Chapter 4

PEER HELPING IN SOUTH AFRICA:
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA (UNISA) STORY

"The mission of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme is to empower student volunteers to shape the learning environment by establishing a network of support, staffed by well-trained and regularly supervised peer helper volunteers, who act as initial support structures in their own environment"

(van Schoor & Mill, 1998)

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the development of peer helping at the University of South Africa (Unisa). A brief historical overview of the developments in higher education since 1997 and the challenges these have had for counselling and support services will be provided. The implementation of a peer helping model at various institutions for higher education in South Africa will also be discussed. The focus will then shift to the development of peer helping at Unisa and will highlight the role that the Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development (BCCAD) played in establishing its programme on a national basis. The Unisa selection and recruitment procedures will be highlighted; the rationale for the adaptation of the training model will be emphasised and the role of supervision in on-going training will be discussed. Finally the need for the monitoring of the growth and development of the Unisa peer helpers, by means of a portfolio management process, will be explained.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

In his opening address to Parliament, Nelson Mandela, as the newly elected president of South Africa, shared his vision for a "... transformed, non-racial, democratically governed

South Africa" and called for the transformation of the education system by saying:

> ... we seek to restructure the South African higher education system such that every citizen, especially those in our society who have been historically disadvantaged in one way or other, has access to quality education, which enables him or her to realise his/her full potential and play a central role in building a new united nation.

President Mandela, further emphasised the importance of a commitment to "... the empowerment of the people through education, accessibility and transparency, co-operativeness, commitment and passion for service, innovativeness and critical engagement, and efficiency and effectiveness in delivery" (Mandela, cited in de Jager, 1998, p.1).

The South African White Paper on Higher Education (April 1997) echoed Mandela's quest and called on higher education institutions to (1) speed up the transformation processes within their institutions; (2) increase the access for specifically African students and women; (3) "... promote equity of access"; and (4) improve the chances of success for all students (de Jager, Simpson & Kleinig, 1997, p. 1).

In line with the call for greater access for all, as stipulated in the White Paper on Higher Education (1997), de Jager et al. (1997) emphasised that greater access needs to be understood in the broadest terms to include greater access to both academic and social support structures. De Jager et al. (1997) furthermore stated that the degree to which higher education institutions could respond to the challenge of empowering students to reach their full potential, would have a profound effect on the future of South Africa.

According to Keller (1999, p.1) higher education enhances students' development on three levels namely "...as people, as learners and in relation to a specific future position in the World of Work". The demands that higher education places on students often lead to negative

experiences which could adversely affect academic performance (Keller, 1999).

Keller (1999) further emphasised that higher education institutions in South Africa are increasingly rendering a service to students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. This is particularly true for Unisa where approximately 70% of the total student body of the merged institution (see par. 4.3) in the year 2004 were from disadvantaged backgrounds (Unisa Bureau for Management Information, 2004).

Majozi (1994, p. 2) echoed this and stated that previously disadvantaged students, who are often older students, "... experience difficulties when making a transition from a disadvantaged background into a challenging and diverse multi-cultural university environment". These students, furthermore, often lack the academic skills and foundations required by higher education.

Newly enrolled students also have specific needs. According to de Jager (1998) these students need to make major adjustments to meet the demands of higher education. Many of these students do not make use of the professional services available to them, or are hesitant in doing so. It is therefore critical that South African higher education institutions provide the necessary "... support structures" to assist students with the development of both academic and life skills (Keller, 1999, p. 2). The challenge for counselling and educational support services is therefore to adapt and to extend their services in creative ways to assist students in adjusting to the demands of higher education and to help these students to reach their full potential (de Jager et al., 1997; de Jager, 1998).

One adaptation and extension which has proven successful over an extended period in Canada is the peer helping programme. This programme is presently well established at all levels of education and in many community programmes in Canada (de Jager et al., 1997) and has been extended to many international locations (see chapter 2, par. 2.4). Peer helping has also been introduced to many higher education institutions in South Africa (Motsabi, 1999; 2000).

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PEER HELPING IN SOUTH AFRICA

The peer help movement, based on the Canadian programme developed by Carr and Saunders, was initiated in South Africa by the Port Elizabeth Technikon (currently incorporated in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University - NMMU) in 1994. This development was funded by a Canadian government support initiative namely Community Outreach through Institutional Linkage (COTIL). The funding enabled Ms Marina de Jager, a senior student counsellor in the Department of Student Counselling, Career and Development Centre at the NMMU, to attend training workshops for peer helper trainers in 1995 which was offered by Peer Resources, Canada. On her return, the *Peer Counselling Starter Kit* developed by Carr and Saunders (1980) was adapted by her for the South African situation and was introduced to the members of the Society for Student Counselling in Southern Africa (SSCSA).

The Department of Student Counselling, Career and Development Centre at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University continues to play a leading role in the training, supervision and consultation of peer help practitioners in South Africa. Apart from running a well-functioning peer help programme on campus, this department has, since the initiation of the peer help programme in South Africa, contributed to its continuing development by means of the following activities:

- a variety of individuals (such as professionals from higher education institutions; staff from the National Department of Education; community leaders; student counsellors; teachers and social workers) were trained as peer helper trainers.
- three national conferences have been organised to further develop and broaden the skills of the peer help practitioners.
- a Peer Help Resource Centre, incorporated in the existing Resource Centre at the department, has been established with the specific aim of serving as "... a basis for a

central consulting service to all trained peer help practitioners" in South Africa.

- institutional links on a national and international basis have been established. International links were established in 1997 with two Australian Institutions for higher education namely Adelaide Institute of TAFE and Flinders University of South Australia. It was envisaged that these links would form the basis of the South African Consortium for Peer Helping, an international network which, to date has not materialised due to lack of funding. Peer Help programmes have, however, been initiated on a smaller scale at both Australian institutions with whom the linkage was established (M.J. de Jager, personal communication, May 3, 2002).

De Jager concluded:

... the foundations for mutually supportive capacity development and cross fertilisation at local, national and international level have thus been laid. Enough interest has been generated and opportunities to work collaboratively with colleagues who work in similar fields but in different cultures and contexts have been identified (M.J. de Jager, personal communication, May 3, 2002).

Peer help programmes at South African institutions for higher education

A wide range of services are rendered to students by student counselling centres at universities and technikons in South Africa. The services are usually rendered by professional psychologists and psychology interns and focus on individual counselling; therapy; career counselling, and academic and life skills development (Scheepers, cited in Keller, 1999). The number of counselling professionals at institution for higher education is, however, insufficient to meet the increasing needs of students (de Jager, 1996). To address this problem, peer counselling or helping programmes were initiated at a variety of higher education institutions in South Africa since 1990. Peer helping is therefore a relatively new development at these institutions.

Motsabi (2000) conducted a survey amongst higher education institutions in South Africa to determine the prevalence and use of peer helping programmes at such institutions. Of the 14 technikons that were surveyed, nine indicated well-developed peer help programmes, whilst 20 universities conducted these programmes on campus. The number of registered students on these campuses ranged from between 1 000 to 5 000 students on nine university campuses, to 15 000 or more registered students on six university campuses (Motsabi, 2000).

According to de Jager (1998) the theory and practice of peer helping is in line with the recommendations of the White Paper on Education (1997). Peer help programmes offer "... innovative service delivery, increased responsiveness to societal interests and needs, increased co-operation and partnerships and increased chances of success for all students" (de Jager, 1998, p. 2). Peer help programmes are, therefore, developed and maintained to reach out and build capacity within diverse student communities to provide guidance and counselling specifically to those students struggling to cope with the demands of higher education (de Jager, 1998). Peer help programmes, furthermore, form the core of a "... pro-active approach to guidance and counselling" and allow students to develop coping skills prior to any psycho-social crisis (de Jager, 1996, p. 4).

PEER HELPING:
DEVELOPMENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA (UNISA)

The University of South Africa (Unisa), is one of 13 mega distance education institutions in the world. This mega institution was established in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope. In 1916 the name of this institution was changed to the University of South Africa and many colleges, under the auspices of this institution, became autonomous universities (Unisa General Information, 2002). Since 1 January 2004 the University of South Africa has merged with the Technikon of South Africa (TSA) and with Vista University Distance Education College (VUDEC) under the existing name of the University of South Africa (Unisa). This merger has increased the total student population registered for formal courses to approximately 154 000

students (Unisa Planning Office, 2005).

The Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development (BCCAD)

The Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development, prior to the merger known as the Bureau for Student Counselling and Career Development (BSCCD), is a professional department which consists of three divisions namely (1) Counselling and Career Development (consisting of five counsellors, a career developer and three support staff); (2) Academic Development (consisting of an academic development manager; three programme managers, three project coordinators and an office manager); and (3) the Regional Counselling, Career and Academic Development Units (consisting of four counsellors acting as regional managers, one career developer and four office managers).

The vision of the BCCAD is " [t]o facilitate the successful entry and passage of students through the University and beyond" (van Schoor, 2004, p. 1). The focus of the department is therefore on assisting students through the phase of higher education by facilitating their career decision-making and helping them in preparing for their specific careers.

Unisa has a heterogenous student population, not just in terms of racial, socio-economic, geographical and ethnic diversity but also in terms of talents, abilities and career preparation. Many students study under difficult circumstances. Some are full-time employees who study part-time. Others are unemployed, full-time students who are largely under prepared for the demands of higher education in general, and distance education in particular. Many students are also isolated and physically removed from their fellow-students, lecturers and counsellors thus making it difficult to capitalise on pre-registration career guidance and support (van Schoor & Mill, 1998).

A further challenge facing the counsellors at the BCCAD is to meet the career development needs of a large student population. As from 1 January 2004 (the merger date) a total of nine

counsellors render a professional career development and counselling service to a student population of approximately 154 000 students (Unisa Planning Office, 2005). This translates into approximately 17 000 students per counsellor in the year 2005. The limited number of counsellors and the ever increasing demands from students led the then BSCCD to look at creative ways in meeting student's needs.

Peer counselling / helping was the method chosen to help the Bureau build capacity and extend its reach - thus a practical solution to this problem. Scheepers (cited in Keller, 1999, p. 11) stated that peer counselling "... is a practical, pro-active, cost-effective and empowering strategy to expand and supplement the range of services offered by the student counselling center".

THE UNISA PEER HELP VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

The Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme was initiated at the Main Campus in Pretoria as well as at the Western Cape regional campus in 1996. Subsequently, the programme has been extended to the regional campuses in Polokwane, Limpopo; Durban, KwaZulu-Natal and at the Johannesburg Learning Centre, Gauteng (see Appendix B for the vision and mission of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme).

The programme is maintained for three specific purposes namely:
- 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 pro-active, preventative guidance programme where personal and academic problems are identified timeously with the aim of preventing student failure and increasing retention.
- to extend the range of guidance services to schools and the broader community. Peer helper volunteers are empowered with knowledge in terms of the career decision-

making process and, subsequent to this training, conduct career guidance and information outreach activities to schools and in communities.

- to empower the peer helpers to develop critical personal and employability skills. Participation 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 are developed as a result of involvement in the programme (van Schoor & Mill, 1998). The peer helpers are trained and encouraged to develop individual career portfolios of the skills developed through participation in the programme.

Since the inception of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme in 1996 a cohort of students have been trained to support fellow students on the Unisa campuses. The distribution of students trained over a nine year period is as follows:

Table 9: Summary of the distribution of peer helpers trained at Unisa

YEAR	KwaZulu- Natal	Limpopo	Pretoria	Western Cape	Johannesburg
1996	-	-	8	10	-
1997	15	-	9	17	-
1998	23	15	18	8	15
1999	12	14	15	10	8
2000	18	-	12	10	10
2001	17	6	11	25	6
2002	18	11	14	-	6
2003	18	11	20	6	6
2004	-	12	18	10	18
Total	139	69	125	96	69
Total number of peer helper volunteers trained to date:					498

Not all these students are still active peer helper volunteers. Some have managed to secure

contract / permanent employment but continue to render a service to their communities on an ad hoc basis.

Recruitment and selection of Unisa peer helper volunteers

According to Motsabi (2000) no single criteria for the selection of peer helpers was used by participating South African higher education institutions in her survey. Academic performance, seniority, leadership skills and recommendations by staff, administrators or other students are mostly used as criteria for selection. Only a small percentage of institutions (6%) use psychometric testing for selection. A total of 75% of the peer counsellors at the universities participating in her study, offered, on a voluntary basis, to be trained as peer counsellors.

The recruitment of peer helpers at Unisa takes place through campus media, specifically posters inviting senior students who are interested in helping fellow students, to apply. No grade point average is stipulated but the academic records of applicant are attached to the application form for consideration during the selection process. Initially, with the inception of the peer help programme at Unisa, project leaders conducted limited selection and trained most of the volunteers who applied. A large dropout of volunteers was found at all the participating campuses. This led to the identification of specific selection criteria namely (1) currently registered Unisa students who have passed at least 10 modules or the equivalent thereof; (2) effective communication skills; (3) people centredness and a helping orientation; (4) the ability to take ownership for own learning, and (5) sound academic performance.

The first stage of the selection process at Unisa entails the screening of the completed application form to ensure that all the criteria are met. This is followed by an interview where applicants have the opportunity to share their motivation for wanting to become peer helpers, discuss past helping experiences, reflect on personal difficulties, and share self-directed activities that they have initiated or are involved in. Successful applicants are informed when the three-day core training in listening and communication skills will commence. Final selection, however, only takes place after the three day core training sessions have been completed and when trainers have had the opportunity of observing the volunteers closely during the training sessions. Unsuccessful candidates are given an opportunity to discuss the

reasons for nonacceptance by the committee. The aim is to give these candidates the opportunity for feedback and to identify areas for improvement.

The number of peer helpers trained per session depends on the number of peer helpers actively rendering a service at a specific time, the size of the group that each project leader prefers to work with as well as the infrastructure available in terms of peer help office space.

Unisa peer helper training

The Unisa Peer Help Volunteer training is based on *The Peer Counselling Starter Kit*, developed by Carr and Saunders (1980) and adapted for South African conditions by M.J. de Jager of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (de Jager, 1995). According to de Rosenroll (1989) the manual included some ideas and activities from other sources and emphasised that the kit was designed specifically to provide a platform for other practitioners to implement and develop their own programmes. D'Andrea (1987) echoed this and stated that it is imperative that training programmes are tailor made for the situation at a particular college or university campus.

The Unisa context, with its distance education and learning programmes, together with an increased programme emphasis on experiential learning and portfolio development, required that the core training modules be adapted to provide for an introduction to experiential learning as well as ample opportunity for critical reflection after each training session. The existing 12 core training sessions, designed by Carr and Saunders (1980), were adapted by Barnard et al. (2003) and extended to 20 sessions (see next point). The core training was also supplemented by additional training modules to prepare the peer helpers to meet the needs of the students they serve (see details on supplemental training on pp. 73 - 75).

The training focusses on the following, namely: (1) compulsory core training in empathic listening and responding skills; (2) compulsory supplemental training focussing on career guidance and information; academic skills development; project and portfolio management;

and office administration; and (3) elective practical training. Continuous, on-going training also takes place during compulsory supervision sessions.

- **Core training in empathic listening and responding skills**

The adapted core training programme consists of 20 sessions which aim to empower the peer helper volunteers with effective communication, empathic listening and skilful responding skills to enable the peer helpers to assist fellow students through processes of decision-making and problem-solving. The training sessions consist of a total of 24 hours of training spread over three full days. The training is conducted by registered psychologists and senior student counsellors who are staff members of the BCCAD. The learning outcomes of the training modules are as follows:

Table 10: Summary of the learning outcomes of the core training programme

TRAINING MODULES	LEARNING OUTCOMES
Session 1: **Overview of the programme**	At the end of this session the trainees will know what peer helping entails; understand why such programmes are used; know how peer helpers are made available to students and be familiar with the peer help model and training programme.
Session 2: **Expectations and ground rules**	At the end of this session the trainees will understand what is expected of them; appreciate what they stand to gain from participating in the programme; discover the importance of ground rules to create an atmosphere of trust; be familiar with the rules for the training sessions and have had the opportunity to discuss the ground rules that are important to them.
Session 3: **Presentation; getting acquainted; attending**	At the end of this session the trainees will have had a chance to get to know each other; have become more sensitive to the characteristics of a helping relationship and understand what it feels like to need help.
Session 4: **Pre-testing counselling knowledge**	At the end of this session the trainees will have completed the pre-test to establish a base line of their individual knowledge about interpersonal skills.
Session 5: **Decision-making A**	At the end of this session the trainees will have explored how they have made an important decision such as enrolling at Unisa and will understand what motivates students to make use of the services of the BCCAD.

Session 6: Experiential Learning Cycle	At the end of this session the trainees will have learnt how to be reflective learners; be comfortable with reflecting on activities and experiences and will have started to develop insight into their personal and academic growth processes.
Session 7: Awareness of others and non-verbal attending	At the end of this session the trainees will have explored the components of communication namely verbal, non-verbal and paralinguistic communication; have been introduced to the concept of attending; have increased their awareness of positive and negative attending and have become aware of ineffective communication styles.
Session 8: Roadblocks to communication	At the end of this session the trainees will have explored and become more aware of ineffective verbal communication styles and have experienced the effects of ineffective ways of communicating.
Session 9: Active listening - empathy	At the end of this session the trainees will be familiar with what listening and empathy entails and will be able to recognise and respond to feelings and situations / content of what is being communicated.
Sessions 10: Active listening: a structured & more natural response	At the end of this session the trainees will be familiar with a formal response for empathic listening and will experience a structured approach to listening. Through role play exercises the trainees will shift from a mechanical to a more natural way of responding empathically.
Session 11: Questioning skills	At the end of this session the trainees will have been introduced to questioning as a skill; will be able to distinguish between open and closed questions and be aware of when questions are not genuine.
Session12A: Self disclosure: 'I' and 'You' messages	At the end of this session the trainees will have been introduced to 'I' and 'You' messages; have an increased awareness of the effects of these messages; and have been empowered to recognise and demonstrate the difference between these two messages.
Session 12B: Feedback	At the end of this session the trainees will have been introduced to the concept of feedback and be aware of ineffective ways of giving and receiving feedback.
Session 13: Decision-making B	At the end of this session the trainees will have been introduced to the concept of responsible decision-making and problem-solving; will be able to present a Five-Step-Decision-Making-Process; understand why facilitating the decision-making process is a highly valued skill; and understand how to lead a person through the decision-making process, without giving advice.
Session 14: Role plays: putting it all together	At the end of this session the trainees will have had the opportunity to integrate all the skills learnt up to this point; be able to monitor whether they reflect on both feeling and content; be able to ensure that the decision-making process is facilitated; and be able to monitor that they do not revert to giving advice.
Session 15: Values clarification	At the end of this session the trainees will have shared their ideas on values; understand the importance of a personal set of values and have explored the influence of values on one's thoughts, opinions, decisions and actions.

Session 16: Review; ethics; confidentiality & referrals	At the end of this session the trainees will have discussed professional and ethical considerations of confidentiality in helping relationships; have developed a code of ethics for their group; have developed a referral procedure and have become aware of the importance of knowing/recognising when to call in expert help.
Session 17: Post-testing of counselling knowledge	At the end of the session the trainees will be able to determine whether the training has expanded their individual knowledge basis on counselling and helping and be able to check which areas need to be revised.
Session 18: Glossary of terms	At the end of the session trainees will have discussed and be familiar with a number of new terms used during the training; and will have started compiling their own personal dictionary of new terms.
Session 19: Evaluation: format and criteria	At the end of this session trainees will understand what the evaluation at the end of their training period will consist of.
Session 20: Action plan for the following 6 months	At the end of this session trainees will have started drawing up an action plan for the next 6 months of peer help involvement.

(Barnard et al., 2003)**.**

Full attendance of the three day training session is a prerequisite to qualify as a peer- help- volunteer-in-training.

• **Supplemental training**

The supplemental training sessions focus on empowering peer helpers with knowledge and skills about basic career guidance and information; academic skills; basic project management and problem-solving skills; portfolio management, and office administration. The supplemental training consists of between 20 - 30 hours of training and the learning outcomes of these modules are as follows:

Table 11:

Summary of the learning outcomes of the supplemental training programme

SUPPLEMENTAL TRAINING MODULES	LEARNING OUTCOMES
Career guidance and Information	At the end of this training the trainees will have been introduced to the four components of this session namely: **Basic career guidance and information:** The trainees will have been introduced to the personal factors such as aptitude, interest, personality and values that would influence career choice; be aware of educational, training and job factors of specific careers; be aware of resources available to refer students to; be aware of training opportunities before and after grade 12 and be aware of factors in underachievement. **Curriculum design:** The trainees will be familiar with the study possibilities at Unisa and be aware of the relevant subject combinations that will lead to specific careers. **Job searching skills:** The trainees will understand the importance of job searching skills, CV writing and interview skills in the job searching process. **Presentation skills:** The trainees will understand the importance of effective presentation skills and will know how to present workshops specifically Career Guidance and Information Workshops to grade 11 and 12 learners.
Academic skills	At the end of this workshop the trainees will understand the importance of effective academic skills to ensure academic performance and will be familiar with a variety of academic skills.
Basic Project Management and Problem solving	At the end of this workshop the trainees will understand what basic project management entails to enable them to execute a variety of projects successfully. Learning outcomes are to reflect on why a project should be planned; what type of project is needed to achieve the results; location on where it will be implemented; considerations such as resources, costs, barriers, resistance and practical problems; decisions on how the project will be implemented; appointment of individuals to each task; setting dates for completion for each task; completion of an assignment matrix; drawing a time line and, finally, completion of the project evaluation.
Portfolio Development	At the end of the session the trainees will have been introduced to the concept of what portfolio development entails; be familiar with the structure of a career portfolio; know how to organise portfolio documents; learn how to reflect on day-to-day experiences and become aware of the importance of taking charge of their own learning processes.

Office Administration	At the end of the session the trainees will have drawn up a duty roster to structure the voluntary service; be aware of individual and group responsibilities in terms of the running of the peer help office; be familiar with reception skills and telephone etiquette; understand the importance of record keeping for statistical purposes and be familiar with referral procedures to professional counsellors.

Full attendance of these training sessions is a prerequisite to qualify as a peer helper-volunteer-in-training.

• **Elective practical training**

The peer helper volunteers also have a choice of a number of practical projects to get involved in. Through participation in these projects peer helpers develop skills. These skills are reflected on, and contained in their portfolios, which is the focus of this study. Finally these skills are summarised as transferable skills in their CV's.

The elective practical training focus on the practical experience in: (1) the compilation, editing, printing and distribution of a peer helper newsletter; (2) the marketing and materials development for projects such as awareness days; (3) HIV/Aids care and counselling training to develop an understanding of this pandemic and to support students whose lives are affected by this disease; (4) participation in research activities conducted by the programme and the BCCAD; (5) involvement as Career Peers in the development of the Resource Centre as well as participating in Employment Recruitment Days; and (6) assisting with students' electronic requests for help on the workflow system (Pretoria region only).

Peer helper supervision

According to Motsabi (2000) no clear guidelines existed with regard to the supervision of peer helpers amongst the South African institutions of higher education participating in her research. From her survey it seemed as if the hours spent in supervision ranged from one hour per week for individual sessions to two hours for group supervision. The hours spent

depended on the need and requests by either individuals or the peer help group itself. This survey also pointed to the fact that some campuses do not provide supervision to peer helpers at all.

At Unisa, it is compulsory for all peer helpers to attend regular supervision sessions as the project leaders consider that supervision is critical to the continuing development of the peer helpers themselves as well as to the quality assurance of the programme. The frequency of these sessions are determined by the needs of each group and the time that each project leader has at her disposal to conduct such sessions. The aims of the supervision sessions are to (1) create a platform to discuss concerns about cases dealt with; (2) provide further training in terms of curriculum and career development issues; (3) discuss concerns about individual and group functioning; (4) provide feedback during role play exercises; and (5) provide specific training in terms of portfolio management. These supervision sessions also contribute to the continued development of group cohesion as stated by Blain and Brusko (1985).

A number of mixed reactions towards the implementation and management of peer counselling programmes were found in the literature consulted for this study. Some researchers noted that some project coordinators felt overwhelmed by the expected workload of implementing such a programme (Carr, 1986). Others were concerned about the demands that the management of such a programme would place on their time and energy resources (de Rosenroll & Dey, 1990). Some programme coordinators felt that they broke even in terms of the time and effort invested into such a programme. They felt that they did save time by having trained peer counsellors available to render a service to students, but that the time saved was in turn, spent on training and supervising the peer counsellors (de Rosenroll, 1986). Other researchers such as Frisz (1986), however, believed that the advantages of managing such a programme outweighed the disadvantages.

The concerns mentioned above are shared by the project leaders of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme, particularly those in the regional centres. These project leaders cannot

be released from their other responsibilities and duties of managing their respective units. The management of the peer help programme forms only a small part of their total responsibilities. It is therefore imperative that the peer helpers in the Unisa programme are self-motivated students who take responsibility for their own learning and are committed to extend their knowledge base beyond the core and supplemental training and supervision that is provided. It is for this reason that portfolio management was introduced as a way to, not only enable peer helpers to monitor their skills development, but also for the project leaders to monitor the development of the peer helpers themselves.

Peer helper service delivery

According to Motsabi (2000) most higher education institution participating in her research indicated that they use peer helpers mostly during student orientation (79%); counselling for social and personal problems (72%); HIV/Aids counselling (72%) and study skills counselling (62%). Peer helpers were utilised the least for religious counselling (7%) and for the interpretation of psychometric tests (3%).

Before a peer helper is eligible to function in a Unisa Peer Help Office the following criteria must be met: (1) full attendance of the three day core training in empathic listening and responding skills; (2) full attendance of the supplemental training sessions, and (3) a pass mark of 70% in the curriculum test. Once a peer helper has met these set criteria, he/she becomes part of the duty roster to render a service in the Peer Help Office.

To structure peer helping on a national basis at all the Unisa campuses, a Draft Peer Help Volunteer Policy Document has been formulated to provide a structure for peer helper functioning and to set clear boundaries within which all peer helpers should function. Each individual peer helper is required to sign a contract agreeing to the stipulations contained in the contract. As the peer helper role does not include counselling in terms of individual and group therapy, a specific procedure for referrals to professional counsellors is in place. Peer

helpers are constantly reminded of the need to be aware of their own limitations and to make referrals when necessary.

As mentioned previously, the peer helpers participate and render a service to the student population and the community at large in a variety of ways such as individual support to students who contact the peer help office, either telephonically, in person or via email; participation in marketing drives such as awareness days; and participation in career guidance and information sessions to Grade 11 and 12 learners. According to Bowen et al. (1985) community involvement serves two purposes namely that it fosters the link/connection between the university and the community that it serves; and provides a broader base of experiences to the peer helpers as opposed to them just focussing on university student needs.

Through involvement in peer help activities the Unisa peer helpers are provided with opportunities for broadening their knowledge and skills basis in general, as well as to increase their knowledge about their own individual functioning, growth and development. The concept of portfolio management was therefore introduced to allow peer helpers to reflect on what they have learnt from their experiences and to assist them in developing career portfolios that would provide evidence of their skills development. The focus of this study is specifically to determine whether the process of portfolio management does assist peer helpers to monitor the growth and development which results from the broad range of experiences that they are involved in.

Monitoring of growth

A number of researchers agreed that although peer helpers do benefit from the training, supervision and participation in the programme, the extent of such growth and development requires more research (de Rosenroll, 1989; McIntyre et al., 1982). Varenhorst (1984, p. 738) echoed this and emphasised that "... training is the area of peer counseling needing the most

attention in future research". The training she referred to included, not only the core training and supervision aspects but also the personal growth of the trainees. The focus of this study links with Varenhorst's appeal, and aims to demonstrate how peer helpers use portfolios to monitor their development and provide proof of what they have learnt from their experiences and which skills have been developed over the time of peer help involvement.

The implementation of the peer help programme has allowed the BCCAD to build capacity to render a service to a larger proportion of students. In practice, however, the demands of managing the programme and monitoring the development of the peer helpers individually, have increased the pressures on the already overloaded counsellors acting as project leaders. As was previously explained, Unisa peer helpers are selected from the student population by means of set criteria during individual interviews. After the core and supplemental training, all five regional programmes reported that it seemed as if many of the peer helpers remained passive, lacked initiative, did not reflect on experiences and did not take responsibility or ownership for further development. It furthermore seemed as if the dedication, commitment and motivation amongst the peer helpers varied considerably and also fluctuated during the academic year due to a variety of reasons such as personal and academic commitments. Some peer helpers remained passive and overtly stated that they were waiting for the project leaders to develop other training modules to broaden their knowledge basis - thus not taking responsibility for their own learning. This created difficulties in monitoring the growth and development of such a diverse group.

During interviews with clients, peer helpers are at times faced with questions and requests for information on issues that fall outside the content of the core and supplemental training modules. It is therefore expected of the peer helpers to take responsibility for researching additional information in order to assist clients. The peer helpers are also responsible for conducting self-directed searches into other issues of interest and to broaden their knowledge basis beyond what is provided in the training.

The challenge for the project leaders was, therefore, to develop a mechanism to (1) allow peer helpers to provide proof of any learning that has taken place since the core and supplemental training; (2) monitor the individual development of each peer helper; (3) certify the level of competency based on the portfolios presented; and (4) provide individual feedback to the peer helpers with regard to their development. The development of portfolios was, therefore, initiated as a mechanism to reach these goals.

Lawson (1989) listed a variety of difficulties encountered with the implementation of peer help programmes by participants in her study. Motivating peer helpers and time constraints for activities such as monitoring and supervision were two of the difficulties mentioned. Tindall (cited in Carr et al., 1989) echoed this and stated that skills learning and the development of peer helpers should also be evaluated on an on-going basis. The use of portfolios to monitor the growth and development of peer helpers is the method applied by the project leaders at Unisa to address the abovementioned issues.

Programme evaluation

Peer counselling programme evaluation focuses on three areas namely the evaluation of the peer counsellors themselves; the evaluation of the knowledge and the skills applied in the peer counselling process; and the evaluation of the outcomes of peer counselling (Altmann et al., 1986; Keller, 1999). The focus of evaluation of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme has to date been on the peer counselling process and the effect on the peer counsellors themselves. The effectiveness of the peer helping programme from the client's point of view has not been investigated.

Six factors are taken into consideration in the evaluation of Unisa peer helpers namely:
• ability to integrate the skills acquired through the training components, the applied competence and theory-to-practice transference in a role-play interview. This is assessed by a rating scale focussing on the different phases in an interview.

- compilation and presentation of a portfolio based on the specific structure of a career portfolio. This is assessed by a rating scale focussing on different portfolio areas namely portfolio presentation; self-directed learning activities; reflection and skills development and a narrative essay reflecting on the peer helper's helping experiences and motivation for joining the peer help programme.

- the number of volunteer hours of service rendered by a peer helper, measured against a total number of hours.

- knowledge about curriculum compilation, assessed by an open book test.

- involvement in projects focussing on the ability to plan, execute and evaluate a project. The focus is also on the development of employability skills through reflection on project involvement.

- the number of supervision sessions attended. During these sessions the theory-to-practice transference is monitored and feedback is provided. The assessment of the number of supervision sessions attended by a peer helper is measured against the total number of sessions held.

In line with the programme structure as reported by Carr (1981) formal recognition in the form of certificates are presented to students who have completed the peer help training in full. Three types of certificates are available to peer helpers at Unisa namely:

- Certificate of Attendance - for the completion of the core training in listening and responding skills.

- Senior Peer Helper Certificate - for students who have completed the core and supplemental training; have rendered a volunteer service for a period of at least six months; and have passed the formal peer help evaluation.

- Certificate of Merit - for commendable contribution to a project or activity of the peer help programme.

CONCLUSION

In a relatively short period of time, and as a result of international funding and the initiative by the former Port Elizabeth Technikon, peer helper programmes have been established at a number of higher education institutions as well as in a number of communities in South Africa. The peer help programme at the University of South Africa was established in 1996 and a number of developments and innovative programme changes have been made over a period of nine years. A total of 498 peer helpers have been trained during this period to reach out to a large student population of 154 000 students in 2005 (Unisa Planning Office Statistics, 2005)

Since its inception a number of significant changes have been made to the original peer help model. The initial selection process has been adapted by identifying specific criteria; the core training model has been extended from 12 to 20 sessions to incorporate experiential learning and portfolio development; the core training model has been supplemented with additional training in a number of aspects that peer helpers at Unisa need knowledge of; regular supervision sessions are held to support the volunteers and to monitor the quality of the services rendered; and an evaluation system was developed to assess the integration of the knowledge and skills of the peer helpers. The programme has also made a significant contribution to the peer helpers themselves, by initiating the development of career portfolios. The focus of this study is therefore to demonstrate how peer helpers use portfolios to monitor their skills development and to compile career portfolios which will provide evidence of how and where transferable skills were developed.

McCarthy et al. (1975, p. 66) stated that:

> The literature contains reports of innovative paraprofessional programs which begin with great hope and somehow either fade away or become stagnant. Few of the reported programs change, grow, and become more refined as the results of the program are monitored.

The Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme has fulfilled part of its vision and mission as stated nine years ago. Since its inception it has continued to grow and the processes have continued to be refined. This process of refinement will continue with on-going monitoring of the processes and the growth of the individuals involved in the programme.