisa. As it is known, Unisa is one of higher education institution in South Africa; however, the institutional character of Unisa differs considerable when viewed against the background of the other residential institutions. As a result, the researcher deems it pertinent to consider how the university's institutional character and context influences how the participants make sense of their peer helping roles in such a mega university.

What emerged from the data is that the participants construct their roles as sources of support, for not only the Unisa student community, but the community as well and that helping their fellow students means a lot to them. They perceive themselves as a unit capacitated to respond to the student inquiries using the university resources. From the macro systems perspective, the participants seem to have understood the challenges of studying at an open distance learning institution. As a result, they took the initiative to join the programme that can equip them with adequate skills to help their fellow students. They also help their fellow students to look at the context of ODL as a suitable learning environment where they can launch their careers. The extent to which the Unisa institutional culture influences the participants' view of their roles finds expressing in how they construct their roles as the peer helpers. Below are two participants' verbatim accounts.

*“(Laughs) what it means to me is that (sigh) I can talk to the students about the options that they have, the support systems you know, myUnisa, and then also you can get a list of students who are registered for the same courses or contacting your lectures, or attending tutorial classes, for some modules one can get an invite to come and attend a discussion class”.*

*“A Unisa peer helper, as you know that the university is an ODL institution, a Unisa peer helper is more of a mentor, is more of a satellite for the community out there, immediately as you start having a peer helper in each and every community, for you it is more like a satellite. Unisa can communicate through this peer helper”.*

I do not wish to reuse the participant’s responses verbatim in this chapter, however, the aim of using the above quotes is to express the extent to which the participants have internalised the culture, ideology and other contexts of studying and helping fellow students who are studying at an open distance learning institution like Unisa.

From the student involvement standpoint, the way in which the participants constructed their roles as peer helpers in an open distance learning institution, it shows that the UPHVP is structured in a way that elicits student efforts to indulge themselves in university activities and to reach out not only to student community but the wider community as well. This theme is viewed from the perspective of the first, third, fourth and fifth tenets of student involvement theory. *Firstly*, engagement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy. In the present study, the participants’ construction of their roles as helpers, empowering agents, and satellites for the community indirectly makes them the role model for other students. These positive factors as perceived by the participants are likely to increase the retentions and keep them further involved. Such responses when viewed from the students’ involvement theory’s first tenet show the extent to which the participants invested both physical and psychological energy in the UPHVP. *Thirdly*, engagement has both quantitative and qualitative features. This tenet seems to focus more on the curricula activities while the UPHVP falls under the co-curricular activities. However, in the light of the findings the manner in which the participants committed themselves to the UPHVP, the significant contribution the programme has had on them is a good indication

of a qualitative investment in the programme. *Fourthly*, the amount of student learning and development associated with an educational program is directly related to the quality and quantity of student engagement in that program. To explain the theme comprehensively, I have to borrow from the first theme where participants stated that one of their main goals for joining the UPHVP was to get a practical exposure to the field of psychology and counselling. The time spent on UPHVP has a profound influence on the academic success of the participants in the sense that they are getting the opportunity for practical exposure from the UPHVP, which is important in their future careers in psychology and most importantly their roles as peer helpers. This contributes substantially to the academic success of others students.

In their synthesis of literature of higher education Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that engagement in co-curricular activities maximizes persistence and educational attainment and that interaction with peers is a powerful force in student persistence and degree completion. *Lastly*, the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the ability of that practice to increase student engagement. The main purpose for the implementation of the UPHVP was not only to benefit the university, but also to give the student the opportunity to engage in the university activities and to empower the peer helpers to develop critical personal and employability skills (Van Schoor and Van Schoor 1998). So considering this, the implementation of the UPHVP has opened doors for students to participate actively in a programme that does not only maximize the chances of making counselling service available to many students, but also afford them the unique opportunity of being exposed to counselling.

In explaining this theme from the social exchange theory, the researcher borrowed from Chibucos et al. (2005) key assumption. The first assumption postulates that individuals are generally rational and engage in costs and benefits in social exchange. As the participants



described their roles along the lines of helping, it shows that they made a conscious decision to assist their fellow students and their communities. When this is viewed from the SET frame of reference, helping others or any social exchange should benefit all parties involved. Therefore, the unwavering commitment that the participants show, to help others, signals that both the participants and the students benefit equally from the UPHVP. If the opposite were true, in the sense that the benefits were fairly less than their input, from the SET perspective, the participants would have withdrawn from the programme. As the SET builds on the assumption that those who engage in interactions are rationally seeking to maximise the profits on benefits to be gained from those situations, especially in terms of meeting basic individual needs. The exchange between the participants as peer helpers and the students maximises the opportunities of mutual benefits. The students benefit from the services of the peer helpers by obtaining career counselling, selection of appropriate modules, study skills etc. On the other hand, the participant also benefits from the exchange in the sense that the counselling services they are rendering fits in with their long-term goals, they have more knowledge about different careers and they are passionate about helping their fellow students. Although there are intangible benefits deriving from the exchange, there is no evidence suggesting that both students and the participants get benefits that fulfil their basic needs. The third point of Chibucos et al. (2005) does not receive much support on the basis that the exchange between the students and the participants does not give rise to a pattern of interactions. Although one of the participants reported that he gets a lot of complement from the students he has helped and that one of the students wanted to buy him a gift, it still does not result in a pattern of social exchange. Lastly, the SET views individuals as goal oriented in freely competitive social systems. In light of the findings, the participants' responses depict the elements of goal orientation because, they know what experience they need,

they know what they are passionate about and they want to participate in the university activities. As a result, they choose to take an initiative by joining the UPHVP that helped them achieve their goals. Moreover, the way they construct their role shows that they are passionate about helping their fellow students.

When data were viewed against the research sub-question, for example, how do they make sense of their roles as peer helpers in an ODL institution, the researcher assumes that there are substantial elements from the collected data which answered the research sub-questions very well. What was more interesting is the manner in which the participants constructed their roles, it is not limited to Unisa only, but extends beyond the parameters of Unisa and spilled over to the community. This supports the notion expressed by Van Schoor and Mill (1998) that the UPHVP was initiated to extend the range of guidance services to school and the broader community.

In the literature of peer helping, it is widely accepted that the peer helpers play a vital role in communicating and assisting their fellow students. In a study conducted by Gould and Lomax (1993) they argue that peer educators can communicate with other students in ways that faculties and administrators cannot. Furthermore, de Jager, (1995), stresses that the development and implementation of peer help programmes specifically in educational settings are based on the notion that students approach other students when they are experiencing difficulties or concerns de Jager (1995). In light of the findings in the study, the researcher submits that the manner in which the participants constructed their roles shows a commitment and competency in responding to the needs of both registered and prospective students.

In a study conducted by Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) to develop a framework and models to improve student success in the ODL context of Unisa, they argued that most students

are under prepared for higher learning as the consequence of an on-going legacy of apartheid and a predominantly sub-standard schooling system. They come from disadvantaged backgrounds and face deeply rooted socio-economic challenges, which, in combination, threaten their success. These findings imply that Unisa tends to attract students from low socio-economic status who are likely to experience difficulties in adapting at the ODL context and may even not succeed in completing their studies. Although, the peer helpers assist students who are referred to them and those who voluntarily come for counselling, the researcher argues that the peer helpers play a vital role in mitigating the negative impact of the challenges that the students face. More so because, in constructing their roles, the participants stated that they share similar experiences with the students, they are able to empower the students and they are always available to help their fellow students. Lastly, the peer helpers can also refer students for further assistance. Such pro-social behaviours may benefit many students who are facing challenges and Cowie and Wallace (2000) stated that the practice of peer support could positively transform a school community support this.

Smith and Watson (2004) found that staff reported benefits for the peer supporters, including being empowered and involved in their school. Supporting this claim is Kuh, and Goegre (1991) who stated that the best way to adjust to the college is to get involved and those students who get involved tend to perform better academically. The findings of this study show that some of the participants enjoy the role of helping others and that influences how they perform academically. Additionally, the role and prestige of being trained to assist others tends to encapsulate the elements of altruism as it also fulfils some of the personal needs of the participants. Savishinsky (1992) offered a clear description of altruism as a gift that can never be reclaimed, in the exchange for other people's gratitude, which in turn is a reward that can rarely

be bought. Specifically, the way in which the participants constructed their role depicts that they are also benefiting as much as they are helping and the above statement explains this well. This reciprocal benefit was also found by McWilliam, (2010) who affirmed that peer mediators in an Australian school commented on increased satisfaction with school processes, a sense that the school environment had been enhanced, and that they felt proud and responsible for helping others.

Generally, peer supporters in the schools in the CHIPS (Child-line in Partnership with Schools) evaluation had great enthusiasm about their role, and staff and peer supporters felt that it led to the development of interpersonal and transferable skills, improved self-confidence, a sense of empowerment and responsibility (Smith & Watson, 2004). Helping fellow students make critical decisions regarding their careers, informing them about other support structures available at Unisa and receiving positive feedback from their fellow students are some of the aspects that emerge from the data and was noted as a crucial aspect of the participants construction of their roles. It also affirms that the kind of services they render is making a significant difference in many students' lives and this has been noted by other researchers who stated that pupils employed as peer mentors felt that they are making a difference to the lives of their fellow students (Department for children and families, 2008; Mentorship and Befriending Foundation, 2011).

Although, Unisa's institutional character tends to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds as Mill (2005) emphasised that in 2004 alone, 70% of the student body of the merged institutions were from disadvantaged backgrounds (Unisa statistics, 2004). Keller (1999) also affirmed that higher education institutions in South Africa are increasingly rendering service to students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite the challenges the students may

face, the finding showed that the participants felt that they have the duty as peer helpers to empower students to take charge of their studies and instil a belief that they can achieve their goals in spite of their disadvantage background.

According to Keller (1999) and Morrill et al. (1987) the peer counselling training programme should be designed to fit the context in terms of user needs and to prepare counsellors for the problems and the concerns that they will have to deal with in a specific setting. What emerged from the data is that the participants expressed they have self-efficacy in helping their fellow students on basis that they are Unisa students themselves, they know and understand fairly well what it is like to study in an ODL institution and that they also share similar experiences with their fellow students. These findings imply that the UPHVP is implemented in such a way that it caters for the needs of the students. This notion is supported by Foster-Harrison (1995), who stated that when peer help programmes are premeditated and implemented correctly, they have the potential to create a conducive environment that engages students in a process of growing; teaches students divergent ways of handling issues and problems and encourages new structures of thinking.

Houlston et al. (2009, p. 105) described peer counselling as, “the provision of support to students through relatively formal structured sessions”. Peer counsellors, or listeners, are equipped with active listening skills to support other pupils with their difficulties, either in scheduled appointments or in drop-in sessions, which normally takes place in a designated place. With reference to the UPHVP, listening is one of the fundamental skills that are taught to peer helpers. Drawing from the findings it is clear that listening to the clients to establish their central is at the heart of peer helper-students interactions. This helps the peer helpers to understand the need of the clients.

## **Positive experiences of participating in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme**

### **Personal growth**

The meso-level comprises the connections and progressions occurring between two or more contexts that contain the growing person. This could include the settings like relations the between school and home, school and workplace and so forth (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The meso system is a system of micro systems. Meso systems are defined by Landsberg et al. (2005) as the relationships that develop and exist between the micro-systems, and influence the relationship between the schools, as they interact with and modify one another. According to this system, all the systems are in the context of mutual influence. This means that what happens at the micro system might have a direct influence at the macro system. The meso system level will explain the positive experiences of participating in the UPHVP. As indicated in the previous chapter, this theme has four sub-themes and they are discussed individually through the lens of the meso system level.

The personal growth sub-theme, encapsulates the personal benefits that the research participant felt they would otherwise not have gotten if they never participated in the UPHVP. These gains are linked to the research participants' personal and professional development. In brief, the positive changes on the personal and professional level of the participants relate to self-insight, changes in attitudes and career insight are some of the aspects that emerged from the data as fitting the description of personal growth. These positive changes are the result of the interactions between the participant as an individuals and the immediate environment. From the meso system perspective, the main source of the positive changes on the part of the participants

is the exposure to the UPHVP where the participants receive training to help their fellow students. The exposure to the UPHVP seemed to have groomed the participants in the sense that they perceive it as an eye opener, a place to grow on a personal and professional level, develop positive attitude and sensitivity to others, discover themselves, growing and acquiring social skills and self-confidence and challenge maladaptive thinking patterns. The researcher argues that from the interactions that developed at the micro systems level, the participants have developed a positive, benevolent view of themselves.

To explain the personal growth sub-theme, the researcher opted to employ the first and fourth tenets of the theory of student involvement (Astin, 1984). Encapsulated in this sub-theme, are the aspects deemed by the researcher to be the element of personal growth. These elements range from self-discovery, growing, acquiring social skills, developing self-confidence, changing thinking patterns and self-management. The first tenet entails the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. Through the lens of the student involvement theory, the participants' investment in the UPHVP has yielded fruitful results for the participants as they reported that they have grown extensively from participating in the programme. The fourth tenet refers to the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. Since the peer helpers are usually psychology students who are trained to offer counselling services to fellow students, it indicates that there is some sort of a relationship between the content of the UPHVP and psychology that the participants are studying. However, the relationship between the psychology curricular (participants' course content) and UPHVP was not measured to establish how it influences the quality and the quantity of participants' engagement in the UPHVP in this study, but, most of the gains reported by the participants'

points to the psychology constructs. This is supported by Kuh (2009) who stressed that the outcomes of student involvement are closely related to multiple desired outcomes of college education such as cognitive development, psychosocial development, self-esteem, locus of control, ethical development and persistence.

From the angle of SET, the researcher employed the concept of reciprocity postulated by Meeker (1971) to explain the personal growth subtheme. Reciprocity is equity in the sense that people try to get out of an exchange what they think they deserve, based on what they have put into it. By zooming in to the findings, some of the aspects that emerged were that the participants expressed that from interacting with students they have changed the ways they interact with other people in general, from engaging with students they have grown as individuals, they have more career insights, they are empowered to deal with their personal problems and so forth. When the researcher looks at what they put in against what they get out of it, it is safe to state that the gains obtained by the participants are beyond not only what they put in, but also even, what they have expected. The potential application of the reciprocity concept here strengthens the fact that the process of exchange between the participants and the students is mutually beneficial.

The primary aim of this study is to explore and describe peer helpers experiences of student peer helpers at open distance learning institution as from when they joined the Unisa peer help programme. One of the sub-question of the study was to explore the positive experiences of being a peer helper at the open distance learning institution. Drawing from the findings, there are various forms of positive experiences that the participants reflected on. In this section, the researcher discussed the personal growth sub-theme. Subsequent section is dedicated to discussing other positive experiences.



The body of literature shows that peer helping programmes have several advantages not only for counsellors and counselling department but also for peer helpers as they are more likely to develop interpersonal skills and self-growth. (Myrick & Folk, 1999; Tindall, 1995). The issue of interpersonal skills featured strongly in participants accounts of positive experiences; however, that is discussed in the following sub-theme. In this section, the focus is only on acquiring personal growth as one of the positive experiences of being a peer helper. The participants' reflections showed that there are in fact quite a lot of advantages that come with involvement in the UPHVP. The participants stressed that from the interactions they have with the students they have grown personally and professionally in many ways. The aspect of growth acquired by participants receives support from the literature as other researchers like (Houlston et al., 2009; Smith & Watson, 2004) share the same sentiments that the peer programmes benefits the whole school environment, helps to target (vulnerable) pupils and benefits those acting as peer supporters.

Peer mediators in the US Mediator Mentors programme showed significantly higher gains on social-cognitive development and empathy measures compared to non-mediators, and reported less conflicted home lives (Lane-Garon & Richardson, 2003; Lane-Garon et al., 2005). One of the participants reported that she has changed the way she interacts with people and she is now more sensitive and concerned about how she speak with other people. This implies that she has gained social skills from participating in the UPHVP.

According to Varenhorst (2004) who is regarded by De Rosenroll (1990) as an expert who has contributed significantly in the literature of peer counselling, the three basic components of a healthy self-esteem are:

- (1) A sense of unique attributes; that awareness of what is special about me that makes me different from others,
- (2) Secure membership in a group or groups that one values, and
- (3) A feeling of participating in meaningful roles that make a lasting contribution to others or society as a whole.

Varenhorst (2004) argues that these elements are difficult realise in our present society, yet all are possibly obtainable in peer helping programmes. In light of the findings of this study, the researcher argues that the UPHVP has been an avenue for the participants to explore their personalities as some of them reported that they have discovered themselves and they have developed a sense of being special which relate to their roles. Lastly, the participants believe that they belong in a group that is making changes in the lives of others and themselves as well.

In a study conducted by Voyles et al. (2011) at the Southern Illinois University, to examine the effects of residential peer mentoring programme on mentors, they found that the mentors were consistently reporting positive in all aspects relating to academic and social integration. The mentors also indicated that they have improved their understanding of the basic course and improved their social skills because of their role as mentors. Taking into consideration the findings of the present study, there is a variety of positive outcomes that result from being a peer helper. Although there is no indication from the findings that the participants felt being a peer helper helped them to improve their academic performance, they, however, mentioned that they help each other in their studies and there are substantial elements pointing to social skills obtained by the participant from being the peer helpers.

*“It is quite helpful like I said, you get to learn to have meaningful conversation with people even outside, you get to have meaningful conversation such as empowering your friends”.*

*“I also discover that I am not introverted as I have also thought I am”.*

The positive outcome of using students to help other students emerge in a study by Colvin and Ashman (2010) from the Utah Valley University, where they undertook the study to demonstrate that students, instructors and mentors have different opinions about the mentor’s role and how that role should be constructed. They found that there are three areas important for mentoring: roles: benefits and risk, and powers and resistance. Of particular importance is the issue of benefits where the peer helpers indicated the aspect of dual benefit in peer mentor relationships. They mentioned three benefits of being a mentor: being able to assist students, reapplying concepts in their own lives, and developing connections themselves. Against the findings of the present study, there are instances where the participants indicated that they are applying what they have learned from the peer help programme in their lives. Aspects like time management, dealing with one’s own uncertainties and transferring the counselling and problem-solving skills to their lives also features in the findings to accentuate that the participants have indeed grow personally and professionally.

### **Attainment of skills**

The attainment of skills sub-theme could be best understood from a meso system level as it defines the relationships that developed and exist between the micro-systems. Bronfenbrenner, (1994) stated that a meso-system comprises the interrelationships between two or more micro systems. The aspects that are the focus of discussion at the meso-system are the relationships

between peer helpers, and their fellow students. From the lens of meso-system, the researcher will discuss the skills obtained by the participants as peer helpers from their interaction with their fellow students.

The participants have acquired several skills ever since they partake in the UPHVP. The training that the participants went through before they become peer helpers, cannot be ruled out as some of the skills were taught and obtained during the training; however, the majority of those skills seem to emanate from the interactions with the students. Some of the skills that the research participants obtained are communication skills, time management skills, counselling skills, computer skills and listening skills. Drawing from the data, attaining good communication and interpersonal skills seem to be the most crucial skills that the participant felt they have acquired from engaging with the students. The skills that they learned have shaped their lives in the sense that they can now transfer them in other contexts. This is also, in keeping with what the meso-system focuses on the interactions among all the systems in the micro systems that influences the experiences of individual on other systems.

*“My confidence has grown since then, I am able to communicate my needs and I am able to stand in front of the large group of people, of which then before the peer help was a challenge for me”.*

*“I could say if you take a student who has not went through a peer help programme and me, even if we have the same qualifications, I could say that I can stand out to me more equipped and more experienced than that student. Even if we have the same qualifications with that student, with me, I have transferable skills that I got from the peer help that I can be able to use at any working environment”.*

The above reflections are an indication that the participants have been influenced by the relationships occurring at the micro systems and that have shaped their interactions with other people as they have developed good communication skills.

From the lens of the student involvement theory, the researcher employed the first and the fifth tenet to explain the participants investment of physical and psychological energy in the UPHVP and how it has been of huge beneficial to the participants. By participating in the UPHVP, the participants discovered their strengths and passions from involving themselves in the UPHVP. Moreover, the participants also acquired crucial skills and grew in ways that were beyond their expectations. For example, one of the participants reported that she discovered that she is not introverted as she used to believe. The fifth tenet of the student development theory states that the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. From this, the researcher deduces that the personal and professional development obtained by the participants, in terms of skills and self-insight from both educational programme and the UPHVP, shows that the participants ability to integrate the theoretical knowledge and the practical knowledge from the UPHVP have yielded fruitful results in terms of skills they have acquired from the programme. These two programmes have something in common, which is to empower the student peer helper with skills.

Through the lens of SET, the skills obtained by the participants from participating in the UPHVP may be best explained by Meeker's (1971) concept of rationality and Chibucos et al. (2005) suggestion that exchange processes produces rewards for the individual. The participant's initiative to join the UPHVP indicates that they use logic to participate in the UPHVP on grounds that their participation will bear fruitful results for them. In light of the findings, all the

participants gave account of the skills that they have acquired from the UPHVP of which, they were not likely to get if they did not take part in the programme. From the SET perspective, it shows that they were rational in their thinking and considered the cost and benefits of joining the UPHVP. For example, they knew that by joining the UPHVP, a large proportion of their time would go to the programme. That, however, was not in vain as they benefited substantially from the decision they made. Likewise, the process of exchange between the participants and the student population has indeed produce notable rewards for the participants. There is no indication from the findings that the exchange between the participants and the students led to some kind of social exchange. When one examined the findings closely, it shows that the exchange is mutually beneficial to all parties involved, in the sense that the students are getting the information they need from the participants (peer helpers) and the peer helpers (participants) are harvesting skills from interactions with the students. The skills referred to are communication and interpersonal skills, listening skills, time management, counselling skills and computer skills. Lastly, the SET from Chibucos et al. (2005) perspective holds the view that individuals are goal oriented in a freely competitive social system. This tenet is supported by the account of one participant who said that she had acquired counselling skills which is one of the skills she wanted to get in the first place. The participants verbatim has the elements of being goal oriented since the participant knew what she wanted and took steps to get what she wanted.

*“I think the most important one is the counselling skill, which is the most important skill that coming into this environment I wanted to have, I wanted to acquire. Even to have a conversation, a counselling conversation with a client”*

The peer help programmes have been quite beneficial to the peer helpers regarding attainment of skills. According to Carkhuff (1969):

- A lay person could be trained to function at levels related to constructive change even within the confines of short-term helping relationship,
- Taking an active part in the helpee's total life situation,
- Empathising more effectively with the helpee's style of life,
- Teaching the helpee, within his/her frame of reference, more successful actions, and
- Providing the helpee with an effective transition to higher levels of functioning within a social system (Carkhuff, 1969).

With reference to Unisa peer helpers, psychology students are usually selected and trained to help their fellow students. However, Carkhuff, (1969) made no reference to the benefits the peer helpers gain from helping others. Cowie and Wallace (2000), mentioned core peer support skills that peer helpers should possess and these skills are re-emphasized later in Cowie and Hutson (2005) that young people are trained to help others outside friendship groups, that training develops key skills such as communication skills and enables them to deal with conflict (James, 2011). The findings from this study support the notion that the peer helpers do develop communication and interpersonal skills from involvement in the UPHVP. Furthermore, the fact that the participants stated that their interactions with people have changed after they joined the UPHVP could be linked to the internalisation of training they received and the actual work they do which also supports (Cowie & Hutson, 2005).

In addition, the participants seemed quite upbeat about the skills they had received from the UPHVP. Some affirmed that their self-confidence has grown considerably, they can now listen attentively, and that through using the university resources to help their fellow students, they have gained computer skills. Attainment of skills by Unisa peer helpers, particularly confidence and communication skills is widely acknowledged in the literature as Cowie (1998)

who conducted a study to capture the experiences of peer supporters and the members of staff in charge of the peer support services. When she asked them about the perceived benefits of the peer support scheme for the peer helpers and for the school as a whole, the participants mentioned the benefits relating to self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, and a belief that they were contributing positively to the life of the school community.

The skills that peer supporters received are not just limited to the school environment. They are skills that are useful in all domains of life, preparing pupils for adulthood (James, 2011). The conflict resolution and communication skills required by peer mediators have been seen to be valued outside the education system, and to prepare pupils to become good citizens (Baginsky, 2004). In light of the findings of the present study, the participants mentioned the skills that they obtained from being peer helpers and which they plan to use in the workplace and in their day-to-day lives. Below are some of the participants' comments.

*“I am grateful to be part of the peer help programme, I think in every field of work there are some skills, especially communication skills that you must have in order to work in an effective way. Communication skills are needed in all aspects of life so I am grateful for acquiring those communication skills, including counselling and other skills that you can mention”.*

*“Yeah, and then communication skills. Yeah, communication skills and just meddling with people. I used to be a very reserved person let say, I can see a difference in that now I can (sigh) relate with others easily, than before”.*

In conclusion, the capacity of peer help programmes to benefit all people involves has also been noted in the literature. Myrick and Folk, (1999) and Tindall, (1995) emphasised that



peer helping programmes have advantages not only for counsellors and counselling departments, but also for peer helpers themselves in developing their interpersonal skills and self-growth, which in turn will benefit peer helpers.

### **Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme is a learning zone**

More often than not, in case studies research design, the case itself is of little importance but the units of analysis are the focus of research. In the present study, the UPHVP is the case and the experiences of Unisa peer helpers are the actual units of analysis. However, these two are inseparable in the sense that one cannot discuss one to the exclusion of the other. This subtheme: “Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme is a learning zone”, is given this name mainly because the accounts of the participants showed that the UPHVP is a fertile environment for further learning and growth. The key aspects that emerge from participants reflections are that the UPHVP teaches one to learn to accept feedback for growth to occur, the programme creates a context that is open for sharing ones feelings without being judged, the environment allows for establishing friendships and networking relationships and that they as peer helpers share similar experiences.

Through the lens of the ecological theory at the level of meso systems, which entails that, the relationships that were built at the micro system level continues to infiltrate and shape the outlook of the individual in other contexts. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), the meso system composes of the linkages and the processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person, (e.g., the relation between home and school, school and workplace, etc.) Bronfenbrenner (1994) further emphasises that the meso systems is a system of micro systems. It is clear from the findings that the relationships that were initially built when

the participants met to join the UPHVP continues to exist even beyond the confines of the institution as one of the participants reported that the friendship build from the Unisa peer help programme continues to exist in social contexts. While reflecting on her experiences, the same participant mentioned that the social skills she acquired from joining the UPHVP have also influence how she interacts with her siblings at her home, which also emphasised that the meso system comprises of interactions between different parts of a person's microsystems.

When these findings are view from the angle of student involvement theory's first tenet, there is a continuation of investment of energy by participants into the UPHVP, which benefits them in many ways. By participating investing their physical and psychological energies into the programme, the participants turned the UPHVP into a context conducive for sharing feelings, making friends and learning to take feedback from others and learn. The context enabled the participants to engage in introspection, which gave rise to changes in thinking patterns and worldviews. One participant reported that, she has make friends and developed some skills and has learned many things. This shows that by investing into the UPHVP, she has developed social skills and she is now more alert and curious about her environment. Furthermore, the other participant stated that he learned to take criticism as the feedback. On the other hand, the other participant reported that by parking in the UPHVP, she can now think outside the box and she has learned social skills. She also argues that what she has learned from the UPHVP cannot be learned anywhere unless one is a peer helper. Lastly, the other participant stated that interacting with students is in line with his future career goals as a researcher. From first tenet of the student involvement theory, it is evident that his involvement in the UPHVP is benefiting him to learn skills that he believes are crucial for his long-term career goals. All these positive experiences

narrated by the participants reflect the importance of investing in university activities, as there is a unique opportunity for growth and development.

The researcher employed the concept of reciprocity and rationality both from the SET to explain the participants' accounts encapsulated this sub-theme. To understand the gains of the participants through the lens of reciprocity, the researcher deems it important that he start by highlighting the responsibilities of the peer helpers. According to Barnard et al. (2003) the UPHVP empowers the peer helpers and enable them to act as first contacts and initial support structures on the Unisa campuses, in person and via telephone and internet. The Unisa peer helpers also acts as first contact and initial structures in their communities, make support readily available through various delivery forms, act as sensitive listeners who use communication skills to facilitate self-exploration, decision making, growth and development in other students, provide information about career prospects and study possibilities. Moreover, they also support fellow students on an academic, personal and career level during the academic year, provide support structure from where most complex cases can be referred to professional counsellors, and extent the range of guidance services to schools and the broader community where such services currently do not exist. By assuming the responsibilities to offer these services, they also benefit a lot from this. Reciprocity entails that people try to get out of the exchange what they think they deserve on basis of what they have put into it.

Juxtaposing what the UPHVP aims to achieve with the help of the peer helpers and the findings of the present study, there is strong evidence, which points to the reciprocal exchange between the two parties. The findings also show that almost all participants have something positive to share about their involvement in the programme especially with regard to their interactions with each other and their supervisors. The exchange between the supervisors and

their participants often takes the route of motivation, guidance, role modelling and empowering. Drawing from the findings, it is clear that the supervisors use their expertise knowledge to inspire the peer helpers not only for work purposes but also for life outside of work as the participants reported transferring the knowledge gained from the UPHVP to their family and social life.

*“The one role that they played in all of us is facilitating the peer help programme, supervising our work, and encouraging us to do research in terms of Unisa students, what is it that they need, what is it that we can provide them, they are always approachable, their doors are always open, in terms of, when I have a personal issue impacting on my studies and on my work and I am able to go to the supervisors and say I have this kind of the problem can we talk about it, then we will sit and talk about it”.*

The above quotation implies that the role played by the supervisors to empower the peer helpers to keep themselves updated with new information and to seek help if they have personal problems. The researcher, therefore, argues that the motivation to participate in the university on the part of the participants seem to be influenced by the possible gains that they envisage to get out of their participation. To support this argument, the researcher employs the rationale perspective, which entails that people use logic to ascertain likely consequences and what they can do to achieve those things. When the researcher asked the participant what made them consider joining the UPHVP, they stated that they want to put theory into practice; this is already explained in the first theme. Despite the fact that the supervision is mandatory, the participants seem to be engaging in supervision on the basis that there are possibilities for growth. Although some initially experienced challenges regarding working under supervision, those challenges seem to have faded away as the participant perceives the supervision as important to learning and

developing. From this, the researcher posits that the participants looked beyond supervision and discovered the potential contribution it has for them as peer helpers and subject them to it, both as it is required of them to do so and to access the perceived gains.

The reflections of participants reveal that the UPHVP is not only a place to make friends, acquire skills, but also, it is a context that affords the peer helpers an opportunity to share their feelings knowing that they are less likely to be judged. One of the participants mentioned that her understanding of a work place has changed completely. She used to hold the view that off-work life is segmented from work life. After she joined the UPHVP, she realised that the spill over of off-work life events to workplace context is common. To accentuate that her fellow peer helpers from the UPHVP are supportive, she stated that they offered her a space to talk about whatever was bothering her.

*“In this place, you bring the whole of you, from family to your social life somehow, it is that environment, I was used to “when I am at work I am at work” I am running around doing classes and nobody cares what is going on in my life at that point, but here, it is that environment where somehow people can see through you, or they give you the platform to talk about it.”*

Drawing from this, it appears as if the prevailing climate at the UPHVP allows the peer to share their feelings and experiences. This indicates that the contexts at the micro systems where individual functions do converge and influence the functioning of an individual in other contexts. In other words, if a person is worried about a stressful situation at home, chances are that the elements of the stressful situation a person’s faces at home may manifest in other contexts like work environment or school.

As indicated above that the UPHVP was not the focus area of research, the researcher did not anticipate that when asking the participants about the positive experiences of being a peer helper, the participants' reflections will point to the UPHVP itself. However, inherent in the findings are the reflection that shows how the participants view the UPHVP. As the researcher adopted an interpretive paradigm as an epistemological position, the accounts of participants were seen as the essence of what is true to them and as a reflection of their global view of the UPHVP. Therefore, taking the participants' positive reflections of the UPHVP as expressed by them answers the research question of the study.

Furthermore, the participants perceive the UPHVP as a source of knowledge where one learns about oneself, various careers, acquires knowledge and develops other abilities and experience.

*“Understanding yourself as a person, understanding your interest, and empowering yourself to do more research about the career field that you are interested in, that was the most thing that I learned here at DCCD”.*

*“Yes, in a lot of ways. The first way is that although it is a Unisa environment, we are dealing with students but there are some skills that you couldn't learn just by studying, like your counselling skills and speaking professionally”.*

From a literature perspective, these findings are supported by a study by Association of American and College Universities (2011) where it is stated that peer leaders are sharpening skills that are regarded as twenty-first century learning objectives for colleges and which are also sought by employers. These skills include self-directions, oral communication, intercultural skills, civic engagement, teamwork and critical thinking. Although the participants did not

mention some of these skills, the crucial part is that the peer help programme contributes extensively in developing the peer helpers and affords them a unique opportunity to acquire more skills for themselves and for life post studying. Furthermore, the findings from the peer leadership survey by the National Resource Centre (2009) for the first year experience and students in transitions yielded profound perceived experiences from almost two thousand students in peer leader roles from 145 colleges and universities. The findings depicted self-rated change in development of six skill areas. These are interpersonal communication (94%), organization (81%), time management (80%), presenting (79%), written communication (61%), and academic (51 %). There is no indication that these outcomes are specifically viewed as emanating from the peer programmes alone as this sub-theme capture the account of the participants' views of the UPHVP. They may cover the overall experiences of the peer leaders. Nevertheless, these findings continue to shed light about the role of peer help programmes.

Whilst reviewing literature, it was discovered that the use of a paraprofessional stem from the scarcity of qualified professionals, Brown (1974) stated that that the emergence of non-professionals were the direct results of both an increased demand for counselling services and the inability of professionally trained personnel to provide all of those services. This statement does not concur with the reason behind the formation of the UPHVP (Van Schoor & Mill, 1998) which was to develop a network of support for the Unisa student population, to extend the range of guidance services schools and the broader community and to empower the peer helpers to develop critical personal and employability skills. On the other hand, Hamid and Van Hook (2001) stressed that peer leader's offer budget relief to the programmes and offices that need to assist more students to meet the demands of large campus or to offset the effects of budget cuts

on staffing levels. Hamid and Van Hook (2001) seem to be congruent not only with the aim of the UPHVP, but also the account of one participant quoted below.

*“The peer help programme is better in that way because its Unisa students, so they know the challenges that students go through, they have also been through the application process, it is nice when you do counselling and they are talking about the application and you talk also from the experience”.*

*“I think it also makes it easier for me to talk to students about their challenges because it would be something that I going through or something that I went through”.*

The salient aspect emerging from this quote is that the UPHVP make use of Unisa students to help other Unisa students. This idea of using Unisa students in the UPHVP seems to have positive outcome in the sense that they understand the Unisa system. This shows that the participant view the notion of using Unisa students in the peer help programme as a viable method to help other students because of the commonalities between peer helpers and the student community. This is has also been echoed by a considerable number of researchers like (Astin, 1993; Carr, 1991; de Jager, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Robinson at al., 1991; Varenhorst, 2004).

According to Cowie and Sharp (1996) peer helping could be more beneficial and effective when peers are more cooperative, care for each other more, lend assistance as quickly as possible, and support moral values as well. It could be in vain if peer helping obtains a hierarchical structure in mutual relations. This signals the subtle yet crucial element for the full functioning of the peer help programmes but also for the wellbeing of the peer helpers themselves. One of the participants has stressed that as peer helpers, they support each other or



they create a suitable environment for sharing feelings. One participant reported that in the context of UPHVP, one brings him/herself as a whole and her fellow peer helpers create a space for everyone to talk and express their feelings.

Lastly, in a paper presented by Odirile (2012) from the University of Botswana a peer helper stated that he got an opportunity to go to Finland due to the skills from peer counselling where he had an exposure and growth. He further stated that if it were not for the training he would have failed the interview for international placement. His testimony continues to give credit to the peer help programme for exposing students to opportunities and grooming them.

### **Interactions with fellow peer helpers and the role of supervision.**

One of the positive experiences of the participants emanates from the conversations they have with each other as peer helpers and their supervisors. What emerged from the findings is that the participants perceive each other as support systems on the basis that they share similar academic and social experiences while the supervisors are perceived as useful sources of information, as they are a step ahead of the peer helpers. Moreover, the supervisors also play a vital role in empowering and grooming peer helpers. The supervisors are seen by the participants as being dedicated to their work.

The salient issues discussed in this sub-theme point to the relationships that develop at the micro systems and continue to have a profound influence on the participants' lives. For instance, if for unknown reasons one or two peer helpers did not strike a good working relationship with their fellow peer helper or supervisor and no measures were taken to rekindle the relationship that might result in a strained relationship and a globally negative perception that may spill over to many aspects of the peer help programme. As it appears to the researcher, the

peer helpers and their supervisors are in the context of mutually interacting and they positively influence each other. As a result, the finding shows that the supervisors are playing a crucial role in developing the peer helpers and this finds expression in the participants' reflections.

*“You come out of the supervision having learnt a lot of things and the things that you were struggling with or lacking confidence in, you go out feeling more empowered”.*

*“(Sigh) I am trying to think of a metaphor I could use for it, but there is, I describe my supervisors as two scientists in the lab that if there are two scientists in the lab they would manipulate things, they would change whatever they are creating, they would make sure that something stays in a good condition for that to become a final product”.*

The above verbatim portrays a positive picture of the significant role played by the supervisors. As a researcher, I could not rule out the possibility of existence of negative experiences between the peer helpers and their supervisors, however, their positive aspects inherent in the participants account, shows that the supervisors are committed to ensuring that the UPHVP runs smoothly and that the peer helpers are regularly supervised with the aim of empowering and motivating them. This is in keeping with the Unisa peer help invitation letter (see Appendix C), which states that peer helpers are supervised on a weekly basis and the ultimate goal of the supervision sessions are solely designed to assist the peer helpers in developing further skills.

The student involvement theory postulates that students cathect their physical and psychological energy to objects outside themselves. To explain this theme, which captures interactions between the participants and their supervisors, the researchers opted to use the first and the fifth tenet as the point of reference. As it has been stated in the previous section, the first

tenet refers to the investment of physical and the psychological energy in various objects, which may be general or specific. What was more salient in this sub-theme is the professional relationship between the supervisors and the participants. The participants portrayed their supervisors as playing a key role in grooming them as peer helpers, which often occurs during supervision processes. The supervisors are perceived as committed to their work to ensure that the peer helpers deliver counselling service that respond to the needs of the participants, they are seen as understanding the challenges faced by the students, and they continuously motivate the peer helpers to keep abreast with new information. Through the lens of student involvement theory, researcher assumes that the participants demonstrated a higher level of investment to learn continuously how they can improve in delivering their services on a personal level, as well. One of the participants confidently stated that the supervision they receive is empowering and growth oriented.

*“You come out of the supervision having learnt a lot of things and the things that you were struggling with or lacking confidence in, you goes out feeling more empowered”.*

*“With supervision as much as there were challenges, it has been helpful because if it wasn't for it, I would have not been where I am currently”.*

Moreover, by investing their energy to supervision, they get unique opportunity to be corrected on and to learn from their mistake in delivering peer help services. Drawing from one of the participants' accounts, the supervisors are described as involved, dedicated and committed in ensuring that the UPHVP runs smoothly and the service delivered by all parties involved is up to required standards. Therefore, this signal that large amount of energy are also channelled to

supervision where the participants are receiving on-going training, that sharpens their skills, thereby making their services more effective.

The fifth tenet of the student involvement theory states that the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. The researcher assumes that the level of commitment shown by the supervisors to grow, empower and further educate the peer helpers, signals their willingness to increase the peer helpers involvement. Therefore, by receiving this type of support from their supervisor, the researcher argues that the peer helpers are less likely to withdraw from the programmes, as it becomes a safety net for them. Moreover, when the researcher view the findings through the lens of this tenet, the interactions between the participants and their supervisors depict that they care about the participants in the sense that if the participants have personal problems, the supervisors open doors for further assistance. Therefore, this in its own, goes beyond supervision to create a climate conducive for personal and professional development, which also enhances involvement.

The supervision is mandatory for all peer helpers. The goal of supervision in the peer helping is “to enhance learning, guidance and a supportive function” (Cowie & Wallace, 2000, p. 25). The findings of the present study extend the range of supervision to include empowerment, commitment on the part of supervisors and grooming the participants. Through the lens of social exchange theory, the researcher will explain this sub-theme from the perspective that people engage in social exchange because they are rationally seeking to maximise the profits and benefits to be gained from those situations and that social exchange produces payoffs or rewards for the individual involved, which leads to patterns of social exchange. As has been indicated, the supervision is compulsory. There is also no indication that supervisors view as an exchange

to get something out of it. What emerged from the data is that one participant reported that their supervisors created an atmosphere that makes the participants feel free to consult them should they encounter a difficult life circumstances or work challenges that requires expert knowledge. This shows that participants benefit the most from supervision. They reported feeling upbeat and motivated when they came from the supervision sessions.

On the other hand, the researcher posits that the type of benefits that the participants get from their supervisors does not necessarily help the participants to meet their individual basic needs. It is undeniable that the social exchange between the participants and their supervisors produced rewards, but there is no evidence suggesting that the social exchange gave rise to patterns of communications. The reason behind this is that the supervision is mandatory and devoid of monetary value. However, the researcher believes that the relationship between the participants and their supervisors makes it easy for the participants to approach them but it does not rigidly structure the lines of communications.

Cowie and Wallace (2000, p. 133-141) stressed that supervision should be the cornerstone of the peer support services on the basis that it ensures the safety of people who use the service and those who work as peer supporters. They also stress that it should offer opportunities for personal growth and skill development to the supervisor and the peer supporters. With reference to the subjective experiences of the participants, it is important that the supervision sessions are structured in a manner that benefits the peer helpers on many levels.

Moreover, in accordance with National Peer Help Association (NPHA) cited in Aladag (2005) supervision has three goals: it enables programme staff to monitor programme-related activities and services, it enhances the effectiveness of and personal growth of peer helpers, and

lastly, it encourages peer helpers to share with, learn from, and support each other in the performance of their helping roles. Again, the findings of the present study converge with the above goals of supervision given that there are elements indicating that supervisors are taking charge of the UPHVP in the sense that they motivate the Unisa peer helpers to keep abreast with new information and they also groom and keep their doors open for the peer helpers. However, with regard to supporting each other, there seem to be no dual relationship in the sense that there is not an indication from the findings that the supervisors do get support from the peer helpers. However, the peer helpers do help each other in performing their duties and with regard to their studies. Below are the participants' quotation verbatim depicting that they support each other.

*“Because even if you can ask most of the people that I work with, I am very open, I talked a lot. Sometimes I wish I could go cut back on my talking, but I would turn to my colleague and say look at this email, how would you respond to it?”*

*“Like I said, it is always empowering being around with people who share the same vision as you, who also encounter the same difficulties as you do. We see them, talk to them, and I usually ask people how they get to their third years. They would reflect on their journey like “I passed matric with distinctions; it took me the minimum of three years to complete my degree, now I am doing the honours”.*

### **Negative experiences of participating in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme**

The negative experiences of the participants are discussed and viewed through the lens of exo system of Bronfenbrenner ecological theory. The exo system, according to Bronfenbrenner (1994) comprises the linkages and processes taking place in various settings, which do not

contain the developing person, but in which the events that occur, indirectly influences the processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives. This does not mean that the person is the victim of circumstances but that there are situation that impact in the person which the individual has no resources to effect change in those situation. To emphasise this, the researcher draws from Landsberg et al. (2005) who accentuate that the exo system, entails one or more environments in which an individual is not directly involved as an active participant, but may influence or be influenced by what happens in the settings.

One of the participants reported that his negative experiences emanate from adapting the context of DCCD. His lifestyle at his immediate level was in sharp contrast with what was required of him when he was accepted as a peer helper. As a result, he struggled to adapt to what the context needed him to be. The characteristics of the environment, which he as an individual has no control over seem to impact on him and influenced him to change in order to fit in with the context specifications.

On the other hand, the other participant stated that her negative experiences stemmed from lack of information to disseminate to students as a peer helper. It must be stated that, the peer helpers are trained to assist their fellow students with various issues; therefore, the discrepancy between what the participants claim to know and what the environment requires her to know was the source of her negative experiences. It also raises eyebrows that the participant knew that she should consult when she was not certain but she did not want to admit that she does not know. From the lens of the exo system, the manner in which the participant dealt with issues at her micro systems proved to inapplicable in other contexts. The environment required the participant not only to be open to new information and seek information, but also to function effectively as a peer helper. From this, we could assume that the role of situational demands,

which impacts and fosters changes on the individual, is in keeping with Bronfenbrenner (1994) ecological theory.

The student involvement theory does not seem to take into account that student' investments in university activities may bring about negative experiences. The theory put more emphasis on that academic success tends to correlates with student involvement in the university activities. Most of the basic tenets of the student involvement theory focus more on the level of investment shown by the student and the capacity of the educational programme to encourage student involvement. As a result, it seems difficult to explain the negative experiences of the participants through the lens of the student involvement theory. However, when the researcher views the findings through from the standpoint of the third tenet, which entails that involvement has qualitative and quantitative features, there is considerable evidence that the student showed qualitative investment in the UPHVP despite the challenges they encountered.

This theme captures the challenging moments that the participants experienced in their tenure as peer helpers. Some of the challenges relate to adapting to a working environment, dealing with difficult clients, assisting clients who present the challenges that the participants were facing, working under supervision and so forth. Even though the participants dealt differently with the challenges they experienced, the negative elements of those challenges did not diminish their interest in continuing investing in the UPHVP. Instead, they seem to have employed coping strategies that helped them deal effectively with the challenges they encounter. From this angle, the researcher assumes that the participants demonstrated qualitative features of investment because they continued despite encountering some difficult situations. Drawing from the findings, three participants reported the challenges they faced when they join the UPHVP, but their willingness to be part of the programme allowed them to reflect and find better ways of



dealing with the challenging aspects of the situation. Inherent in the participant accounts below, are the challenges that relates to adapting to the demands of the work environment.

*“So from also a life style, the way of doing things, the life style, the culture itself for me it was a big challenge but now things have changed, I could say I am more oriented in terms of work ethics, I have moved to a point whereby even some of my colleagues they see me as, as I am, one who dresses formally in most cases, some would aspire or take note that this guy has really changed from a person who was wearing sneakers then to formal shoes”.*

*“I have to make sure that I do my job and everything, so being in this environment and being supervised and dealing with people has actually changed me and it was hard to adapt to, but I realised that it is something that I need especially in the profession that we are in”. (Sigh) so moving from that island, to be part of the community, and first it was challenging, but I adapted quickly because I am a social person if you can call it like that. I like to interact with people. I was not that much of a challenge; it was a matter of changing my mind set and adapting to the environment”.*

*“I was not confident in some instances, such as when someone reviews my work, and yeah that is it. It is basically the confidence. However as time goes on and with the support that is there within this programme, you get to build on your confidence and one other thing of my challenges, was working under supervision”.*

In the verbatim quotations above, it is clear that the participants rose above the challenging moments they encountered by figuring out the contextual demands of the

environment they find themselves in. That enabled them to manoeuvre their way and submit to the environmental demands for effective functioning.

The other challenges narrated by the participants pointed to the challenges of executing duties effectively and some personal issues infiltrating to hinder effective delivering of duties. The first participant the researcher quoted below, encountered a difficult client but the positive side of the situation is that she managed to contained herself and that did not deter her commitment to the programme.

*„I had that situation where the client was difficult; I could not even deal with the situation. I went out of hand, it was out of control, she did not understand what I was saying, or I do not know. So when she got here she was very frustrated and when I told her she must go back there, she just could not imagine herself queuing again, so yeah for this particular situation, it was out of my control. I think it’s also part of being a counsellor”.*

The challenges in delivering duties emanating from the personal issues as reported by the participant highlighted a situation where clients bring to the counselling session, the very same issues that the peer helper was reeling from or struggling to come to terms with. In short, the participant in question failed many modules that she was registered for and was still dealing with that shock. To add to her grief, a client came for counselling as she also failed too many modules. What transpired is that the participant failed in her attempts to help the client as she has not helped herself. To ensure that the client receives help and she does not break down, as she was not in the position to help the client, the participant opted to refer the client to others who may help. This continues to show that the participants have an unwavering interest in helping

their fellow students. Therefore, the researcher holds the view that the participants' capacity to deal effectively with the challenges they encounter in their roles as peer helpers is a sign of qualitative investment into the UPHVP.

To explain the findings contained in the theme from the social exchange theory, the researcher employed the tenet of rationality (Chibucos et al., 2005; & Meeker, 1971) which put more emphasis on the individual capacity to make informed decisions. In light of the findings, there is strong evidence suggesting that the participant made good decisions to deal with the challenges they encountered. *Firstly*, regarding the challenges that emerged when participants were helping their fellow students, there is no situation where the social exchange between the participants and their clients was abruptly terminated because of differences and misunderstanding. Supporting this statement, the participants referred the clients whom they were struggling to help which shows that they are rational and can make informed decisions. *Secondly*, some of the participants encountered the challenges, which pointed to requirement of the workplace environment. The context of DCCD where the participants ply their trade required the participant to adapt to the specifications of the environment. One participant struggled because his lifestyle was different to the demands of the DCCD. The other two participants struggled because they were not used to working under supervision. The former was working under limited supervision in her previous job and the latter was lacking confidence when his work is review by the supervisors. However, both of them found better ways of dealing with their challenges by changing the manner in which they view supervision. One participant perceives supervision as an on-going part of her career goals in psychology and for the other participant, receiving support from the supervisors was enough for him to adapt quickly. The capacity of the participants to adapt to the demands to the DCCD and subject themselves to

supervision where there are ample chances of obtaining desired goals shows elements of rationality and the ability to make informed decisions.

From a literature point of view, the role of the peer helper is not always accompanied by the positive experiences; however, there are situations that bring forth the negative experiences as well. The body of literature shows that those who take the role of providing support to other peoples may experience peer harassments (Cowie, 1998; Smith & Watson, 2004). Smith and Watson (2004) also reported that peer supporters may experience teasing; some peer supporters reported pupils pretending to need help or teasing them because of the caps or bibs they wore to distinguish them. On the contrary, there is no indication from the findings that the Unisa peer helpers have been harassed by clients who pretended to need help. However, there were cases of difficult clients whose requests was beyond the scope of Unisa peer helper practice. Lastly, the t-shirts that they wear, makes them identifiable even outside the parameters of the University, but they were not teased because of that.

In a study conducted by James at al. (2013) to explore the experience of peer mentors, one of the negative experiences associated with the role of the peer helper was that they also dealt with serious issues that were not appropriate for them. In the present study, there are incidents where the clients brought to the counselling, personal issues that were beyond the scope of practice of peer helpers, however, in such situations Unisa peer helpers are taught to refer the clients to student counsellors for further assistance and the participant referred the client. This shows that the participant was are well aware of their limitations and boundaries of their positions as a peer helpers which is a crucial aspect noted by Keller (1999). Tsebe (2010), at the University of Pretoria to explore the experiences of mentors implementing a mentorship programme at a higher education institution. He found that the most salient elements relating to

mentors' negative experiences pointed to correspondence between mentors and mentees, lack of mentee attendance in mentorship meetings, gender and racial issues, and mentors uncertainties about what to do in the programme and feelings of lack of guidance.

Another study that shed light on the negative experiences of peer helpers was by Varghese et al. (2013). The study was envisaged to highlight the role the Peer Helper Unit play to facilitate the course group and the community based research from the perspective of both the peer helpers and the instructor. The roles of the peer helpers at the University of South Africa and the University of Guelph differs considerably, however, some of their findings partially concur with the findings of the present study. For example, they found that the peer helpers experienced challenges related to facilitating learning while engaging in their own learning activities. For example, in the present study, one participant reported that she experienced challenges when she had to assist the students who were facing similar challenges as her. Both the peer helper and the student failed most of the modules they have registered for. This signals that general students' challenges may surface during conversation between students and the peer helpers and negatively impact on the peer helpers' capacity to help. Of more importance in such circumstances is that, the participant in question referred the student to other sources of help.

This chapter was dedicated to discuss the findings against research questions, literature and three theories. The researcher believes that the aim of the study was achieved, as the research questions were adequately answered. The findings have largely, concurred with the body of literature used for this study. To broaden the understanding of peer helpers' experiences, the researcher employed three theories: ecological theory, student involvement theory and the theory of social exchange. These three theories gave the researcher a new set of eyes to explain the findings, and they contributed greatly in understanding the peer helpers' experiences from

different standpoints. Zooming in to the findings of this study, there is a sense of shared subjective experiences on the part of peer helpers. The participants live in their communities, their lives as students, personality characteristics, socio economic statuses, career goals and their roles as peer helpers are interwoven aspects that influence their experiences as peer helpers at an open distance learning institution. On the other hand, sufficient information has emerged highlighting the critical role the UPHVP is playing in the personal and professional development of student peer helpers and benefiting the Unisa student community.

## **CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The conclusion chapters aims to presents a succinct wrap up of the research project. In this chapter, the researcher will first discuss how qualitative research techniques were applied throughout the study, pay attention to the strengths and weaknesses of the study, recommendations and conclusion.

### **Qualitative techniques: how they were used?**

The qualitative research approach was the most suitable approach to undertake the study as it allowed the researcher to achieve the aims of the study. In chapter 4, the researcher named and discussed some of the techniques of qualitative research he deemed important to incorporate in his study. These are researcher as an instrument, distanciation, thick description, triangulation and trustworthiness. These techniques will be discussed briefly, in how they were employed in the study. My role as the primary instrument for collecting and analysing data guided my approach during the interview process and data analysis. By creating an atmosphere free of any external disturbance, body posture, eye contact, head nodding while the participant is talking and probing for clarity, the researcher believes that he portrayed himself as an attentive listener who also empathised with the participants. This stance was also used during data analysis where the researcher immersed in the data with an open mind yet guided by the research questions, the aim off the study and the interpretive paradigm as the epistemological position.

As a former peer helper myself, it was important for the researcher to strike a distance between myself and the research participant and data to guard against personal opinion clouding my view of data. Through distancing, the researcher hopes he managed to emotionally and intellectually distance himself from the research participant by involving other people and continuously reflecting. This study has presented thick description of peer helpers' experiences and the researcher is confident that although these findings are subjective accounts of the Unisa peer helpers, they may be transferrable to other similar contexts. Moreover, the fact that the participants were given the interview transcripts to expand and correct mistakes, ensured that the findings and discussion are based on the true account of the participants. This brings me to triangulation, which entails the use of multiple sources to bring more credibility in the study. In chapter four, the researcher discussed five types of triangulation and opted to use one, which was investigator triangulation. During the course of the study, the researcher also incorporated theory triangulation as he borrowed from two more theories. This has strengthened the study and a detailed description of the peer helpers' experiences has been achieved.

The rigor of qualitative research is judged against the background of trustworthiness, which encapsulates four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The findings presented in the study reflects what happened in the research setting, as a result, the credibility of the study is still intact. The researcher hopes that the findings of the present study may be transferable to other similar context through analytical generalisation feasible in case studies. The manner in which the researcher has described the research process shows that the study was carried out in a reasonable way. Moreover, all the stages of research are thoroughly discussed making the study more dependable. Lastly, the researcher assumes that the aims of the study have been achieved, in as much as the research



questions were sufficiently answered. Therefore, the confirmability of the study has been achieved.

## **Findings**

Any research project has, as its goal, to find the answers to the research questions. This study was no exception. In brief, four data driven themes were identified in this study and there is a strong connection between the research questions and the themes. Below is the breakdown of themes, which are briefly explained.

### **Peer helpers goals for joining the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme**

This theme captures the participant (peer helpers) shared goals for joining the UPHVP. The most salient accounts reported by the participants relates to securing a conducive environment where there is an opportunity for practical exposure to the field of counselling and psychology (putting theory into practice), exposure to the world of work and an opportunity to participate in the university activities.

### **Construction of roles as peer helper at an ODL institution**

The second theme encapsulates the participants' construction of their roles as the peer helpers at the open distance learning institution. Inherent in this theme is each participant accounts of what the role of being a peer helper means to them. The participants shared unique

and complementary accounts on how they view their roles. When reviewing their roles, participants perceived themselves as being in the position to disseminating information to Unisa student community and the wider community, sharing similar experiences with their fellow students, view their roles as an opportunity to learn, to grow and as a revelation.

### **Positive experiences of participating in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme**

This theme presents the rich description of the participant positive experiences since joining the UPHVP. The theme has four subthemes containing the participants' positive experiences namely, personal growth, attainment of skills, peer help programme as a learning zone and interacting with fellow peer helpers and supervisors. In each of these subthemes, the researcher presented the participants accounts as express by them and as the essence of what is true to them.

### **Negative experiences of participating in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme**

In this theme, the researcher presents detail subjective accounts of participants regarding the instances where they felt unhappy and challenged by the circumstances they face in their roles as peer helpers. The findings presented here emerged during the in-depth interactions when the researcher asked the participants to reflect on their negative experiences or challenges they encounter as peer helpers. The salient negative experiences contained in this theme points to, but,

not specific to adapting to the work context of the Directorate for Counselling and Career Development (DCCD), dealing with difficult clients, lacking self-confidence in handling student inquiries, and working under supervision.

### **Strengths and limitations**

In this study, the researcher strove to incorporate and employ qualitative techniques throughout the study. The relationship established by the researcher and the gatekeepers was a profound starting point for data collection processes. As the primary instrument for inviting participants, arranging interviews and collecting data, the researcher was obliged to be flexible, open and willing to be influenced by the participants. That did not only enable the researcher to establish rapport with the participants, but the interviews were arranged on basis of participants availability. The number of participants willing to participate in the study exceeded the expectations, which was something the researcher believes, was due to qualitative techniques he used when getting into the setting. While collecting data, the researcher kept his mind opened about the aims of the study, asking questions in more open ways, yet staying in touch with the interpretive paradigm as the epistemological position to collect and analyse data. Employing the interpretive paradigm influenced the researcher to consider the participants stories as the essence of what is true to them. In doing so, participants' experiences were seen and understood from their frame of reference and the researcher listened attentively and empathised with them. This nurtured the participants-researcher relationship as the participants were willing to share their experiences and researcher, on the other hand, was looking for no objective reality but multiple realities. This is also evident in the findings where the researcher, by applying thematic analysis,

painted a picture of patterns and shared themes, which were data driven yet answering the research questions. The study has presented a comprehensive picture of both positive and negative experiences of Unisa peer helpers' experiences in terms of skills they have obtained from the programme, how they viewed the Unisa peer help programme and their roles, why they joined the programme and the personal and professional benefits of participating in the UPHVP has been well discussed in this study. Furthermore, the study has highlighted the contribution made by the UPHVP in grooming the peer helpers and offering them an opportunity for practical exposure to the field of psychology. The positive gains reported by the participants in this study are congruent with several studies cited in this chapter.

Common to all research projects is that there are always strength and limitations. One of the limitation stems from the case study design employed in the study. As indicated in the methods chapter, the plausibility of generalising the findings to the wider population from a case study are not feasible and the fact that the sample size of this study consisted of seven participants hinders the likelihood of generalising. The researcher, however, hopes that the findings of the present study may hold true in other studies conducted to understand peer helpers experiences in ODL contexts and in other higher education institutions.

Another limitation of this study is attributed to the researcher as he is a former peer helper. Although the researcher tried to suspend his experience from influencing how he interviewed the participants and how he deal with data, there were occasions during data collection and analysis where the researcher's experiences crop out and infiltrate the process of research, but the researcher, managed to create a gap between himself and the participants.

## **Recommendations for future studies**

The UPHVP has been implemented in sixteen regional centres in South Africa and in the present study sample, the peer helpers from the Sunnyside Campus only. The researcher believes that a study with a larger sample size may generate findings that can take the UPHVP to new frontiers.

There is no doubt that the Unisa peer helpers are playing a key role on supporting their fellow students regarding their inquiries. The findings of this study, revealed the stance, which the peer helpers took in relation to Unisa student community and the wider community. However, the researcher's suggestion for future studies, which aim to strengthen the UPHVP, is to explore students' perception of the peer helpers' services.

In the study, the participant reported positive and negative experiences; the researcher would like to suggest that future studies be conducted to explore the factors responsible for both positive and negative themes, which emerge from this study. For example, some of the participants reported that from participating in the peer help programme, they have discovered themselves; they have learned that they are not introverted as they used to believe and they have worked out their career paths. As a result, it would be interesting if future studies unpack the all those aspects responsible for these positive outcomes. Regarding the negative experiences, the researcher would like to suggest that future studies be directed at mitigating the negative experiences of peer helpers.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter was dedicated to give a wrap-up of the dissertation. The researcher revisited the qualitative techniques used in the study, provided a succinct review of the themes identified in the study, discussed strengths and limitations of the study and concluded with a recommendation for future studies.

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## Appendix A: Ethical Clearance



Department of Psychology

20-11-2012

### ETHICAL CLEARANCE OF A RESEARCH PROJECT INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

**Project:** Unisa peer helpers: reflecting on their experiences as sources of support at the open distance learning institution

**Researcher:** Sfiso Emmanuel Mabizela

**Supervisor:** D J Kruger (Department of Psychology, 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 our Ethics Committee without any conditions.



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## **Appendix B: Informed Consent forms**

Dear Potential participant

My name is Sfiso Emmanuel Mabizela. I am working on completing my research project in fulfilment of Masters in Research Consulting at the University of South Africa. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to explore and describe the experiences of peer helpers as sources of support at an open distance learning institution.

The primary aim of this study is to get an in-depth understanding of peer helper's experiences as frontline sources of support for students at the open distance institution like UNISA. The researcher wishes to give peer helpers a platform to reflect on their positive and negative experiences of being peer helpers at an ODL institution and what skills and knowledge they have gained from being peer helpers. The study also has a potential to produce scientific knowledge of peer helpers experiences in supporting other students at an ODL institution. I as the researcher will ensure that I abide by all research ethics throughout the study. In doing so, I would ensure that participating in this study is voluntary. As a result you will not be coerced to partake in this study and you can withdraw at any stage should you wish to do so.

I will ensure that all volunteering participants will remain anonymous. Your original names will not be used in this study. Apart from that, the information that will be shared will remain confidential. This means that the information will be used for research purposes only. However, the outcomes of the study will be available in the form of research report or dissertation. I will collect data by interviewing participants. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. I would like get your permission to tape record the interview. The recordings will be kept for five years. After the period of five years the transcripts will be destroyed.

If you agree to take part in this study you will be requested to sign an informed consent form. The informed consent entails that you as the peer helper have read and agreed to voluntarily participate in the study. However, it is not a binding contract that disallows withdrawal from the study. You can withdraw from the study if you want to. There are no anticipated discomforts that may result from partaking in the study, so risk to participants is minimal. There are no tangible benefits or incentives that will be received by participants for taking part in the study, however, snacks and refreshment will be available post the interview.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me, my supervisor or the department of psychology which granted the permission for this study. The contact numbers are as follows:

email address: [sfisomabizela.mabizela@gmail.com](mailto:sfisomabizela.mabizela@gmail.com)

email address: [djkruge@unisa.ac.za](mailto:djkruge@unisa.ac.za)

Department Psychology department

Telephone number: 012 429 8256

### Statement of consent

I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions I may have will also be answered by a member of the research team. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. I understand I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Name of the participant	
Signature	
Name of the researcher	
signature	

## Appendix C: Peer help invitation letter



Dear Prospective Peer Helper,

Thank you for your interest in the Peer Help programme. To apply for the programme, download the application form at <http://bit.ly/PHform>. Send the completed form, together with your supporting documents (ID and recent academic record) to [deyzel@unisa.ac.za](mailto:deyzel@unisa.ac.za).

The Peer Help Volunteer Programme is an innovative programme striving to place assistance within reach of each and every Unisa student. It gives students the opportunity to plough back to the Unisa population and the community at large what they have received in terms of education and development. Participation in this exciting programme, however, not only benefits the communities mentioned above, but provides valuable opportunities to the Peer Helpers to develop personal and employability skills.

### **Why join?**

- Because you enjoy interacting with people, and consider yourself a natural helper.
- You are, or would like to be a good listener.
- You would like to experience Unisa differently and want to know what it is like to work with fellow students.
- You are curious about what it means to facilitate someone's decision-making process.



- Your studies sharpen your intellect, but you would like to be good at managing your emotions as well.

### **How do you benefit?**

We all work with people, some of us more effectively than others, but anyone can learn how to communicate more effectively. Peer Help training & supervision, and working at the Directorate: Counselling & Career Development as a volunteer helps you to gain valuable work experience. Peer Help evaluation via role plays and developing a career portfolio, serves as evidence of the experience you gained. You will develop valuable transferable skills, such as presentation skills, listening skills, interpersonal skills, ability to work in a team, ability to work independently, computer skills and many more.

### **Requirements**

Unfortunately not all students applying to become Peer Helpers are selected. To be selected, you will need:

- to have passed at least 10 modules or the equivalent thereof;
- outstanding interpersonal skills & distinctive listening skills;
- exceptional willingness to learn about Unisa;
- to convey clearly how you intend to apply your skills in the Directorate and how you see this programme connecting with your career, academic and personal development.
- not to be in full-time or part-time employment.

Before you decide to apply to become a Peer Help Volunteer, you need to carefully consider what participation in the programme will demand from you.

**The following is a rough indication of the time that the programme will require from you:**

Peer Help Activity	Volunteer Hours required
Basic Peer Help Training	<p>Three days in February 2015 (08:00-16:00)</p> <p>This workshop will focus extensively on empathic listening, skilful responding, problem-solving and decision-making. During the training sessions, role play exercises will be conducted to determine whether you can apply the skills. The first three days will focus on basic counselling skills and the last two days on how to integrate Unisa information with your basic counselling skills.</p>
Supervision and role play sessions	<p>Weekly supervision sessions (Thursdays from 09:00-12:00). Supervision will take place from February to August (with a break in May/ June during exam time). The focus of the supervision sessions is on developing further skills.</p>
Learning group participation	<p>Small learning groups are formed and meet every two weeks to discuss specific issues and to provide support to group members in accordance with the group's learning needs.</p>
Information management	<p>Peer helpers need to be able to convey information to clients and to that end, need to complete an information management assessment (pass rate:</p>

assessment	70%). This assessment is completed electronically at the Directorate.
Information management assessment	Peer helpers are expected to render at least four hours of volunteer duty per week. Duty hours are from 08:00-12:00 and 12:00-16:00 from Monday to Friday and your specific shift will be negotiated on completion of the Basic training programme. Your duty at the peer help office will enable you to practice your skills.
Portfolio development	15-20 minutes per day (1 hour per week). You will be required to develop a portfolio with documentary proof of the learning that has taken place during the course of the year. The final evaluation in August/ September will also be partly based on this portfolio.
Project work	You may participate in DCCD projects and events such as the Careers Fair and career and study guidance workshops.
Evaluation & feedback session	This session will allow you to present your portfolio to the trainers and allow us the opportunity to observe your counselling skills. You will also complete a case study, in writing, as part of your portfolio.

Peer Helpers are active during January, February, March, April, July and August. The commitment required from the Peer Helpers is extensive and you should carefully consider whether your current workload and personal commitments would allow you to participate fully.

### **Procedure to apply as Peer Help Volunteer**

1. Complete the application form (available at: <http://bit.ly/PHform>) and send together with your supporting documents (ID and recent academic record) to [deyzel@unisa.ac.za](mailto:deyzel@unisa.ac.za). Take care in your application – the first selection is based on what you write about yourself.
2. Suitable applicants will be invited to an interview to determine whether you have the necessary qualities and motivation to become a peer helper. The interview panel will consist of staff members involved with training and supervision, as well as senior assistant student counsellors.
3. After the initial interview we will make a selection of possible peer helpers.
4. You will be invited to spend four hours at the Directorate to experience the environment before you confirm that you will attend the basic training.

The decision of the selection panel is final and no appeals will be allowed. Applicants who are not selected can re-apply at the beginning of the next training cycle.

### **Personal decision – Am I a self-starter who takes ownership for my own learning?**

It is critical that you determine what goals you want to reach through participating in the programme. Merely stating that you want to help others is not enough to sustain you during the year and to keep you motivated. Ask yourself what you want to gain from participating in this

programme on a personal, academic, and career level. These will form the goals that you would want to pursue during the year.

Self-directed learning forms an integral part of the empowerment programme. The input provided by your project leader in terms of training, empowerment, supervision and roleplay sessions, forms only one part of your activities. The balance of the empowerment depends on self-directed learning in the form of participation in projects and reflection on activities, experiences, thoughts and feelings. The level of your development will ultimately depend on the amount of self-directed effort put into your own learning and development.

Your last decision should therefore be based on whether you are a self-starter and whether you are prepared to invest time and effort into your own development or not.

It is time-consuming to train and work as a peer helper. You get no money – only many opportunities for self-growth and work experience. The Directorate: Counselling and Career Development sets high standards for performance and those who persevere have opportunities for employment and further studies. Many Unisa peer helpers have moved on to permanent employment or further studies and cite their peer help experience as an important factor in their career development.