Exploring first year student counselling needs in an Open and Distance Learning institution

Sfiso Emmanuel Mabizela
University of South Africa
South Africa
sfisomabizela.mabizela@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Directorate for Career Counselling and Development (DCCD) at the University of South Africa conducted a study to explore first year student's counselling needs. A descriptive research design was employed. The survey questionnaire, adapted from Gallager, Golin, and Kelleher (1992), was emailed to a total of 6458 first year students from the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (CAES) and College of Science, Engineering and Technology (CSETS) and the response rate was 60%. The measuring instrument has an inter-item reliability of 0, 92. Initially, student'' counselling needs were classified along three constructs, the factor analysis showed that there were six constructs which were named: Career Advancement (CA), Self (S), Effective Studying Skills (ESS) , Job Searching Skills (JSS),Organisational and Planning (O&P) and Relationship and Emotions (R&E). Students were compared according to age groups, race, gender and college. Descriptive statistic were performed and the results showed that first year students needs counselling on adaptation to studying at an Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution, knowing career opportunities, improving study skills, preparing for examinations, identifying further study opportunities, compiling career portfolios, preparing for job interviews, and dealing with exam failure. Counselling needs which are considered less important to students were issues relating to accepting others and dealing with peer pressure.

Keywords: counselling needs, College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (CAES), College of Science, Engineering and Technology (CSET), Directorate for Career Counselling and Development (DCCD), first year students, and Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

According to Siddiqui (2007), Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a viable means of supporting attainment of academic, social and economic development around

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the world. This type of learning can enhance access to education as a result of its flexibility and elasticity, expandability. ODL can be described as a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographic, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and coursework, and between student and peers. The present study was conducted at the University of South Africa (Unisa) which is an ODL institution. The present study is a prerequisite in the sense that students counselling needs should be continuously explored in order to strengthen the Directorate for Career Counselling and Development (DCCD) which offers a wide range of support and counselling services to students. Despite the dearth of literature concerning the counselling needs of students at ODL institutions and Unisa in particular, there are a handful of research studies which have been conducted in full time higher education institution. Although ODL and full-time institution differ in various aspects, research studies conducted in some full-time institutions provided the foundation for the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The university experience, especially for undergraduate students, is one of transition, a process of continual engagement and disengagement as individuals encounter new academic and personal challenges (Rickinson, 1998). On the other hand, students are confronted with various developmental challenges, including separating from their family, setting up their own social networks, coping with the rules and requirements of an organisation, stepping into a career path, and building romantic relationships (Giovazolias, Leontopoulou & Triliva, 2010). This signals that there should be an in-depth orientation to help students adapt to the challenges that comes with being a university student. In addition, at an ODL institution like Unisa where contact with lecturers is minimal, students' concerns should be a priority and be considered as an important aspect to enhance students' academic success.

Furthermore, Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) who conducted a study at Unisa to develop a model and framework to improve students success in an ODL institution, argue that most students are under prepared for higher learning as the consequence of an on-going legacy of apartheid and predominant substandard schooling systems, emanating from a disadvantaged background and facing deeply rooted socio-economic challenges which in combination threaten their success. This signals other aspects that pose a threat on students' academic success which should also be taken into cognisance by counselling centres.

In the United States of America (USA), Gallagher, Golin and Kelleher (1992) identified a number of significant personal, career and learning skills needs of college students. The results indicated that overcoming procrastination and problems with public speaking anxiety were the most prevalent personal concerns of students, with

52% and 45% of students reporting a high to moderate need for assistance regarding these problems. Other items that were indicated as being in the top three personal concerns included increasing self-confidence, increasing motivation, eliminating self-defeating behaviour, becoming more assertive, fear of failure, controlling anxiety and nervousness, relationships with faculty, controlling weight, and coping with depression. Furthermore, 25% of the students indicated a high to moderate need for help with their feelings of depression, 58% indicated the need for assistance in terms of developing job search strategies, 40% for overcoming procrastination, 39% would like assistance with making career choices, 46% would like to improve their study skills, 45% would like to learn better test-taking strategies, and 45% indicated the need for assistance in developing better time management skills. Fear seemed to be a common theme in many highly ranked concerns, such as the lack of self-confidence, lack of assertiveness, worries about getting a job, anxiety about test-taking skills. There were 31% who indicated the fear of failure being a major concern. In addition, female students reported significantly more concerns than male students with controlling their weight, whereas male students reported significantly more concerns with their discomfort in social situations, adjustment to campus, anxiety about AIDS, improving reading skills and dealing with peer pressure and drinking too excessively. Consequently, this suggests that males and females may require different counselling services from university counselling centres (Gallagher et al., 1992).

In Cape Town, located in South Africa (S.A), Nicholas (1995) investigated the personal, career, and learning skills needs of first year students at the University of Western Cape (UWC). The findings showed that 95% of respondents indicated that they required help with five items or more. These five concerns included, overcoming procrastination, public speaking, increasing self-confidence, increasing motivation, and eliminating self-defeating behaviour. Nicholas (1996) suggested that the increase of access to universities in South Africa by underprepared learners necessitates the evaluation of their needs in order to avoid high drop-out or failure rates. There is a perception that the quality of guidance in high schools in South Africa is much lower than it should be, as many guidance counsellors are inadequately trained (Nicholas, 1996). In turn, this may have major implications for university as there are a great number of first-year university students who could have poor study skills and are enrolled in programmes in which they may be unsuited for, and may not be familiar with seeking or using counselling to assist them with their problems. Consequently, there may be at greater risk of failure (Nicholas, 1997). The usual personal, career, learning skills and financial problems that students may experience during their academic years, may appear overwhelming, given the insufficient resources allocated within tertiary educational institutions to lessen student problems (Nicholas, 1997). Students also differ regarding their counselling needs sessions.

Despite the fact that studying in an ODL institution may be a challenge for some students, there are support structures which are created to assist students. Potter

(1998) conducted a study to explore students' perspectives concerning support service needs in distance learning. When she asked them what had most helped them in their distance education learning, respondents offered comments that could be clustered into five categories: personal issues; employment issues; course design issues; communication issues; and other factors. This shows that counselling services can be in a better position to respond to student counselling needs if a student counselling needs analysis is done.

There are cases where students would prefer to be consulted individually and there are cases where they would prefer group counselling. This needs to be well noted as it can defeat the goals of counselling. For instance, Nicholas (2002) conducted a study to investigate first year students' counselling needs and preferred counselling sources. The results showed that individual counselling was the preferred form of assistance chosen for only five items, namely the fear of failure, overcoming procrastination, and coping with depression, discomfort in social situations and coping with loneliness. Group counselling was preferred for concerns like sexual identity concerns, careers, time management, and AIDS anxiety. Lecturers were identified for half of the items (21 out of 42); whereas there was a high rate (32 out of 42 items) of students who reported that they sought preferred assistance from professional help outside the university. Many students indicated that they utilised indigenous healers and religious healers as their preferred means of assistance for the concerns they indicated. In another study conducted by Giovazolias, Leontopoulou and Triliva (2010) in two Greek universities to explore students counselling needs, they found that issues relating to relationships, goal setting and problem solving were the main counselling concern of the participants. Moreover, they also found that students who were experiencing psychological difficulties were not likely to visit university counselling centres.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

To understand the counselling needs of first year students, a descriptive method was the best option. The research process started by reviewing literature on students counselling needs. A survey questionnaire adapted from Gallager et al. (1992) was further modified to tap on the elements of the Unisa institutional character. A descriptive research is suitable with studies that seek to accurately portrays the characteristics of persons, situations and groups (Polit & Hungler, 2004). For the purpose of this study, descriptive design fits in with the aim which is to explore and describe the first year student counselling needs.

Measuring instruments

The measuring instrument was adapted from the Gallager Survey of Students' Needs (1992). The questionnaire has 23 items all on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1= 'Strongly disagree' to 5 = 'Strongly agree'. The three original scales were named as career issues, academic issues and personal issues. Career issues dealt more specifically with selecting the appropriate career path and preparation for the work place. Academic issues were conceptualised as typical aspects that every student might face at the university. Academic issues scale covered aspects like time management, preparing for examinations, and dealing with exam failure, adapting at an ODL institution, improving study skills and reading and writing more effectively, developing numerical skills and avoiding procrastination. The third scale dealt more with personal issues such as health, financial challenges and relationship issues impacting on studies, dealing with peer pressure, accepting self and others, coming to terms with sexual orientation, and an understanding on how emotions and feelings affect behaviour. The questionnaire has an inter-item reliability of α=.92. A factor analysis was performed to assess the validity of the instrument. As a result six (sub) scales were identified namely, relationship and emotions (six items), organisational and planning (five items), job searching skills (three items), effective studying skills (four items), acceptance (two items), and career advancement skills (three items). The decision to regroup the constructs was based on the factor loadings of the items. Above mentioned constructs were identified and labelled respectively.

Sampling

The target population for this study were first year students registering for the first time at Unisa during the 2012 academic year. As this study was conducted towards the end of 2012 academic year, targeted first year students were those who registered during the first and second semester. The survey questionnaire was sent to 6, 518 first year students, 2, 245 from the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES) and 4, 213 from the college of College of Science, Engineering and Technology (CSET). The sampling frame was obtained from the database of first year students registered from both colleges. Simple random sampling was used as a sampling method, given that every first year student from the above mentioned colleges had an equal chance of participating in the study. In addition, simple random sampling is defined as a method where each element has an equal chance of being selected, and the selection of each element was independent of the selection of the previous one (Durrheim & Painter 2006).

Ethics

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the university. Students were not coerced into partaking in the study. Students who wished to partake in the

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study were informed that they would remain anonymous and the information shared would not be linked back to them.

Recruitment of subjects

First year students were invited to take part in the study by short-message-service (SMS) which requested them to partake in the study, informed them about the study and where to find the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was placed on the student email system (MyUnisa) to every first year student from the CAES and CSET.

Subjects

The sample size of the study was a total number of 107 participants. The breakdown of participants race indicated that 85% were Black, 7% White, 5% Indian, and 4% were Coloured. Of the 107 first year students who participated in the study, 54 students were from the CSET and 53 were from CAES. Below is a graphical presentation (Figure 1) which depicts the race of the participants
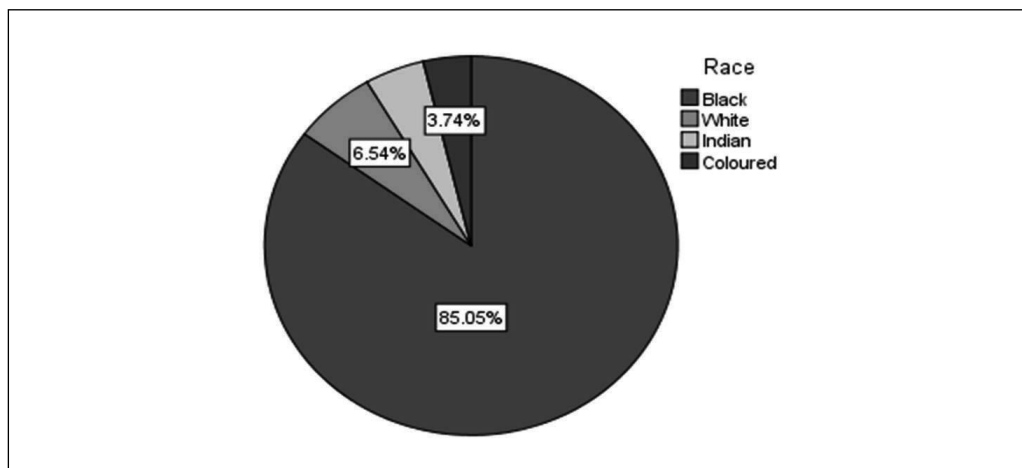
Figure 1: Pie chart depicting the race of the participants

The clustered bar chart (Figure 2) displays the age groups of participants and shows that there was a great difference in terms of age groups as 60% of the females students were between the age of 17-21 years while male students between the age of 17-21 years were less than 40%. However, males between 22-27 years were represented by slightly above 60% participants compared to females of the same age group who were below 40% respectively.
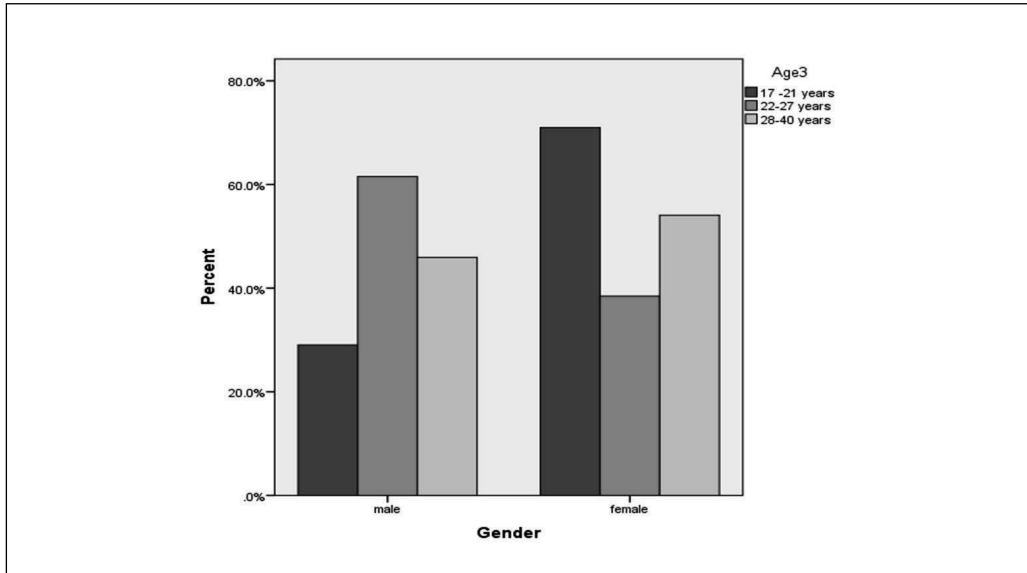
**Figure 2:** Bar chart depicting gender and age groups

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics was performed through SPSS to explore differences in the scores of participants in all items of the questionnaire. After critical observation of the results, the researcher wanted to understand the origin of variance. In doing so, attention was directed at ascertaining the variance in the mean scores of participants per gender, age group and college. The researcher envisaged that knowing the core of variance in the mean scores of participants will facilitate the understanding of sampled first years student's counselling needs. The focus of data analysis was on items that have the highest and lowest mean scores.

Sub-scales

The sub-scales were named based on factor loadings. As indicated earlier, the questionnaire consisted of only three constructs. However, as factor analysis was performed during the data analysis phase, six sub-scales were identified. Relationship and emotional self-management (R&E) consisted of five items ranging from sexual orientation, relationships, emotions, and health. Academic skills and attitude (ACA) has five items focused on developing essential academic skills. Job searching skills has three items encapsulating aspects that were important for students in preparing for the world of work. Effective studying skills sub-scale (ESS) has four items that were centred on effective studying skills and adapting at an ODL institution. Self and others-acceptance sub-scale has only two items that dealt with acceptance. Lastly, career advancement (CA) sub-scale has three items that dealt specifically with career

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opportunities, postgraduate programmes and the relation between values, interest and skills on one's career. In conclusion, the subscales were therefore named on the grounds of the items the researcher assumes they encapsulate.
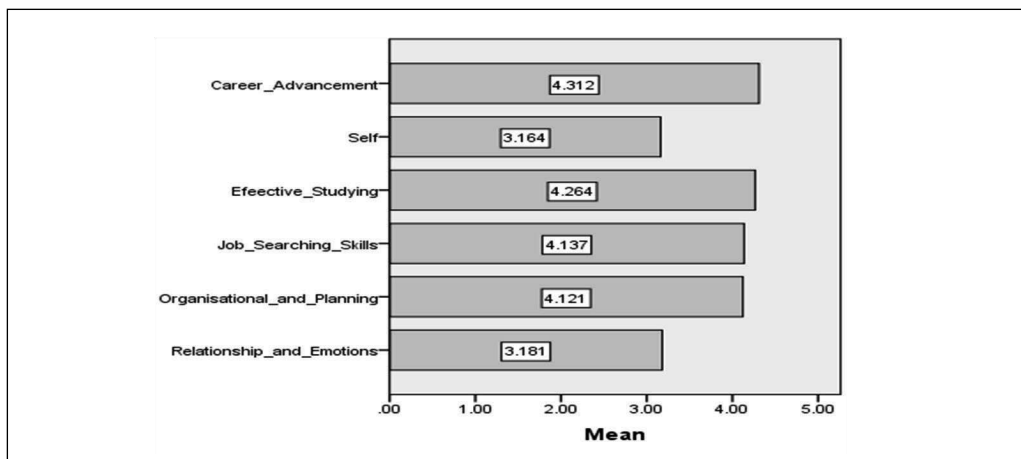
Figure 3: Depicting the mean scores of six sub-scales

RESULTS

The mean scores were based on six subscales identified through factor analysis were CA, 4.31; Self, 3.016; ES, 4.26; JSS, 4.13; O&P, 4.12 and R&E, 3.18. Comparison of the constructs shows that they range from one to five. Higher scores on the sample means of the CA, ES, JSS, and O & P constructs indicate the counselling needs that are important to first year students and which DCCD should take into consideration. However, the lowest scores on the means of constructs R & E and Self and others seemed not be of high important to the sampled first year students, but it was not be overlooked given the sample size of the present study. As the main aim of this study was to uncover the counselling needs of first year students, the focus of analysis will be centred on the students' mean scores for all items in the questionnaire. Emphasis was placed on the counselling needs that were more important to students, seven middle items and the lower items which are not of high importance to the sample of first year students. When descriptive statistical analysis was performed on all items, the results showed that the students required counselling regarding to adapt studying at an ODL institution, career opportunities related to the course for they were studying, improving skills, preparing for examination, postgraduate study opportunities, compiling career portfolio, preparing for the job interview and dealing with examination failure. The seemingly less important counselling needs relates to accepting others, dealing with peer pressure and support regarding sexual orientation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study show that 64% of first year students indicated the need for counselling regarding adapting at an ODL institution. The breakdown of age indicates that of the 64% of students who indicated that they need support regarding adapting in studying through an ODL institution, 29% were between the ages of 17-21 years old, 36% were between the ages of 22-27 years, and lastly 21% were between the ages of 28-50 years old. Students' inability to find their feet at an ODL institution might have far reaching implications. Therefore, strategic measures developed to ensure student retention and success should be approached from different angles and knowing student counselling needs could possibly provide fresh insight for redefining and implementation of such measures. Although there are no studies which confirm the present finding, van Schoor and Mill (1998) stated that Unisa has a heterogeneous student population, not only in terms of race, socioeconomic status, geographic and ethnic diversity, but also in terms of talents, abilities and career preparation. They also emphasised that many students study under difficult circumstances in the sense that 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. As a result these could be some of the reasons why they struggle to find their feet in an open distance learning institution.

According to Keller (1999), higher education enhances student's development on three levels, namely 'as people, as learners and in relation to a specific future position in the world of work'. In the present study, 69% of the students indicated that they would like to know career opportunities related to the course they are studying. This signals that these first year students are concerned about career opportunities related to the programmes for which they are enrolled. Apart from the results that show that students indicated that they need support regarding adapting to ODL system and they want to know about further career opportunities, the results also show that 70% of males and 53% of female students need support about how they can improve their study skills. This is a crucial aspect given that ineffective studying skills may not only have a negative impact on the students, but it might contribute to high failure rate and dropouts in particular. Gettinger and Seibert (2002) stated that student with low academic achievement demonstrated ineffective study skills and were unaware that they must extend effort to beyond simply reading the content to understand and retain it. This is in contrary to Potter (1998) who found that the have already receive assistance with concerns relating to employment issues. This could imply that their counselling services are structured in a manner that corresponds to students' needs.
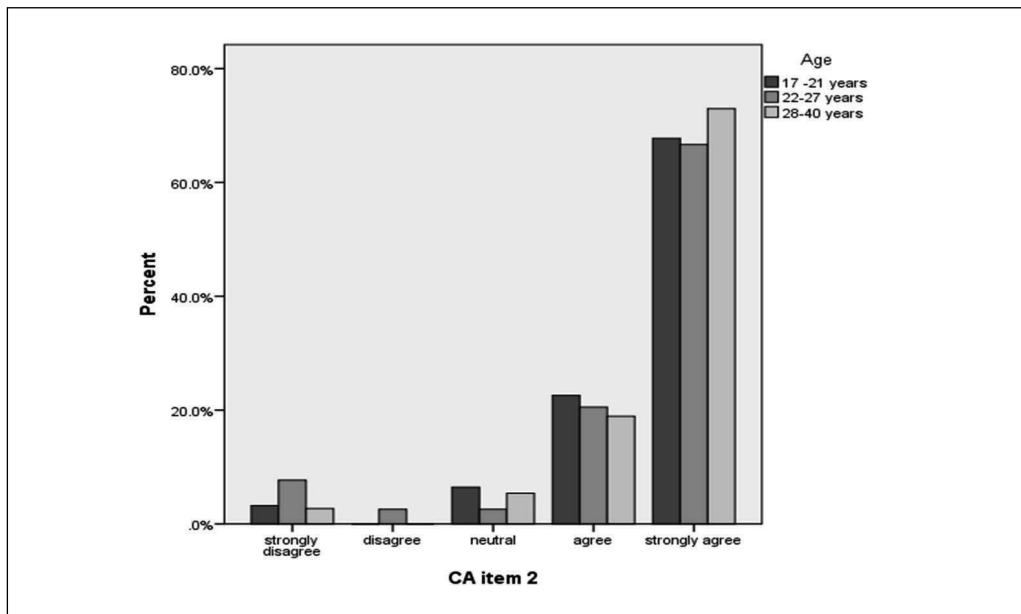
Figure 4: Career item

Given that the study was conducted towards the end of the 2012 academic year, there is a greater possibility that the sampled first year students were concerned with imminent examinations. This is evidenced by 56% of student who indicated the need to know how to prepare for the examination. First year students between the age of 28 and 40 years were more concerned about the career opportunities related to the course for which they are enrolled with a 70% score. As more than 60% of students from the both the colleges indicated the need to know about further study opportunities related to their career. This signals that first year students are keen to further their studies in the future, but there is a level of uncertainty about postgraduate programmes available for them. Furthermore, 64% of male students reported the need to be assisted in compiling a portfolio compared to 50% females. Preparing for the interview was noted as an important aspect in first year students. There was no significant difference between 17-21 and 22-18 students' age groups, as both groups scored above 60% on the item requiring them to indicate their need regarding preparation for a job interview. The majority of students seemed to be concerned about how they can effectively deal with examination failure. The findings show that 59% of the older group (28-40 years) needed more help on how to deal with exam failure in comparison to 46% of the other age groups that had no significant difference on this item. Despite students' highly ranked concerns which indicates the higher level relevance to students, the mean scores of students on the lower ranked items shows that the those counselling needs were of less importance

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to them. However, students differ in their responses, particularly with regard to age groups. On an item measuring the extent to which students need support regarding their sexual orientation, 45% of students do seem to require support with sexual orientation. When zooming in to the findings, it appeared that 23% of students between the ages of 28 and 40% considered it important to receive support on their sexual orientation while 23% were uncertain as to whether they need help or not. In a study by Nicholas (2002), the majority of students preferred to group counselling when experiencing sexual identity concerns. While students between the ages of 28-40 years were more concerned about their sexual identity, 32% of students between the ages of 17-21 years seemed to be more concerned about learning how to accept other people. In addition, the findings depict that learning to accept themselves is a major concern for students between the ages of 28-40 years.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

In the course of the study, some limitations on some aspects of this study have been identified. First, the questionnaire used was not pilot tested and therefore, problematic items were not identified in advance. Secondly, the sample size was not representative of all first year students but from only two colleges and this poses a threat to the possibility of generalising the findings to other first year students. However, the response rate 60% was fairly substantial. Lastly, students were not equally represented in terms of age. It is envisaged that future research studies on the topic in question could be more effective if the limitations identified above could be adequately addressed. Recommendations for future studies in brief, should have a large sample size, pilot test the questionnaire, identify problematic items, and assess it for validity and reliability before administering it. In addition, review of the constructs is recommended as some have only few items, the lowest being two. Reviewing constructs might help in understanding student counselling needs and enhance modification of the existing support structure as a means to encapsulate the broader concerns identified by students.

CONCLUSION

The present study focused more on non-cognitive variables which do not feature in the admission of first time students but are equally important as cognitive variable. Concerns that have been identified by students should be considered as representing the counselling needs which are most important to students and should be deemed as elements that are necessary to enhance students' success and wellbeing in an ODL institution.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Sfiso Emmanuel Mabizela is awaiting the results of his Masters in Psychology (with specialisation in Research Consultation). As a developing researcher, he has acquired a sound knowledge of utilising both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. His fields of interest include, but not limited to programme monitoring and evaluating, employee wellness, social research, health and HIV/AIDS programmes, as well as student support structures. He is currently a Research Intern at Wits University.

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