The Impact and Efficacy of E-Counselling in an Open Distance Learning Environment:A Mixed Method Exploratory Study

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Rossano Wells

Directorate for Counselling & Career Development, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of a study which sought to investigate the impact and efficacy of technology-based counseling offered by the University of South Africa (Unisa), an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution. The study focused specifically on student perceptions of the services they had received from professionals based in the Gauteng regional center, in the context of academic admissions and support, career indecision, financial and psychosocial challenges. A client satisfaction questionnaire was administered to 30 students. The theoretical framework for the study was Activity theory, which is a philosophical and cross-disciplinary framework for studying different forms of human practices as development processes, with both individual and social levels interlinked simultaneously. A mixed-method approach was adopted to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of e-counseling. Quantitative data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Open-ended responses contained in the questionnaire, were subjected to qualitative analysis using the Atlas.ti program. Accessibility, convenience, and efficiency were highlighted as significant benefits of e-counseling. Results of the study suggest that while e-counseling should not be construed as a substitute for traditional, face-to-face counseling and psychotherapy, particularly in respect of more severe emotional and psychological challenges, it can be a useful adjunct to traditional modes of practice. The study also has important quality assurance implications for student counseling practice in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions, particularly with respect to informing online ethical imperatives.

Introduction

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has a critical role to play within the open and distance learning (ODL) environment, helping to minimize the detachment between lecturers, student support structures, students and the institution. Butcher, Baijnath, and Ryan (2012), however, posit that the ODL approach adopted by UNISA, characterized by (what are the typical features/ characteristics of the former ODL approach which have been shortcomings) has

CONTACT Rossano Wells, PhD ✉ wellsrs@unisa.ac.za 🖃 Directorate for Counselling & Career Development, University of South Africa, PO Box 392, Pretoria 0003, South Africa

been largely ineffective in terms of making quality education accessible. The more recent Unisa model places emphasis on online distance learning (ODeL) and encompasses, *inter alia*, electronic counseling as an important adjunct to the learning process. The institutional strategic operational plan of 2015 is an attempt to bring about innovative ways of service delivery to Unisa students. Two imperatives which inform this paper are (1) to sustain a supportive, enabling and productive research environment; (2) to promote the appropriate adoption and use of innovative ICT in teaching, learning, research, student support and community engagement (National Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). To this end, the new business model adopted by Unisa saw the introduction of a compulsory online module for first-year students, and an uptake of e-tutors to provide tutorial support for students via the medium of technology.

Historically, Unisa students have sought the traditional mode of face-to-face contact with a student counselor at student counseling centers, when the need arose. Student counseling units form part of the broader student support structure of the institution, with regional service centers based in different towns across the country. Services at these centers are rendered by qualified career counselors and registered psychologists, and include individual career counseling, group counseling, individual therapy and the facilitation of academic related workshops. Professional staff attend to a variety of student issues ranging from academic and career-related challenges, psychosocial challenges as well as personal and psychological difficulties such as anxiety disorders and mood disturbances. Administrative staff and volunteers provide the necessary administrative and logistical support to the counselor(s). However, traditional face-to-face counseling has several practical implications for students who wish to utilize the service. These include having to physically travel to the nearest center for assistance, at the student's own expense. In line with the new strategic imperatives of Unisa, greater focus has been placed on making student counseling and career development more accessible to the student using e-counseling. The present study therefore seeks to investigate the use of e-counseling services and its impact on students at UNISA.

In the twenty-first century, mobile phones, iPads, laptops, computers and tablets are commonplace among the student popluation. Although the numbers may vary according to racial and economic factors, it is notable that there is an exponential growth in the number of students who use mobile phones. With the advances in technology, smartphones, connectivity, changes in the student profile and education needs, it seems plausible to assume that the institutional approach to teaching, learning and support had to embrace this transformation. Transformation would entail improving efficiencies in technology-based student learning and support services (National Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). The research by Murphy et al. (2009), whilst investigating comparative differences between online and face-to-face

counseling methods, highlights the growth of cyber counseling in the field of distance education. This study by Murphy et al. (2009) focused on client satisfaction and outcome comparisons of online and face-to-face counseling methods. It compared Global Assessment of Function (GAF) and client satisfaction survey scores for clients receiving either face-to-face or online counseling. The results of the study, as well those by Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, and Shapira (2008), concluded that "internet based therapy on the average is as effective or nearly as effective as face-to-face therapy". Similar results are found in traditionally contact universities in South Africa namely; University of Cape Town (UCT), university of the Western Cape (UWC), the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) and overseas universities (Ng'ambi, Bozalek, & Gachago, 2013). It appears that while Unisa is adopting such technology-based transformation, with advancements in online modules, signature courses and enhancements of ICT initiaves (Baijnath, 2012), the extension of these techonological dvancements to the domain of student counseling and support apears to be lagging.

Currently, Unisa counseling services staff are required to adopt a more flexible, blended approach comprising traditional counseling, accomodating a number of face-to-face "walk ins" as well as the use of e – to support and assist students. Varied student issues presenting at the student counseling units, are attended to by different role players. As mentioned earlier, these include a counselor, who is a registered psychologist as well as an administrative officer who provides administrative assistance to students and staff at the student counseling units. Peer helpers are senior students majoring in psychology, and have volunteered their services to the counseling unit. They undergo training in basic aspects of counseling and provide basic support, information and assistance to students on study-related matters. Unfortunately, the issue of online counseling or e-counseling, has not been adequately researched, particualrly in the context of ODL. This paper therefore seeks to investigate the efficacy of online counseling in the student support services sector, with a view to informing and enhancing best practices on the use of ICT in this context.

Problem statement

Transformative shifts in the higher education landscape, characterized by an increase in the numbers and diversity of students accessing tertiary institutions, necessitated adaptations in teaching, learning and student support. The ODL shift toward technology-based learning necessittates a shift in student counseling paradigms of service delivery and requires a review of how technologiy is utilized in counseling to respond to students who are unable to access face-to-face counseling. Such changes brought about a concerted drive toward an e-delivery mode (Unisa, 2013). However, the student population

dynamics at Unisa pose a great challenge to the realization of this transformative enterprise. It would seem that the majority of Unisa students come from previously disadvantaged backgrounds characterized by poverty and a lack of access to basic necessities such as elecricity and running water. Access to internet connectviity therefore poses a serious challenge to individuals living in low-income communities; this, in turn, has potentially problematic implications for the envisaged mass communication and electronic e-counseling and support goals of the intsitution (Butcher et al., 2012). On the other hand, however, many possess mobile phones that have connectivity to a host of social platforms or applications (apps). Despite the foregoing disparate psycho-socio-economic statuses, the student population can be reached via their smart, android phones, Ipads and tablets for technology-based counseling. However, few studies have actually focused on the utilization and effectiveness of online counseling – a gap which the present study seeks to address. By investigating the efficacy of technology-based counseling in an ODeL environment at Unisa, one can add value to the envisaged ODeL strategies of the e-counseling mode of service delivery.

Literature review

The use of counseling generally

Researchers seem to agree that the 21st century has brought forth development in technology and, as such, possibilities in the provision of online counseling services (Issroff & Scanlon, 2002; Ritterband et al., 2003). There is a growing body of online counseling literature (Barak, 2008; Bates, 2015; Britto & Rush, 2013; Daniel, 1998; Day & Schneider, 2002; Frederickson, Reed, & Clifford, 2005; Israelite, 2015; Kummervold et al., 2002). These studies conclude that online counseling reduces cost and improves quality, canbe considered a form of life-long learning in relation to compurt-based skills in the 21st century and improves student support services by focusing and meeting their needs and helping them develop competencies, attribute, and knowledge to be self-regulated learners utilizing online skills. However, these do not seem to focus on online counseling interventions in distance education. A literature search of studies conducted in the area of online counseling service in distance education and the African context in particular, suggests that this area remains largely under-researched. Limited research available such as the work of Barak (2008), posits that cyber counseling is a field that has seen tremendous growth in the past decade. Recognizing the research lacuna and the need to expand our knowledge and understanding of this field, this study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of online counseling within the context of South African distance learning. The study focusses specifically on how students experience e-counseling in an ODL environment. It is envisaged that the research findings

will assist university management and role players in ascertaining the extent to which online counseling is utlized as well as the impact thereof, on students, with a view to enhancing and making the service more accessible to larger numbers of students in remote areas. Latest research by Minnaar (2011) and Bates (2015) on student support services and online learning, respectively, were found informative for the study. According to Minnaar (2011) open and distance learning institutions are faced with integrating ICT in their instructional strategies and planning. However, the question that arises is how to support students in an e-learning environment, in an African context, to enhance growth and development. This question is eloquent as it also addresses student support in an e-counseling space. Accordingly, this is considered to speak to the advantages of online counseling as espoused by many researchers (Marks, Cavanagh, & Gega, 2007; Ng'ambi et al., 2013; Speyer & Zach, 2011).

The use of e-counseling in higher education institutions

Researchers, such as Anthony (2000), Britto and Rush (2013), Israelite (2015), Murphy et al. (2009), and Richards and Tangney (2008), highlighted the growth of technologies and the possibilities for online psychological support. These looked at internet-based psychological support, including online counseling. These studies conclude that the modality is not different to traditional face-to-face in bringing about change. These cited studies focused on online psycho-education and online peer support. Others have highlighted the many benefits and challenges associated with online counseling (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004; Tate & Zabinski, 2004). Cited benefits relate to engaging with a therapist at own space and time, reduction in transport fees, alleviation of waiting time and queues as well as the possibility of absence from the office for the therapist. Some of the disadvantages would revolve around connectivity and access to the internet, lack of connectivity or difficulties with same in rural areas, third world electricity interruptions, computer skills for some clients and competency and confidence in engaging in online counseling for both client and counselor. A highly debated issue at hand is confidentiality issues regarding online counseling and therapy. However, research in this field suggests that online/cybercounselling is equivalent in impact to face-to-face work.

The use of e-counseling in ODL

A review of available literature on e-counseling in ODL revealed that research has primarily been conducted in first world countries, especially Europe, and mainly in traditional contact universities. Researchers have tended to focus on the features and benefits of online counseling (Marks et al., 2007; Richards,

2009), without actually exploring the impact and efficacy of technology in the open and distance education environments (King, 2001; Ng'ambi et al., 2013). The benefits may include convenience and accessibility across physical locations and disability. Other studies, such as Murphy et al. (2009), offer a comparative perspective of satisfaction outcomes associated with online and face-to-face counseling. Findings suggest that while students report satisfaction with e-counseling, the ability to bring about change, the traditional face-to-face counseling approach is still preferred. This would suggest that online counseling should not be construed as a substitute for traditional, face-to-face counseling. On the other hand, the ODL context presents unique challenges in respect of student counseling and psychotherapy, with students at distance education institutions experiencing physical, spatial, time and resource constraints because many of them are employed full time and do not have the luxury of immediate access to a student counselor when the need arises.

There are several advantages of online counseling which may include convenience and accessibility across physical locations and disability. Also noteworthy is the sense of client autonomy and empowerment as the client initiates electronic contact, selects choices and determines the pace of interaction and outcomes, in collaboration with the counselor. The client therefore retains a sense of ownership as is typical of the traditional, face-to-face therapeutic modality. Disadvantages of e-counsellling may include the fact that it does not afford an opportunity for meaningful clarification of non-verbal cues from both client and counselor. Furthermore, the author of this present study believes that it is imperative that both client and counselor are comfortable with using the technological platform for counseling.

Noteworthy is that despite living in an age of increasing technological advancement, the practice of cybercounselling or e-counseling is still relatively unexplored amongst practitioners in the helping professions. There is furthermore a lack of research exploring client utilization and satisfaction with technology-based counseling in an ODL environment. The author considers research of this nature significant in bridging this research gap, as well as alerting student counseling practitioners to salient variables that can enhance best practices in the area of career guidance, counseling and psychotherapy. The goal of the research reported here is therefore to investigate the impact and efficacy of online student counseling in ODL.

Applying conceptual and theoretical framework to counseling

Theories considered relevant to this study on e-counseling include the theory of transactional distance by Moore (1972) derived from Dewey (1949), and the activity theory from the works of Vygotsky (1978) and Leont'ev (1981).

Moores' (1972) transactional theory is of relevance to the present study as it addresses the importance of engaging effectively with students and attaining results that do not compromise on quality of output. The theory of transactional distance was an attempt to define distance education and articulate a theory. It is a concept describing the universe of teacher – learner relationships that exist when learners and instructors are separated by space and by time (Moore, 1972, 1993). As explained by Boyd and Apps (1980), the theory signifies the interplay between the environment, the individuals and the patterns of behaviors in a situation. With separation, there is a psychological and communication space to be crossed; a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner (Moran, 2006). It is this psychological and communications space that represents the transactional distances (Moore, 1972).

The activity theory is a philosophical and cross-disciplinary framework for studying different forms of human practices as development processes, with both individual and social levels interlinked simultaneously (Kuutti, 1996). Accordingly, the basic unit of analysis is an activity, which is defined as a form of doing by a subject directed at an object using tools in order to transform it into an outcome (Moran, 2006). The foundational concept of "activity" is understood to be purposeful, transformative, and developing interaction between the actor and an object. Kaptelinin (1994, 2006) views the activity theory in terms of human computer interaction in context. The individual "client" engages in purposeful and transformative "activity" with the "computer" in order to receive counseling which serves as a "transformative" objective. According to Engestrom (2001), the activity theory has been widely used in an interdisciplinary manner, spanning psychology, education and cultural studies. This view is considered pertinent for this paper as it speaks directly to students interacting with technology, of whatever make and type, in the context of student counseling. Frederickson, Reed and Clifford (2005) and Engestrom (2001) posit that the activity theory represents the activity systems in terms of the relationships between an individual (subject), and the object in the environment and community. It is imperative to acknowledge that these relationships are mediated in different ways. The activity systems postulate that a relationship exists between the subject and object and is mediated by cultural artifacts or tools in the environment. Accordingly, these cultural artifacts can be material objects or symbol systems or procedures – anything that is used in the transformation process. Activity systems are typically in flux as contradictions result from the operation of external influences (Engestrom, 2001).

Below is a graphical adaptation of the human activity systems based on the activity theory conceptual mind map (Figure 1).

The above diagrammatic representation was adopted to highlight the similarities in the theory and practice- based counseling process. The basic
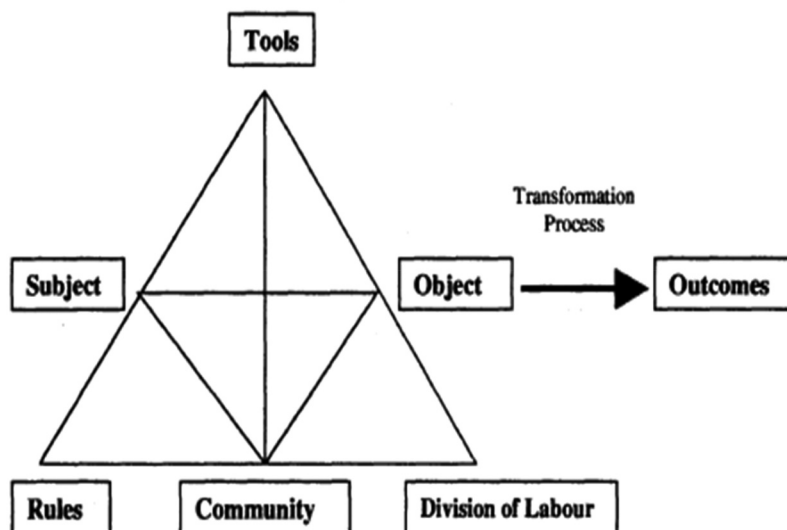
Figure 1. Structure of human activity system (Engestrom, 1987, 2001).

assumptions are that, just as a student follows the learning in a learning situation, so does a "client" in a therapeutic situation. The learning process is very similar in the manipulation of a tool to reach a desired outcome. The computer aided "e- counselling" is a form of tool mediation, which allows for appropriating socially, developed forms of interaction in the social apace. In an ODL counseling environment, the use of e- counseling speaks to the client "acting" purposefully in using any electronic devices in the process of achieving an outcome, therapy.

The roles within this therapeutic alliance are also deemed similar to that of an instructor, as the therapist works according to the pace and presenting information, mastery of the interaction-online language speaks to the rules of communication and the counselor's navigation of appropriate language usage for the client's benefit and understanding.

The envisaged outcome by both parties is a positive resolution or empowerment of the client in the counseling process. The counselor's sensitivity to the client's culture and social /community aspects, informs the pace and language complexity used for different clients at different levels of any therapeutic alliance. The pace at which the client engages in the process determines how, what and when the counselor can intervene; thus always ensuring that the client eventually develops a sense of agency in the whole process. This speaks to the advantages of online counseling as espoused by many researchers (Marks et al., 2007; Ng'ambi et al., 2013; Speyer & Zach, 2011).

Research methodology

Research approach and data collection

A mixed method approach was employed to investigate the efficacy and impact of e-counseling for students utilizing this form of support at Unisa. Ivankova (2007), as cited in Delport () Maree (2010) defines mixed methods research as "a procedure for collecting, analysing and 'mixing' both quantitative and qualitative data at some stage of the research process within a single study to understand a research problem more completely". This comprehensive approach was deemd apporpriate for capturing both the quantative and qualitative aspects of particpants experiences of online counseling (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1996).

An online, asynchronous e-mail survey questionnaire was designed seeking feedback regarding services utilized at the student-counseling unit. The Likert scale, client satisfaction questionnaire comprised both closed and open-ended questions (Appendix, p. 14) and provided a range of five response options from very satisfied to very dissatisfied.

For this study, the questionnaire was sent to students who were using different mobile devices such as computers, iPads, smartphones and tablets. The questionnaire had to be easily accessible to any respondent who had access to technology and, most importantly, any type of mobile phone that could receive text messages. This became an important criterion in the design of the questionnaire. This was tested by sending links to different types of mobile phones and only thereafter, was the research questionnaire was designed, based on the noted accessibility success. In a criterion-based questionnaire, the individual responses are critical, as these are not compared to the sample or other respondents. This also takes care of bias issues that may confound research results (Mouton & Marais, 1996).

The satisfaction survey comprised questions exploring participants' levels of satisfaction with critical counseling skills such as responsiveness, professionalism and understanding of the client's needs by the counseling staff member. The Likert scale format allowed for greater discrimination of the intensity of a respondent's belief regarding an issue. Quantitative data were analyzed by means of SPSS while those that are qualitative in nature are analyzed using Atlas.ti. Open-ended questions afforded students the opportunity to express, in their own words, the subjective experience and impact that the e-counseling process had on them.

Target population and sampling

According to the notion behind sampling theory, even a small set of observations can give an idea of what can be expected in the total population of the intended study (de Vos, 2011). The client satisfaction questionnaire was

administered to thirty students who had utilized e-counseling services that ranged from, (academic admissions, career indecision, registration, financial issues, academic progress and minor psychosocial difficulties. E-counseling would not be utilized for interventions regarding psychological difficulties such as suicidal ideation and intent, depression and anxiety, trauma, psychosis, personality disorders and self-injurious behavior, for example), and had indicated an interest in responding to the survey. Nineteen students completed the consent form and submitted completed questionnaires via mail. This figure comprises the actual sample of the study, with fourteen of these individuals being female and five, male.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed by means of SPSS while those that are qualitative in nature were analyzed using Atlas.ti. The quantitative approach to data analysis advocated by Sweet and Grace-Martin (2012), was employed for this study. According to Sweet and Grace-Martin (2012), it is imperative that researchers examine the study variables and construct them in forms that are amenable the research approach. The findings/results need to be examined carefully and tested in relatin to participant responses or concerns. This approach would ensure rigor in interpreting the research findings. Multiple factors that contribute to social experiences and control for the influence of effectiveness of an intervention can be examined.

Thematic analysis was the qualitative approach adopted to analyze participants' experiences. This method entailed adopting a spiral approach, with the researcher moving in analytic circles rather than a fixed linear sequence (Creswell (2009) & Patton, n.d.) . According to Schwandt (2007) and Guest (2012), a variety of analytic strategies are used that involve interpreting the data by sorting, organizing and reducing them to more manageable pieces and then exploring ways to reassemble them. The qualitative analysis was initiated inductively, thus allowing for a better understanding of the voices/narratives of the participants (Patton, n.d.). In accordance with Creswell (2013), the process involved organizing text data, as in transcriptions, for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes. Initial coding was conducted using Atlas.ti.

Coded themes were followed by the integration of of qualitative findings with quantitative findings, and elaborated on in the form of an analytical discussion

Research findings

Quantitative findings

The results for this study were analyzed in two ways, first focusing on the quantitative data obtained from the Likert scale questions contained in the questionnaire. The second step in involved the analysis of qualitative data based on open-ended questions. This analysis required the following important scientific steps: first, coding the responses to ensure anonymity of the respondents. The second step involved analyzing the responses for themes from the different response narratives in response to the open-ended questions (Sweet, 2008 & Pallant, 2007).

Rating of experiences

The results show that fifteen students who received technology- based counseling were "very satisfied" with their overall experience with counseling services. Three stated that they were *satisfied* with the experience, while only one stated that they were *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied* with the online counseling experience. This rating is important as it speaks to issues of perceived impact from the perspective of the client; in particular, existing or impending difficulties with client engagement and professional practice.

Recommendation to other students

All nineteen participants responded positively to the question. It would seem on the surface, it would appear that students were satisfied with their counseling experience and would definitely recommend such services to fellow students.

Rating of satisfaction levels

This question formed the basis of the study. It is a criterion based question investigating participants' overall level of satisfaction the subjective mode of satisfaction and deemed important in improving and enhancing service delivery in a counseling environment. Fifteen students reported being *very satisfied* with the responsiveness of the attending service provider; three were *satisfied*, and only one stated that he/ she was *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*.

With regard to professionalism, fifteen students stated being *very satisfied* with the level of professionalism of the attending service provider. Three students stated being satisfied with the professional manner in which they experienced counseling sessions, while only one student stated an ambiguity (*neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*) with their counseling experience.

The third component of significant service provider activity revolves around the understanding of client needs. For this criterion, fourteen students were *very satisfied* with the counseling experience, four were *satisfied*, while

only one student stated more of a neutral response, *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*, with the counseling experience.

Qualitative findings

Qualitative perceptions of the e-counseling service were varied and informative, and pertained specifically to how students experienced the counseling sessions – whether the client experienced unconditional acceptance and felt respected in the counseling process, despite the interaction not being face-to-face. Also pertinent is the client's experience of the counselor as a professional who displays an understanding of what issues the client is presenting. The above possible experiences by clients were considered very important in evaluating counseling service delivery.

Four main categories were developed from the thematic analysis of integrated interview and open-ended survey responses: patience- responsiveness of the counselor; satisfaction with online counseling; and marketing-awareness of online counseling services. These are discussed in detail, below.

Counselor empathy & responsiveness

In relation to the responsiveness of the counselor, the participants pointed to satisfaction with the manner in which online sessions were conducted as well as the patience with which the counselor assisted them. Participants also highlighted counselor empathy in dealing with presenting issues. One participant highlighted a cognitive – emotive aspect of the counseling interaction. The "interaction" speaks to the "activity" that is taking place. The "activity" that emanated here is three-fold in that it was (i) between the student and technology (human computer integration-HCI), (ii) between the student and the counselor, and (iii) the student's self- efficacy or belief in using technology to express the presenting difficulty. A few "verbatim" extracts below:

> I'm satisfied with the way the sessions are conducted and the patience of the counsellor.

> …..At no time during the interaction did I feel that I was bothering the counsellor.

> ….."Very efficient and helpful"; "very friendly and empathetic counsellor"; "very helpful"; "very professional"; "I am helped in more than one way"; "patience of the counsellor"

Still other participants signified the importance of a safe environment in which the students can cathart. Responses suggest that the concept of "therapeutic safety" can extend beyond physical to include technological spaces as well. It is a clinical imperative that such catharsis happens in a space that affords the student a sense of privacy, including the context of online counseling. As espoused by Murphy et al. (2009), it is imperative that professional counselors who are often registered psychologists, consider online counseling a viable

modality and seek to familiarize themselves with online ethics, techniques and approaches.

The above quotations indicate that participants experienced the e-counselor as personally attentive, present and focused. They also reportedly feel understood and "heard", and that they were afforded sufficient time and space to proceed with their issues, at their own pace. Counselor interpretations and reflections were also regarded as accurate and constructive

Accessibility to online counseling

Participants highlighted accessibility and convenience of e-counseling as significant benefits, particularly in the context of full-time employment:

> . . .In my case it is because I am permanently employed and it is difficult to plan such a session off-site.

It was further noted from some of the narratives that participants were satisfied with the e-counseling interaction because of the autonomy that it offered them to make informed decisions at their own pace. This, in turn, had an empowering impact on their sense of self, elevating their levels of self-mastery:

> . . .I was reassured that I was also not dictated or prescribed to. The notion that it is my decision after all gave me a sense of having a modicum of controlling my own situation.

According to participants, the human element was retained, despite the use of technology as the primary mode of contact. This result may be linked to that of a study by Murphy et al. (2009), which concluded that "internet based therapy on the average is as effective or nearly as effective as face-to-face therapy" (p. 638). Similarly, findings from a study by Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, and Shapira, (2008) concluded that internet-based approaches and online therapy could be useful and effective for treating anxiety and stress-related challenges in a similar way to face-to-face interventions. The author, further states that psychotherapy and counseling should adjust to the changing world and adopt new, innovative tools and methods of meeting client needs.

Marketing-awareness of online counseling services

Although satisfaction was indicated in the area of marketing and awareness of the service, it would appear that this aspect could benefit from further improvement:

> . . ..Make sure people know about services"; "marketing of services

> I think more advertising of the services you are rendering because some students do not even know that you exist on the campus.

The call for improved marketing and awareness of online counseling services implies a recognition that the service is valuable and needed, but that increased visibility and accessibility of the service needs to be prioritized.

Discussion

Results of the study indicate that e-counseling has positive practical implications in terms of accessibility and efficiency, and can serve as a useful adjunct to conventional counseling and psychotherapy. Issues which e-counseling can help address include career related issues, academic skills, study skills and critical thinking and problem – solving skills, student advocacy and disability support advocacy. Issues regarding personality disorders, psychosis and other serious psychological impairments are not addressed via e -counseling. Students could manage and regulate the pace of counseling, own the process from their time and space as well as bridge the distance from distance education. Analysis of the quantitative feedback on aspects of counseling core functions such as professionalism, understanding of client needs and responsiveness of the service providers showed significant satisfaction of the technology based counseling.

The human activity system framework, as described in Engestrom(2001), emphasizes the interactive and dynamic nature of learning, that learning occurs through interaction of the social presence, cognitive presence and activity presence. The activity, which encompasses engaging in online counseling, would have the presenting psychosocial issues for counseling as well as the cognitive unpacking, realization and motivation for seeking and engaging in online counseling. The framework indicates that technology is there for online therapeutic/counseling interventions to access and use.

The theoretical framework by Moore (1993) relating to transactional distance between the professional counselor and student, pertains here as it addresses the importance of engaging effectively online with students and attaining results that do not compromise on quality of output. The theory of transactional distance was an attempt to define distance education and articulate a theory. It is a concept describing the universe of teacher – learner relationships that exist when learners and instructors are separated by space and by time (Moore, 1972). As explained by Boyd and Apps (1980), the theory signifies the interplay between the environment, the individuals and the patterns of behaviors in a situation, in this instance online counseling. Accordingly, the student who is at a distance (ODL) engages in online counseling to bridge the gap (distance) between the student and the counselor. Online counseling, in this instance, would not compromise on the quality of counseling even though at a distance from the student.

Most studies, as cited earlier, tended to focus on student needs and how the institutions would or could address them. Addressing the gap in online

counseling in an ODL environment is critical as ultimately, the efficacy of online counseling may have important implications for an innovative manner in which masses of students can be reached in the support services of the University of South Africa.

Conclusion

The outcome of this research has led to gains in understanding student experiences in relation to what institutions of higher learning provide in student support services. Professional student support that is flexible and responsive to students' personal and practical needs should be prioritized in higher education institutions. Online counseling care that provides coordination of psychosocial technology based care could bridge the gap in an ODL environment. Noteworthy reflections included the need for stringent marketing of online services as well as positive narratives of the effectiveness of online counseling, especially, for ODL students who may be in fulltime employment and financial savings for students from remote and rural areas.

The author posits that this study supports the results found in the study by Murphy et al. (2009), that online counseling can be an impactful and convenient adjunct to, traditional face-to- face counseling interventions.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

It is possible that a number of students did not participate due to constraints and challenges relating to internet access and affordability. Future studies could seek to replicate the present research while targeting a larger sample of the population.

Evaluation of Student Support at the Unisa and will inform the envisaged follow-up study.

Cultural and ethical implications of online counseling need to be considered, particularly in terms of how it could be perceived, utilized and exploited by individuals and groups who do not necessarily have the appropriate training and authorized access to the service. These considerations point to possible areas for future investigation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix. Client satisfaction survey questionnaire