

# STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TRAINING IN COUNSELLING SKILLS: PERSONAL, WORK AND STUDY OUTCOMES

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores students' perceptions of outcomes of counselling skills training. The course was a Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland (COSCA) accredited certificate course intended to develop counselling skills in those who were seeking to utilise them in a variety of professional and non-professional contexts such as nursing, teaching, and volunteering management. The course was located in an adult learning environment and was underpinned by andragogical principles. The research took place in a context in British society that has seen increasing demand for people with counselling skills linked to an increased appreciation of the value of the human resource. Most students believed they had derived personal and professional benefits from participation in the course: greater understanding of self and others, improved communication skills, and enhanced confidence. Enjoyment and intellectual stimulation had encouraged many to undertake or at least consider further study. Since the data presented here are drawn from nine student intakes over a nine-year period, arguably they represent more than just a single snapshot of student experience.

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study was to explore students' perceptions of outcomes of training in counselling skills. Those who had completed a part-time Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland (COSCA) accredited certificate course in a university Adult and Continuing Education department were asked whether they considered the course had been of general benefit in their personal and professional lives and in voluntary work. They were also asked whether they thought the course had been a contributory factor in i) subsequent career progression and ii) their involvement in further studies.

Nine student intakes were included in the study, reflecting the first nine years of the course's existence. All students who completed the course during the period, 1993-2001, were surveyed. This period was one of considerable change in the demand for those with counselling skills and the broader context in which counselling operates (BACP 2004). In Scotland, for example, course provision in counselling skills training and in training counsellors expanded rapidly. In 1995, COSCA, the national training provider in Scotland, validated six providers of counselling skills courses throughout Scotland, compared with 30 in 2001. The 2006 figure was 47. Over the same period, 1995-2001, the number of Certificates in Counselling Skills awarded by COSCA increased from 280 to 572. In 2006, this figure was 610 (COSCA 2007).

Changes in British society have provided the backcloth against which such developments have taken place. A study by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy examined factors that have contributed to a situation in which counselling has become better understood and more widely accepted by the general public (BACP 2004). This extensive survey highlighted changing attitudes in Britain, the researchers proposing that a range of international and national influences have been at work. In particular, it is argued that 'mass affluence' (BACP 2004: 7) has contributed generally to a 'freeing up of the mind' (BACP 2004: 8), as a result of which people are more conscious of self than ever before. The stresses of modern life, it is suggested, have contributed to higher anxiety

levels; accelerating life changes have led to higher levels of uncertainty; and more people expect more from life. All of this has produced an increasing demand for people with well developed skills in interpersonal relating (such as those trained in counselling skills), in addition to the demand for counselling services (BACP 2004). This highlights a greater need for those who are trained in counselling skills and who are able to apply their learning in the various caring and people-focused settings that exist beyond the confines of the therapy room.

#### BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Relatively few studies focus specifically on students' perceptions of their learning experience in courses whose focus is either on counselling skills training or on counselling training at diploma level. It has been observed that '...at present it is unclear what being a student on a counselling course looks like from the point-of-view of the student' (Bennetts 2003a: 305). In common with our study, two studies focus on higher education provision albeit of diploma-level counsellor training. The first of these explores students' accounts of their learning experience (Bennetts 2003a). The methods used are person-centred interview and focus group, involving six female students. Given that our study is concerned with a course provided by an Adult and Continuing Education department which is likely to attract mature students, it is especially relevant that Bennetts relates theory and research in adult development to counselling training and practice. She emphasises the focus of adult development on transitions and transformations; adults as self-directed learners; and the importance of reflection for personal and professional development. Bennetts concludes that counselling courses offer participants important opportunities to explore their learning through the high level of interaction within the group (Bennetts 2003a: 320).

The second study explores the nature and extent of the perceived impact of a two-year diploma course in counselling on graduates, with reference to their working environments (Richards 2002). The author concludes the course had affected all aspects of students' work roles and that such training can bring benefits to the workplace. Richards reaches her conclusions on the basis of a small-scale qualitative study, using a questionnaire and in-depth interviews with twelve respondents.

Several studies have a specific focus on counselling skills training. A small-scale study indicates that mental health nurses believed that counselling skills training had improved their work practices (Stickley 2002). A survey of the impact on students of undertaking counselling skills training at a further education college offers insight into some of the outcomes of relevance to our study (Uttenthal & Brown 2006). Using a structured questionnaire, the authors surveyed students who had completed the course over a ten-year period from 1997. Amongst other findings, the authors conclude that significant numbers of the students believed that, as a result of the course, they had a more positive attitude at work, and enjoyed better relationships at work. Almost two-thirds of respondents reported improved relationships with family and friends. Another study considers participants' experience of a counselling skills course and their perceptions of its impact on practice (Johnston & Smith 2005). Based on a convenience sample of six health-care professionals, it is concluded by the authors that students changed their work practices by improving skills and by developing deeper relationships with patients and their carers.

In the above study of health-care professionals the authors offer a cautionary note by stating that what they were able to discover were students' perceptions of the impact of counselling skills training. If the value of research data based on perceptions alone is queried, it is worth remarking that all evidence on any matter rests on what appears to be the case, 'subjectively'. When what appears to be the

case to someone or some people is taken with other evidence, an inter-subjective account, tending towards objectivity, can emerge.

#### BACKGROUND TO THE COURSE

For many years prior to the establishment of the current certificate course in counselling skills, the university's Adult and Continuing Education Department had provided non-certificated short introductory courses (ten-week evening classes) in counselling. These recruited almost entirely from the voluntary sector, such as Cruse Bereavement Care, Citizens' Advice Bureaux, and organisations concerned with alcohol abuse (Foulds 1980: 13). Although the subsequent certificate course also attracted voluntary workers, anecdotal evidence suggested that most people embarked on the course for reasons related to current or future employment. It appears this is not an isolated pattern. Generally, certificated courses have attracted those seeking to develop counselling skills for application in current employment (which may be a non-counselling setting) and those wishing to pursue a career in counselling by progressing to diploma-level training (Mearns 1997: 178-179).

During the course, students developed their counselling skills and explored different modalities of counselling from a theoretical and a skills perspective. The course extended over one academic year and consisted of weekly three-hour evening sessions together with three weekends. It was designed primarily for those who had experience of working in a helping relationship and who were working in such a situation at the time of application to the course. Teaching and learning methods reflected the context in which the course was situated, in an adult learning environment. The intention was to create a supportive and stimulating climate for learning. The methodologies included experiential approaches such as role-play, group work and group discussion, all drawn from an andragogical model. This model assumes that adults bring experience to an educational activity; that adults have a readiness to learn those things that they need to know in order to cope effectively with real-life situations; adults need to know why they need to learn something; adults are life-centred in their orientation to learning; adults maintain the concept of responsibility for their own decisions (Knowles *et al.* 1998: 72). It has been observed that 'the experiential approach to adult learning ...has become firmly rooted in adult learning practice' (Knowles *et al.* 1998: 152). In student-centred programmes of this nature the ideas of Mezirow are of particular interest. Mezirow links perspective transformation and adult development in his transformation theory of adult learning (Tennant & Pogson 1995: 112). He stresses the importance of reflection, critical reasoning, and discourse in enhancing adult learning (Mezirow 1995: 39).

#### METHODOLOGY

Data were collected by means of postal surveys of all students enrolled in the course during its first nine years who had fulfilled attendance and assignment requirements. This included a very small proportion of students who were not eligible for the award because they had not passed the final counselling skills role play at the end of the course. The surveys were carried out at two different points in time (mid-1998; mid-2002), as follows.

- All students (n=77; 12 men, 65 women) who had completed the 1992/3 - 1996/7 courses were surveyed in mid-1998. Students, therefore, had completed the course at least one year and at most five years prior to the survey.
- All students (n=71; 2 men, 69 women) who had completed the 1997/8 - 2000/1 courses were surveyed in mid-2002. In this case, students had completed the course at least one year and at most four years prior to the survey.

The design was intended to balance different considerations. It was important that some time had elapsed between course completion and participation in the survey. This allowed career changes/progression and further study to have taken place or be in the offing, but not such a lengthy period that students recollected little. The period of between one and four/five years would show what students had actually done since completing the course rather than their ideas about what they might do. Also, since the number of students enrolled in each course was relatively small (ranging from 13 to 20 students per course), surveying a number of intakes together was likely to yield sufficient respondents to provide a sounder basis for analysis. It was expected, however, that most of the findings would be based on descriptive rather than inferential analyses, since it was likely that total numbers would still be relatively small and not allow for analyses of many sub-groups of respondents (for example, by age-group or occupation).

The questionnaire used in the postal surveys (see Appendix) was based on one devised for a similar study of the post-Access experience of adults who had completed a part-time, university-based Access programme (Karkalas & Mackenzie 1995). The original questionnaire had been developed by means of a series of in-depth interviews with former Access students. Many of the questions in this earlier questionnaire were incorporated into the questionnaire used in the current study but adapted as appropriate to reflect the nature of the counselling skills course. A draft form of this questionnaire was also piloted using in-depth interviews with former students of the counselling skills course. Reported here are results related to questions about student perceptions of benefits of the course and its link with career progression and further study. Questionnaire results associated with expectations of the course, possible changes in specific attributes and skills, and in relationships with family, friends and work colleagues have been reported elsewhere (Mackenzie & Hamilton 2007).

A questionnaire was selected as the research tool in order to obtain a broad view of students' perceptions from a larger group of former students than would have been feasible using individual interviews. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions but overall it allowed considerable scope for respondents to expand on their answers, if they wished, and at length. In this way, it was hoped to also obtain qualitative data that would complement the more quantitative.

The questionnaire used in the two surveys was identical, and was sent to a total of 148 students.

### **Response Rates**

The number of questionnaires returned from the first five student intakes (1992/3–1996/7) was 41 (out of 77), a response rate of 53%. The number of questionnaires returned from the next four intakes (1997/8–2000/1) was 45 (out of 71), a response rate of 63%. The total number of questionnaires returned, therefore, was 86, an overall response rate of 58% (see appendix for the list of questions in the questionnaire).

### **Research Questions**

#### **Demographic Profile**

- Who were the students, in terms of age, gender and occupation?

#### **Perceived Benefits**

- Had the course been of benefit, personally, professionally or in voluntary work? If so, in what ways? If not, why was this?

#### **Career Progression**

- Had participation in the course allowed progression in an existing career?

### **Further Study**

- To what extent had the course experience encouraged or discouraged further study in counselling or other areas?
- Since course completion, had other studies been pursued? If so, what form had these taken?

Throughout the questionnaire, respondents were invited to elaborate on any of their answers.

### **RESULTS**

Where statistical analyses were able to be carried out to investigate possible significant differences between earlier (1992/3 – 1996/7) and later (1997/8 – 2000/1) student intakes, the results of these analyses are given in the text below. However, a relatively small total number of respondents (n=86) sub-divided across three or more categories of response (in both open and closed questions) meant that inferential statistical tests could not be employed frequently.

#### **Demographic Profile**

##### *Gender*

The overwhelming majority of respondents were female, and this was even more marked in the later student intakes. This gender distribution was reflected in occupations: respondents were drawn largely though not exclusively from occupational groupings where the majority of the workforce is female, for example, nurses, health visitors, and care and support staff (see Occupation below).

##### *Age*

The age range of all respondents when they started the course was 21-63 years, with a mean age of 41 years. Just under two-thirds (64%; n=55) were aged 30-49 years. There were no statistically significant differences between the earlier and later intakes in terms of mean age ( $t=-0.08$ ,  $df=84$ ,  $p=0.94$ ) or proportions in the different age groups ( $\chi^2=2.48$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=0.65$ ).

##### *Occupation*

Respondents were drawn mainly from the health, care, and educational sectors. At the start of the course, the largest occupational grouping, 40% of all respondents, was employed in medical or health-related roles, most commonly as Registered General Nurses, followed by District Nurses and Health Visitors. The next largest grouping (30%) consisted of those employed in roles related to counselling, care or support. This group included a number of counsellors and counsellor trainers, and to a lesser extent social workers, support workers, and others including a hospital chaplain, employment consultant, and telephone counsellor. A further 15% were employed in education, for example, teachers, an educational audiologist, an educational partnership officer, and head of nursing education. The remaining 15% occupied various roles, for instance, human resource managers, civil servants, housewife, shop assistant, receptionist and student. One respondent described herself as 'unemployed'. Inspection of the occupational data suggested a difference between early and later student intakes, especially in the proportions in medical/health-related occupations (51% and 29% respectively) and counselling/care/support (24% and 36% respectively). A chi-square analysis was carried out, based on the four occupational categories of (i) medical/health-related (ii) counselling/care/support (iii) education and (iv) 'other' (representing 'administrative', 'unemployed', 'housewife/student/retired', and 'miscellaneous'). This analysis showed that occupational patterns of early and later intakes did not show a statistically significant difference: there were no statistically significant differences between earlier and later intakes in proportions in the four occupational groupings ( $\chi^2=6.04$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=0.11$ ). It should be borne in mind that, when respondents are

classified into a number of sub-groupings - in this instance, into early and later intakes further sub-divided into four occupational categories - relatively small numbers of respondents are produced in each sub-division. Therefore percentages (e.g., 51% of early intakes; 29% of later intakes) may represent relatively small actual numbers (n= 21; n=13 respectively).

### Perceived Benefits

Students were asked whether the course had been of benefit in personal and professional life, any voluntary work in which they were involved, or in any other respects. Their responses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Was course perceived to be of benefit?

	Respondents in 1992/3-1996/7 intakes		Respondents in 1997/8-2000/1 intakes		All respondents	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
On a personal level:						
Yes	38	93	43	96	<b>81</b>	<b>94</b>
No/Not applicable	2	5	2	4	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
No response	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
Totals	41	100	45	100	<b>86</b>	<b>100</b>
In a professional capacity:						
Yes	38	93	42	93	<b>80</b>	<b>93</b>
No/Not applicable	2	5	0	0	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
No response	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
Totals	41	100	45	100	<b>86</b>	<b>100</b>
In voluntary work:						
Yes	14	34	20	44	<b>34</b>	<b>40</b>
No/Not applicable	3	7	3	7	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
No response	<u>24</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>54</u>
Totals	41	99	45	100	<b>86</b>	<b>101</b>
In other respects:						
Yes	3	7	5	11	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
No/Not applicable	3	7	0	0	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
No response	<u>35</u>	<u>85</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>89</u>	<u>75</u>	<u>87</u>
Totals	41	99	45	100	<b>86</b>	<b>100</b>

Note: Percentage column totals do not always equal 100 because percentages have been rounded up/down to whole numbers.

Almost all respondents in both early and later intakes had found the course of benefit in personal life and professional settings. For most (n=75), there were benefits in both areas. Considerably fewer reported benefit in relation to voluntary work. Just over a third (37% of 86; n=32) said they were involved with the voluntary sector when they started the course. The relatively high proportion of 'no responses' to this part of the question is likely to be accounted for by the proportion of respondents who were not involved in voluntary work. No-one reported benefits associated solely with voluntary work. Of those who did refer to benefits in this area, most (n=28 of 34) combined them with benefits in both personal and professional life.

Respondents were also asked to expand on their answers. As shown in Table 1 (numbers in brackets), most respondents chose to elaborate on personal and professional benefits. These 'free' responses were content analysed to identify the kinds of benefits described by respondents (Table 2).

Table 2 Reported benefits of course

	Respondents in 1992/3-1996/7 intakes		Respondents in 1997/8-2000/1 intakes		Total	
<i>On a personal level:</i>	n	% (of 25)	n	% (of 28)	n	% (of 53)
<i>Increased self-awareness</i>	13	52	17	61	30	57
<i>Improved communication/ listening skills</i>	5	20	6	21	11	21
<i>Increased confidence</i>	7	28	3	11	10	19
<i>Better management of relationships</i>	0	0	5	18	5	9
<i>Sense of achievement</i>	2	8	1	4	3	6
<i>Personal development</i>	2	8	1	4	3	6
<i>Of general benefit</i>	1	4	1	4	2	4
<i>In a professional capacity:</i>	n	% (of 30)	n	% (of 27)	n	% (of 57)
<i>More comfortable in dealings with others</i>	8	27	9	33	17	30
<i>Improved counselling skills</i>	10	33	7	26	17	30
<i>Improved communication/ listening skills</i>	6	20	10	37	16	28
<i>Increased confidence in work settings</i>	7	23	4	15	11	19
<i>Provided theoretical context for practice</i>	2	7	3	11	5	9
<i>Empowerment/promotion/ enhanced status</i>	1	3	4	15	5	9
<i>Of general benefit</i>	2	7	1	4	3	5
<i>In voluntary work:</i>	n	% (of 5)	n	% (of 11)	n	% (of 16)
<i>Improved communication/ listening skills</i>	1	20	5	46	6	38
<i>Increased confidence</i>	4	80	2	18	6	38
<i>Led to new role</i>	2	40	2	18	4	25
<i>More comfortable in dealings with others</i>	1	20	2	18	3	19
<i>Improved counselling skills</i>	3	60	0	0	3	19
<i>Provided theoretical context for practice</i>	1	20	2	18	3	19
<i>Increased status</i>	1	20	0	0	1	6
<i>Of general benefit</i>	0	0	1	9	1	6

Note: Percentage column totals do not equal 100% because respondents could describe more than a single benefit.

For all student intakes combined, the most frequently mentioned personal benefit – by some margin - was increased self-awareness or better understanding of self, followed by improved communication/listening skills and increased confidence.

There was some variation between early and later intakes in the frequency of references to some benefits. Increased confidence, for example, was more frequently mentioned by earlier intakes, better management of relationships by later intakes. Small numbers, however, make meaningful comparisons difficult.

Four respondents reported the course had not been of benefit in personal life. Only one, however, explained why this had been the case, namely, that, in her view, there had been a lack of work on self-awareness during the course, an important area, she felt, even in an introductory course of this kind.

In terms of professional benefits, taking early and later intakes together, mention was made of three in almost equal measure, all reflecting improved interaction with others. These were being more comfortable in dealing with others, improved counselling skills, and improved communication/listening skills. There was a little variation between early and later intakes in percentages reporting the three kinds of benefits but again, in view of the small numbers involved, comparisons between early and later students are not very informative.

In the case of those who chose to elaborate on benefits associated with voluntary work, the most frequently mentioned were improved communication/listening skills and increased confidence, although here small numbers are even more a feature of the data.

Finally, only two of the eight respondents who reported the course of benefit in ‘other respects’ actually expanded on this. One had found that ‘my reading has expanded into areas I had not considered “me”.’ The second felt

I’m now treated with some respect in certain areas of my life because I have a qualification. It’s absurd but a sad fact.

### ***Career Progression***

One of the aims of the study was to determine whether participants believed the course had allowed them to progress in their current career. Table 3 shows the responses to this question.

Table 3 Career progression as a result of the course

	Respondents in 1992/3–1996/7 intakes		Respondents in 1997/8 – 2000/1 intakes		All respondents	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Career progression:						
Yes	15	37	20	44	<b>35</b>	<b>41</b>
No / Not applicable	24	59	21	47	<b>45</b>	<b>52</b>
Don't know/ Uncertain	1	2	3	7	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
No response	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>
Totals	41	100	45	100	<b>86</b>	<b>100</b>

Note: Percentage column totals do not always equal 100% because percentages have been rounded up/down to whole numbers.

Content analyses of respondents’ elaborations of their answers produced a number of reasons why participants thought the course had been a factor – and why it had not – in career progression (Table 4).

Table 4 Why course was thought to be related/not related to career progression

	Respondents in 1992/3-1996/7 intakes		Respondents in 1997/8-2000/1 intakes		Total	
Course allowed progression:	n	% (of 11)	n	% (of 18)	n	% (of 29)
<i>Gave access to further study/training or secondments</i>	4	36	6	33	10	35
<i>Skills gained during course</i>	6	55	4	22	10	35
<i>Gave ability to expand role/branch out</i>	5	46	5	28	10	35
<i>Course valued by employer</i>	4	36	5	28	9	31
<i>Increased confidence</i>	2	18	5	28	7	24
Course did not allow progression / not applicable:	n	% (of 11)	n	% (of 15)	n	% (of 26)
<i>Course not taken with aim of career advancement</i>	4	36	5	33	9	35
<i>Course taken to develop skills required in current job</i>	5	46	2	13	7	27
<i>Still in same job - course has had no impact on job prospects</i>	2	18	3	20	5	19
<i>Career has moved away from relevant areas</i>	1	9	3	20	4	15
<i>Course was undertaken for personal reasons</i>	1	9	2	13	3	12
<i>Have progressed in career as far as possible</i>	1	9	1	7	2	8

Note: Percentage column totals do not equal 100% because respondents could describe more than one reason.

Taking early and later intakes together, for those who believed the course had allowed progression, the most common reasons for this were as follows. It had provided access to further training, study programmes or secondments; it had enabled students to acquire or develop relevant skills; and it had given students the ability to expand their role at work or branch out into new areas. Other reasons referred to the course being valued by employers and the increased confidence students believed the course had given them.

Approximately half (n=19 of 35) of those who thought the course had been a factor in progression also said it had contributed to career change, and for the same reasons – the course had been a stepping-stone to further training, and had developed students’ skills and confidence. Most of these respondents remained in the same or a closely related area of work but had a different or expanded role or greater seniority. For example, a district nurse became a team leader in cancer care; a welfare rights officer became a special needs manager; a counsellor became a senior project manager; a careers adviser with a local authority became guidance officer in a higher education institution; and a head teacher branched out to become a self-employed educational consultant working with parents. For a few respondents, the career change also referred to changing from part-time to full-time employment or from volunteer to paid employee. For one or two respondents,

the career change had been a more radical one. A civil servant, for instance, had become a counsellor and children's resource worker. In all cases, the career change was viewed as a positive one, leading to a more rewarding role. The former civil servant, for example, described her career change as follows.

...effectively I'm on less money than I was with ----. However, this is still progression in my eyes! I'm happier than I've been in years. The job is stressful but fulfilling and worthwhile. Finally knowing I "belong" and am where I want to be for now.

Although just over half of all respondents reported the course had not helped in career progression, two-fifths of these (n=18 of 45) stated that this had not been their intention when they applied for the course. They had undertaken the course for personal reasons ('for breadth of personal development') or in order to improve skills and knowledge in respect of their current jobs. 'I still do the same job,' said one, 'but I do it in a different style.' Another explained that "'Progression" in my career was not my aim. It [the course] has been very useful, however, in my work.'

### **Further Studies**

Having completed the course, did respondents take up subsequent studies in counselling or other areas? The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Subsequent studies in counselling and other areas

	Respondents in 1992/3–1996/7 intakes		Respondents in 1997/8–2000/1 intakes		All respondents	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>In counselling:</b>						
Yes	9	22	11	24	<b>*20</b>	<b>23</b>
No	7	17	2	4	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
No but might in future	14	34	20	44	<b>34</b>	<b>40</b>
No response	<u>11</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>27</u>	<b>23</b>	<b>27</b>
Totals	41	100	45	99	<b>86</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>In other areas:</b>						
Yes	19	46	26	58	<b>*45</b>	<b>52</b>
No	5	12	2	4	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
No but might in future	10	24	7	16	<b>17</b>	<b>20</b>
No response	<u>7</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>22</u>	<b>17</b>	<b>20</b>
Totals	41	99	45	100	<b>86</b>	<b>100</b>

Note: Percentage column totals do not always equal 100% because percentages have been rounded up/down to whole numbers.

\*Eight respondents had taken up further studies in both counselling and other areas.

### *Subsequent studies in counselling*

The course had acted as one step on a ladder in counselling training for just under a quarter of students (23%). Courses to which students progressed included postgraduate diplomas and masters degrees in counselling and supervision. In addition another 40% of respondents indicated they might consider this option in the future.

Subsequent studies in other areas

Just over half (52%) of the respondents had undertaken study in other areas. Most of this group (60% of 45; n=27) had in fact studied in areas not far removed from counselling skills. Examples included a Bachelor's degree in Health Studies, Diploma in Health and Social Welfare, Diploma in Community Care, and HNC in Youth and Community Work.

The majority of respondents (66% of 86; n=57) had gone on to further study (in counselling or other areas) but had the counselling skills course itself acted as a trigger to encourage or discourage this?. Table 6 shows responses to this question. Table 7 shows the results of content analyses of these elaborations.

Table 6 Extent to which course experience encouraged subsequent studies

	Respondents in 1992/3 – 1996/7 intakes		Respondents in 1997/8 – 2000/1 intakes		All respondents	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
In counselling:						
<i>Discouraged greatly</i>	0	0	2	4	2	2
<i>Discouraged to some extent</i>	5	12	2	4	7	8
<i>Encouraged greatly</i>	13	32	15	33	28	33
<i>Encouraged to some extent</i>	14	34	13	29	27	31
<i>Other responses</i>	1	2	2	4	3	4
<i>No response</i>	8	20	11	24	19	22
<b>Totals</b>	41	100	45	98	86	100
In other areas:						
<i>Discouraged greatly</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Discouraged to some extent</i>	1	2	0	0	1	1
<i>Encouraged greatly</i>	11	27	12	27	23	27
<i>Encouraged to some extent</i>	10	24	12	27	22	26
<i>Other responses</i>	1	2	2	4	3	4
<i>No response</i>	18	44	19	42	37	43
<b>Totals</b>	41	99	45	100	86	101

Note: Percentage column totals do not always equal 100% because percentages have been rounded up/down to whole numbers.

Table 7 Why students felt encouraged to continue studying

	Respondents in 1992/3-1996/7 intakes		Respondents in 1997/8-2000/1 intakes		Total	
<b>In counselling:</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>% (of 25)</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>% (of 27)</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%(of 52)</b>
<i>Enjoyment/desire to learn more</i>	15	60	18	67	<b>33</b>	<b>64</b>
<i>Career ambitions/job opportunities</i>	5	20	9	33	<b>14</b>	<b>27</b>
<i>Personal development</i>	6	24	4	15	<b>10</b>	<b>19</b>
<i>Increased confidence</i>	4	16	4	15	<b>8</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>Sharing of thoughts, ideas</i>	1	4	5	19	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>In other areas:</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>% (of 19)</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>% (of 23)</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%(of 42)</b>
<i>Enjoyment/desire to learn more</i>	9	47	14	61	<b>23</b>	<b>55</b>
<i>Personal development</i>	5	26	6	26	<b>11</b>	<b>26</b>
<i>Increased confidence</i>	4	21	7	30	<b>11</b>	<b>26</b>
<i>Career ambitions/job opportunities</i>	1	5	7	30	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>
<i>Sharing of thoughts, ideas</i>	2	11	3	13	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>

Note: Percentage column totals do not equal 100% because respondents could describe more than one reason.

*Further study in counselling: had the course encouraged or discouraged participants?*

Two-thirds of respondents reported that they had been encouraged to at least seriously consider further study in counselling, most typically in both early and later intakes because of the enjoyment gained from the course and the interest it had created within students to learn more. Other motivations, mentioned by smaller proportions of respondents, included the following: career ambitions or potential new job opportunities; a desire to continue the personal development experienced during the course; an increase in confidence; and having the opportunity to share ideas with others.

Fewer than 10% (n=8) of all respondents had been discouraged from further study, and of these one cited integral failures or weaknesses in the course itself as being responsible. The remainder, in contrast, had been discouraged because, for example, they felt unsuited to counselling; they had no desire to pursue counselling any further; they would need to make a greater commitment than was possible or desirable for them; or they would face impossible financial constraints.

## DISCUSSION

### *Demographic Profile*

The gender and age profiles of respondents were typical of the wider context in counselling training. Females tend to predominate in counselling courses generally (Bondi *et al.* 2002; Uttenthal & Brown 2006). The major survey conducted by BACP highlighted factors in British society, such as a more open attitude to the expression of emotion, which have made both men and women receptive to counselling (BACP 2004). However, it seems that men are still less likely to consider becoming counsellors themselves.

It has been noted in a recent study that almost all trainees in the counselling and psychotherapy fields are mature students (Bor & Watts, 2006, p.2). Respondents in our study had a mean age of 41 years, and more than three-quarters were aged 20-49 years. Many were likely to be at a mid-stage in their careers and possibly at a point when they felt the need to build on their knowledge and experience and supplement existing skills or develop new ones.

The value placed on the course by this largely mature group of students can be gauged in part by the fact that half (n=43) had paid the substantial course fees themselves. (A further 18% had paid a proportion themselves.) The majority of mature students receive no financial support at all for part-time study (Knox & Turner, 2001). It is not surprising, therefore, to find that most counselling graduates start their careers in debt (Bor & Watts 2006: 1).

However, almost half of the students in the present study received either full or part assistance (29% and 16% respectively) from their employers towards payment of course fees. Support for their staff to undergo counselling skills training, the results of which can then be fed back into the organisation, may be regarded as a useful investment by employers, particularly in the areas of health, social care and education.

### **Perceived Benefits**

It has been observed that there are

Numerous areas of human endeavour potentially able to benefit from the application of.....counselling skills, for example nursing, teaching, social work settings, personal/welfare work (Mearns 1997: 179).

The occupations referred to ten years ago by Mearns, drawn from the health, care and educational sectors, were evident in the present study. These are broadly similar to the occupational groupings that have been identified in other recent studies. For example, the study of the impact of a counselling skills course at a further education college over a ten-year period showed that 42% of students were in social care/health occupations, 26% in education (Uttenthal & Brown 2006).

Almost all respondents in the current study believed the course had been of general benefit in personal and professional terms. Increased self-awareness, better communication skills, greater capacity to listen to others, and better understanding of others were among the specific outcomes reported. Some of these benefits have been reported elsewhere. For example, a major survey of adult learning showed that as a consequence of participation adult students became more tolerant and understanding of others (Department of Education and Skills 2006). As detailed above, counselling skills training continues to appeal to those from 'people-centred' occupations. For respondents and their employers, enhanced self-awareness and better understanding of others are potentially valuable assets in the workplace. The following comments illustrate the point.

I felt I had discovered more about me as a person, how and why I function the way I do.

I work in an admission unit for mentally ill patients. This Certificate has been of great use to me in helping my patients. Personally I have become more self aware.

Counselling skills are a relatively small part of my "formal" job and the course gave me knowledge and improved skills to do what I was already doing. I had not intended or anticipated an improvement in career terms.

Although sparse in number, a few other studies relate such outcomes to work issues. Health-care professionals on a counselling skills training course reported

improvements in their practice, resulting from enhanced self-awareness and the development of deeper therapeutic relationships with patients (Johnston & Smith 2005). In her account of a study of counselling graduates, Richards (2003: 450) summarised training as a 'challenging personal growth experience', with graduates reporting greater insight into self, personal needs and strengths. According to Richards, these graduates then transferred the effects of their counselling training into the workplace, their increased self-awareness and self-acceptance bringing benefits for themselves, clients and organisations. They valued their counselling course experience as something that had extended their prior understanding of the work environment. The effects seemed not to fade with time but instead became more integrated, as distance from course completion increased. The author noted that those who undertake counselling training can 'clearly benefit the organisation of which they are a part' (Richards 2003: 459).

Self-efficacy - 'beliefs about their (students') ability to perform counselling or related behaviours.....' - has been reported as an outcome of counselling training (Lent *et al.* 2003: 97). According to participants in the current study of counselling skills, enhanced ability to understand self had in turn helped them to work more effectively with others in current roles. This outcome could be attributed at least partly to the opportunities available for interaction with – and, importantly, feedback from - others on the course through role play, for example. Comparable outcomes have been reported elsewhere. For instance, mental health nurses who had experienced role play recognised its value and wanted more (Stickley 2002).

From an adult education perspective, as a field in which mature students are prominent, counselling skills training provides the potential for students to achieve transformational learning. Bennetts has observed that 'individuals evaluate transformational learning by the extent of major changes in thinking, feeling, acting, relating and being.' (Bennetts 2003b: 457) She echoes the ideas of Mezirow, who argues that the education of adults is understood as organized activity facilitative of reflection and rational discourse (Mezirow 1995: 39). He observes that learners must engage in critical reflection on their experiences, which in turn leads to a transformation of perspective.

For just under half of the respondents, increased self-awareness and confidence had also contributed to career progression, as illustrated by the following comments.

I applied for a post in another area because of increased confidence gained on the course. I secured the job (aged 56) against several younger people. I was told possession of the Certificate was a factor in gaining the position.

The course gave me the confidence to move on to new challenges which I would have found more difficult having been self-employed for almost 30 years.

It gave me confidence to branch out - I'm now working as a Research Assistant at a university. The skills I've developed have enabled me to interview a wide selection of cancer patients, many of whom have thanked me- for being there at a difficult time.

The main focus of the study was an exploration of students' perceptions of course outcomes with regard to self, work and study, with analyses based on students' self-reports of their views. The reported changes in the respondents' degree of self-awareness, depth of understanding of others or competence in communication skills, therefore, were drawn solely from respondents' self-evaluations. The questionnaire did allow considerable scope for elaboration – a feature utilised by many respondents - so we have a clear view of the respondents' beliefs about course benefits for them.

### **Further Study**

As a learning experience, the course had laid the foundations for further study for a number of respondents. This was attributed to general enjoyment of the course and the interest it had awakened in the subject matter and in study more generally. Studies have shown that adult learners are likely to wish to develop and build on positive learning experiences (e.g., Hodgson 2000; Karkalas & Mackenzie 1995; Mackenzie & Karkalas 1995; Sargent 1997). Sargent reported that recent experience of learning is a powerful influence on whether adults expect to study in the future (Sargent 1997: vii). In this current study just under a quarter of respondents had progressed to study in counselling and over a third were keeping such an option open for the future. Over half of all respondents also studied in areas other than counselling.

The extent of progression to further studies might have been greater but for the kind of barriers that traditionally beset mature students (see Cross 1981; Fuller 2000; Munn & MacDonald 1988; Thomas 2001). Eleven respondents claimed that financial circumstances and family commitments 'got in the way'. Uttenthal & Brown's (2006) study has shown that whilst the majority of students on a counselling skills course were interested in further study in counselling, they were prevented, by the cost and time involved, from pursuing this.

### **CONCLUSION**

There are limitations to the study. The total number of respondents was relatively small and so did not allow for detailed statistical analysis of responses to most survey questions. In most instances, therefore, it was not feasible to explore possible statistically significant differences in responses between early and later student intakes, genders and age groupings. Secondly, the time that had elapsed since course completion was not identical for all respondents, ranging from one to five years. It is difficult to gauge whether this factor affected responses and, if so, in what ways.

The research data on which analyses were based consisted entirely of self-reports of students' perceptions of their training experience. Such data, because of their subjective nature, may be regarded as unimportant and not constituting a legitimate form of research evidence. However, data consisting of students' self-reports can constitute evidence having some weight on its own, for example, in relation to the course. It may also be taken along with other evidence, say, about students' lives and experiences, or about comparable courses, and have evidential value in conjunction with other sorts of evidence, on a possible range of issues.

In the context of the methodology adopted (i.e., postal surveys employing self-report questionnaires) very sound questionnaire response rates were obtained in both surveys. In addition, although the focus of the study was one course, the data are drawn from nine student intakes over a nine-year period, and so provide more than a single snapshot of student experience. In an under-researched area, the study tells us what students believed were the personal, work and study outcomes of participation in counselling skills training. The inclusive student-centred teaching methodologies of the course clearly had had a positive impact on participants. Respondents believed that the course had been effective and worthwhile, providing them with a valuable adult learning experience that had personal and professional implications.

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The research study was approved by the Research Committee, Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow.

## APPENDIX

### *List of questions included in questionnaire*

1. Sex
2. Date of birth
3. Occupation (full-time/part-time): at start of course/at time of survey/involvement in voluntary work
4. Date of course completion
5. How did you finance the course? *[fixed response categories]*
6. Since you completed the *Certificate* course, have you pursued any form of study in counselling/in other areas? *[fixed response categories together with request for elaboration]*
7. To what extent did your experience on the Counselling Skills course encourage you to pursue further study opportunities in counselling/in other areas? *[Likert scale]*  
Why was this? *[open-ended question]*
8. Do you consider the *Certificate* course was of benefit to you in any way on a personal level/in a professional capacity/in voluntary work/in other respects? *[fixed response categories with request for elaboration]*
- 9a. What, if any, expectations did you have of the *Certificate* course when you applied for it? *[open-ended question]*
- 9b. Were these expectations met? *[fixed response categories with request for elaboration]*
10. Do you consider that your abilities/skills in any of the following areas changed as a result of participating in the *Certificate* course: tolerating others' views; being confident in expressing my own views; being sensitive to others; coping with my own personal problems; participating in groups; weighing up evidence; thinking independently; exploring new fields of knowledge; communicating (listening; responding; challenging)? *[Likert scale]*
11. As far as you can judge, were there any changes in the following relationships as a result of the *Certificate* course: family; friends; other *(details requested)? [Likert scale with request for elaboration]*
- 12a. Did participating in the *Certificate* course allow you to progress in your career? *[fixed response categories together with request for elaboration]*
- 12b. Did participating in the *Certificate* course allow you to change your occupation? *[fixed response categories together with request for elaboration]*
13. What, if anything, did you learn about yourself as a result of participating in the *Certificate* course? *[open-ended question]*
14. Please use this sheet to elaborate on any of your answers or to include any comments or information which you feel has been omitted from the questionnaire.

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