

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT SUPPORT  
OFFICERS OFFERING COUNSELLING SERVICES TO STUDENTS AT TVET  
COLLEGES IN THE WESTERN CAPE**



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NDXSAS008

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of student support officers (SSOs) who offer counselling services to students at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in the Western Cape province, South Africa. Methodologically, the study employs a phenomenological approach as its focus is on experience-generated knowledge. It is thus located within the qualitative paradigm to give voice and the perspectives of the SSOs. Previous literature demonstrates that students historically sought counselling primarily for academic and career purposes. However, over time, the nature and type of counselling students required became increasingly complex with greater expectations of counsellors at higher education institutions. Therefore, further research is necessary to better understand this consequential phenomenon from the perspective of the SSOs through their meaning-making. This study found that SSOs experienced their role to be ill-defined, fluid and riddled with challenges of language and culture thus affecting the quality of meaningful counselling. This study offers recommendations emanating from interviews with SSOs. This study is germane to governance in TVET colleges in the Western Cape but may offer insights to other institutions of higher learning.

*Keywords:* culture, governance, higher education, language, lived experiences, mental health, student counselling centres, student support officers, voice

## **PLAGIARISM DECLARATION**

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

<b>DHET</b>	Department of Higher Education and Training
<b>FET</b>	Further Education and Training
<b>HET</b>	Higher Education and Training
<b>NSFAS</b>	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
<b>SSS</b>	Student Support Services
<b>TVET</b>	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
<b>SSO</b>	Student Support Officer
<b>SSDS</b>	Student Support and Development Services
<b>SNE</b>	Special Needs Education
<b>FGD</b>	Focus Group Discussions

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

TVET colleges form part of the Department of Higher Education and have students from diverse backgrounds with unique challenges (Muchinerip et al., 2022 & Maimane, 2016). Thus, student counselling centres in higher education institutions have been recognized to play a pivotal role in advocating holistic student development both internationally and locally (Naidoo, 2016). Student counselling centres, across the world, react to the deprivation of students' needs as students face a myriad of challenges and experience an array of mental health issues (Schreiber, 2007 & Harrison & Gordon, 2021). In South Africa, counselling centres offer students in higher education institutions a variety of psychotherapeutic services that vary from career counselling to psychotherapy (Cilliers et al., 2010).

Psychotherapeutic services in institutions of higher learning are essential as students embark on an academic journey with the hope of a propitious future however some students unexpectedly find themselves derailed by mental health issues (Kirsh et al., 2016). Health care professionals, namely, “psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses in mental health settings and psychosocial health workers, which include registered counsellors provide the foundation for an effective mental health care system” (Scheffer et al., 2011, p.2). Counselling professionals are essential to campus community members who contribute to counselling services to students at South African TVET colleges in the form of student support officers (Kadambi et al., 2010 & Fryer, 2014).

Students at TVET colleges are mainly adolescents and young adults between 15 and 40 years (Fryer, 2014). The trajectory of mental health concerns has been delineated to increase rapidly from childhood to adolescence and reach a pinnacle point in young adulthood (Newman et al., 1996). Recorded mental health concerns in this group range from anxiety and stress to depression and other serious psychological issues, which may inevitably impact a student's life negatively (Schreiber, 2007 & Saleem et al., 2013).

I acknowledge the societal and emotional disposition of university students and consider it important to understand their experiences and what mental health issues they encounter daily (Saleem and Mahmood., 2013 & Kirsh et al., 2016). However, student counselling centres play a crucial role in meeting the demands of students who are in psychological need of care

and support (Cilliers et al., 2010). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the context in which student counsellors and student support officers (SSOs) practice and the meanings they make of their role within academic institutions.

More than a decade ago, Cilliers et al., (2010) conducted a national benchmark survey to assess student counselling centres in South Africa with the purpose of determining the skillset of counselling and student support staff members as well as the level of services offered to students. The findings revealed that counselling centres consisted of specialised healthcare professionals who offered substance abuse, career guidance, psychopathology and crisis counselling to students and there appears to be a demand for student counselling services (Cilliers et al., 2010). The study also revealed that “on average 18 percent of enrolled students were seen as clients” (Cilliers et al., 2010 p. 48). Further, another study by Lawal et al., (2018) postulated that institutions of higher education worldwide have deemed the mental health support needs of students a priority. This surge has found that mental health among university students has become a prominent public health concern and is a growing crisis in many countries (Harrison & Gordon, 2021; Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019; Cilliers et al, 2010). This is to say; higher education counselling centres have become a significant, at times the first port of call for many students, especially distressed students. However, as some scholars such as Munyaradzi and Addae (2018) & Fryer (2014) have shown, limited attention has been given to exploring the experiences of student support officers within TVET colleges. In response to these concerns, this study therefore poses the central question, “*How do student support officers make sense of their experiences of offering counselling services to students at Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in the Western Cape?*”

## **1.2 Problem Statement & Rationale**

Student affairs practitioners play a pivotal role in the success of many graduates, and this is because they have daily interactions with students (Xaba, 2021). This interaction is enriched by student affairs practitioners’ level and duration of engagement with students over many years (Xaba, 2021). Similarly, a study by Buthelezi et al., (2024) highlighted that interventions offered by student development practitioners (SDP’s) and lecturers at TVET colleges are beneficial. Therefore, there isn’t much focus on assessing lecturers and SDP effectiveness regarding these interventions (Buthelezi et al., 2024). However, to date, there is a paucity of literature on the lived experiences of these practitioners (Xaba 2021).

Registered counsellors and social workers are at the forefront of providing a valuable counselling service to TVET college students (Scheffer et al., 2011). Thus, there is a need to

understand the experiences of SSOs and how they make sense of their role in offering counselling services to students in academic institutions, including TVET colleges in the Western Cape. It is therefore imperative to acknowledge their role in ensuring the availability of counselling services to students at higher education institutions in South Africa (Harrison & Gordon, 2020; Naidoo, 2016).

Furthermore, the essence of student counselling is reported to have changed over time "into a versatile practice that both responds to and reflects the changing landscape of higher education and the broader society within which it is embedded" (Naidoo, 2016, p. 1). Therefore, more attention needs to be paid to healthcare professionals' experiences within the TVET counselling centres (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018). For example, the increase in student enrolment works in tandem with the increased workload of SSOs at TVET colleges, which impacts their productivity. There is also ambiguity about the roles and responsibilities of SSOs, which negatively impact their performance and the overall functioning of the institution (Fryer, 2014). SSOs' primary responsibility is counselling students, and this role in the operational governance structure must be evident so that they can provide this crucial service to a largely vulnerable student population (Fryer, 2014)

In addition, clarifying the role of SSOs and how they make sense of it is essential. This understanding will benefit other college staff, such as college managerial staff and teaching and learning staff to grasp the function of SSOs and improve the institution's governance of academic and support staff roles. This, in turn, will improve the counselling services offered to distressed students. While counselling services have also positively impacted student experiences (Morrison et al., 2006), not addressing these concerns may hurt the quality of psychological, mental health and social support services students receive from student counselling centres in TVET colleges.

### **1.3 Study Aim and Objectives**

The primary aim of the study is to explore the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape and the secondary aim of the study is to understand how student support officers make sense of their role.

The study objectives are to:

1. Explore the role of student support officers at TVET colleges, and
2. Identify the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape

3. Understand how student support officers make sense of their role

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

This study asks the following research questions:

1. How do student support officers offering counselling services at technical vocational education and training (TVET) colleges in the Western Cape make sense of their experiences?
2. How do student support officers who offer counselling services to students make sense of their role?

#### **1.5 Researcher Positionality**

I am a student support officer at one of the TVET colleges in the Western Cape, South Africa. My professional role makes me an insider and outsider to this topic: an insider because I am a student support officer and an outsider because I am a researcher in this study. Therefore, my positionality is vital to reflect on from the onset, as it may influence the research process due to my proximity and biases. My positionality may also positively enrich the study with keen insights and further provide empathic understanding to the participants as they are SSOs and colleagues in the sector.

There are three ways for a researcher to assume positionality within a study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The first way is identifying my personal position regarding this study and understanding how this may or can influence the research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Being a student support officer, too, I hold particular views about the roles and responsibilities and the daily experience of being an SSO on a campus. The position I have taken regarding this research undertaking is to capture the opinions and thoughts of the participants and draw from my experience to illustrate the realities of SSOs in the Western Cape. The second way of identifying my positionality is by locating myself amongst the participants to gain insight into how I view myself and others in this research process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The third way is acknowledging that my experiences and exposure may influence the research outcome. As a practising counsellor at a TVET college in the Western Cape, my lived experiences and exposure could contribute positively to the construction of new literature on this topic. My commitment as a fellow practitioner has always been to ensure that the voices of SSOs are honoured and that their voices are heard loud and clear. SSO meaning-making experiences are grounded in interpretative phenomenological which has afforded me the opportunity as a

researcher to not only reflect on my positionality and biases but also to be aware that it is aligned with the theoretical framework.

The benefit of my insider-outsider positionality is that, from my assessment, participants generally felt safe enough to share how they truly felt, and this was because they knew I could relate to their experience. Due to this, I sensed the expectation for me to advocate on their behalf to make academic staff members more aware of their convoluted roles and responsibilities as SSOs.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Overview**

Student counselling centres in higher education institutions have been recognized to play a pivotal role in advocating holistic student development. Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape. To achieve this aim, it is also important to understand how student support officers make sense of their role. This chapter focuses on the literature review and will provide a brief overview of literature on the following areas: (1) An international perspective on the origins of counselling and psychological services in Higher Education, (2) Student support services in developed and developing countries, (3) Student counselling services in South Africa, (4) Moving from Apartheid era education to non-discrimination, (5) Transformation in Colleges: Inception of Further Education and Training (FET) colleges in South Africa, (6) Student Support Department Governance, (7) Organisational Role Theory (ORT) and (8) Theoretical Framework: Interpretive Phenomenology. This review also has several subheadings, which will serve as the foundation for the discussion that follows.

### **2.2 An international perspective on the origins of counselling and psychological services in Higher Education**

The emergence of college and university counselling in higher education occurred roughly 80 years ago and ever since then, it has evolved and transformed considerably (Hodges et al., 2016). Originally, counselling services within a college were led by the faculty members as they were deemed the ideal professionals to provide counselling and academic advice to students (Hodges et al., 2016). The counselling that was provided focused on educational and vocational guidance and during this time other college staff members argued that counselling training for faculty members was necessary whereas other campuses with a more religious affiliation, offered counselling services to students with the help of the clerical members (Lloyd-Jones & Smith, 1938). This resulted in immense confusion, disagreements and tension during the initial period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century concerning the type of counselling and who was well-matched to provide such specialised services to students (Hodges et al., 2016).

After World War II, the implementation of the GI Bill (Veteran Benefits Bill) in 1944 by the United States of America President Franklin D. Roosevelt provided veterans with funded opportunities to further their education and this alluded many servicemen to universities (Hodges et al., 2016; Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018). This escalation in student enrolments got many colleges to impose several restrictions such as gender, race and disabled student quotas

on prospective students, especially non-white prospective students which prevented several servicemen admission into university (Hodges, 2001). Eventually, federal legislation in the United States of America, allowed all servicemen access to higher education institutions including those previously denied and this necessitated the rapid growth of student counselling services to comprise not only vocational education issues but also personal and social issues (Hodges et al., 2016; Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018).

In addition, the deep-rooted and entrenched social barriers held towards ethnic minorities and women were reviewed and opportunities were made available to them. (Hodges et al., 2016). The evolution of counselling centres gradually improved and consisted of trained professionals offering various psychological services and personal counselling (Hodges et al., 2016). Furthermore, due to the nature of the problems that clients encountered, these counselling professionals began advocating for the formation of ethical standards for regulatory purposes (Forster, 1977). Another important aspect was the development and refinement of counselling, assessment, diagnosis and treatment planning in colleges (Hodges et al., 2016). This trajectory in the counselling profession gradually attracted many healthcare professionals and by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the counselling centres in colleges and universities began hiring various specialised healthcare professionals such as psychologists, counsellors, social workers and psychiatrists (Hodges et al., 2016).

### **2.3 Student support services in developed and developing countries**

The phrase student services can be traced back to the Athenian education era in 4 BCE where it evolved to today's society to be utilised in the higher education sector to describe the department that renders student-related services to the student population (Ciobanu, 2013). Lumadi (2021) echoes this and states that "student support" as a broad term offers a myriad of services to students with the intended purpose of improving their learning aims so that they can complete their studies successfully. Higher education in developing countries such as Brazil, India and South Africa share many similarities (Ngubane, 2018). Brazil's higher education system, like that of South Africa's, depicted a level of inequality as the lives of the political elite were enhanced and Brazil as a country was commanded by a militant system (Speckman & Mandew, 2014). To date, Brazil and South Africa are still confronted with similar issues such as inequality, inefficiency and inequity within the education sector and it seems to be deteriorating (Ngubane, 2018). This implies that these countries have a greater need for student support services.

According to Dhillon et al., (2006), most of these higher education institutions, especially universities are able to meet the academic and personal needs of their students because the services offered to students are entrenched in an effective student support structure. Ciobanu (2013) argues to the contrary, highlighting that student-related services oscillate from county to country. For instance, in the UK, a study conducted by Hallett (2012), highlighted how counsellors are prescribed to provide short-term therapy to clients and one of the setbacks with short-term therapy is that it inadequately addresses the client's needs to resolve their issues, especially if it is complex.

As with South Africa, some countries also integrate their student services officers within the university operational structure as staff while other countries outsource this by using external organisations to assist students at their institutions (Ciobanu, 2013). In the United States of America, the student support services division was founded on the “in loco parentis” (literally means “in the place of parents”) model (Ngubane, 2018 & Hodges et al., 2016). This model was built on the premise of adhering to rules, discipline and regulations as it applied to serving veterans who returned from war but as time moved, the student support services division evolved towards a more holistic approach to mental health (Ngubane, 2018). Australia, the United Kingdom and Europe also followed a holistic approach to student wellness, however, student counselling services in certain areas of Europe are still in the infancy stages (Ngubane, 2018 & Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018).

#### **2.4 Student counselling services in South Africa**

Student counselling services in South Africa have a very unique historical background and the inception of student counselling pursued a similar route to the USA with regards to being influenced over several decades of political, historical and socioeconomic characteristics (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018). The country's history of oppression and inequality pertaining to education lingers on and continues to influence future generations of black students (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). It is worth noting that South African students are diverse and the phraseology of “Black South Africans” includes Indigenous Africans, “Coloureds” and Indians (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). Furthermore, students from abroad including other African countries also play a pivotal role in a racially varied community (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). According to South African history concerning student counselling, there are 3 specific phases namely, the reactive phase, proactive phase and integrative phase (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018). For the purposes of this dissertation, a brief review of these phases will be conducted to highlight the salient points and the contributions these have on student counselling.

#### **2.4.1 Reactive phase (1940-1970)**

South Africa's earliest form of student counselling services made available to students is traced back to the formerly white-designated University of Natal (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018). The term "student advisory service" was used to describe the unit and the primary issues that students sought assistance with were related to high rates of failure, academic challenges, and transitional difficulties faced by young veterans returning from war and beginning their academic careers (De Jager, 2012; Naidoo, 1997). The counsellors within this unit were denoted as "student advisors" and expansion in the counselling services provided to white students was due to the emergence of a wide range of issues (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018). The name change of the student counselling services occurred in 1985 and it transformed from "student advisory service" to "student counselling centre", but the rationale for the change is not documented (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018). Gradually student counselling services filtered into other South African universities and institutions that were historically White having finally understood that student counselling is a valuable resource (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018).

#### **2.4.2 Proactive Phase (1980-1990)**

The Van Wyk-de Vries Commission of Inquiry into Universities in 1974 yielded positive findings regarding the transformation of the student counselling approach within historically white institutions (Naidoo & Cartwright., 2018). This transformational shift was a comprehensive and holistic approach to meeting the needs of students (De Jager, 2012). It is also imperative to understand the proactive phase in South Africa between the 1970s and 1990s, and the significant socio-political changes that took place during this period (Naidoo & Cartwright., 2018). The National Party Government's oppressive Apartheid policies of racial segregation faced pressure from both local and international representatives, which contributed to the end of apartheid (Naidoo & Cartwright., 2018). The release of the late President Nelson Mandela in the 1990s paved the way for a democratic election in 1994, marking a new era in South African politics (Naidoo & Cartwright., 2018). This change had a positive impact on higher education, providing previously disadvantaged Black students from various ethnic backgrounds with a promise of better opportunities to access higher education, however, this change in student demographics affected the landscape of student counselling as there was an escalation in the range and complexity of student-related issues (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018).

#### **2.4.3 Integrative phase (1990-present day)**

Student counselling services have evolved significantly since their inception, and they now play a valuable and essential role in the higher education sector. Student counsellors within

institutions have established themselves as recognised entities by amalgamating their roles and responsibilities alongside the ethos of the academic institution (De Jager, 2012). The counselling services offered at higher education institutions aim to provide a holistic approach to students, focusing on improving their development needs (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018). However, it is crucial to note that this approach also emphasizes the counsellor's professional development to ensure they can provide the best possible services to students (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018).

## **2.5 Moving from Apartheid era education to non-discrimination**

As reflected in Titi (2023) the effects of the Apartheid regime are still visible in Africa today, where many African people continue to face inequality. The regime was responsible for creating political and social divisions within communities in rural and urban areas. Apartheid policies led to the establishment of townships in South Africa, which became home to many black families. These policies also had a significant impact on the negative shaping of African people's identities. As with the slave trade system, the Apartheid regime aimed to assimilate African people into a capitalistic society (Shell, 1994; Diptee & Klein, 2010; Mamdani, 1996 & Ross, 2010).

“Despite 29 years of democracy in South Africa, the education system has failed to overcome the negative impact of the Bantu Education Act of 1953” (Titi, 2023 p.231). Historically, the Apartheid era in South Africa manifested disparities in all sectors of many people's lives; one of those sectors was education (Buthelezi, 2018). At the time, institutions of learning ploughed more financial resources into White students than Black South Africans (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018). However, since democratic governance in 1994, which ushered in the post-Apartheid era, the educational landscape in South Africa changed drastically, and the main focus was to reconstruct a system that espoused equality, human dignity and non-discrimination (Department of Education, 2001). Therefore, it is vital to acknowledge that students within South African institutions are culturally and racially diverse in line with the previous system of racial compartmentalization (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020).

Titi (2023) further notes that the history of Apartheid in South Africa has had a lasting negative impact on young Black South Africans, resulting in limited access to mental health care and relevant education leading to significant cultural and psychological damage. This psychological damage is particularly true for young people from rural and township areas, as they often experience cultural alienation and lack resources (Titi, 2023). The mental health of

students is therefore of paramount importance across all higher education institutions in the world (Lawal et al., 2018). A study conducted by Erdur-Baker et al., (2006), utilized a “presenting problem list” as a tool to compare which students made use of counselling centres and those who did not. The findings suggested that students with additional needs gravitate more towards seeking help at the counselling centre as opposed to those that do not confirming the critical need for student support at TVET colleges given the demographics. However, studies in South Africa have found that the transition to college life and academic pressures among black students are acutely stressful (Naidoo, 1999; Bojuwoye, 2002).

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often come from rural or semi-urban areas, or other provinces in search of better opportunities and bursaries (Bojuwoye, 2002; Havlik et al., 2020). Black students, however, overwhelmingly come from disadvantaged backgrounds and struggle financially and as a result, are more likely to experience stress. The unequal education system, owing to a racist past, leaves black students with inadequate preparation for post-school education (Naidoo, 1999; Bojuwoye, 2002; Morrison et al., 2006). Post-Apartheid and challenges such as racial inequalities and social exclusion are still ongoing problems within South African society which resulted in the student protests as part of the #Fees Must Fall movement (Dunn-Coetzee & Fourie-Malherbe, 2017; Leibowitz et al., 2007). The student support services department is crucial in supporting students with a safe space to talk about their struggles and advocate for them.

The student protests were a reminder of the inequality and how the legacy of apartheid deprived black people from gaining access to education (Seekings & Natrass, 2008). Studies in South Africa have found that the transition to college life and academic pressures among black students are acutely stressful (Naidoo, 1999; Bojuwoye, 2002). Black students overwhelmingly came from disadvantaged backgrounds and struggled financially and as a result, were more likely to experience stress. The unequal education system owing to a racist past largely left black students with inadequate preparation for post-school education. The schools that students attended contributed majorly to this inadequacy that influences their tertiary academic experience.

## **2.6 Transformation in Colleges: Inception of Further Education and Training (FET)**

### **Colleges in South Africa**

In January 2012, DHET released the Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training for public review, and many stakeholders germane to the educational sector provided valuable

feedback on this document, which helped with the formation of the White Paper (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). The primary focus of the white paper is to accommodate students from all walks of life who are pursuing education and training opportunities (Academic Support Guidelines, 2021). This context is essential to locating the establishment of universities and colleges in the “post-school system” of South Africa against the history of the Apartheid-era education system given South Africa’s history and the support previously disadvantaged communities now require.

### **2.6.1 TVET as an equitable pathway to developing South African youth**

As was found in 2017 by Dunn-Coetzee & Fourie-Malherbe, post-apartheid challenges such as racial inequalities and social exclusion are an ongoing problem within South African society. The Apartheid-era Education Sector was classified into three divisions namely (1) General Education and Training (GET), that solely focused on primary school education, (2) Further Education and Training (FET) that solely focused on secondary school education and (3) Higher Education and Training (HET), that solely focused on universities and colleges (Buthelezi, 2018).

TVET colleges were initially categorised under the FET division but over time, it was changed in 2010 to the DHET division (Buthelezi, 2018). According to Munyaradzi & Addae (2019), the move over to DHET was to acknowledge and resolve the shortfall of skilled artisans in South Africa. This finding is consistent with that of Majapelo & Faku (2020) who mentioned that TVET colleges were inaugurated by the South African government to “provide much-needed practical skills for youth employment, economic growth, and university education” (p. 106).

To achieve the goal of offering practical skills and educational opportunities, DHET intended to create a favourable environment for teaching and learning to meet the needs of students at TVET colleges (Academic Support Guidelines, 2021). Another reason for the introduction of the TVET sector in South Africa was to create employment opportunities for the youth to eliminate poverty (Muchineripi et al., 2022). The expansion and fortifying of TVET colleges are DHET’s intended vision to make these types of institutions attractive to school-leavers so that they become institutions of choice in South Africa, (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). As time went on, DHET experienced substantial transformational changes to the curriculum and institutional structure (Buthelezi, 2018). The most observable change in this sector was the amalgamation of 150 FET colleges into 50 TVET colleges that were accessible to everyone irrespective of class, colour and creed (Buthelezi, 2018).

## **26.2 Ensuring equitable representation**

The college sector in South Africa has transformed dramatically since the late 1990s (Department of Education, 2009). The transformation from “Further Education and Training (FET) colleges to Technical Vocational Education and Training colleges (TVET) denoted a positive era for young people in South Africa” (Moodley, 2015, p 1). This structural change was important as it made provision to accommodate people from all walks of life and address the inequality about race and ethnicity within DHET (Department of Education, 2009).

Along with new changes came a few challenges and the most identifiable one was the adjustment in the demographic profile of students. As described by the Department of Education (2009: 5); “multiple language groups in one classroom; different age groups and therefore different students’ needs on one campus; higher levels of cognitive demand in new programmes and thus a wider range of academic support needs, to name but a few”.

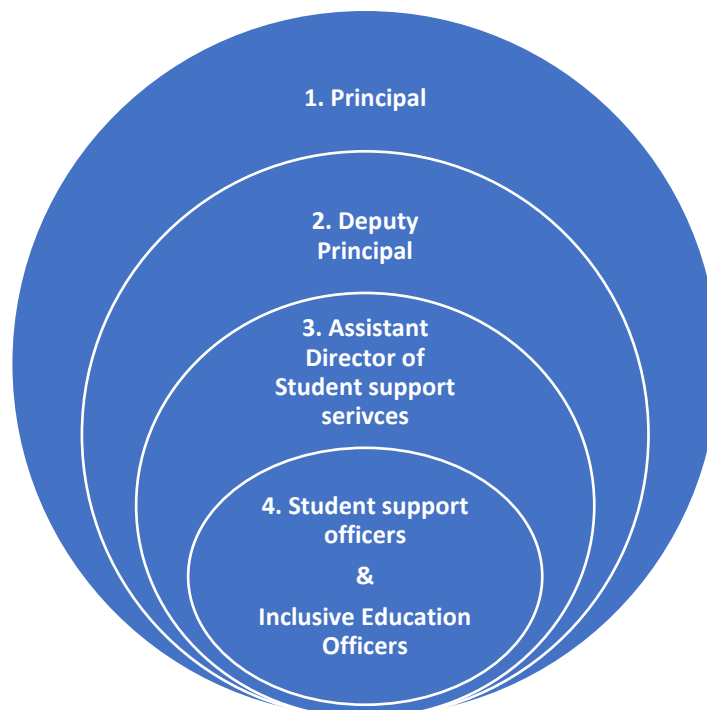
Regarding the use of language in higher education, it is crucial to acknowledge Africa's historical context. During the British colonial era in Africa, a schooling system was forcefully imposed on African people to control their thinking and beliefs (Cakata, 2023). This system allowed the British to exert their power and suppress African people's industrial and linguistic abilities (Cakata, 2023). The British used this power to indoctrinate African people and to separate them from their sense of identity (Cakata, 2023). Specifically, in South Africa, as noted by Naidoo & Cartwright (2018), in 1976, the Soweto uprising claimed the lives of many high school students. It was due to the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in school, and this evoked a sense of frustration, eventually leading to anger. These accounts and events demonstrate the criticality of affirming students' languages (Munyaradzi & Addae, 2019).

Currently, in line with the agenda for transformation in higher education, many higher educational institutions are attempting to transform the educational sphere by “striving to ensure equitable representation of all South Africans in their student and staff components” (Dunn-Coetzee & Fourie-Malherbe, 2017, p.64). This transformation must extend to the practice of psychological and social services offered to students (Titi, 2023). Such a move would support the Student Support Services (SSS) framework, which was completed in 2008 by the DHET to address the needs of students (Department of Education, 2009). The framework aims to help students acclimatize to the college environment, navigate through challenges and achieve personal and academic success (Department of Education, 2009). As a

result, all TVET colleges in South Africa have a mandatory SSS framework to ensure a conducive teaching and learning environment (Maimane, 2016; Department of Higher Education & Training, n.d.).

## 2.7 Student Support Department Governance

All TVET colleges are administered under DHET regulations (Western Cape government, 2022). All TVET colleges consist of a Student Support Services Department (Academic Support Guidelines, 2001). Student support staff play a pivotal role in a student's journey at college as does academic staff (Department of Education, 2009). The hierarchical organogram of the student support services department comprises of a Student Support Manager now referred to as the Assistant Director-Student support services, Student Support Officers (SSOs) and Inclusive Education (IE) officers (Fryer, 2014). However, some TVET colleges do not have IE officers which impacts the role of SSOs (Fryer, 2014). Below is a basic illustration to depict the SSDS organogram at TVET colleges however it may vary among TVET colleges as other TVET colleges have more campuses and more student support staff within their respective department.



### 2.7.1 Student Profile at TVET Colleges in the Western Cape

The TVET student population increased exponentially between 2010-2015 from 420,000 to 737,880 and is as young as 15 years but mainly students are generally, between the ages of 16-18 years old (Fryer, 2014 & Buthelezi, 2018). According to Fryer (2014), this cohort of students

is eligible for the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) curriculum and students older than 18 years of age, are more suited for the NATED curriculum (Fryer, 2014). This surge in student enrolment is aligned with the vision of the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training whereby the aim is to reach 2.5 million students by 2030 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). The shift in younger students also changed the landscape of the student profile in colleges (Fryer, 2014). The typical profile of students is young, immature, unpredictable, have poor concentration abilities, disorderly conduct and are challenging in a classroom setting and these findings date back to a study by Garisch (2007) and similarly to a study by Buthelezi (2018). It can also be postulated that such behaviour is perceived as a transitional period for students to adjust to their new environment (Buthelezi., 2018). TVET colleges these days seem to beguile the type of students who are young, immature, fickle-minded, have poor concentration abilities, are disorderly and are challenging in the classroom setting. Therefore, it can be deduced that younger (immature) students give rise to absenteeism among other problematic issues which place immense pressure on academic staff who in turn eventually refer these students (and the associated pressure) for counselling (Garisch, 2007 & Buthelezi, 2018).

### **2.7.2 The role of student support officers at TVET colleges**

There has been an escalation of mental health challenges among university students surpassing the capabilities of counselling services on campus (Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019). This sentiment was shared by Bewick et al., (2010), who suggested that “university is a time for heightened psychological distress” (p.643). According to Kaminer & Shabalala (2019), affordability and accessibility to mental health practitioners among South Africans who cannot afford private care are limited. As a result, mental health services on campus become the main source for many students within South African universities.

Muchinerip et al., (2022) & Munyaradzi & Addae (2018) argue the unaffordability of access to mental health is because the TVET sector in South Africa attracts students with diverse backgrounds but many of them come from low-income households. Therefore, it can be postulated that financial constraints within a household make it challenging for students to access private care.

The TVET college's SSS annual plan of 2020 stipulated that the holistic implementation of effective SSS within TVET colleges hinges on cooperation with other staff members. SSOs are located on TVET campuses and sometimes leave days or being generally understaffed necessitate that one SSO attends to more than one campus at a time (Fryer, 2014). Working

alongside other staff members on campus means that SSOs by the nature of their position, share a collaborative workspace and working relationships with other staff, especially academic staff.

According to DHET (2020), the role of SSOs is to provide holistic support in the form of career guidance, address financial aid queries, and disability queries, conduct orientation for newly enrolled students, academic queries, sport/extramural activities and free short-term psychological counselling services to students. In the past, student support services had been disorganized, and services were not standardized across the various FET colleges (Revised SSS framework, n.d.). To rectify this problem of non-standardization, the Student Support Services (SSS) Framework structure was introduced at TVET colleges to ensure uniformity and clarify the role of SSOs. The repercussions for unclear roles tend to have a significant on the SSO working environment and on their mental wellbeing as well as they can be overwhelmed especially with the increasing student enrolment numbers in South Africa. This is an even more important reason for the clarity of roles (Fryer, 2014).

Wheeler & Hewitt (2004) found that some institutions have expectations of the counselling that is provided and often there is an unspoken expectation that if a student receives counselling they will improve. However, if the student does not improve despite having received counselling, then the counsellor comes into question (Wheeler & Hewitt, 2004). This is also in accordance with the findings by Harrison & Gordon (2021) that demands placed on counsellors can add pressure on them and because they would feel the need to justify their existence.

### **2.7.3 Support needs of SSOs**

Concerns pertaining to student counselling services including the high demand continue to be a challenge and are well-documented with the oldest archives recorded since 1969 (Broglia et al., 2018). This study follows the work of Fryer (2014) who suggested that there is a limited amount of research in the TVET college sector about college staff and more research needs to be conducted to understand this phenomenon. Wedekind & Buthelezi, (2016), further found a paucity of research on lecturer experiences at TVET institutions. Aspects of a lecturers that have been explored have been on their qualifications or work experience but not on their everyday interactions with other staff members (Wedekind & Buthelezi,2016). This is an important consideration for academic staff however given the student support role SSOs play it is crucial to explore SSO experiences.

The integrity of the psychological profession is based on the premise of the professional's ability to offer quality services to a wide range of people in a variety of situations (Rock &

Hamber,1994). Therefore, the prioritization of psychological services requires immediate attention and better management (Rock & Hamber, 1994). Walton (2003) reported the several roles and responsibilities workplace counsellors must endure impacting their mental well-being because they often must deal with role conflicts, ethical dilemmas, and their boundaries being challenged. Counsellors nowadays have clients that come from various backgrounds and their reasons for seeking help range from simple to more complex issues as such the demand for counselling services has increased (Barletta, 1996). According to Barletta (1996), supervision is primarily an educative process rather than an evaluative one. It is postulated that SSO receiving this sort of assistance from a more experienced counsellor not only helps with managing challenging clients but also safeguards counsellors from burning out. These supervisory services that SSOs receive are also for generating more knowledge and enhancing their skills within the profession.

## **2.9 Theoretical Framework: Interpretive Phenomenology**

### **2.9.1 Overview**

This study explored and examined SSO narratives to better understand, gain meaning and attain insights into their individual experiences and daily realities, and phenomenology was the best-suited theoretical framework to support this inquiry. Phenomenological approaches are qualitative research approaches with deep-rooted origins in philosophy and are also positioned within the humanistic research paradigm (Neubauer et al., 2019 & Mapp, 2008). Phenomenology is centred around consciousness, such as judgements, perceptions and emotions of a person's lived experience (Balls, 2009). So, what is a lived experience? According to phenomenologists it is, the essence of an experience from a person's perspective who is experiencing the phenomenon (Connelly, 2010). The phenomenological goal is to explore "what was experienced and how it was experienced" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p.91).

### **2.9.2 Descriptive vs Interpretative Phenomenological Approaches**

There are two types of phenomenological approaches: Descriptive phenomenology which was derived by Edmund Husserl and is known as the founder of phenomenology. Husserl's focus was grounded in epistemological questions and asserted that one of the fundamental principles in descriptive phenomenology is when a researcher revokes his/her pre-existing experiences and knowledge so that the participant's experience is the main essence (Connelly, 2010 & Neubauer et al., 2019). In other words, descriptive phenomenologists aim to set aside any preconceptions and biases to stop them from having an impact or affecting the study through a process known as bracketing (Connelly, 2010). On the other hand, interpretive

phenomenology, which was derived by Martin Heidegger, takes a different stance and according to him believes personal ideas cannot be disregarded since they are a part of the researcher's persona (Connelly, 2010). Therefore, the researcher can only acknowledge them and their impact on the study (Welch, 2001). Heidegger's focus was grounded in ontological questions and emphasis was on "the meaning of being", in other words, the meaning of being a person in the world (Welch, 2001, p. 35).

Husserl believes that researchers should strive to detach themselves from data and solely uphold participants' experiences in their interpretations whereas Heidegger acknowledges that interpretation is based on what we know and how we understand the world (Welch, 2001). In agreement with Heidegger, based on my experience with the study, I found it is important to stay connected to the research phenomena by avoiding distancing myself from the study data process while studying SSO experiences, as I found it impossible to practice detachment from the research. I therefore resonate with interpretive phenomenologists as I align with Heidegger's phenomenological approach rooted in hermeneutics.

### **2.9.3 Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology**

The study employed interpretive phenomenology, as it values subjective human experiences in knowledge generation by both participants and researchers, as demonstrated in the reflexive nature of the study and my awareness of my positionality. According to Heidegger (Welch, 2001) the concept coined "Dasein" is an expression of being and implies human experience. It also refers to human being's daily interactions of being in the world.

According to Heidegger, human beings live in a world with pre-existing understandings and knowledge of the world (Joubert, 2007). In addition, Heidegger also asserted that in the world human beings are actively participating and making meaning of their experiences (Welch, 2001). In other words, this approach is interested in the connection between the individual and his/her lifeworld (Neubauer et al, 2019). According to Heidegger, the word "lifeworld" means the world in which the individual lives is influenced by their realities and the individual cannot detach themselves from his/her lifeworld (Neubauer et al, 2019). Heidegger was of the opinion that a phenomenon cannot be experienced without reverting to his/her background understanding (Neubauer et al, 2019).

### **2.9.5 The hermeneutic circle of analysis technique**

The interpretations of an individual's experience are impacted by "prior" a Heideggerian concept that human beings cannot be bracketed as it is their very nature to self-interpret.

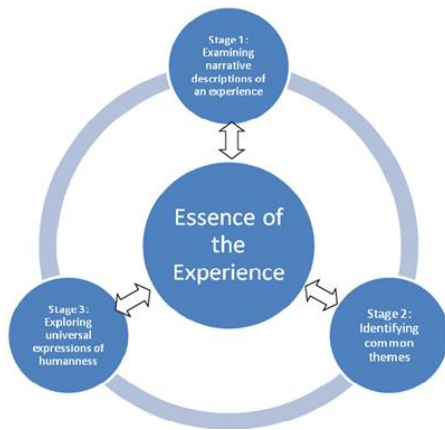
(Neubauer et al, 2019). Therefore, central to Heideggerian approach is the “Hermeneutic Circle” (Neubauer et al, 2019). This three-mode interpretation model will be briefly discussed and referred to as, “Fore-having, Fore-sight and Fore-conception” (Plager, 1994, p.72).

Fore-having is understanding that an interpretation is only possible when the individual has background knowledge about a situation. (Neubauer et al, 2019) For-sight is having a reference point to make an interpretation and Fore-conception is the emergence of expectation from background information. (Neubauer et al, 2019). As the researcher, I employed the hermeneutic (Figure 1) analysis process which allowed me to communicate with all the participants on a deeper and personal level (Welch, 2001). In addition to this, as a researcher and SSO, I began this study with prior knowledge and insights into the roles and responsibilities, culture, language and relational dynamics with work colleagues and overall experiences of student support officers (Welch, 2001). This hermeneutic circle helped to process these participants' experiences being an SSO at TVET colleges.

I also considered the following questions as part of this process since they helped me to better understand the accounts of SSO's experiences. These questions were constructed following Figure: 1 hermeneutic circle.

*“Was the meaning consistent across the person’s life? What illustrations of the meaning are located within the person’s dialogue? and What metaphors does the person use to demonstrate this meaning? And finally, how does this meaning of being an SSO fit with the person’s overall story?” (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005, p.20)*

The narratives of SSOs that emerged from the aforementioned process provided a comprehensive understanding of the life of an SSO and this captured both the positive and negative aspects of being an SSO within a TVET college.



## HEIDEGGER'S HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

A 'lost life': Coming to terms with haemodialysis - Scientific Figure on ResearchGate. Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Heideggers-Hermeneutic-Circle\\_fig1\\_262191063](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Heideggers-Hermeneutic-Circle_fig1_262191063) [accessed 16 Jan, 2024]

To summarize the theoretical framework used in this study, phenomenological researchers move past the words of participants to examine the underlying structures that shape our understanding of phenomena. They immerse themselves in the data, searching for meaning. This approach allowed me to fully appreciate and accept the narratives of the participants as their own reality from an interpretive phenomenological approach, and it proved to be a valuable aspect of my research process (Koch, 1996; Monaro et al., 2014).

### Chapter Conclusion:

This chapter provides a deeper examination of the international origins of student counselling and its intersection with South African history. It highlights the influence of apartheid and post-apartheid eras on education and access to student counselling services. The chapter also discusses the substantial transformation that has occurred over time, allowing students from diverse backgrounds to access counselling services and address their challenges. Moreover, it emphasizes the significant changes in the counselling landscape due to the increasing complexity of students' needs, which requires a more concerted effort from student counsellors to meet these evolving demands. The study employs phenomenology as the most suitable theoretical framework to explore and examine SSO narratives, aiming to gain a better understanding of their individual experiences and daily realities.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Overview**

When tackling a research problem, using the best research approach is crucial. This is where methodology comes into play as it involves identifying why data should be gathered in a specific way (Jackson et al., 2007). As such, this chapter discusses the research design, population and sampling, data collection instruments (focus group discussions, rapport building & online platforms), data collection procedure, data analysis, trustworthiness, reflexivity and positionality (the insider-outsider positionality, researcher bias, blind spots & journaling) and finally ethical considerations of the study such as; non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy and confidentiality.

### **3.2 Research Design**

Quantitative and Qualitative research approaches are two main research designs in social sciences (Mbobo, 2022). As stated earlier, this study is qualitative. The rationale for utilizing a qualitative methodological framework is premised on individual meaning-making within a world of socially constructed interactions with people (Merriam, 2002). In addition, due to the subjective experiences of participants, a qualitative approach seems most pertinent as it allows participants to provide a rich in-depth account of their experiences as student support officers (Swartbooi, 2010). This methodology is instrumental for understanding meaning and a desire to understand the symbolism student support officers ascribe to their world and experiences. A rich description as this refers to the non-usage of numbers to convey a message but rather pictures and words (narratives) of student support officer's experiences to illustrate a phenomenon.

### **3.3 The sample and sampling**

The purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for this study. The rationale for this sampling method was that it is a non-probability sampling technique, meaning participants for the study were selectively chosen by the researcher (Rai & Thapa, 2015). The main aim is to “obtain insights into a phenomenon, individuals, or events, as will typically be the case in qualitative research, and then the researcher purposefully selects individuals, groups, and settings that maximize understanding of the phenomenon” (Omona, 2013, p. 179). As a result, this sampling technique was deemed the most common method in qualitative research (Omona, 2013). The selection of the participants was done at random as all SSOs at

each respective campus were invited to participate in the study. Those who responded to the study formed part of the focus group discussions. According to Marshall (1996), researchers use their discernment in this selection process and the most effective sample is hand-picked to respond to the question. In addition, the type of purposive sampling method is called homogenous sampling as the participants all share common roles and responsibilities and similar characteristics as student support officers on campus (Marshall, 1996).

Participants were all recruited based on being employed as full-time Student Support Officers (SSOs) at a TVET College. Participants are Black South Africans (Black and Coloured), and a combination of both men and women and their educational backgrounds were either in psychology or social work. This inclusion criterion strengthened the quality of the focus group discussions. The exclusion criterion for this study is the non-registration status of an SSO (see Table 3.3).

The selection criteria for this study were to consist of a sample size of 24-30 participants but at the end, only 18 SSOs committed to participating. Data saturation was achieved with this sample size, and this was because adequate data was collected from all 5 focus groups in this study to depict “possible emergent themes within the phenomena under investigation” (Steyn & Hind, 2023 vol. 79 issue 1). Supporting this view, Guest et al., (2016) reported that 80% of themes, inclusive of the pertinent themes are evident within two or three focus groups and 90% of themes are evident in three to six focus groups.

### **TABLE 3.3 INCLUSION & EXCLUSION CRITERIA**

#### **The selection criteria for this study entailed;**

- 1) Sample size: 18 participants
- 2) Full-time employed by a TVET College
- 3) Work in the Western Cape
- 4) All genders

#### **The exclusion criteria for this study entailed;**

- 1) Non-registered healthcare professionals

The study recruited 18 participants from six nationally recognized TVET colleges in the Western Cape. These six TVET colleges are namely, (1) Northlink TVET College, (2) College of Cape Town, (3) Boland TVET College, (4) West Coast TVET College, (5) South Cape TVET College & (6) False Bay TVET College. Table 3.4 below displays the number of participants and the college where they were employed at the time of the study. Since the number of participants varied across colleges, the goal was to achieve equal representation by mixing them. Another reason for mixing the participants within each focus group was for SSOs to bond with other like-minded individuals in the workplace. Finally, the number of participants per group varied as some participants declined to be participants in the research process and it was a decision that needed to be respected.

**TABLE 3.4 PARTICIPANTS FOCUS GROUPS**

Focus group	Participants
FGD 1	Participant: 1 South Cape College Participant: 2 Northlink College Participant: 3 Boland College Participant: 4 College of Cape Town
FGD 2	Participant: 1 West Coast College Participant: 2 False Bay College Participant: 3 College of Cape Town
FGD 3	Participant: 1 South Cape College Participant: 2 False Bay College Participant: 3 Northlink College
FGD 4	Participant: 1 South Cape College Participant: 2 West Coast College Participant: 3 Northlink College Participant: 4 Boland College
FGD 5	Participant: 1 Boland College Participant: 2 Northlink College Participant: 3 College of Cape Town Participant: 4 False Bay College

### **3.4 Data Collection Instruments**

#### **3.4.1 Focus group discussions**

Qualitative research encompasses numerous data collection methods; however, the commonly used methods are interviews and focus groups (Gill et al., 2008). For this study, focus group discussions (FGDs). This in-depth field method allowed a group that shares a similar background to engage in a rich and dynamic discussion. (Kabir,2016). In short, according to Kabir (2016), a well-facilitated group can be deemed helpful in finding out the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of human experience.

The focus group discussions were facilitated using a semi-structured FGD guide (see Appendix E) that consisted of 3 sections, namely, (1) the role of student support officer at TVET colleges, (2) the student counselling needs in the South African context and (3) challenges and positive experiences of student support officers at higher education institutions. Salient open-ended questions were asked to delve further with the participants to hear their thoughts, and opinions and gain more understanding about the topic. This allowed participants to shed light and reflect on their experiences as student support officers. In addition, the focus group discussions were guided by probes, questions and paraphrases germane to the discussion so that I could obtain all the answers to the research questions.

Each focus group was 60 – 90 minutes long and consisted of 3 or 4 SSOs from different TVET colleges per group. The focus group discussions were conducted in English via the MS Teams communication platform where it was simultaneously recorded, and consent was obtained from all participants. The rationale for virtual groups was in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to minimize the risk of exposure to COVID-19 and it was to also offer a safer, more affordable, and more convenient alternative to face-to-face focus groups.

Language differences were anticipated with some of the participants as English was not their first language and due to this, participants were encouraged to express themselves in their native language and two participants opted to speak in Afrikaans. However, these participants only changed to Afrikaans when they wanted to verbalise an Afrikaans phrase to validate a point or express themselves. According to Shah (2019), a researcher may prompt or lead participants in a direction that is favourable for the researcher and as a result, this will result in biased answers. In this study, the focus group discussion was guided by a set of questions and prompts were facilitated by me during the discussions, but it was clear and open-ended questions. During the FGDs, as a researcher, I sought to avoid researcher bias as much as possible.

### **3.4.2 Rapport building**

Qualitative researchers have postulated that before conducting an interview, it is vital to establish a good rapport with interviewees as it reduces their anxiety (Park, 2023 & Glesne, 2016). In addition, establishing a positive connection between interviewer and interviewee can influence the data quality of these interviews (Park, 2023 & Arksey & Knight, 1999). At the onset of every focus group discussion, I opted to establish rapport with participants from each focus group to normalise their anxiety so that they could feel more comfortable talking about their experiences. This was achieved by introducing a whimsical and fun icebreaker that required participants to reflect on a destination they hope to visit one day but the twist was that it had to start with the first letter of their name. This type of activity is consistent with research conducted by Trinity Duke (2005), who found that icebreakers are effective in making participants feel more at ease with one another. In hindsight, it was a good way to get participants not only relaxed but acquainted with one another which set the tone for the focus groups. Rapport was maintained throughout all focus group discussions, and this enhanced the active discussions in the groups. The rapport also seemed to have made the SSOs realise that they are not alone in their struggles and being offered a platform of this magnitude got them to vent/purge the negativity instead of suppressing their feelings and thoughts. The focus group discussions started slowly but with time, participants were actively engaging in discourse and there were many instances where there was mutual agreement with one another so much so that certain focus group discussions had to be reminded of the time. There were some distractions which were not in the control of the participant. For example, a participant was busy in the focus group discussions, and she had a sign on the door indicating “busy in session” but students remained adamant about getting hold of this participant and at one point, this participant had to excuse herself to attend to them. Unfortunately, this occurrence influenced the group dynamic slightly, but the momentum was quickly restored upon her return. Interestingly a significant percentage of participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to vent and express themselves freely but did so after the focus group discussions were concluded. Apart from building rapport with the participants, it was also vital to establish rapport with college principals, deputy principals, and student support managers from the six TVET colleges since it was their responsibility to grant permission for this study and allow me to contact their student support officers. Lastly, I also conducted careful introspection on the methodology chapter which required me to reflect genuinely on the overall research process. This reflective

exercise made me realise that this study provides the necessary foundation for further meaningful research to be conducted.

Another important point is that the results of this study will provide a detailed understanding of this phenomenon because of my position as an SSO and since phenomenology is the chosen framework for understanding how people make sense of their experiences and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.

### **3.4.3 Online Platforms**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all focus group discussions were conducted via the MS Teams communication platform. The rationale for the virtual groups was to minimize the risk of exposure to COVID-19 and it was also to offer a safer, more affordable, and more convenient alternative to face-to-face focus groups. Before the commencement of the focus group discussions, participants were invited to a brief MS teams online meeting which briefly explained the essence of this research undertaking and the value they as SSOs could add to this research endeavour. They were also afforded an opportunity at the end of the virtual briefing to ask questions about the research. In hindsight, there were a few questions posed that centred around confidentiality, anonymity and time. Further to this, every participant also received an email briefing on how the focus group discussions would unfold and the time they would need to set aside for this process. All the focus group discussions were recorded, and consent was received from all participants. One of the main benefits of recording the discussions was that it allowed me to analyse the various participants' narratives, but it also allowed me to analyse the subtle non-verbal nuances of the group dynamic of each focus group discussion. Two participants encountered problems with internet connectivity on the day of their scheduled focus group, which negatively affected their participation. Attempts to accommodate them in a different focus group were explored but due to conflicting work commitments, they were unfortunately unable to participate.

### **3.5 Data Collection Procedure**

The study was approved by the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town to ensure all the relevant ethical standards were being upheld. After gaining ethical approval (see Appendix J), the first step entailed conveying a formal permission request (see Appendix A) to conduct research, and this was addressed to the respective college principals at all six TVET colleges in the Western Cape. This request was addressed to the respective college principals and in hindsight, they responded positively to the request.

Once approval was obtained from the college principals, the second step entailed issuing a formal online MS teams meeting request to the deputy principals of academic services and student support managers at all TVET colleges. The rationale for this meeting was two-fold: firstly, it was to provide an overview of the research study (see Appendix B), and secondly to request permission (see Appendix C) to engage and recruit student support officers within the student support departments through the student support managers. The third step entailed conveying a formal email request to student support officers inviting them to participate in the research study. In this email, each participant was provided with all the necessary information about the research study with the invitation to participate (see Appendices B and C).

Some student support officers seemed eager and willing while other SSOs exhibited a level of hesitancy and chose not to partake in the study. The SSOs that did not choose to participate provided the following reasons: busy work commitments, lack of time and some failed to respond to the request. SSOs who responded positively to the invitation were invited to an information session about the study on MS Teams. The rationale for the information session was to carefully go through the study objectives to facilitate informed consent before the commencement of the focus groups and to create a platform for any further questions they may have had about the research study. Some of the participants were not able to secure a quiet space to partake in the online focus group, and on two occasions there were distractions that the online group etiquette information session could not control.

The fourth step entailed contacting each participant a day before and, on the day, reminding them about the commencement time of the focus group discussion. The fifth step entailed making sure all FGDs were conducted online and recorded, and all the recordings were transcribed into a text-based format to facilitate analysis. The six-step entailed, making sure the focus group transcriptions were completed by an external transcriber and quality checked by myself. The final step was completing the write-up of the thesis based on the thematic data analysis I conducted on the data.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

The data obtained from this study were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 79). This method allowed me to observe and understand the collective or shared meanings and lived experiences of student support officers (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Furthermore, one of the main features that make this method of qualitative data analysis unique is the plausibility of focusing on the data from different angles, making it a flexible method

(Braun & Clarke, 2012). In simple terms, thematic analysis can analyse a data set to gain meaning or examine a specific feature of the phenomenon more comprehensively (Braun & Clarke, 2012). It slightly arranges and defines the data set in rich detail. Due to the nature of this topic, an inductive approach was used for this study. Essentially, this approach refers to the analysis and coding of data from a bottom-up approach and was guided by what was found in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The thematic analysis consists of 6 phases and each phase was followed systematically and will be further discussed in more depth.

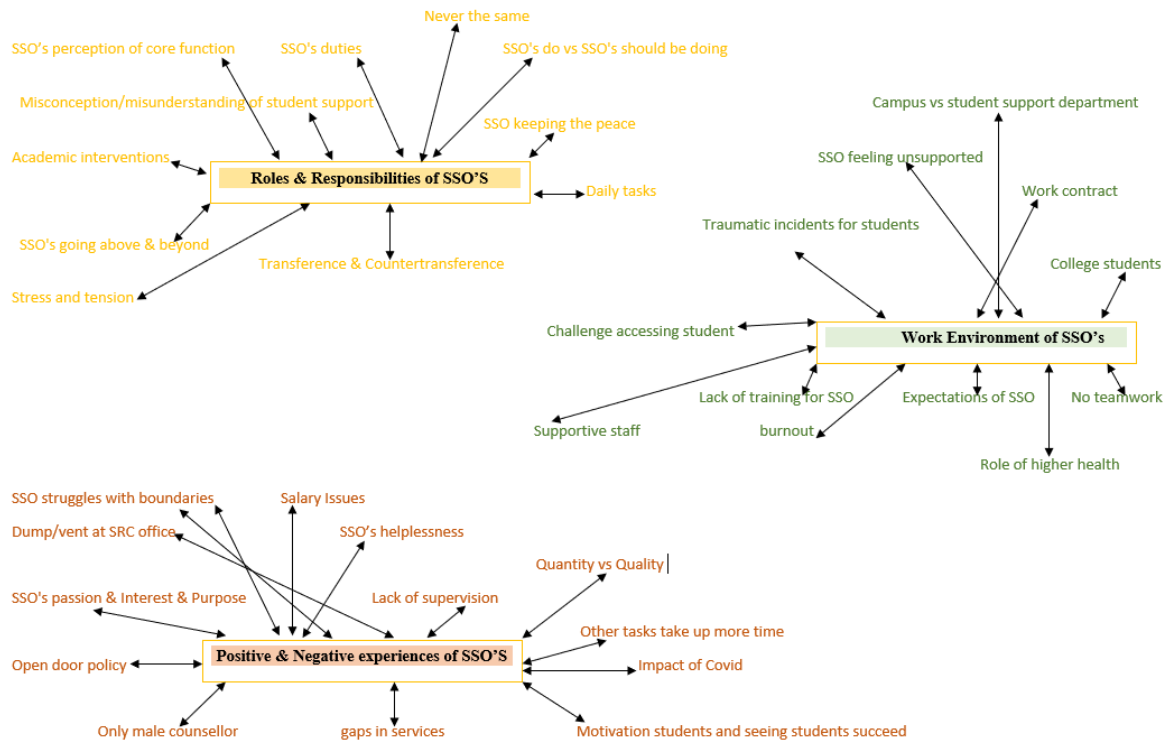
### **3.6.1 Familiarization with data**

The first phase is when I familiarized myself with the data. This phase unfolded during the data collection process where I conducted my focus group discussions with all the participants. I submerged myself in the data, by not only reading but re-reading the data transcripts of the focus group discussion and listening to the MS Teams recordings attentively (Braun & Clarke, 2012). During this phase, a lot of my energy was diverted into reviewing the dataset to understand and note pertinent ideas. In other words, before I coded the data sets, I familiarized myself with the meaning derived from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Based on this research topic, I immersed myself in the content of the various data sets as this helped me in answering the question about the lived experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges.

### **3.6.2 Generating initial codes**

The second phase aimed to, “generate initial codes”, which formed part of the building blocks to provide the foundation for the next phase (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this case, short words and phrases were recorded as depicted in the diagram on page 38, the initial analysis and comprised of codes and initial themes. Each transcript from all 5 focus groups consisted of numerous codes and eventually, all these codes were arranged in a table format. The rationale for the table was to systemically review codes from all five focus groups. According to Braun & Clarke, (2006), the formulation of these codes helps mark a feature of the data.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS SHOWING 3 MAIN THEMES AND VARIOUS CODES (INITIAL ANALYSIS)



### 3.6.3 Searching for a theme

The third phase, “searching for a theme” consists of capturing pertinent patterns that were germane in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2012). When all the data was collated and coded, a comprehensive list of various codes was formulated that was different, unique, and identifiable across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this case, I used the list of generated codes to form a category of similar codes, and this allowed me to understand the data more carefully. All the authentic coded data was collated, and this gave rise to possible themes.

### 3.6.4 Reviewing themes

In the fourth phase, “reviewing potential themes”, where concrete themes were formulated that added richness to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I was able to construct themes that were in alignment with the research questions. This was possible by categorizing all the extracts under specific themes. Upon completion of this task, I spent time reviewing the extracts and themes to ascertain if there were patterns germane to this study.

### 3.6.5 Defining and naming themes

The fifth phase, “defining and naming themes”, was crucial for shaping the analysis to complement the fine-grained detail of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

### **3.6.6 Producing the report**

Finally, phase 6 “Producing the report” entailed interweaving the content extracted from the analysis and constructing a narrative that spoke to the data received (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis within this research study offered rich and fascinating insights into the real-world perspectives and lived experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges. Specific excerpts were carefully used to enhance themes and add great depth to the discussion of this study.

### **3.7 Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is centred around the quality of the study and refers to the credence of data, interpretation, and methods used (Connelly, 2016). Qualitative research has had a fair share of criticism and to develop a sense of trustworthiness, criteria were developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to evaluate qualitative research. These 5 criteria are namely credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability and authenticity (Diane et al., 2014). A brief discussion of the below-mentioned construct was used to achieve trustworthiness.

Credibility refers to the truth of the study, data, views of participants, and overall interpretation (Cope et al., 2014). To ensure the credibility and validity of the study, it was important for me to be mindful of the interpretation of the data. In addition, immersing myself in the data, during the analysis process helped me ascertain the views of research participants and truthful reporting of the study findings and this provided a significant perspective to the study.

Dependability refers to consistent data over time with the same conditions (Connelly, 2016). To ensure dependability. The study was approved by the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town to ensure all the relevant ethical standards were being upheld. To achieve this standard, I closely reviewed and re-evaluated study data. This was often done after a week of completing that specific section and the time frame allowed the data to be evaluated with fresh perspective. In addition, the research methods can be replicated to achieve the same outcome by different researchers conducting similar studies as this study.

Confirmability refers to the researcher's capability to capture the views and opinions of participants authentically without imposing the researcher's viewpoints or biases (Cope et al., 2014). To ensure confirmability, participant excerpts with rich descriptions have been incorporated into the final write-up of study findings in Chapter Four and this has enhanced the thesis. In addition, the inclusion of an external transcriber of all 5 focus groups served as another way to ensure confirmability. An audit trail is a popular technique used in qualitative research and is a technique I used in this study. I recorded all the pivotal themes during data

collection and reviewed all the codes thoroughly. By doing this, it allowed me to see the bigger picture when I had to review the codes and themes to achieve the final analysis.

Transferability refers to findings from the study that can be used in other settings (Cope et al., 2014). To ensure transferability, the findings from this study may be used in a presentation among specific healthcare professionals who also share a similar research interest and context. The findings of this study can be used within TVET colleges only and are further applicable to student support officers. The study findings only apply to SSOs that are responsible for providing a comprehensive service to students and not to SSOs that have a specialised function on campus.

Authenticity refers to the participant's feelings and experiences captured in a true and real manner (Cope et al., 2014). To ensure authenticity, the findings of the study underwent supervision, editorial and rigorous examination to ensure all the relevant research ethical standards were being upheld and findings are substantiated with participants excerpts to demonstrate truthful reporting.

### **3.8 Reflexivity and Positionality**

I conducted this research endeavour in my capacity as a postgraduate student at the University of Cape Town and not as an SSO at my TVET college this was both an ethical imperative to report on as well as a reflexive requirement for the study process. Throughout the research, I was self-reflexive about my views, and my position and mindfully aware of how these may affect the research process and interpretation of data as influenced by my positionality. Since researchers are “the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, reflexivity is deemed essential” (Watt, 2007 p. 82). Being aware of one’s positionality is an important component of research. It is an active process that helps the researcher identify and maintain the position that they have chosen in the research study (Holmes, 2020). As the primary researcher who is also a student support officer, I needed to be aware of my positionality and subjectivity as my participants are also SSOs. In this study, I maintained reflexivity by reflecting on my thoughts, behaviour, and feelings, regarding the phenomena under study. In this section, I describe how I navigated the process through awareness of my insider/outsider positionality, biases, blind spots and journaling. This process helped me enhance my skill set as a researcher (Watt, 2007).

#### **3.8.1 The Insider-Outsider Positionality**

According to Holmes (2020), the insider and outsider position has been a longstanding debate. The debate centres around whether occupying an insider's position is more advantageous than

occupying an outsider's position (Holmes, 2020). The definition of an “insider” is a collective group of people or specific members of a group, and “outsiders” are regarded as non-members (Merton, 1972). From an insider's position, being an SSO myself it was easier for me to gain access to the participants and these participants consider me to be one of them (Holmes, 2020). Another was due to my experience as an SSO, I was able to ask questions that got participants to respond meaningfully, respectfully and honestly. In addition, obtaining these rich descriptions also added immensely to understanding the phenomena. Occupying this position also meant that when participants reflected on work-related markets using references or terms that I could identify. From an outsider's positionality, I reframed from pre-attempting what the codes and themes would be as I did not want my own biases to influence my findings. Therefore, I relied on the outcome of the focus group discussions and analysis of the sector helped me to guide me. I was aware that my positionality as a researcher and SSO might have helped some of the participants feel comfortable. However, there were certain instances whereby participants would make mention of an experience, and they would refer to me for validation but due to my role as a group facilitator, I had to try and remain neutral and objective. This was however challenging because much of what they had shared in various focus group discussions resonated with me.

### **3.8.2 Researcher Bias and Blind spots**

Bias in research is a “trend or deviation from the truth in data collection, data analysis, interpretation and publication which can cause false conclusions” (Simundic, 2013, p. 13). The occurrence of research bias is deemed unethical if conducted intentionally or unintentionally (Simundic, 2013). A blind spot is the tendency to consistently overlook one's own faulty or distorted thinking, often unintentionally, leading to poor judgement and interpretation. These factors both interfere with the integrity of the research and study findings and must be addressed (Redman, 2023).

There are two main types of bias namely, researcher bias and participant bias. However, for the purposes of this study, the focus will be diverted to the researcher's bias. According to Shah (2019), there is confirmation bias which is deemed to be common. It is when the data is interpreted in such a manner to support the researcher's hypothesis. Further to this, data may also omit information by the researcher if the hypothesis was not favoured. In this study, I analysed the data unbiasedly and authentically.

I am aware of a level of interviewer bias during the focus group discussions when I posed the question to one specific group, “*What are the roles and responsibilities of an SSO*”

Immediately all the participants had a giggle and my response in that moment was to mirror a smile. There were also moments during the focus group discussions when participants shared their experiences, and it resonated with me, but I could not agree with them by virtue of my role as a researcher. They also would refer to a particular issue and include me in the conversation (e.g.: “Sashen you know [this is true] ...”).

It was difficult to remain neutral in those moments when this happened. I would merely nod my head as a means of acknowledging them and what they have shared but I did not make a verbal comment such as saying, “I agree with you, etc...”. I understood that them saying my name was a means to validate their point and during these moments I remained silent and did not make a facial gesture. I remained quiet and continued to listen to the participants and often would ask-what do other participants think. So, I redirected comments/questions to the group.

To address my blind spots, I engaged with my research supervisor consistently to receive guidance and support throughout this research endeavour. In addition, her supervisory role also helped me recognise, acknowledge and navigate my biases that came to the fore. My research supervisor also verified that the data was correctly represented and during supervision, she closely examined my work.

### **3.8.3 Journaling**

Throughout the research process, I kept a self-reflective journal about my experiences from the beginning to the end of the research process. The journals also captured the highs and lows of my academic endeavour. My reflective journal captured the research processes in the thesis, and it has been categorised into the following components namely, my research experiences, my fluctuation in motivation, my personal barriers, my relationship with my supervisor, juggling my job commitments and studies and lastly, reminding myself of not allowing my subjective nature to influence my perspective on this research endeavour especially when I was analysing the findings. It was a powerful tool to provide an account of my experience and deepen my understanding of the research (Watt, 2007).

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

As mentioned, it is essential, for transparency, to report that I embarked on this research endeavour in my capacity as a postgraduate student at the University of Cape Town rather than as a staff member at my college. This study was based on the premise of 4 main ethical principles of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (2016): non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy, and confidentiality. Ethics clearance was received from the

Psychology Department at the University of Cape Town, and the reference number is PSY2021-058 (See Appendix J).

### **3.9.1 Non-maleficence**

The first principle is non-maleficence, which refers to the minimization of harm and risk to participants (HPCSA, 2016 & Khanahmadi, 2020). This principle was upheld on the basis that the study was conducted on a virtual platform and the rationale for this was in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, participants were generally geographically far apart which meant that due to work schedules, it would have been challenging for them to engage in a face-to-face group process as requiring participants to meet in person would cause an inconvenience to their work. The decision to hold virtual FGDs therefore further fulfils the second principle.

### **3.9.2 Beneficence**

Beneficence, the second principle, means the benefits of research must outweigh the risks to the research participants (HPCSA, 2016; Titi, 2021; & Khanahmadi, 2020). Some participants were ambivalent at the beginning to share openly about their thoughts and feelings. This hesitancy was a lack of trust and fear of how the information they share will not be easily identified and come across as betraying the confidence of their campus. Furthermore, since the student support department is, they did not want any tension and possible targets on their back from their managers. As the facilitator, I reassured participants about anonymity and confidentiality, and this made them feel more at ease to open up and share their experiences. These were all valid concerns, but the benefit of the study was to provide a platform for them to voice their opinions in a safe space so that change can hopefully happen outweighing the risks attached to them voicing their experiences in a shared space.

### **3.9.3 Autonomy**

The third principle is autonomy which refers to the participant's ability to exercise their right or make their own decision to partake in this research study (HPCSA, 2016; Titi, 2021). This principle was upheld based on the basis that this research undertaking was a voluntary process, and participants had a right to partake in this research at any time and withdraw at any point of the research process if they wanted to, without any repercussions. They also were provided with a safe and secure space during the focus group discussions to express their thoughts and opinions without any judgement. Some student support officers from various TVET colleges elected not to engage in the study for a variety of reasons, ranging from busy work schedules to a lack of interest in this research endeavour. Their autonomy was acknowledged and respected, and the student support officers who were invested took part in the study.

### **3.9.4 Confidentiality**

The fourth principle is confidentiality, which refers to the protection and privacy of the personal information of participants (HPCSA, 2016; & Khanahmadi, 2020). This principle was upheld on the basis that as the researcher, all participants' anonymity was upheld by using pseudonyms and not actual names for the thesis especially when it came to the extracts used in reporting findings. One form of confidentiality is the act of concealing participant's identities and anonymity is the assurance that the information provided about them won't be compromised (Sauders et al., 2015). These principles were adhered to and measures such as gaining informed consent, which will clearly state what the study is about, the expectations of the researcher or interviewer, and most importantly what they can expect from the researcher in terms of the findings. Each participant received consent forms (See Appendix C) that explained their involvement in the study and their right to exercise their autonomy to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research process. All the research data was stored in a folder where the recordings were password protected and six months after the completion of the degree, the recordings will be destroyed. Furthermore, the transcriber signed a confidentiality & non-disclosure agreement form (See Appendix G) and she also gave me a letter of transcription, which confirms the services she provided (See Appendix H). Lastly, with the increase in modern technology such as the internet and computers, researchers may experience challenges ensuring virtual privacy for participants (Plaza & Fischbach, n.d.). Therefore, I ensured online privacy by storing the data safely on the college's drive system (personal cloud storage space). This form of data storage provides high-security encryption and files are kept secure (O'Toole et al., 2018).

### **3.9.5 Chapter Conclusion:**

The qualitative research approach in this study emphasized the process over the outcomes, allowing for the discovery of meaning through the words and experiences of student support officers in the TVET sector. As a result, various themes were identified, contributing to a comprehensive discussion in the findings chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Overview

The previous chapter outlined the methods used in this study. This chapter reports on how SSOs make sense of their role against two objectives, first, to explore the role of student support officers at TVET colleges, and second, to identify challenges and positive experiences of student support officers at TVET colleges using a qualitative inquiry and phenomenology. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the participant's demographics and is followed by a robust discussion about four main themes namely, (1) Student support officer clientele, (2) Collegial relationships and collaborations, (3) “Devalued, yet we do so much,” (4) Connecting with students, (5) Training, capacitation and supervision with subthemes derived participants’ accounts, and (6) Quantity over quality.

### 4.2 Participant Demographic Information

As indicated in the methodology chapter, data was collected from SSOs from six TVET colleges in the Western Cape. The participant demographic table below shows details about (1) the number of focus groups, (2) the participant’s preferred language, (3) the participant's college of employment, and lastly (4) years of work experience of each participant. To maintain participant anonymity, the gender of participants was not included in the below table as it could disclose their identity but is discussed below.

**TABLE 4.2 PARTICIPANT'S DEMOGRAPHIC TABLE**

FGD	Language	Participants	SSO years of work experience
FGD 1	Afrikaans IsiXhosa Afrikaans English	Participant: 1 South Cape College Participant: 2 Northlink College Participant: 3 Boland College Participant: 4 College of Cape Town	10 years 6 years 10 years 11 years
FGD 2	Afrikaans English English	Participant: 1 West Coast College Participant: 2 False Bay College Participant: 3 College of Cape Town	9 years 8 years 7 years
FGD 3	Afrikaans English English	Participant: 1 South Cape College Participant: 2 False Bay College Participant: 3 Northlink College	11 years 10 years 3 years
FGD 4	Afrikaans Afrikaans English Afrikaans	Participant: 1 South Cape College Participant: 2 West Coast College Participant: 3 Northlink College Participant: 4 Boland College	15 years 15 years 9 years 9 years
FGD 5	English English IsiXhosa English	Participant: 1 Boland College Participant: 2 Northlink College Participant: 3 College of Cape Town Participant: 4 False Bay College	2 years 2 years 7 months 6 years

#### **4.2.1 Gender**

Men and women participated in this study, however, the proportion of women participants was much greater than that of men. In addition, while possible to determine the precise male-to-female ratio, it is best to protect this for confidentiality purposes. Above all else, women SSOs outnumber men in the Western Cape TVET sector.

#### **4.2.2 Language**

All participants expressed themselves in English. However, two participants reverted to their first language, Afrikaans, when they referenced a specific phrase or emphasized a point. Some participants mentioned that they are bilingual, meaning they speak two languages, while others noted that they are multilingual, meaning that they speak several languages.

#### **4.2.3 Work Experience**

The work experience of the participants was categorised into months and years. The rationale was to clarify the level of experience of the participants and to provide an additional frame of reference on the participant's lived experiences as SSOs. The below table indicates the work experience range that most participants fall within is between the 6–10-year range. This demonstrates the participants' wealth of knowledge in addition to their experience.

**Table 4.2.3 SSO work experience**

<b>Years and months of work experience</b>	<b>Number of participants that fall within this range</b>
1-5 months	1 participant
1-5 years	3 participants
6-10 years	10 participants
11-15 years	4 participants

### **4.3 STUDENT SUPPORT OFFICER'S CLIENTELE**

The SSO clientele is covered in this subtheme, along with who and what they sought counselling services for. According to the majority of participants, there are three ways in which students are referred to them namely, (1) self-referral; (2) sanctioned of a student disciplinary hearing; and (3) referrals made by lecturers based on student's presenting problems. According to Fritscher (2023), a presenting problem can be explained as a collection

of symptoms that a person exhibits which steers clients to search for professional help from either a medical practitioner or mental health care professional.

#### **4.3.1 The intersection of age, gender, race, class and migration**

According to the participants, clients who access counselling services from the student support departments are a gender diverse groups between the 16-55 age range but more women than men access support services:

*“17 and 25-year olds and if I look at the age category of my students that I do counsel, if I just look at that stats. Definitely I would say an 80% versus 20%, - 80% female versus a 20% male” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 3)*

*“Students, there are students that are younger than 18, youngest age being 16 of course. But the age range can go up to like I said earlier, 55 was the eldest student that I saw on that particular campus. So, a lot of students late 20s to early 30s” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 4)*

*“We have a large male population of students, but I see mainly female students” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 4)*

The data shows that the gender demographic of clients that seek counselling in TVET colleges in the Western Cape are campus campus-specific. From the discussions, it appears that more women than men access counselling services at all six TVET colleges in the Western Cape. Furthermore, representation is based on the course offered as some courses are heavily gendered as well as the geographic location of the campus which speaks to the historic spatial planning of South Africa. The below excerpts highlight the above-mentioned findings:

*“Males don't really come for counselling. And you find that, okay, in your engineering campuses, when you get to meet a male, it's by referral and usually it's due to substance abuse. But most of them/clients do not voluntarily come” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 1).*

*“It's very campus specific and each campus serves a very different population group. So, for XY campus, because of where the campus is located. I would say 80% of my students that I serve are black female” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 5)*

*“For me, it's obviously been a very diverse group. But you do find that at certain campuses, it's, uhm, it's very campus-specific. For example, if I look at XXX campus. We would just have mostly Coloured students accessing the service. Then at our YYY campus, it was a bit of a mix, because it was young girls, so it was quite a mix of students. If I'm looking at our ZZZ Campus, it is mostly black students that access the service” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 4).*

From the excerpt, it is evident that the gender distribution of clients on a campus is influenced by the programmes offered at that specific college and moreover at that campus. Many participants reported that the student population across TVET campuses that access student support services are racially diverse but demographic representation differs for each campus.

Furthermore, as shown in the above excerpts, fewer male students sought counselling services, and such recommendations were made by campus personnel (lecturers) or following disciplinary hearings. The below excerpts shed light on these experiences:

*“I have been surprised, I think last year and this year that there were more males coming to access counselling. I'm not sure why? I don't want to just go on the assumption that it is because of COVID and all that, but I think it did play a major role” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 1).*

*“Males don't really come for counselling. And you find that, okay, in your engineering campuses, when you get to meet a male, it's by form of referral. And it's especially has to do with the substance abuse, maybe a dagga was found or something like that. But most of them do not voluntarily come” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 5).*

*“Societal pressures and image of what a man should be. I find that they struggle to open up, and to talk about what's bothering them. Their sense of pride is still there and standing in the way” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 4)*

*“I find that, in your engineering campuses, when you get to meet a male, it's by the form of referral. But most of them do not voluntarily come” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 1).*

*“I think with regards to the males, because a lot of them their family members, or the breadwinners were losing the jobs, I think for them, it was more that they had to step up into these kinds of roles. So, I think it may be, but I did find that a lot of them also, they had family issues, family members obviously passing away. I think that within the space of COVID and with the stress of the academics being affected, I think that you*

*know, sort of spurred that on to make them realize that, you know, maybe not able to do this on my own but I can't also speak to you know, somebody in my family and my friends so, you know, the counsellor would most likely be the best person to speak to” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 1).*

Social class is linked to financial challenges. Participants reported that most of the students who access counselling services encounter many financial hurdles, and this is due to their social class and economic status. As a result, many of the students presenting for student support services rely on the National Financial Aid Scheme (NFSAS) which offers students financial aid to assist with covering the expense of their tertiary education. Such government aids also have many disadvantages for students. This is supported by the following excerpts:

*“Bursaries, finance is the number 1 need you know, uhm...it just not a priority but in the context of where my students are situated. That's one of the greatest needs” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 2).*

*“Students home circumstances, NSFAS allowances that's not being paid, they can't pay rent, which also means they won't have any accommodation” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 4).*

The above excerpts show that students accessing the assistance of SSOs rely on government financial aid as this is the only means to pursue a qualification which would enable them to support their families given the reported unemployment rates of their families. As Muchineripi et al., (2022) argue, one of these challenges is the need for financial support as these students come from low-socio economic backgrounds. According to Santos (1997), some of these students require this opportunity as they are first-generation students in their families.

Furthermore, some participants reported an increase in student enrolment from other provinces as opposed to students who reside locally. Furthermore, this pattern was more apparent among colleges situated in rural areas. Participants also mentioned that these students who accessed student support had never been exposed to such services before. The following excerpt states:

*“We have about 10 percent of local students and the majority of our students are either from Eastern Cape, Northern Cape you know, so uhm...rural areas in which they are coming from and sometimes uhm...having access to services that this is a first for them so that mostly where my students are coming from” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 1).*

*“At our campuses, we've got a small, White and Indian population. So, for example, if I look at my stats with regards to counselling, it would a higher percentage for Black students that come from the Eastern Cape or other provinces more than the local Black students” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 3)*

The findings suggest that there has been an escalation of students from other provinces that apply to the TVET colleges in the Western Cape and this following the finding by Munyaradzi et al., (2022) that a significant number of students that are enrolled at TVET colleges come from low socio-economic backgrounds.

#### **4.3.2 Presenting problems**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, participants have noticed changes in their client's needs. Most of the participants reported an increase in the number of students accessing the counselling services on campus. Some of the participants speculate the reasons for the escalation in clients may be due to student support services being better promoted on campus which has led to clients being more open to talking about their problems and lastly, some admitted to not knowing the reason. Before COVID-19, participants reported that the problems clients sought help for were substance abuse, trauma, anxiety and study skills to name a few. Post COVID-19, participants have seen an increase in the number of clients with mental health issues such as suicide, depression and anxious clients. The number of clients accessing the service is more and this places strain on the workload of the SSO.

*“The amount of students that are accessing counselling now has increased a lot, Uhm...I'm not sure why or how we are just promoting the services better or if they are more open to speaking about what is happening. Uhm... but yes, there's a lot more traffic coming my way.” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 2).*

*“The counselling has been hectic. I've never had so many students this year. In my 11 years, yeah, I've never had so many students to come for counselling, and it's getting worse because it's from emotional abuse, physical abuse, and yeah, it's hectic” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 3).*

*“I think that within the space of COVID and with the stress of the academics being affected, I think that you know, sort of spurred that on to make them realize that, you know, maybe not able to do this on my own but I can't also speak to you know, somebody in my family and my friends so, you know, the counsellor would most likely be the best person to speak to” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 1).*

It is clear from the above excerpts that there has been an increase in mental health problems and other personal issues that have entered the SSO office. This is in line with findings from Naidoo and Cartwright (2020) that the severity of the pandemic has affected various aspects of a person's life. Young (2009) also shared similar views and that students at institutions of higher learning face many mental health issues and that a significant number of students therefore seek assistance from counsellors at counselling centres on campus. The findings show that the ethnic identities, the age range of clients and also the presenting problems are varied for each campus.

Participant accounts established who, and for what reason, access student support services are students seeking counselling for various reasons, and most of them are referred by their lecturers. However, some students also seek counselling on their own. It was found that each campus's geographical location serves a particular population group, which is why many Student Support Organizations (SSOs) state that their services are campus-specific.

The study also found that men tend to access support services less frequently than women. This is linked to gender norms and stereotypes about men and mental health, single-parent households, and not enough male therapists available at college. However, some participants reported an increase in male clientele, especially on engineering campuses, over the last two years, reportedly due to the demand for mental health support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The gender distribution of students accessing support services is not a new finding. Previous studies, such as Schreiber (2007), have also found similar trends. Two local studies at the University of Western Cape in Cape Town (Naidoo, 1999) and Nicholas found that most clients were female. The findings are also in accordance with Muchineripi et al. (2022), who found that the TVET sector in South Africa enrolls students from diverse backgrounds, each facing unique challenges.

#### **4.4 COLLEGIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS**

This theme describes the organisational dynamic and the daily operations experienced between SSOs, non-student support staff (Staff that are not student support officers) and other SSOs within the TVET college environment. It also describes the close collaboration between SSOs and external service providers and the types of services they offer to the broader campus environment. Participants reported having experienced supportive and unsupportive collegial relationships with non-student support staff from various departments on campus. Therefore, it was important to explore these work relationships as the work environment dynamics are

essential in ensuring daily work tasks are completed successfully and timeously (Ehrhardt, 2014). The following subthemes emerged and will be discussed: (1) Cross-functional collaboration within TVET college community, (2) The lone counsellor and (3) Bullying and lack of support.

#### **4.4.1 Cross-functional collaboration within the TVET college community**

Cross-functional collaboration is “when members of different departments or teams come together to execute a specific task, project, or goal” (Boogaard, 2023, p. 1). These collaborations are also referred to as cross-functional teams and visible within organisations that are responsible for managing specific tasks and the main aim is to draw on each other’s skills and work together to achieve success (Birt, 2023). This subtheme discusses the cross-functional collaboration between student support officers and various staff members at their respective colleges and it concludes by discussing the relevance of the collaboration between SSOs and external service providers on campus.

Participants reported that they work in close collaboration with various role players on campus such as a campus manager, programme heads, lecturers, administrative staff, financial aid staff, work integrated learning staff, E-learning staff, open learning centre (library) staff, and maintenance staff. These role players are referred to as “non-student support” staff because they do not work within the student support department. Participants also described these daily interactions as inevitable and reported their interactions with several of the aforementioned role players at their respective campuses vary daily. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

*“We work with academic staff, programme managers, and campus managers. Pretty much everyone who’s not in the student support space” (Men, Participant 3, FGD 5).*

*“When lecturers come, they come for advice and support. We also work very closely with lecturers because they refer students”. (Women, Participant 2, FGD 3).*

*“Let’s just say functional managers, like your campus manager, programme managers, academic staff are the people we work with every day” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 2)*

The above excerpts are in line with Kadambi et al., (2010) who noted that counselling professionals at institutions of higher learning in South Africa, offer various services such as student consultations, student groups, and faculty consultations. It can therefore be postulated that these types of engagement with various members at college more specifically staff on campus unfold every day. In addition, participants described their work experience with non-

student support staff on their respective campuses as good, conducive, and supportive. One of the participants even equated their relationship with selected campus staff to family. The following excerpts demonstrate this point:

*“So, campus level [what] becomes you know, your place of work. I think the nice thing about my campus is that we are like a family. We are a bunch of sisters” (Women, Participant 4, FDG 5).*

*“It is a really supportive environment amongst peers and it’s a positive experience” (Women, Participant 4, FDG 1).*

*“Where I am based, its comfortable. We have good resources in terms of the staff component. Uhm. It’s quite conducive. I have good support from campus management, colleagues, and the students”. (Women, Participant 2, FDG 2).*

The above excerpts corroborate Field and Buitendach (2011), who point out that support staff members play pivotal roles and contribute immensely to ensuring tertiary educational institutions function optimally. Field and Buitendach (2011) however also argued that support staff members are often overlooked as more focus is on academic staff. Therefore, one can postulate that if a work environment is healthy and positive, it would yield positive organisational outcomes. This statement is in accordance with the findings by Gavin and Mason (2004) who concluded that organisational success is due to people's positive and happy mood states within the work environment.

On the contrary, some participants described their work experience as different and reported that they receive little to no support from certain non-student support staff on campus and little to no managerial support from “higher up staff” at the central office. According to participants, "higher-up staff" at the central office commonly include senior management such as the college principal, deputy principals, other managers and the student support manager, now referred to as an assistant director of student support services. In addition, a few participants reported that due to this lack of support, they must advocate their services to non-student support staff on campus, so that they can be taken seriously. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

*“So, the campus where I am at now is sort of where you have to force your way in and make them realize that you know, you sort of need my services here”. (Women, Participant 1, FDG 2).*

*“There could be more support from management. I understand there is pressure that comes from up top as well with our line managers, but we need the support. Make it*

*clear that this is what we do, and this is what we can't do. (Women, Participant 4, FDG 1).*

*“Miracles are expected from us, without any thought of how we are coping or dealing or even how we make it happen. And sometimes we do these things, and we take it in our stride. And then there's not even a thank you at the end. So, I definitely think we need more support” (Women, Participant 1, FDG 4).*

While SSOs reported their work environment as healthy, they at the same time do not receive adequate support and due to this often find themselves feeling stressed. They educate staff about the importance of the student support department and their services so that they can be recognised and taken seriously. This finding corroborates Koinis et al. (1984) who found that lack of support from colleagues and higher rank staff can impact a healthcare professional well-being and should therefore be addressed.

#### **4.4.2 Quality of Collegial Relationships**

Furthermore, the majority of participants described work relationships and interactions with their respective SSOs on campus as well as from other campuses as supportive and functional. They also stated that on occasions, disagreements and personality clashes occur which influence the student support department team dynamics, but these are temporary setbacks. The following excerpt demonstrates this point:

*“I've been here for 11 years. So obviously, with that came a lot of changes with team members. And what I found is that there's a lot of, obviously a lot of differences in opinion. And there's a lot of strong personalities within the team. But at the end of the day, we work together, you know, for the same purpose and the same goal. So yes, we have our, you know, disagreements or whatever, but at the end of the day, we still, you know, you put that”. (Women, Participant 4, FDG 1)*

*“We consult frequently with each other, uhm.. we've all been here for a couple of years, so there's good rapport amongst the SSO's. There is a lot of like case consulting, consulting around issues happening on campus so that support feels good” (Women, Participant 2, FDG 2)*

*“Quite supportive. It's quite easy to phone one of my colleagues or to message them to get at, you know to sort of guidance on whatever situation is happening in my space. Uhm.. ya, I think the support is quite good and the relationship we have it works well” (Women, Participant 3, FDG 2).*

Consistent with the findings by Florenthal and Tolstikov-Mast (2012), it is evident from the excerpts that a strong campus culture is achieved when there is a strong sense of community among employees (Florenthal et al, 2009). This sense of comradery is also formed when the relationship between staff is positive. However, Oosthuizen and Van Lill (2008), argue that stress is a variable in our everyday lives and essentially, it is the onus of the organisation to create an environment whereby employees can function in a manner that will alleviate work stress.

In addition, several participants reported interacting and networking with various external healthcare service providers such as (NGO's, clinics, mental healthcare professionals, NPO's and higher health) as essential. Through these collaborations, participants were able to cultivate positive relationships with external service providers, particularly when referring students. For example, Higher Health offered support and guidance in the form of a clinical psychologist to TVET colleges in the Western Cape. Below are excerpts to highlight these experiences.

*"I love to network with external stakeholders, I think it is important when a student comes to you sometimes it's something way out of what you can help that student with. For instance, I make sure I connect with social development, make sure I know my community so that when that student is in need, I can do a great referral." (Men, Participant 3, FGD 1)*

*"I have a relatively good understanding with our service providers, so I can call and make an appointment for our students, and then follow up." (Women, Participant 1, FGD 4).*

*"I don't know what is happening with [Higher Health?] but I am hoping that we get another clinical psychologist again. Because he was very efficient and would follow up with the students on the same day, which was really very nice. Instead of having them wait, you know, weeks or months for an appointment." (Women, Participant 2, FGD 1)*

*"So, if where the student lived had no clinical psychologists at their clinic, or the waiting list is just so long, they can only see the student in two months, that student would come back and i would write a referral letter to Higher Health, and Dr Short normally offered MS teams therapy sessions for our students". (Women, Participant 1, FGD 5)*

From the above excerpts is clear that external healthcare service providers offer an invaluable experience to students at college and these services are made possible through these

collaborations. However, unfortunately, at the time this research was conducted, this service was no longer available due to the resignation of the clinical psychologist. Despite this gap, participants indicated such services were extremely beneficial for them and for the students.

#### **4.4.3 The lone counsellor**

This subtheme discusses the misunderstandings that non-student support staff members have about what is expected of SSOs, as well as how these misunderstandings affect SSOs who work alone on campus and the importance of boundaries as a result. Some participants reported that certain “higher up staff” at central office seem to have misconceptions about the SSO role and responsibilities. The participants also indicated they felt that higher up staff do not fully understand the daily challenges faced on campus as they are not there to observe its daily operations. Below are excerpts to highlight these experiences.

*“People working at central office or you know SMT (senior management team) people. I think those are the higher-up people. I think those higher-up people don’t understand what’s going on the ground” (Men, Participant 2, FDG 1).*

*“You need to let them know that you don’t just sit in your office, you are not just behind a desk, you are busy, you are working. So, you cannot just be up and ready to go when they call you for every student related matter” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 3)*

The excerpts suggest that senior staff members in positions at the central office (head office) do not fully understand the challenges that SSO face daily and as a result have misconceptions of their roles and responsibilities. The above excerpts also suggest a sense of frustration and helplessness in the expressions of the SSOs. This is in accordance with findings by Fryer (2014) that an SSO role is multifaceted, and responsibilities are diverse.

In addition, data also shows that non-student support staff members on campus often assume that any issue pertaining to a student is the responsibility of the SSO and that SSOs are expected to handle these issues even if they are outside of their official roles and responsibilities. The following excerpts demonstrates this point:

*“Every little issue that’s related to a student has from you know, falling down the stairs or you know having a headache whatever it may be. Everything is just pushed to student support.” (Men, Participant 3, FDG 5).*

*“A student came and said, I’m struggling to breathe and while on the phone with the ambulance, she fainted. I am not a first aider. I am not by nature somebody that deals*

*quiet well with a medical crisis, because I don't have the knowledge” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 4)*

*“I think just that people expect us to wear different caps all the time, to sort out everything that comes student, even something that happens on campus, student support needs to handle that, and they don't care if it falls under us. We just need to sort it out (Men, Participant 3, FGD 1)*

The above excerpts suggest that SSOs believe that non-student support staff do not understand the roles and responsibilities of SSOs. The study found that due to this lack of understanding, there appears to be an unspoken expectation that all student-related matters will automatically be managed and resolved by the assigned SSO. This finding is supported by views by Fryer (2014) that staff on campus assume SSOs are responsible for all student-related tasks and that they should be the “jack of trades” but mastering all.

Participants further reported there is one SSO on each campus at their respective colleges and they are responsible for providing student support services to all students on campus. Some of the participants stated that they had to manage more than one campus simultaneously and this was due to being understaffed. As a result, they described feeling overwhelmed, tired, overworked and alone. The excerpt below captures this point;

*“We are four counsellors on seven campuses. So, we split between two campuses. That's a huge major issue for me. Because you spend two days at one campus, three days at one campus. So naturally, or, a week, per week, just to give you a context” (Men, Participant 3, FDG 5).*

*“It's a bit tough for us right now because we are heavily understaffed so we have three vacant campuses or there is no SSO so that means we basically have to now share and jump in and help on different campuses during the week, so that obviously causes a lot of extra pressure and you are out of your office and you know you cannot see all your students because you also need to go and help elsewhere” (Women, Participant 1, FDG 2).*

*“I do work across two different campuses within Northlink at the moment. So, my week is basically split up into one half and then a second half which starts all over again from scratch.” (Women, Participant 4, FDG 4).*

The above findings of this study suggest that being a lone counsellor on a campus is challenging and demanding and this could influence an SSOs productivity negatively. In addition, the fact

that at certain colleges the SSOs have to oversee more than one campus on their own without any additional support is an unrealistic expectation and this could lead to staff burnout. This is in line with a finding by Du Plessis et al., (2014), that healthcare service providers frequently face a variety of emotional and mental obstacles as a result of the nature of their profession and the surroundings in which they operate, burnout being one of the difficulties.

#### **4.4.4 The need for professional boundaries**

Participants described their work environment on campus as having no routine and that each day is never mundane. Participants stated that due to the nature of their jobs, non-student support staff and students occasionally overstep their professional boundaries. As a result, some of the participants had to build up the courage to notify non-student support staff and students of what is acceptable and what is not. Below are excerpts to illustrate the above point:

*“There's a new campus manager and he comes to me and says that there's a student that needs money. At the time the manager had food in his car for the student, but also suggested that I need to do a home visit. I said meneer, please. This will be the first and the last. I'm not doing home visits” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 1).*

*“I am also a boundary person so uhm sometimes what it don't like is when students don't understand boundaries you know uhm.. for an example, I am in a meeting the door is closed but I'm saying in a meeting but because to the student the need is now, they will just open the door and I'm like but I could be in a session with someone” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 2).*

*“We on WhatsApp and then sometimes I have to say to the SRC, listen here, switch off now because this is my quality time that I need to spend with my family. But that is how dependent they become on you” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 3).*

The findings suggest that an SSO boundary is not always respected and on occasions, they have to take a bold step and speak up for themselves. Participants further reported that students arrive at their office daily with various problems for them to resolve and they never know what to expect or what will happen on campus. The following excerpts illustrate this point:

*“At the campus level, every day is different. There's no such thing as a routine. There's different challenges, different students that constantly come to your office with different problems that you need to sort out “(Men, Participant 2, FGD 1).*

*“There are just students coming through, staff members phoning you for anything. And everything is dumped on student support. So, you never know what you're going to get when you get to campus” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 1).*

*“You can plan your day, you can have scheduled meetings, and then it just gets rewired with crisis, with students needing your help, with students fainting, with students having an epileptic fit, etc, etc.” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 4).*

The above excerpts prove that SSOs never know what to expect daily at their workplace as their current role and responsibilities are multifaceted. The excerpts also suggest that SSOs need to be ready to deal with any and every student related. This is in accordance with findings by Hewitt and Wheeler (2004) that the organisational context is a distinctive experience and due to its ever-changing environment, it opens opportunities for tension within the workplace.

In response to the unpredictability of their role, several participants indicated how important it would be for them to implement boundaries at work. SSOs reported that non-student support staff also make their work challenging and setting boundaries would communicate realistic goals and expectations which will inform the non-student support staff (for example campus management), and higher up staff at central office (senior management) what to expect from the student support officers. The below excerpts highlight the above-mentioned findings,

*“I think it's about time that we learn to say but this is not part of my role or my responsibility. I think that is where the problem lies. But you know how it is, when management asks you to do it, you just expected to do it.” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 3)*

*“I'm realizing more and more that I need to set some boundaries, because it's been taken to another level. It feels like being taken advantage of or like being abused, to put it mildly.” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 3)*

*“But I feel like we also need to draw the line. We can't be like, all over-doing everything. There are specific people employed to do certain things and we need to work within our roles and responsibilities as SSO's (Women, Participant 1, FGD 1)*

SSO's roles and responsibilities are multifaceted and diverse (Fryer., 2014). However, unpredictable work requirements can lead to misunderstandings and confusion among staff. It is evident from the above excerpts that SSOs have come to the realization the importance of implementing boundaries as this will communicate what is expected of them and what is not expected of them. The excerpts further point to the need for enforcement of boundaries as a

means for self-care so that they can provide the best service to students if they are in a good and healthy mental and physical phase. This finding is in accordance with a study that pointed out that employees in student support roles are usually unclear about what their job entails and how certain tasks should be performed (Breugh and Colihan, 1994).

#### **4.4.5 Lack of management support and Bullying**

This subtheme discusses the level of support SSOs receive from management and there were different experiences about support received. Participants shared that they need protection from the assistant director of student support services (manager) to advocate for them. Some of the participants stated they receive reliable support and guidance from their student support manager, now known as the assistant director of student support services. Whereas other participants indicated that they felt unsupported and neglected by their assistant director of student support services. This is supported by the following excerpts;

*“Somehow our managers, you know, do fail us in a way. Because they are the ones that got the power to explain to these people, on campuses and higher-up what’s our role” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 10)*

*“I feel like our department needs a bit more support from our manager to say like, you know, this is what our student support officers do. You know, because we offer a valuable service and, if you want to preach about how this is a core service that our students need to have, then why don't we have the support in this regard” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 1)*

*“You get the other departments, for example, a marketing department which we had in the past. Their manager would stand up and say, this is what my people do. This is what they won't do” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 1)*

The above excerpts corroborate the importance of having a manager who has the authority and influence to engage with senior management to make other departments comprehend the importance of the student support department, but it seems some managers struggle to speak up for their SSDS staff. Participants also reported inconsistent and limited support from academic staff when they have important student support related events on campus such as student orientation, student campaigns, SRC-related events and student workshops etc. This has left many participants feeling frustrated and stressed. The following excerpts exemplify this point:

*“The campus manager has told me orientation is your responsibility, and you need to coordinate it, you need to plan it. So, I literally need to inform this person, you are on for that slot, you are on for that slot. They come and they leave. They leave me so alone in the hall with all of those students” (Women, Participant 1, FDG 5).*

*“On our campus, at our college, the student support officer is in charge of the orientation. And you set up the entire orientation programme and run it all alone. There is no support from lecturers and at times, you had to go and call students from class to attend orientation” (Women, Participant 2, FDG 3).*

*“There is not support from staff when it comes to student related events on campus. You end up having to cope and manage large groups of students on you own. That's frustrating and very stressful” (Women, Participant 3, FDG 4).*

Some participants reported numerous incidents whereby authoritative figures such as non-student support staff such as campus managers as well as senior management from central office expected them to go above and beyond their call of duty. Often due to this imbalance in power, participants reported feeling intimidated. On occasions when they found the courage to voice their opinion, participants described that they were subjected to various forms of bullying and as a result, felt a sense of helplessness. Below are excerpts to illustrate the above point:

*“You are stuck on campus; you are on your own. You fight your own battles. I was bullied for six years. I was bullied and I tried so many ways, and no one stuck up for me. So at least this ended because the manager resigned. So, it was six years of being bullied by my manager who would just dump everything on you” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 1)*

*“When a campus manager understands student support a particular way, like mine does, it's just you do everything. I will give you an example, it's someone's birthday and I got to work, and it was my responsibility to go blow up balloons. So, if you want peace, quiet and a nice working environment, you tend to just go with the flow.” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 5)*

*“My campus manager refers staff to me for counselling. This is not on for me, because I'm a student counsellor, not a staff counsellor. I constantly tell her, even parents when we have a private meeting, and then I have to counsel parents as well. So, I told her that that is a no. That was an issue, because she said, you are here, so why can't you do it? Because it's also part of your job” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 5)*

The findings suggest that collegial collaborations are vital for student success and also for the smooth running of a TVET institution. From the above concerns one can postulate that staff working within organisations prefer a better workplace so that they can function optimally in their role (Budiharso & Tamani, 2020, and Barken et al., 2018). The study found lack of support to support by management and fellow staff can lead to workplace bullying, which is, a problem that has gained significant traction globally within organisations (Mokogolo 2017).

Collegial relationships impact work performance. From the findings, we see that SSOs closely collaborate with higher-up staff, SSOs, and non-student support staff at their respective TVET college and receive varying levels of support in their daily interactions. This is in accordance with the findings by Allen & Eby (2012), Ehrhardt (2014) and Chandrasekar (2001) who hold that our experiences at work are both ubiquitous and profoundly impacted by interpersonal relationships and impacts on productivity. SSOs working environment needs to be conducive and if this is achieved it will yield positive outcomes for them to fulfil their roles on campus.

#### **4.5 “DEVALUED, YET WE DO SO MUCH”**

The title of the second theme speaks to the heart of the sentiments of SSOs and reflects conversations from the interviews about the roles and responsibilities of SSOs. This theme offers insights into the daily functions of SSOs and 4 subthemes form part of this overarching theme namely (1) “We wear so many hats outside of what is in the job description” (2) The downside of being in the best interest of students’ well-being (3) SSOs as a dumping site, and (4) Inconsistent remuneration.

##### **4.5.1 “So many hats outside of the job description”**

This subtheme discusses the several roles and responsibilities that SSOs have to fulfil and the intense workload that they need to manage daily. Participants stated that there seems to be a disparity in what they do daily versus what is specified on their work contract and work description. The overwhelming majority of participants reported it was challenging to describe the roles and responsibilities of SSOs. Some participants even laughed when they were asked the aforementioned question. Despite this, there was a shared consensus among participants that they understand what is expected of them as there is a job description, but the overall description is vague. The below excerpts will illustrate this point:

*“I like how you asked the question “what are the roles and responsibilities of SSOs?”, [and] everybody just started laughing. It’s a complex one I mean we know there a job*

*description right, but if anything involves a student it involves you.” (Women, Participant 3, FDG 2).*

*“I don't think the roles and responsibilities of a student support officer can be described in like one thing. I think the roles and responsibilities of a student support officer is to always be there for students” (Men, Participant 2, FDG 1)*

*“I think basically on paper we are doing what we supposed to do. But we actually do more than what is on that paper. I don't think people do understand what we really do, it's the running around, it's just trying to assist everywhere.” (Women, Participant 1, FDG 3).*

*“I think just that people expect us to wear different caps all the time, to sort out everything that is student related. They don't care if it even falls under us. We just need to sort it out” (Men, Participant 2, FGD 1).*

Furthermore, participants reported to be required to fulfil roles that they are not trained for such as medical emergency response and sport coaching. Medical response entails attending to medical-related crises such as panic attacks and epilepsy. These are duties that they reported to not feel comfortable doing and this is because they are not trained medical professionals and are without prior but are required to assume the duties of first aiders on campus. Participants also reported that overseeing sports/coaching was another responsibility they did not receive any training and this generally evoked feelings of dissatisfaction among several participants. Below are excerpts to illustrate this point:

*“If a student has got a broken finger, or anything, a pain, wherever, they think that it's our responsibility. And my thing is always, besides the fact that I don't have that first aid experience, it's a risk. I'm putting myself as one as the student at risk.” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 3)*

*“When a student came and said, I'm struggling to breathe. She was sitting opposite me on the chair. And while on the phone with the ambulance, she fainted. I'm not a first aider. I'm not by nature somebody that deals quite well with a medical crisis, because I don't have the knowledge. And I think that's the one part that I least like but more in*

*a way that I'm extremely nervous for when a student comes to me.” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 4)*

*“Ultimately, you need to sort out sport on your campus. And I mean, I didn't study sports or coaching or anything like that, because if I wanted to do sports, that is what I would have went to study. But I didn't, but now I'm responsible for it. So that doesn't sit well with me” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 5)*

The above excerpts demonstrate that even though SSOs are aware of their roles and responsibilities, there is still a sense of ambiguity surrounding them and pressure to work outside of their job description and training. The study found that participants are aware of the risks attached to working in roles they hold no expertise in. In addition, the study found that wearing multiple hats ultimately leads to them finding themselves spread so thin left feeling fatigued and stressed. Below are excerpts to illustrate the above point:

*“I am in agreement with Participant X and for me I don't mind the amount of work but sometimes it's never ending” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 2).*

*“For me, definitely that fact that we are so overloaded with work” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 3).*

The above excerpts confirm findings that defining the roles and responsibilities of the SSO is not simple and there is no standardised description (Fryer, 2014). However, a significant number of participants stated that they make a deliberate effort towards assisting a student on their academic journey at a TVET College by adhering to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) student support services model: (1) pre-entry: (2) on-course, and (3) exit support (DHET, 2007). This model is the foundational guide that SSOs use to navigate their way with students but as shown in the excerpts other ad-hoc duties are expected to be completed. Below is an excerpt to corroborate the findings:

*“We have our structured role and responsibilities in terms of pre-entry support, on course support and exit support. But there's so many underlining things in between that we do.” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 4)*

*“I definitely agree with everything that Participant X and Participant Y said. It's actually so sad, because that is not what we are here for, blowing up balloons, running to the mall, cutting the oranges. And that is what gets to me, and I've been unhappy for*

*the longest time in my post and, you know, just hear that it's exactly the same, or at least similar at other colleges” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 5)*

*“We doing so many things at the same time. For example, a lot of our time is taken up with the SRC, attending to the SRC, transport the SRC to meetings and it’s a constant barrage of messages and checking in and answering with the SRC. There's so many things we need to juggle” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 2)*

*“You are the student supporter. When the child is pregnant, I drive to the hospital with the students, things like this” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 1)*

From the above excerpts, we see that the majority of the participants shared that their roles and responsibilities are so varied that they juggle several tasks daily. These excerpts also suggest even though they have an SSDS framework to guide them resolve student-related matters, there are always ad-hoc duties that need to be completed (Fryer, 2014). In addition, several participants reported that they have numerous roles and tasks to perform and often get additional instructions from non-student support staff on campus to deal with various student related matters. Below are excerpts to illustrate the above point:

*“As a student support officer, a lot of things get kinda off lugged onto our role. Anybody that consults the college around something whether they want to address students whether it be a gym, whether it be a bank, it gets lugged onto the SSO role and you need to run with that and orchestrate that. We wear so many hats outside of what is on the job description.” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 2)*

*“I agree with Participant Z because, as said earlier, we wear different hats. So, our roles and responsibilities do vary” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 2).*

*“People expect us to wear different caps all the time, to sort out everything that comes our way. Even something that happens on campus, student support needs to handle that and they don't care if it falls under us” (Men, Participant 2, FGD 1)*

From the above excerpts, we see that SSOs are expected to take on multiple roles for the institution, staff and students. Due to this reason, SSOs often have to avail themselves so that student’s needs can be met. Below is an excerpt to corroborate the findings:

*“I think the roles and responsibilities of a student support officer is to always be there for students. You need to be their father, their mother, their brother, their sister,*

*everything in one to support them in whatever they might go through” (Men, Participant 2, FGD 1).*

*“The belief that we must as students support officers, be there for anything related to a student. Which is not most of the time not even our responsibility, but it's just been rerouted to us (Women, Participant 3 FGD 5).*

*“We even have to be drivers and sometimes when our students get sick, which is not even a part of our responsibility, you end up having to take the student to hospital” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 3)*

*“Students needing your help, with students fainting, with students having an epileptic fit, etc., etc. With students that need toiletries or food. And it is just sometimes overwhelming, I would say. You feel swamped sometimes” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 4)*

The above excerpts support the view of Kadambi et al., (2010), that higher learning institutions consist of counselling professionals, and they are deemed as vital members of the campus community. In addition, to providing this level of support, they also often take on these maternal and paternal roles to assist them adjust to their college environment (Kadambi et al.,2010). In addition, as shown in the excerpts, because the roles and responsibilities of an SSO are so diverse, more expectations are placed on them, and this leads to physical and mental exhaustion (Fryer, 2014).

The study found that SSOs take on many different roles and responsibilities and due to this, clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of SSOs becomes a complex matter. The findings show that many of the participants have shared that there is a level of understanding of what they know is expected from them to fulfil in their role as an SSO, but it is still too vague and ambiguous. SSOs rely on the SSDS generic framework (outside of their campus context) to help guide and support them fulfil their role. Within this framework, it states the key areas that SSOs need to oversee in ensuring the best possible help for a student in their success at college (graduation). Despite this, the challenge of additional work beyond job descriptions towards SSOs by non-student support staff results and further reproduces a misconception that SSOs must resolve anything student related. For example, academic-related queries should be managed by academic staff but SSOs have on several occasions been tasked to take responsibility for such matters.

#### **4.5.2 The downside of the best-interest-of-student well-being rule**

This subtheme discusses the disparities in the daily operations of SSOs, how SSOs go above and beyond the call of duty, the impact of medical emergencies and the administrative tasks of SSOs. According to them, prior to working at a TVET college, many assumed that counselling students would be a primary role but many soon found out that it was the least, especially with all the other tasks that they had to complete. Below are excerpts to illustrate the above point:

*“So, we even have to be drivers and sometimes when our students get sick, which is not even a part of our responsibility, you end up having to take the student to hospital and things like that. But it's a risk” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 2)*

*“We have to take our SRC, to the Ex-Co meetings, to the academic meetings. I mean, transport is not my responsibility, but it is, because when I asked my manager like why am I taking the SRC, it's like, okay, now who else must?” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 3)*

*“I expected to do a lot more counselling work, a lot more psychological work. And, you know, maybe even a lot more group work. I will say that from a counselling point of view, I expect it to be a 70/30 trade off, it's almost like the amount of work and attention that gets put into counselling, it's a bonus. When you come to work and you're doing more SNE stuff, you're doing more registration stuff, you're doing more admin tasks, which, if that was made clearer to me in the interview, I would have at least known what I had got what I would be getting myself into. I don't know if I speak for everybody. So practically what we doing versus what we signed up for, it's kind of chalk and cheese.” (Men, Participant 3, FGD5)*

From the above excerpts, it is clear that participants are highlighting that specific tasks and responsibilities take precedence over others. These views are supported by Hewitt and Wheeler (2004), who argue that administrative tasks are not the only necessary skill set SSOs need. However, they are also involved with other activities, and as a result, it is seen as time-consuming, which takes away time from other tasks, such as time away from client sessions. As an illustration of SSOs need to be client sessions, some participants considered themselves as born nurturers with an instinctive need to help others and they sacrifice a lot to ensure students and non-student support campus staff receive the best help possible. Below are excerpts to substantiate the above finding:

*“And I'm the type of person that will really go that extra mile, I will help you, even if the problem is not really mine, because, at the end of the day, the student is in front of me.” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 3).*

*“I personally enjoy the fact that I'm the go-to person for each and every student and quite like it because it's kind of like adopting a motherly role”. (Women, Participant 4, FGD 4).*

*“I have a lot of students or some students that come to me, they are maybe hungry or they need something or you need just money for [unintelligible: 0:38:11] fees or whatsoever, when you can assist that student and you can see the appreciation on their face, they come back and say thank you” (Men, Participant 2, FGD 1).*

*“It's in our nature to be accommodative and caring. You know? You want to help everyone, because why else do you go study in this field?” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 5).*

The excerpts suggest that participants consider themselves as instinctual caregivers and nurturers in accordance with findings by Harrison & Gordon (2021) who found that counsellors are often the first-line interveners, and they contribute greatly to the overall success of a student. Furthermore, participants reported that they go above and beyond the call of duty for the well-being of their students. Sometimes they have to respond at short notice and abandon whatever they are occupied with to attend to student needs. In addition, participants also reported that on occasion, working overtime is challenging, especially for those who have families. Below are excerpts to illustrate this point:

*“Sometimes at short notice, we just have to fit in and like, especially now in the time where there are strikes and things happening, it's our responsibility. Can you just attend this meeting? Can you bring the SRC along? So, we even have to be drivers and sometimes when our students get sick, which is not even a part of our responsibility, you end up having to take the student to hospital and things like that” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 3).*

*“Sometimes our working hours are not limited to 7:30 am to 4:00 pm. For example, we have SRC training that takes place over weekend. On a Friday, and Participant X can*

*also agree we had SRC elections when we used to work for the same college that went late into a Friday afternoon. Even with the sporting event that we had a couple of weeks back, it also goes on late into the day” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 1)*

*“Working after hours on this campus, I don’t have much cases but when I was working at another campus there were many instances where I had to work overtime but I had to put my foot down and say listen, these are contact numbers of 24-hour centres that students must use.” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 2).*

The above excerpts are in line with Harrison and Gordon (2021) who hold that counsellors experience several rewards and challenges in their work which may affect them both professionally and personally. Further to this, one of the major challenges is that counsellors going above the norm, can increase the chances for stress and burnout (Oosthuizen and Van Lil, 2008). The findings confirm the position of Munyaradzi and Addae (2019) in that TVET colleges in particular face many challenges in their attempt to render psychological services to students.

#### **4.5.3 SSOs as a dumping site**

This subtheme discusses the lack of regard for the SSO profession. Participants stated that certain non-student support staff seem to think that anything related to students is solely the responsibility of the SSO. As a result, many participants felt that they were not fully understood, sometimes taken advantage of, and that the student support department was being treated as a place to dump problems. Below are excerpts to corroborate the above-mentioned finding:

*“I think that the most difficult part, is that student support is sort of the dumping grounds, for all student related issues and problems” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 4)*

*“The frustration that I have is when things are being dumped at student's support. You do the explaining; people don’t take you seriously. Agh, you are just there, you are the student supporter” (Women, Participant 3, FDG 1).*

*“Anybody that consults the college around something whether they want to address students whether it be a gym, whether it be a bank, whether it be that gets lugged onto the SSO role and you need to run with that and orchestrate that)”. (Women, Participant 2, FDG 2)*

*“When it comes to staff members on campus level, oh well, student support, you know, is student support. We get everything, it's like student support is a dumping site for everything. Whenever there is a problem, they call student support, even if it doesn't involve us. So, we've come or we've learned to accept that in a way you know, that we get everything even if it doesn't fall within our department”. (Women, Participant 1, FDG 1)*

The above excerpts are in line with Harrison and Gordon (2021) who is of the view that working in an environment where you feel unappreciated and invisible can impact a counsellor's sense of self and overall professional identity. Participants also reported that SSOs face unreasonable expectations, which put them under a lot of pressure to perform often unattended work at the expense of SSO key performance areas such as conducting workshops. Below are excerpts to illustrate the above point:

*“Time is a challenge, because now they put me up for workshops or exit support. And like Participant X also said, academically, there's not a lot of time to do this. So, I normally just ask the lecturers for free time, but they can't put me on a schedule, because they are so busy. These workshops are important because, for example, it is to prepare students for their CV, to prepare themselves for an interview, that is stuff that they need before they leave” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 3).*

From the above excerpts, it is clear that SSOs are expected to conduct specific workshops with students on campus. However, the dilemma is that non-student support staff (lecturers) are often unwilling to designate time for workshops by SSOs as they deem their work more important and meaningful. Often, lecturers need help understanding the importance of these workshops. The findings suggest that no designated timeslot in the timetable has been created to accommodate workshopping the campus community, which would serve as a supportive intervention to the needs of students and all staff.

This finding corresponds with Fryer (2014), who is of the view that other members of staff hold an inferior view of SSOs, a perception held among academic staff that they are more senior and more influential as opposed to SSOs, thus regarding them as dumping site for student and campus related problems.

#### **4.5.4 Inconsistent remuneration**

This subtheme discusses the inconsistent and poor remuneration within the TVET sector in the Western Cape and the impact it has on SSOs. The overwhelming majority of participants reported that there is an inconsistent and poor remuneration for student support officers. This issue evoked immense discussion in every focus group discussion and all the participants shared the same sentiment which was that they do not always feel appreciated within the work context and for years struggled to get paid a worthy salary for all the work that they do. The below excerpts will provide more insight into this matter:

*“I don't think that we are appreciated for the amount of work that we do. And when I speak about appreciation, not only the physical appreciation, but the remuneration as well. I feel like this has been a struggle for many years. It's like, if you look at the workload that we have, and if you look at what, you've heard, all the things that we cover as student support, are we properly remunerated for that?” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 1)*

*“Salary because generally, it is a conversation that goes nowhere. I guess we all feel like compensation is possible below what it should be but it's generally a conversation that people have been having for years even before I started here and it is not going to go anywhere (Women, Participant 2, FGD 2)*

*“You all know about the fight of the salary levels. When I started here in January 2020, I started off as a level five. I have been called, my job title was student supporter, and on my pay slip it said, admin. My job description was copy and pasted as an officer. As a team, we lodged a grievance. And about a week or two weeks ago, I got an email, and I am now an officer. So that's been a very positive thing (Women, Participant 1, FGD 5)*

The above excerpts show that participants know that salary levels at various TVET colleges vary, which has contributed to feelings of uneasiness, disappointment, anger and apathy towards their role and responsibilities as an SSO. The study found that the main point of dissatisfaction is that the SSO is the sole healthcare professional and juggles several roles and responsibilities for the entire student population on a specific campus. Following Adams et al. (2019), one of the significant problems in community mental health is therapist turnover. Adams et al. further argued that financial strain is a common factor for employee stress, which seems to escalate workplace absenteeism and unproductivity.

## 4.6 CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS

This subtheme discusses the rapport and connection SSOs have built and nurtured with their students. Focus will also be diverted towards the gender, age range, ethnicity and presenting problems of the clients that have reached out to SSDS services at all six TVET colleges in the work.

### 4.6.1 Cultivating interpersonal relations with students is a top priority

Participants reported the interpersonal connections that they develop with students on campus are important to them. However, these interpersonal connections are two-fold. The first type of interpersonal connection is when participants usually establish connections with students during student related events such as sports day or when working closely with the SRC on campus. The other type of interpersonal connection is established during counselling sessions. This authentic and professional therapeutic dynamic between SSO and client can motivate students to reach out for help (come for counselling) and allow students to get over their anxieties of asking for help. Below are excerpts to illustrate this point;

*“The interpersonal connections that you have with students, that is very important. Just to get to know the student. It doesn't have to be a topic that you discuss, but just talking to the students, maybe in a group setup, maybe get to know them better. And then also the sports aspect. They feel more comfortable opening up to you” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 1)*

The above excerpts prove that building rapport with students is an SSOs duty and this interaction is instinct as they are aware that such engagement with students can help them form a bond and this can also be a platform to market their services to students. Participants further reported that they have more than one reason they enjoy working as SSOs. It looks to be multifaceted, with some of the benefits of being an SSO including conducting activities on campus, food drives, providing financial aid guidance, especially during COVID-19 (lockdown), and working closely with the SRC and hearing their success stories once they leave the college. Below are excerpts to illustrate this point;

*“I don't think I can single out like one thing. I have been busy with this food drive on campus, so it initially started just like a holiday hope thing for like December when they don't get, you know NSFAS and we want to make sure they there is enough groceries*

*for the families. My first SRC members when I started at the college uhm. He is a ward councillor now in Khayelitsha, so he was like one of the speakers for our uhm.. induction training for the SRC". (Women, Participant 1, FGD 2)*

Participants also reported that being able to assist students to their full potential and seeing them attain their jobs is not only rewarding but also a proud moment for them. This is a reminder and confirmation that their work is meaningful and there's a sense of purpose for student support officers. Below are excerpts to illustrate this point:

*"I'm able to then facilitate the growth and support from a counselling point of view for that student. So, in essence, if I know that person A comes to me and they are distraught, and they've got, you know, they're completely out of their wits, they want to give up in whatever sphere of life. And as the weeks go on, you see this student getting stronger, you see the student becoming more self-reliant, strongly in their own belief about themselves, and you are helping to facilitate that." (Men, Participant 3, FGD 5)*

*"Working with the SRC, seeing how they grow. Seeing how they become the leaders. And when we've met them, maybe a year ago and the path that they took and where they actually got to, and then at the end seeing them graduate" (Women, Participant 3, FGD 4)*

Participants also reported that seeing students graduate was meaningful for them as this marked the beginning and end of a student's academic journey on campus and knowing they have played a part in that success is gratifying and humbling. Below are excerpts to illustrate this point:

*"Actually, attending the graduation ceremony of our students and seeing how in spite of challenges, the students that have persevered and pushed through, how they can just enjoy the success of their journey" (Women, Participant 2, FGD 4).*

From the above excerpts, it is clear that SSOs learn from their students and clients and vice versa. The findings show that if students can relate with the SSO or feel like their SSO is supportive, during times of need they will be more likely to reach out to an SSO. This is in accordance with the finding by Ciobanu (2013) that student support services serve as an essential part of the active participation in student development and growth.

#### 4.6.2 Journeying with students toward their achievements

This theme showcases positive experiences of being a SSO to the following factors; student graduation, interpersonal connections with students, helping students on their personal journey and student success stories. Some participants felt that engaging with students daily and at events is a rewarding and fulfilling experience for them. According to participants, such engagement with students also afforded them the opportunity to learn from them. This is supported by the following excerpts;

*“I think it’s the informal interactions with students that are the ones that when you go to like an event. For an example, the sports event and health and wellness activations”*  
(Women, Participant 4, FGD 1)

*“For me, it’s the daily contact you have with students. I encourage students to come to the office just to say hi.”* (Women, Participant 3, FGD 2)

*“I enjoy interacting with students. They challenge your thinking sometimes makes you broaden your way of thinking and also to adapt to certain things. For example, they are more computer savvy, and these things are sometimes new to you but you get to learn from them”* (Women, Participant 1 FGD 4)

Several participants reported that being able to assist students navigate through their personal struggles is something that comes naturally to them and seeing the progress within these students is worthwhile. This is supported by the following excerpts:

*“When my mother would make food, I’m like put in extra because I need to take this to the hostel because this child needs to eat. He passed his hospitality and up until today, he always asks how I am, and he always tells me what he’s doing.”* (Women, Participant 1, FGD 3)

*“When a prospective student comes to you with an issue. It can be perhaps sexual trauma or suicide, and I am able to facilitate the growth and support from a counselling point of view for that student. Seeing this student getting stronger, you see the student becoming more self-reliant, and stronger in their own beliefs about themselves”.* (Men, Participant 3, FGD5)

*“Working with the SRC, seeing how they grow. Seeing how they become the leaders and when you met them, maybe a year ago and the path that they took and where they actually got to.”* (Women, Participant 3, FGD 4)

In addition, several participants indicated witnessing students graduate is one of the highlights to see a student come full circle. This is supported by the following excerpts;

*“Actually, attending the graduation ceremony of our students and seeing how in spite of challenges, the students that have preserved, pushed through and passed” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 4)*

*“For me, it’s when one of my students completed the programme when the students started. I think to myself, you have a lot to deal with and to watch the growth that they achieved is exciting”. (Women, Participant 3, FGD 2)*

*“We see students from the first month at the college and a lot of them come with adjustment issues and its beautiful to see them start off very tentative and awkward and then to see them in level 4 at graduation all robust and confident is a good feeling” (Women, Participant 3, FGD 3)*

Several participants stated that hearing about a student's accomplishment after they have completed their studies at college is rewarding and it affirms that they are doing some good. This is supported by the following excerpts;

*“When I meet up with students after a couple of years and they have succeeded despite their challenges, and they took my advice and guidance. I think that for me is very satisfying to see and to experience” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 4)*

*“Even after they have completed their studies, it’s always those who will come back to you and say thank you for the role of mentoring that you have done in my life. Because you don’t even realise the important role that you play” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 3)*

*“My first SRC member when I started at the college, he is now a ward counsellor in Khayelitsha, and he was one of the speakers for the induction training for the SRC. To hear that I was one of his favourite SSOs at least I am doing something good.” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 2)*

*“I assist a lot of students but what I can say is when these assist students come back to college to say thank you” (Men, Participant 2, FGD 1).*

While the above is good, there are limitations to what SSOs can do for student in their professional roles. Participants found themselves assisting students with basic student needs such as safety needs, a sense of belonging, and financial support on campus. Furthermore, many of the participants stated such issues often leave them feeling stuck as they do not have access to adequate resources such as financial support to assist and meet the needs of these students.

#### **4.6.3 Language and Cultural Beliefs Incompetence**

Language is an important aspect of communication and understanding a client's culture is significant for building rapport. Yet, several participants have indicated that they encounter language as a barrier when communicating with certain clients, making the counselling process challenging. According to these participants, it is evident in counselling sessions that clients whose first language is not English struggled to express themselves and this impedes the effectiveness and quality of service rendered by student support officers. The below excerpts will illustrate this point;

*“If English is not their home language, it does become more difficult to offer, you know, a good quality session. Because they, I do know that people are more comfortable speaking in their home language, and they'll be able to express themselves. Like so it's a slight barrier.” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 1).*

*“I think what makes it actually also difficult is the language barrier. I can't speak Xhosa, and then a student can't like put the words that they want to say into so that I can understand what they're feeling. So that is maybe what makes it difficult to have a quality session with a student.” (Men, Participant 1, FGD 1).*

*“It becomes a bit difficult, you know, when they have to express themselves in a language that is not their home language. Because too often I would find a student, you know, an Afrikaans-speaking student, shame trying to explain and I know nothing when it comes to Afrikaans. So, it'll be a little bit difficult.” (Women, Participant 2, FGD 1).*

Another issue that participants have to manage daily is centred around the cultural beliefs and values of their clients. In other words, there have been a few clients who presented for counselling and during individual sessions became reluctant and resistant to engage in the process. In other incidents, students felt they couldn't access student support services because according to their cultural beliefs it would be perceived as negative or a bad omen while other

clients held the notion that accessing counselling goes against their religious faith. Participants stated they try to remain unbiased, but it can be challenging at times.

*“I had a student I think it was last year, a student that struggled academically and we realized that there are deeper issues. So, when we spoke to the student, he just said, no, he does not believe in counselling, he believes in the Bible”. (Women, Participant 3, FGD 1).*

*“I was like, you know, the service is here, it's available. And so, she was like, no, in her culture, it's like if you come to counselling, something's wrong with you. Like you're cursed or something like that. And I'm like, I never knew this, and she's like, yes. So, I'm like, but it's, you know, that's not the case. So, she's like, no, because then it's about, you know, what, are people going to say if I come to counselling.” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 1).*

South Africa is a widely known country steeped in rich history and great cultural diversity. The prolific diversity exists in the ethnicity, linguistically (11 official languages), customs and culture of all South Africans (Masipa, 2021). The above excerpts are in line with a study by Matthews and Van Wyk (2018), who stated that several studies conducted in the South African context reported language to be a significant barrier in healthcare delivery. This is also in accordance with the finding by Stern & Newland (1994), that English is the language of choice by the majority of South Africans. Another study by Griner and Smith (2006) that to be culturally competent psychologists need to understand that language is an important aspect of being an effective healthcare professional. Further to this study, the ability to converse in the language of the clients provides opportunities and benefits for the client. Therefore, it can be postulated participants that who are unable to converse with their clients in their first language could possibly hinder the therapeutic process and this may result in the client not receiving the most suitable treatment.

#### **4.7. TRAINING, CAPACITATION, AND SUPERVISION**

This subtheme discusses the training and supervision of SSOs and the importance of ensuring that they receive this form of support so that they can fulfil their roles and responsibilities. Several participants reported a lack of continuous professional development (CPD) such as training as well as clinical supervision. These participants further stated that this is a stumbling

block, and it hinders them from gaining the support and knowledge needed to grow professionally as shown in the following excerpts:

*“Staff development is something that's just not top priority. And for me, with our changing environment, with our changing times, we are more in need of staff development right now. Because that's the one area that we are really neglecting.”*  
(Women, Participant 3, FGD 3)

*“We also need clinical supervision of which we don't have here at College X. This is one of the things I miss about College Y the clinical supervision”* (Women, Participant 3, FGD 1)

*“Professionally for me one of the challenges at this institution is the minimal support in terms of supervision. We could offer more and grow more if we had this support”*  
(Women, Participant 2, FGD 2)

Some participants reported that there are no platforms for debriefing with other colleagues. Debriefing is the sharing and discussing of information about a client's experience in a safe space. Participants also stated there are no sharing of best practices from other TVET colleges which they can use to enhance their student support services on campus. The below excerpts will illustrate this point:

*“Monthly support platforms for staff members where we could debrief and maybe even share best practices but even that is lacking.”* (Women, Participant 4, FGD 4)

The above excerpts prove that training and supervision is important to SSOs as this provides them with opportunities to enhance their professional identity as a counsellor. This is in line with findings that supervision can be described as a vital aspect for the practice of psychotherapy (Roth & Fonagy, 2006).

#### **4.8 Quantity over quality**

Several participants reported that non-student support staff such as campus managers, assistant director of student support services and senior management at the central office place a lot of emphasis on the statistical aspect of the monthly and quarterly student support report and expect a high outcome in student numbers. They also assume that a high number of students who access these services equates to a functional and efficient student support department. If

this is not achieved, then many questions are raised about the efficiency and effectiveness of the student support officer. This is supported by the following excerpts:

*“I’ve come to realize that it’s not about the quantity of the work that you provide, it’s about the quality of work. However, when your numbers are not up to standard, they don’t want to see that. They want to see the numbers, they want to see the quantity, and if you don’t see 10 students a day, then they question, what are you doing?” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 1).*

*“I think sometimes especially from a management level they expect to see good statistics and they want numbers, and the totals must be high and you must reach targets but uhm... I also feel like this can comprise the quality of the service.” (Women, Participant 1, FGD 2).*

*“Higher-up individuals, I don’t think they have the correct perception of what we are doing. What we are trying to do is give quality service to the students. But what they want to see is just numbers and see what we are doing each and every day. Because I think in their minds we’re just sitting around and doing nothing, and that’s why they just want to see the numbers.*

*“When you connect with our students, that personal connection with your students is important. It’s not a conveyor belt of seeing clients one after the other kind of thing. higher-up, that they don’t know what’s going on. they just want to see the numbers” (Women, Participant 4, FGD 1)*

Most participants shared views that are similar to Fryer (2014), that administrative tasks are seen as a primary responsibility of an SSO. In addition, the findings in the study also suggest that a monthly narrative and statistical campus report were cited as important evaluation tools that student support officers utilized at colleges for record keeping. The purpose of these reports is to provide a summary of all the student support services and activities that are rendered and utilized by students. According to Fryer (2014), there is a hierarchy of SSO responsibilities, and it’s divided into primary, secondary and tertiary. Going above and beyond the call of duty would most likely fall under the tertiary level as this is the level that is described as “anything new on campus” (Fryer, 2014).

#### **4.9 Chapter conclusion:**

In this chapter, a range of themes was explored and discussed, revealing that Student Support Officers (SSOs) have numerous roles and responsibilities to manage. The overarching finding of this study is that SSOs work in an environment where they must balance multiple roles and responsibilities simultaneously, often with minimal support. The following chapter will provide a summary of the study findings, and recommendations and share study limitations.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Overall findings**

This study investigated the experiences and sense-making of student support officers offering counselling to students at TVET Colleges in the Western Cape. The roles and responsibilities of student support officers are multifaceted and encompass various crucial aspects. These officers are involved throughout a student's academic journey, from pre-enrolment to their time on campus and beyond. However, there is a lack of understanding among non-student support officials regarding the essential nature of the student support officer role, leading to misconceptions that leave the officers feeling misunderstood and undervalued. Furthermore, there is a significant expectation from senior management for student support officers to provide comprehensive care and support for students, potentially jeopardizing the quality of their work. Additionally, in instances where a single student support officer is responsible for many students, it becomes unrealistic and unachievable to meet all the goals within SSDS. Despite these challenges, student support officers continue to strive to provide students with a positive and supportive experience.

The dearth of literature specifically covering SSOs at TVET colleges in South Africa gives this work its rare value. The bulk of the research on TVET colleges has focused on other stakeholders such as lecturers, curriculum developers and students but not SSOs so this contributes to literature in this area of research. I vividly recall there was a limited body of research information about student support officer's experiences, especially within the South African context.

The research was qualitative and rooted in a Heideggerian phenomenological framework to fit the experience-generated knowledge. The data was collected through five online focus group discussions with SSOs. The data was thematically presented and analysed through literature to contribute to knowledge on this topic; (1) Student support officer clientele, (2) Collegial relationships and collaborations, (3) "Devalued, yet we do so much," (4) Connecting with students, (5) Training, capacitation and supervision with subthemes derived participants' accounts, and (6) Quantity over quality.

The study found Student Support Officers understand their work to have an important role to play in helping students at TVET colleges and their involvement begins prior to their enrolment providing career counselling and continues during the entire duration of their academic

endeavour until they complete their studies successfully. SSOs hold a valuable position to beneficially influence various students and are equipped to provide all students with a good corrective emotional experience so that they can graduate and add to the country's economy.

One of the key findings of this study demonstrated that the organisational dynamic and daily operations experienced between student support officers, non-student support staff and other SSOs within the TVET college environment are vital. The results have shown that close collaboration with various role players (staff members) daily on campus is inevitable and these interactions at their respective campuses vary daily and such work relationships are important because they ensure that daily work tasks can be completed successfully and timeously. The data also demonstrates that higher-up staff at central offices of colleges have misconceptions about the SSO role and responsibilities or even worse, disregard them. SSOs also stated that their challenges are not observed and respected in daily operations as there are a lot of ad hoc duties assigned by senior managers beyond the scope of work. The misconception regarding the roles and responsibilities of SSOs by non-student support on campus featured prominently as an area of concern. Many of the SSOs regarded the practice and attitude of designating to SSO all matters related to students as "dumping". Since there is only one SSO on a college campus, collective bargaining is essentially impossible on campus, placing SSOs in a somewhat isolated position. The data demonstrates that SSOs can easily be stretched to manage other campuses as well as the colleges are often understaffed but the workload takes a toll on their mental and physical wellbeing. On occasions due to inadequate support, participants mentioned that endured varying levels of bullying in the workplace.

Another important theme from the analysis of this study demonstrated that participants took on multiple roles and responsibilities as an SSO daily however due to the ambiguity of their roles. The difficulty in roles and responsibilities unsettles SSOs with immense feelings of confusion and fatigue. The results further showed that the roles and responsibilities are so varied that they juggle several tasks daily and have to take semi-parental roles as well as chauffeuring student leaders in the execution of their duties. Many participants mentioned that assuming these various roles created more responsibilities for them, and they found themselves resolving ad-hoc matters which created discrepancies between their expectations and actual tasks.

Even with expressed dissatisfaction, SSOs still follow up with diligent care as many identify as nurturers. Apart from this, several participants also mentioned that they complete other student-related tasks after hours, driving students to the hospital or other medical appointments and placing SSOs and student(s) in a very precarious dilemma. SSOs expressed concerns that

are still to be resolved on managerial dynamics regarding referrals, job clarity and compensation that does not correspond with the additional ad hoc duties.

Participants also noted the increased number of students from diverse backgrounds since COVID-19 but mostly disadvantaged and largely gendered with a few exceptions of male students and those, mostly due to referrals. There does not seem to be a consensus between SSOs on the gender disparity. Student support officers expressed positivity about their students becoming full members of society and drawing a lot of joy from their success.

Another important theme for analysis of SSOs in their experiences was around the challenges of language and culture between a lot of SSOs and students, affecting the quality of counselling services that can be offered. Finally, many SSOs demonstrated a continuous professional development desire consisting of two main components namely, participants attending trainings/workshops to upskill themselves with the relevant knowledge and skills and the other was individual supervision, a mentor, someone who utilises their field of knowledge to help SSOs manage challenging clients more ethically and professionally.

## **5.2 Study Limitations**

This study has identified 8 study limitations and each of these limitations will be explored further.

The first limitation of this study is after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when college environments adjusted to a new normal, many of the participants were required to take on extra duties at work. As a result, their overall commitment to the study was slightly affected, particularly in terms of finding time and availing themselves to participate in the focus group discussions.

The second limitation is the unpredictability of service delivery with Eskom and prolonged periods of load shedding despite the load shedding schedules. Two of the participants were unable to continue with the research endeavour because they had trouble logging on at the beginning, and another participant experienced technical difficulties with their internet connection during the focus group discussion because of load shedding. These setbacks resulted in the participants being unable to participate in the full focus group discussion and rich meaningful data was missed.

The third limitation is that two participants requested to switch groups due to work commitments clashes and because a new date was provided to them but that also was a clash with their work and therefore, they were unable to participate. These setbacks regarding participation resulted in varying focus group sizes: three in some, and four in others.

The fourth limitation is the researcher's inability to meet important submission deadlines due to the participant's delay in meeting group discussion appointments and the researcher's delay in meeting deadlines due to constant exposure to pandemic stressors.

The fifth limitation is that this study cannot be generalized, in other words, the results of this study cannot be applied to all higher health institutions, and this is because this study setting is unique, but it may apply to TVET colleges only as it consists of a similar structural student support department.

The sixth limitation in this study was opting to use an external individual to transcribe the data as opposed to making use of NVivo a computer software program that enables a researcher to methodically examine and process qualitative data. The use of this software could have highlighted codes and themes more succinctly and more accurately.

The seventh limitation is that during my focus group discussions, it would have been advantageous to have a co-facilitator to manage the behind-the-scenes glitches on the MS Team's platform. The co-facilitator could have also probed during the focus group, and this would have generated rich data and made for a good analysis.

The eighth limitation was that the duration of these focus groups was longer than an hour and there were no breaks in between the focus groups. Therefore, scheduling a brief interval may have helped student support officers alleviate any tension in their bodies and make use of a lavatory. These study limitations outlined herein denote shortcomings within the research design that may have exerted an influence on the study's findings and conclusions.

### **5.3 Recommendations for future research and practice**

Emerging from this study, the recommendations are that college counselling centres in South Africa must be encouraged as the first port of call for many students, especially distressed students. A special effort to destigmatise the services needs to be made to increase the male student population. Though this study focused on TVET colleges in the Western Cape, it would be useful to further explore similar research conducted in other provinces to get a national perspective which would hopefully lead to better framework development and enforcement. These studies can be conducted and compared (e.g.: longitudinal studies) as this would provide a more in-depth insight into the structure and operations of a student support department/unit.

Emanating from the research, it is evident that language and culture would serve as an important bridge between students and SSOs and to have multilingual professionals to match the students would be greatly beneficial for all.

A strong recommendation emanating from the experiences of the SSOs is the need for a national forum of SSOs that would convene quarterly within each province to help with collective bargaining against professional abuse and overreach. This would also help to implement and enforce the existing framework from the Department of Higher Education and Training. Currently, it is difficult to enforce the framework under the current isolationist placement of SSOs.

Another important recommendation would be for colleges to either continue or start providing training opportunities to SSOs so that they can continue their professional development. In addition to this, it would also be beneficial for SSOs to have ongoing supervision with a more experienced healthcare professional to discuss and navigate difficult clients.

This recommendation is of paramount importance, more staff is required as there is usual one SSO per campus and student needs have evolved drastically. Therefore, additional staff can help address this issue and help prevent possible burnout or fatigue among SSOs.

Lastly, improved monthly remuneration for SSOs would be a great way to show appreciation for the work that they do daily and boost morale.

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## **APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL PERMISSION REQUEST LETTER**

**Title Research Project:** *An exploratory study of the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape.*

Dear Principal

My name is Sashen Naidoo, and I am a student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) completing a Master Research (MSocSci) degree within the psychology department. The study aims to explore the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape and to achieve this aim it is also important to understand how student support officers make sense of their role. I am also a registered counsellor by profession and employed as a student support officer at False Bay TVET College. I work within a similar role and environment as the potential participants of the research, but this research study will be conducted in my capacity as a master's student at UCT.

I am writing to request permission to recruit participants from your institution to form part of my research study. I kindly request your permission to invite institutional staff (student support officers) from your institution to join the study upon research ethics approval of the study. This request is accompanied by the (a) study information sheet, (b) informed consent form (c) focus group confirmation letter, and (d) confidentiality & non-disclosure agreement form for a transcriber. These documents will also be sent to potential participating staff (student support officers) and it is only them that I will invite to participate in the study.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time. Student support officers from TVET colleges in and around the Western Cape that agree to take part in this study will receive a formal invitation via email requesting their permission to partake in an online focus group. They will be requested to complete an informed consent form before the commencement of the study. The goal of the informed consent process is to provide sufficient information about the research study so that they can make a voluntary decision regarding their participation in the study in the form of a once-off 45 – 60 minute focus group discussion which will be recorded online.

The focus groups will be facilitated by myself to stimulate discussion among participants and will be conducted in English via the MS Teams communication platform. The rationale for a virtual group is in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to minimize the risk of exposure to COVID-19 and it will also offer a safer, more affordable, and convenient alternative to face-to-face focus groups. In total, there will be five focus groups consisting of 6-8 student support officers from different TVET colleges per group.

All the focus groups will be recorded on the MS Teams platforms and transcribed into a text-based format to facilitate analysis. The focus group transcriptions will be completed by an external transcriber and quality checked by myself. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality & non-disclosure agreement form (see Appendix F) to maintain participant confidentiality. The research data of this study will be stored in a safe digital encrypted file on my laptop device to ensure confidentiality and privacy.

Upon the completion of this research project, the data will remain anonymous to protect the identities of participants. Due to guiding principles for ethical research, there will be no sharing of data, but appropriately anonymised processed data can be made available to Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) management upon request. Study findings in thesis format will however be made available to the public.

Kindly note, that this study is being supervised by Dr Neziswa Titi through the psychology department and if you have further questions about this study, she is contactable via email. If you have concerns about your rights as a research participant, please kindly contact Ms Rosalind Adams. Their contact details are listed below. Please feel free to also contact me for any additional information you may require.

Kind Regards,



Sashen Naidoo

*Student Researcher*

***Contact details of Student Researcher***

Mr. Sashen Naidoo  
Registered Counsellor (PRC 0009692)  
False Bay TVET College  
MA research student: Psychology Department  
University of Cape Town  
E-mail: [sashenn85@gmail.com](mailto:sashenn85@gmail.com)  
(Tel/WhatsApp): 0788103462

***Contact details of Research Supervisor***

Dr Neziswa Titi  
Researcher: Children's Institute  
Department of Paediatrics and Child Health  
University of Cape Town  
E-mail: [neziswa.titi@uct.ac.za](mailto:neziswa.titi@uct.ac.za)  
(Tel): 021 6501473

***Contact details of Postgraduate Administrator***

Ms Rosalind Adams  
Postgraduate Admin Assistant  
Psychology Department  
University of Cape Town  
E-mail: [rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za](mailto:rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za)  
(Tel): 021 6503416



## **APPENDIX B: INFORMATION TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS**

My name is Sashen Naidoo, and I am a student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) completing a Master Research (MSocSci) degree within the psychology department. I am also a registered counsellor by profession and employed as a student support officer at False Bay TVET College. I work within a similar role and environment as the participants, but this research study will be conducted in my capacity as a master's student at UCT.

I would like to cordially invite you to partake in this study, which endeavours to explore “*The experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape*”.

The overall significance of this study is to understand how do student support officers make sense of their experiences offering counselling services to students and their role as student support officers at technical vocational education and training (TVET) colleges in the Western Cape.

This research study will entail a once-off 45 – 60 minute recorded online focus group discussion. This focus group discussion will be conducted in English via the MS Teams communication platform where it will be simultaneously recorded. The rationale for a virtual group is in response to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and to minimize the risk of exposure to COVID-19 and it will also offer a safer, more affordable, and convenient alternative to face-to-face focus groups. There will be five focus groups consisting of 6-8 student support officers from different TVET colleges per group. The focus group will be facilitated by the researcher to stimulate discussion among participants. All these recordings will be transcribed into a text-based format to facilitate analysis. These focus group transcriptions will be completed by an external transcriber and quality checked by the researcher. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality & non-disclosure agreement form (see Appendix F) to maintain participant confidentiality.

Due to the nature of focus groups, I cannot guarantee confidentiality. Each participant will however be required to sign a statement that prohibits them from discussing the content of the focus group discussions with external parties. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from this study at any time without giving any reason. Before the

commencement of this research study, you will need to complete an informed consent form, and the goal of the informed consent process is to provide you with sufficient information about the research study so that you can make a voluntary decision regarding participation in the research study.

Please note, that all focus group discussion recordings and transcripts will be marked with a distinctive research code that cannot be traced to you and the data will be stored in a safe digital file encrypted folder with a password to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy. After the data collection process, all participants will be invited for a presentation on the initial findings where they will be provided with an opportunity to verify study results although this session will not be compulsory for them to attend. Upon the completion of the research project, the study findings will be written up for academic purposes in the format of a thesis and accessible to all. The data will however remain anonymous to protect the identities of participants. Due to guiding principles for ethical research, there will be no sharing of data, but findings will be made available to participants and then Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) management in the form of study findings in thesis format. Data will be appropriately anonymised, and the release of the data will become available on request only.

This study is being supervised by Dr Neziswa Titi through the psychology department and if you have further questions about this study, she is contactable via email. If you have concerns about your rights as a research participant, then kindly contact Ms Rosalind Adams. Their contact details are below. Please feel free to also contact me for any additional information you may require.

Kind Regards



Sashen Naidoo

*Student Researcher*

***Contact details of Student Researcher***

Mr. Sashen Naidoo  
Registered Counsellor (PRC 009692)  
False Bay TVET College  
MA research student: Psychology Department  
University of Cape Town  
E-mail: [sashenn85@gmail.com](mailto:sashenn85@gmail.com)  
(Tel/WhatsApp): 0788103462

***Contact details of Research Supervisor***

Dr. Neziswa Titi  
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Department of Paediatrics and Child Health  
University of Cape Town  
E-mail: [neziswa.titi@uct.ac.za](mailto:neziswa.titi@uct.ac.za)  
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***Contact details of Postgraduate Administrator***

Ms Rosalind Adams  
Postgraduate Admin Assistant  
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University of Cape Town  
E-mail: [rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za](mailto:rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za)  
(Tel) 021 6503416



## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### **Title of the research project:**

*An exploratory study of the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape.*

**Researcher:** Mr Sashen Naidoo

### **Introduction**

This consent form has been designed to offer you an opportunity to participate in this study by agreeing to partake in a focused group discussion which is aimed to explore the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges. Please ensure you fully understand and agree with the process.

### **What is expected of you:**

Agreeing to partake in this research study entails availing yourself to partake in a once-off 45–60 minute online focus group discussion. Kindly note, you will also be in a group with 6 to 8 other student support officers from various TVET colleges within the Western Cape and the communication platform this group discussion will take place is on Microsoft Teams (MS teams) where it will be simultaneously recorded. The time allocation for these focus groups will be set following your availability. To ensure this research study captures your valuable insight and experiences properly, I seek your permission to record these virtual focus group sessions for transcribing purposes. The transcribed findings from this study will be examined further and all interview transcripts will be marked with a distinctive research code that cannot be traced to you. In addition, personal information will not appear in any report or publication, and you may withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

### **Potential Risks:**

I do not foresee any risk or imminent danger that could place you in harm's way. During the focus group process, if you stumble across any question that you deem is a challenge to answer then I would advise you to take the time to reflect on the question before responding. Lastly, if

you feel this process is too evocative then I would encourage you to seek help from an external healthcare professional, either a counsellor or a psychologist. Given the nature of the focus group, I cannot guarantee confidentiality and request participants to demonstrate a level of respect for the research process and not share any content that will be discussed in the focus group with any third parties.

### **Benefits:**

There will be no immediate benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, we hope your involvement and the information obtained from this study make student support officers more aware of their experiences as student support officers and the findings from this research study could also improve how student support officers understand their role within TVET colleges in South Africa.

### **Confidentiality:**

The entire research process will be based on important ethical principles such as confidentiality, anonymity, privacy and informed consent. Please note, that all your personal information gained from this study will be strictly confidential and your identity will be anonymized. However, if at any point during this research study, you elicit signs and symptoms of suicidal or homicidal ideations or report potential harm to another person, then I would have to ethically break confidentiality to get you or the reported person the necessary medical and mental care. All recorded interviews will be transcribed and will be completed by an external transcriber and quality checked by myself. Apart from myself, my supervisor and the transcriber will have access to the data, for supervision and data analysis purposes. All the focus group transcripts will be marked with a distinctive research code that cannot be traced to you. The focus group recordings and electronic versions of the informed consent will be password encrypted in a file within cloud storage on my laptop. Upon completion of this research study, all recordings will be stored for 6 months before they get deleted. Furthermore, please note, that personal information will not appear in any report or publication.

### **Participation and Withdrawal:**

Participation in this research study is a voluntary process and you will be allowed to withdraw from this study at any stage of the process if you decide too and no questions will be asked.

**Who is funding the study:**

The study is not funded

**Reimbursement:**

At the end of the interview process, you will receive a Pick n Pay Voucher, and this gesture is to thank you for your participation in this research study.

**Rights of Participants (property rights policy of UCT):**

To have sufficient time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the primary researcher who is conducting the research. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after the study begins. To ask who will have access to the information and about confidentiality. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research.

**Who to Contact with Questions.**

This study is being supervised by Dr Neziswa Titi through the psychology department and if you have further questions about this study, she is contactable via email. If you have concerns about your rights as a research participant, then kindly contact Ms Rosalind Adams. Their contact details are below. Please feel free to also contact me for any additional information you may require.

**INFORMED CONSENT**

Kindly review this consent form and if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact either me (Sashen Naidoo), my supervisor (Dr Neziswa Titi) or Ms Rosalind Adams (ethics committee administrator)

*Please initial next to each item to demonstrate you agree and understand what is required from you (if you do not agree, please leave it blank):*

	<b>What we're asking of you</b>	<b>Initials</b>
1.	I agree to take part in the study, which has been fully described to me.	
2.	I understand my participation in this focus group is completely voluntary, and there will be no consequence if I choose not to participate.	
3.	I agree to keep the focus group discussion confidential and to not share anything discussed in the group with any third parties.	
4.	I agree with the focus group discussion being virtually recorded on MS Teams.	
5.	I agree the data generated during the focus group discussion will be shared with my supervisor and the transcriber for supervision and data analysis purposes only.	

*By signing this consent form it shows you have read this consent form, and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction.*

*I (full name) ..... willing agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form via email before the commencement of the focus group discussion.*

*Participant Name: .....*

*Participant Signature: .....*

*Date: .....*



**APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP CONFIRMATION LETTER**

**Title Research Project:** *An exploratory study of the experiences of student support officers offering counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape.*

Dear Participant

Let me take this opportunity to thank you for your willingness to participate in this focus group. As discussed during our initial virtual meeting, this focus group would like to hear your thoughts, opinions and experiences of what it means to work as a student support officer offering counselling services to students within a TVET context. Kindly note, you will be in a group with 6 to 8 other student support officers from various TVET colleges within the Western Cape and the communication platform for this group discussion will take place is on Microsoft Teams (MS Teams). The rationale for utilizing this communication platform is that the encryption and user privacy are more secure than Zoom. Please note, that your responses to all questions will be kept confidential and anonymous. There will be 5 focus groups, and you will be required to choose a day and time that will work best for you from the table listed below. Once you have made your decision, kindly email me your preferred date and time.

	DATE	TIME	CONFIRM
GROUP 1	2 Feb 2022	10:00-11:00	<input type="checkbox"/>
GROUP 2	3 Feb 2022	13:00-14:00	<input type="checkbox"/>
GROUP 3	4 Feb 2022	10:00-11:00	<input type="checkbox"/>
GROUP 4	7 Feb 2022	11:00-12:00	<input type="checkbox"/>
GROUP 5	8 Feb 2022	12:00-13:00	<input type="checkbox"/>

The focus group discussion will start promptly, so please ensure you log on 5 minutes before the commencement time.

If you encounter any difficulties on the day of the focus group discussion, please send me a Whatsapp message or email.

Please note, there are no right or wrong answers, the overall purpose is for us to have a stimulating discussion.



## APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

### **Participant Demographic Information:**

Pseudonym name (for anonymity purposes):

Gender:

Age:

TVET college:

The period working as an SSO:

### **1. The role of student support officers at TVET colleges:**

1.1 Please tell me about your work?

1.2 What are your fondest memories of your role as a student support officer to date?

1.3 Please describe the role and responsibilities of a student support officer?

1.4 What aspects of being a student support officer do you enjoy (why)?

1.5 What aspects of being a student support officer do you least enjoy (why)?

### **2. The student counselling needs in the South African context:**

2.1 Please describe the student demographic that comes to you for counselling?

2.2 What are the common issues students consult you for?

2.3 Have the counselling needs of students changed if so, how have they changed?

2.4. What protocols are in place to support student needs such as referrals, if any?

### **3. Challenges and positive experiences of student support officers at higher education institutions**

3.1 What has challenged you most about your work?

3.2 How do you manage these challenges?

3.3 What have been your positive experiences as a student support officer?

3.4 Lastly, would you like to share any other information that I did not ask you about your experience as a student support officer offering counselling services to students at a TVET college?



## APPENDIX F: CONFIDENTIALITY & NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT FOR TRANSCRIBER

**Research Study Title:** *An exploratory study of the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape.*

In this research study, as a transcriber, I understand there will be recordings of private and confidential discussions that I will be required to listen to. Participants in this study have requested strict confidentiality and as the transcriber, I understand that not only is it important, but it is also my responsibility to adhere to this non-disclosure agreement. Failure to comply with this agreement will be considered a breach of contract.

Please note, that any information from these video/audio recordings will not be shared with any third parties and I agree to strictly adhere to this agreement of non-disclosure in full.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree that all the information provided by the researcher for this study will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

1. If the identity of any individual is revealed during this research process, particularly during the interviews, I agree to hold the strictest confidence of their true identity.
2. The strictest confidence is required to be maintained when it comes to the content of the recordings and any other documents of the participants.
3. No copies of audio recordings, video recordings or personal documents of the participants will be copied by the transcriber.
4. I agree that research data will not be discussed with any third parties without consent from the researcher.
5. I agree to create a private space to transcribe video and audio recordings, and all study-related data will be stored in a safe, secure location. Recordings of all video and audio content will be stored in an encrypted file on the transcriber's laptop in a secure format.

Transcriber's Name and Surname:

Transcriber's signature:

Date:

## APPENDIX G: SIGNED CONFIDENTIALITY & NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT TRANSCRIBER FORM



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN  
IYUNIVESITHI YASEKAPA · UNIVERSITEIT VAN KAAPSTAD

### APPENDIX F: CONFIDENTIALITY & NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT FOR TRANSCRIBER

**Research Study Title:** *An exploratory study of the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape.*

In this research study, as a transcriber, I understand there will be recordings of private and confidential discussions that I will be required to listen to. Participants in this study have requested strict confidentiality and as the transcriber, I understand that not only is it important but it is also my responsibility to adhere to this non-disclosure agreement. Failure to comply with this agreement will be considered a breach of contract.

Please note, any information from these video/audio recordings will not be shared with any third parties and I agree to strictly adhere to this agreement of non-disclosure in full.

I, Aimee-Claire Smith, agree that all the information provided to by the researcher for this study will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

1. If the identity of any individual is revealed during this research process, particularly during the interviews, I agree to hold the strictest confidence of their true identity.
2. The strictest confidence is required to be maintained when it comes to the content of the recordings and any other documents of the participants.
3. No copies of audio recordings, video recordings or personal documents of the participants will be copied by the transcriber.
4. I agree that research data will not be discussed with any third parties without consent from the researcher.
5. I agree to create a private space to transcribe video and audio recordings, and all study related data will be stored in a safe, secure location. Recordings of all video and audio content will be stored in an encrypted file on the transcriber's laptop in a secure format.

Transcriber's Name and Surname: Aimee-Claire Smith

Transcriber's signature: .....

Date: 6/4/22



## APPENDIX H: LETTER FROM TRANSCRIBER

**Aimee-Claire Smith**

062 205 8897

[aimeeclaire.email@gmail.com](mailto:aimeeclaire.email@gmail.com)

27 Oxford Road, Observatory, Cape Town, WC, 7925

29 December 2023

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to verify that I, Aimee-Claire Smith (ID: 9808140184083) provided transcription services for Sashen Naidoo in early 2022. I transcribed 5 (five) focus group discussions. To the best of my ability, I transcribed these focus group discussions faithfully and with an understanding of confidentiality and anonymity.

I can be reached on [aimeeclaire.email@gmail.com](mailto:aimeeclaire.email@gmail.com) or 0622058897 if necessary.

Signed

Aimee-Claire Smith



## APPENDIX I: FOCUS GROUP WHATSAPP NOTIFICATION

# FOCUS GROUPS

Research Title: An exploratory study of the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape


Focus group dates: 4th - 8th April 2022

In preparation for the FOCUS GROUPS please ensure the following:

1. Make sure you have a quiet office space
2. Good internet connectivity for the full duration of the focus group
3. Log on 5 mins before the focus group starts
4. Make sure there are no interruptions during the focus group
5. WhatsApp me if you have any concerns/challenges

FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH 

 MS TEAMS Virtual Platform

 sashen.naidoo@falsebay.org.za

 0788103462



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## APPENDIX J: ETHICAL CLEARANCE FROM UCT

### UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



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### Department of Psychology

University of Cape Town Rondebosch 7701 South Africa  
Telephone (021) 650 3417  
Fax No. (021) 650 4104

25 January 2022

Sashen Naidoo  
Department of Psychology  
University of Cape Town  
Rondebosch 7701

Dear Sashen

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been given by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your study, *An exploratory study of the experiences of student support officers who offer counselling services to students at TVET colleges in the Western Cape*. The reference number is PSY2021-058.

I wish you all the best for your study.

Yours sincerely

Lauren Wild (PhD)  
Associate Professor  
Chair: Ethics Review Committee