

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Exploratory Qualitative Study on the Perceived Barriers to Accessing Ghanaian University Counselling Services

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Abstract

Despite research emphasis on university students' counselling needs and service benefits, barriers to counselling service participation for students have been less explored in Ghanaian higher education. Yet literature is replete with reports on high undergraduate student attrition and a low sense of belonging, stressing the severe need for increased counselling service participation among students in higher education. This article explored the barriers to increased counselling service participation faced by Ghanaian public university students. Our research engaged 13 counselled undergraduate students, purposively selected via snowball and convenience sampling techniques. We engaged study participants in in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion to gather appropriate data and further used the interpretive phenomenological approach to find meaning in the gathered data. Students revealed their perceptions on poor counsellors' sense of initiative, their low service awareness, and their misconceptions which seem to hinder students' counselling service participation. Our results underscore the need for more service advertising and possibly increased counsellor initiative to promote counselling service use among higher education students in Ghana. Daily service advertising with counsellors' reliance on text and WhatsApp messaging, still pictures and short videos on the various campuses (Amos et al., 2020) would considerably increase students' awareness of counselling services.

Keywords

counselling, academic achievement, higher education, student support service

Introduction

Higher education students derive immense benefits when they engage with the institutional counselling services made available to them (Colón & Stern, 2011). This service notably promotes students' academic performance and therefore facilitates their timely and successful graduation (Stallman, 2012). Without undermining the key role played by first-year orientation programmes in facilitating student institutional adjustment

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and actualisation of a meaningful college experience (Owusu et al., 2014; Cooper, 2021), compelling evidence confirms the usefulness of engagement with individual and group counselling services for first-year students especially. In terms of the former, research has shown that those first-year students who had engaged in the carefully planned orientation programme of the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, for instance, were more likely to easily receive promotion to their second year of study in the 2013/2014 academic year (Owusu et al., 2014). Many of these new students reported having a stronger sense of belonging, and experiencing less stress, confusion, and anxiety once they had participated in the institution's lively orientation programme in their initial year of study (Owusu et al., 2014; Ocansey & Gyimah, 2015; Cooper, 2021). However, the benefits students draw from experiencing a comprehensive orientation programme are indisputable. For instance, many report an improved sense of academic direction and motivation (Aidoo, 2011), and also learned how to practise worthwhile study habits at university when counselling complemented orientation (Essuman, 2007). Such academic habits include improved library use, prompt lecture attendance, and time-management skills (Quampah, 2010). Student experiences with their institutional counselling facilities have also been shown to bring improvements in mental health (Andoh-Arthur et al., 2015), relational skills to foster the establishment and maintenance of more reliable personal emotional and romantic relationships (Liem & Martin, 2011). Students additionally gained robust financial management skills, marriage satisfaction, and encountered fewer accommodation problems on their respective campuses, all of which culminated in their improved academic performance (Quampah, 2010). The aforementioned equally endorse the utility of counselling services in ensuring overall improvement in students' lives (Choi et al., 2010).

Thus, the institutionalisation of the counselling facility in Ghanaian higher education as early as 1997 was a matter of course (Essuman, 1999, 2015). However, the recent past has seen Ghanaian university students' continual overlooking of their institutional counselling services, despite their severe need for support, which has increased to a worrying extent (Andoh-Arthur et al., 2015). Cultural factors generally underpin students' disregard for counselling services, promoting their preference for prayer camp services and traditional healing centres instead (Asamoah et al., 2014; Osafo et al., 2015). Fear of social stigma and rejection also deter students from participating in counselling centre activities on various Ghanaian university campuses (Andoh-Arthur et al., 2015). Other service barriers include students' low problem perception, poor service awareness (exacerbated by low service advertising on university campuses), and excessive workload (Vidourek et al., 2014; Marsh & Wilcoxon, 2015; Armstrong & Young, 2015). Low service awareness often leads to poor service use (Stallman, 2012; Kituyi, 2014) and it is common for Ghanaian university students to experience severe service ignorance which often results in institutional resources going unused (Kituyi, 2014). Educational stakeholders are severely disturbed by the situation, given their profound insight into the services' usefulness in promoting students' academic and general well-being (Ahyia, 2010; Aidoo, 2011).

Following students' and tutors' popular confessions about counselling service usefulness to their studies and teaching (Ahyia, 2010; Aidoo, 2011), stakeholders have

committed to increasing professional counselling service use among student groups in both Ghanaian universities and colleges of education. Our research thus adopted a phenomenological approach to explore higher education students' reservations to greater counselling participation in Ghanaian public institutions of higher learning. We settled on in-depth interviews and a focus group session to gather data, in consonance with our phenomenological research focus to make worthwhile student idiographic findings from which to derive recommendations towards growing counselling service use by students in Ghanaian higher learning.

Accordingly, the study aimed to achieve the following:

- Gain insight into the unique counselling experiences of academically counselled public university students in Ghana;
- go in depth and highlight individual interpretations of the unique service barriers expressed by academically counselled public university students in Ghana; and
- make appropriate recommendations to forestall the identified service barriers to students' increased service participation in Ghanaian universities.

Theoretical Framework

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), the attitudes humans adopt in their diverse circumstances engender varied outcomes. To be active and persistently engaged (autonomy) or to remain passive and alienated (relatedness), depends largely on the conditions in which one operates. Given the reality of service barriers, and the need for a resilient attitude on the part of students to confront and overcome their individual service access barriers, we adopted self-determination theory as a guide for our research. We found the theory apt for this purpose based on its emphasis on motivation in driving satisfactory human behaviour that gratifies diverse human needs (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Determination in this theory simply refers to the desire, urge, or drive to pursue and fruitfully accomplish an act (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Determination may also be naturally stimulated (intrinsically motivated) or externally activated (extrinsic motivation). While intrinsically motivated behaviours tend to flow spontaneously from within and are thus often propelled by an internal drive to achieve a specified desired goal, extrinsically driven acts oftentimes rely on potent external and attractive elements to drive their goal-achievement process (Ryan & Deci, 2009). Despite their marked differences, both models of motivation thus often integrate meaningfully to facilitate human life advancement.

The theory's key factors, namely autonomy, relatedness, competence, intricately integrate to gratify diverse human psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Unmet psychological human needs are known to often create deep-seated behavioural problems that necessitate professional intervention to overcome them (Vescovelli et al., 2017). Following the profound insight he gained regarding the key concepts of self-determination theory from his experience applying them in an educational setting, Reeve (2002) encouraged teachers to offer their students greater autonomy in order to promote their students' intrinsic motivation and creative competencies (Ryan & Deci, 2009). In agreement with the latter, Turner et al. (2009) also identified intrinsic motivation not only as a key predictor of students' fruitful

academic achievement but also as a potent strategy in sponsoring autonomy, relatedness, and competence to remarkably propel students' academic goal-attainment. The aforementioned elements interestingly endorse the importance of counselling services in augmenting students' academic attainment that further attract students' increased counselling service use at university (Ryan & Deci, 2009; Turner et al., 2009).

In effect, the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) provided a meaningful and logical roadmap that directed our research.

Method

Procedure

We adopted the phenomenological multiple case study design to accomplish this study. Phenomenological studies generate multiple realities from the perceivers' unique understanding of the specified phenomenon to facilitate rich description of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). We deemed the design most appropriate to our study, following our goal of exploring participants' personal experiences with the counselling service in an effort to identify the idiosyncratic barriers relevant to higher learning students in Ghana. The counselling cases explored in this study enriched our ability to identify service barriers, while simultaneously endowing us with "heuristic" knowledge that exclusively aligns with the case study research method we adopted (Salhi, 2017).

Research was conducted in three southern-based Ghanaian institutions, namely institutions A, B, and C. We subsequently provide an overview of each research site in the study.

Overview of the research sites

Institution A

Institution A is located in the coastal, Fantse-speaking town in the Central regional capital. The establishment is well-known for providing high quality education, both to the general populace and training of teachers for all three educational levels in Ghana. The institution boasts a vast landscape, conveniently couched in the Southern and Northern campuses, where over 74 720 students pursue their various educational goals. The institution's major educational facilities, comprising the main library, science laboratories, lecture theatres, and halls of residence, among others, are presently located at the new site, though the counselling centre is currently located at the old site. Currently, Institution A runs about 210 study programmes across the first-, second- and third-degree levels, some of which include the Arts, Science, Education, Psychology, and Computer Sciences studies. We completed the research field work at the new site.

Institution B

Institution B on the other hand is located in the heart of the business and capital town. Founded in 1965, the institution was the first and sole dual-purpose university established

in Ghana. Primarily, institution B provides professional training in the areas of Accountancy, Management, and related disciplines. Students' socio-academic welfare is the responsibility of three professionally trained counsellors who operate from the modern-styled building housing the counselling and gender unit. Institution B currently has a student population of 14 000, many of whom reside in various hostel facilities scattered around the vicinity. The institution is located in a city of over 2.27 million people (representing 70% of the entire country's population), which renders it one of the most populated towns in the country.

Institution C

Institution C is also situated in the relatively small Central regional Efitu-speaking Central region town. Established in 1992, the institution remains an affiliate of institute A, both of which are charged with providing major higher education training programmes in Ghana. Institution C also has the core mandate of training professional teachers for the nursery and primary schools in Ghana. The institution was established from a merger of seven diploma-awarding colleges from various regional capitals in the country. Presently, the institution comprises four campuses, with the north campus being the central site hosting the administrative seat of the vice-chancellor, as well as the main institutional administration block and four other student halls of residence. The north campus also houses the institution's counselling facility, charged with providing socio-personal, academic, and career counselling services to students in the institution. Over 18 000 students are registered to various academic programmes at institution C. We held all our study interactions at the institution's conference room in the main administration block.

Participant characteristics

We engaged 13 participants for this study, comprising eight females and five male students in total. The interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) stresses the importance of using small homogenous sample sizes for high data richness (Holland, 2014; Wagstaff et al., 2014). We also purposively targeted counselled students in this study, in view of their rich knowledge regarding our research focus on students' lesser-known counselling service barriers, in order to derive appropriate answers to our earlier outlined research questions. One out of the 13 research participants was a 32-year-old student, with the remaining 12, aged between 21 and 26, and also being direct university entrants from senior high institutions in Ghana. All study participants identified themselves as adherents of the Christian faith and were registered to programmes in pursuit of either a Bachelor of Education or Science degree.

Research instruments

We used two pre-constructed data collection instruments, namely an in-depth interview and a focus group discussion guide in this study. Both methods enhanced researcher-participant rapport and further afforded participants the liberty to rationalise and articulate their personal thoughts regarding barriers to counselling in Ghanaian institutions (Josselson,

2007). We derived each instrument's items from the study's research question, but also used a conversational and flexible interactive method, replete with open-ended questions, to promote in-depth participant accounts regarding their counselling service deterrents. The strategy further enabled us to probe deeper where necessary, for further clarification regarding students' service barriers. Additionally, we audio recorded all the field interactions, made notes, and also captured some interesting field events in this study, to enrich the final research report. The audio recordings for instance captured participants' unique narratives regarding their counselling service hindrances which greatly enriched the final research report.

Ethical considerations

Qualitative research essentially seeks to understand individuals' context-specific experiences and perspectives for the purpose of new knowledge creation. This critical aim of the research approach underscores the need for ethical considerations in conducting credible qualitative research (Kynge et al., 2019). Though extremely extensive, ethical considerations are fundamental to the credibility of all exploratory research (Pietilä et al., 2019). In this regard, Tweedie (2016) asserts that qualitative research informants are often vulnerable due to the probing nature of exploratory studies. We thus took great care to follow due ethical qualitative procedures in this study, by seeking ethical clearance and research permission from appropriate agencies, providing participant briefing regarding the research, and further requesting participant consent prior to their engagement in the study. The detailed participant briefing and informed voluntary consent afforded participants the liberty and confidence to comprehensively articulate their views regarding the research topic in this inquiry process. According to Yeong et al. (2018) a reliable interview protocol generates detailed qualitative data in all exploratory studies. Such comprehensive data enrich the research, thereby enabling the inquirers "to gain better understanding of the respondents' experience and identify crucial elements relevant to the subject matter" (Yeong et al., 2018, p. 1).

Participant selection and data collection procedures

At institution A we employed the snowball sampling method to gather data for this study. Our first contact, a lecturer and counsellor, linked us to two counselled students, Lady and Mawutoh, who we engaged in the study after a thorough briefing regarding our research purpose and their expected roles, among other ethical requirements. We assigned them pseudonyms in order to protect their personal identities, in line with confidentiality requirements. Similarly, Nhyira (female) and Nelson (male) heard about our research and joined at the recommendation of a former student at institution A.

At institution B we recruited five students, comprising three males (Seerious, Gordee and Kwesi) and two females (Pee and Esi), for our research purposes. After a long process of searching for counselled students at institution C, the institutional chaplain roped in three female students (Bigails, Yaa and Baby) for our research engagement. We complied with the approved ethical research requirements throughout our field work in this study and further

offered our volunteers the opportunity to opt out of the research project at any time they so desired, without any consequence to them. We further ensured that all participants were well-informed about their expected roles, felt safe, and provided their written consent prior to their engagement in the study. We eventually held two in-depth interviews with 10 of the 12 participants we engaged in the research. Each interview session lasted between 30 to 45 minutes.

In the case of the focus group discussion held at the main students' hostel in institution B, a total of eight participants were in attendance. To accomplish this, one researcher facilitated the session while the other assisted with the audio recording, with permission from participants. We subsequently kept the gathered raw data safely in the institution's archives for confidentiality purposes.

Establishing trustworthiness in the study

The foregoing detailed information provided regarding our research processes and adopted methods serves to paint a clear picture of our study for credibility purposes. Credible qualitative research often reflects the three measures of transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Sousa, 2014; Stratford & Bradshaw, 2016). To promote research transferability, we described our physical research settings, the type of participants we engaged in the study, and elaborated on the appropriateness of the methods we applied in accomplishing this study. According to Sousa (2014) it is important for the research design to fit the kind of research question to which a study seeks to respond, the selected participants to engage the research question, and the methods applied to reach credible findings. In phenomenological studies like the one in hand, the suitability of the adopted methods should enable the research findings to naturally emerge from gathered data, rather than to reveal the personal predispositions of the researchers.

Sefotho (2015) thus describes such findings as the personal or internal ideas and belief systems of social actors about the social phenomenon under study. We carefully chose a well-informed set of participants (counselled university students) to inform our investigation of barriers to accessing counselling services faced by students (Sousa, 2014). Our further efforts at ensuring data consistency, such as conducting occasional member-checking during field work, and also cautiously triangulating our gathered data from both sources to achieve data comprehension, equally aimed at confirming the credibility of our research findings. The faithful reproduction of the above details ensures the dependability of our research, as it may enable other researchers in the field to replicate our study over time to assess the consistency of the study's results (Stratford & Bradshaw, 2016).

Data analysis

We combined the interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) with thematic analysis in this study to unearth participants' exclusively articulated personal barriers to counselling service access in Ghanaian universities (Nizza et al., 2021). We chose the abovementioned meaning-making methods because interpretive phenomenological study participants

actively interpret their subjective world, rather than remaining passive recipients in the knowledge-creation process (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Nizza et al., 2021). By fervently relying on their reported terminologies and texts in our knowledge-creation process, we stressed participants' context-specific and time-bound realities (Sefotho, 2015). This served the purpose of endorsing the ontological underpinnings of participants' lived experiences with counselling service barriers, many of which largely depended on the physical, social, and cultural circumstances in which they were grounded; and more especially that their reported service barriers emerged solely from their periodic encounter with their institutional counselling service (Nizza et al., 2021).

Our initial transcript re-readings then saw us noting all thoughts, observations and reflections that occurred to us on the left transcript margin (Wagstaff et al., 2014). We subsequently captured recurring phrases and personal questions that engulfed our thoughts during further readings on the right side, and also used bracketing to centralise participants' actual field presentations, rather than our private researcher presuppositions and judgements in this mission (Tufford & Newman, 2012). We then engaged theme re-grouping or clustering to re-arrange the set of ideas we had earlier gathered into a more hierarchical and coherent picture that reflected participants' expressed counselling service barriers. We again ensured that the broader themes we derived essentially reflected participants' ideas to maintain credibility in our research. Finally, we derived a master list of themes on a summary table, with corresponding interview quotations, as evidence of participants' actual accounts regarding their barriers to the institutional counselling service.

Results

Major themes related to factors derailing students' use of counselling service in the studied public Ghanaian institutions of higher learning emergent from the study included students' perceptions of counsellors' low sense of initiative, low counselling service awareness, poor first-year orientation service, students' counselling service misconceptions, poor service location and uninviting counselling setting, and counsellor unavailability.

Counsellors' lack of initiative

Regarding the perceived lack of initiative of counsellors at her institution, a participant called Esi reported that "... counsellors stay in their offices and expect students to come to them before they get to know that counselling exists in this institution ... I'm not sure it's the best idea ..." (Participant from institution B). She went on to say: "I frankly think counsellors should be more up and doing ... they should step out of their comfort zones and work ..." (Participant from institution B). This was later confirmed by another female participant from institution A named Nhyira, who went on to make an important suggestion regarding counsellors' sense of initiative. She noted that "... they should come out and educate us more about counselling ... and its benefits ... because a lot of people do not know the essence of the service ...". Likewise, another female participant from institution B, Pee, confidently agreed with Esi and Nhyira's observations. Pee shared that

“... some students ... are ignorant about counselling”. In addition to the aforementioned reports, participants’ criticisms of counsellors’ limited use of information-sharing strategies for counselling purposes also emerged as a theme in this study. For example, many participants accused counsellors of adopting outmoded and mundane strategies, like word-of-mouth invitations, and cited a lack of prior advertising for counselling-related activities on campus, instead of using modernized and student-friendly data-dissemination tools like flyers, brochures, banners and positive declarations from popular student leaders and role models. Information dissemination regarding counselling-related issues thus presented a key barrier to participants’ enthusiastic use of the counselling service in the studied institutions.

A number of study participants also criticised the first-year orientation. For instance, Pee from institution B remarked that “... organised orientation events were quite limited because there were many students in other departments the counselling staff needed to talk to within their usually restricted time frame ...”. She further added that her first-year orientation event was “... boring and restricted ... Because they just come to talk to us about what they do and all that ... but it’s ... just for few minutes ... yes, just few minutes during my orientation in level 100 ...”. In a similar manner, Esi noted that: “... I realise that it’s only during the orientation that counsellors are made known and that for me is problematic. There are no side programmes ... they don’t organise any programme for you to be aware that, yes this is going on ... Because when other people who are transferred from various institutions join us, how do they get to know about counselling if they missed orientation ...?”

Low counselling service awareness

Related to the abovementioned service barriers was the reported poor counsellor-sense-of-initiative and related poor institutional counselling service promotion among students on the various campuses. In this regard, 23-year-old Esi confessed, for instance, that: “Me, initially I didn’t know that counselling existed here, it was someone who even told me about it, I didn’t know there was a counselling unit in my institution ...” (Participant from institution B).

From the same institution B, 21-year-old Pee explained that “People don’t really know that there is counselling session that you can just walk in and talk about your problems in this institution”. On three different occasions, 25-year-old Nelson, from institution A, likewise confessed his ignorance about the location of his institution’s counselling centre. He claimed: “I didn’t even know the place”. Bigails from institution C, the oldest participant in the group, later contributed to the discussion, saying: “In fact, whenever you tell people to go for counselling, they often say we don’t know the counselling centre”. Further, Baby, another 21-year-old, also confessed her ignorance about the availability of counselling services at institution C when she noted that: “I haven’t been there before, I don’t even know the place”.

Baby further echoed Pee’s views as a reason for her delayed use of institution C’s counselling centre. She explained that: “Because I didn’t know we have a counselling

centre here ... yes, I have been in this institution for the past two years but I didn't know ... in fact I think a lot of people don't also know the place".

Poor first-year orientation service

Participants' expressions on the nature and quality of their respective institutions' organised first-year orientation event were generally unflattering. Participants' field accounts about the yearly orientation event revealed a rather brief, monotonous and mechanical encounter. With less time spent at the event, coupled with the unending monotony of its presentation, the students had very little to benefit from their orientation experiences. The implications of students' lack of interest in the first-year orientation were severe and unfortunate. Many of them ended up losing interest and therefore feeling uninvolved in the orientation programme. For example, 21-year-old participant, Pee (from institution B) perceived the event as "... quite limited". She explained, "... it's ... just for few minutes ... yes, just few minutes during my orientation in level 100".

Likewise, at institution A, 23-year-old Mawutoh described the same programme "... as too brief and fast ... it's always as if we were being chased out of the place". At institution C, Baby, who is 21 years of age, also described the orientation programme as "... extremely short and hurriedly organised...". Pee subsequently explained her orientation experience thus: "... because there are other departments the organisers have to talk to ... it takes only few minutes". Going on to articulate another weakness of the programme, she noted that "...they just come to talk to us about what they do and all that ... in fact, a level three hundred friend told me it's been like that for years now".

Students' counselling service misconceptions

The qualitative data gathered from our 12 students revealed that misconceptions regarding the counselling services prevail in Ghanaian institutions. Aside from not fully trusting their counsellors with their private lives, our participants also misconstrued the roles of their counsellors on their various campuses. These erroneous perceptions of counsellors' roles and poor service awareness led them to consult their parents and guardians regarding their personal problems, instead of relying on the geographically more accessible counsellors on the various campuses. For instance, Nelson (from institution A) reported on the matter this way: "Even the close friends I have have never gone for counselling ... They tell me they don't know the use of the counselling centre. Yes, after all they can call their parents for counselling".

Mawutoh's initial misconception of counselling practice was evidenced in her remark that "at first I was thinking if you go for counselling, people will get to know my problem". Her fears of the shameful effect of such a situation increased her reluctance to attend counselling: "that seems like you are exposing yourself and that is very, very bad because it can bring shame to you" (26-year-old Participant from institution A). Similarly, Yaa's service misconception related to fear of breach of confidence and prevented her from seeking early counselling assistance when she really needed it. She reported that: "I feared that my

problem would go to the social media and then a lot of questions may come after. That can be disastrous. I could even be ridiculed by my friends on campus” (Participant from institution C).

In the same vein, Nelson’s counselling misconception as a strictly freshers activity almost denied him the opportunity to benefit from the facility. He admitted: “I thought counselling was solely meant for level hundreds (first-year students), so I was shy to attend counselling”.

Poor service location and uninviting counselling settings

The physical appearance of the buildings housing the counselling facilities of the various institutions also presented as a barrier to students’ service use. As noted by some participants, the seemingly poorly located, unlabelled, and unpleasant look of the service buildings prevented students from visiting the place. Thirty-two-year-old Bigails from institution C shared that “the counselling centre’s appearance doesn’t look attractive. You see sometimes you have a nice building and the way the environment is, attracts you to go inside and see what is happening there. This one doesn’t have it”.

On another note, institution A participants, Nhyira and Nelson, thought the facility was poorly located on their institution’s campus. “I don’t think the counselling centre on campus is easily locatable. Because at first I even thought it was an office or a department for the education students, because there is a bold inscription of the Department of Educational Foundations printed in black paint on the wall, adjacent to the entrance of the Counselling centre”, said Nhyira. Confirming the facility’s poor physical location, Nelson’s specific words were: “one other thing is that where the counselling centre is currently located is wrong. I think it should be brought to where students can easily access it. Or where students can see it. Where it is now, if you are not told that this is the counselling centre, you wouldn’t know. Most people don’t know that counselling centre”. Nelson’s concerns seem to support Bigails’ earlier observation regarding institution C’s counselling facilities: “people say we don’t know the counselling centre, because there is no sign to point out the office to visitors. I think the facility should have an indication, something to specify that this is the counselling centre”. In that vein, Nelson (institution A) also critiqued the poor condition of the billboard advertising the counselling facility in institution A. He remarked that “the inscriptions on the counselling centre billboard are faded. It’s difficult to see”.

Counsellor unavailability

Many participants in the study also perceived the frequent unavailability of counsellors at the institutional facilities as a limitation to service access on their various campuses. In their view, counsellors’ inability to be available on campus and/or accessible to students at all times either due to their excessive workloads or many other responsibilities outside the institutions’ premises does students a disservice when they have to walk long distances to seek counselling, only to find no counsellor on duty. Commenting on this subject, Yaa, the 22-year-old student from institution C, stated: “I will say availability all the

time. Because as we are in our hostels, at times we face certain difficulties and then if a counsellor is available at that time, you can consult him. Because at times your roommate may misbehave and then it will turn into a fight so if a counsellor is available the situation will be solved”.

Likewise from institution C, 21-year-old Baby asserted that “Sometimes you, you will be thinking about your problem so much but when you come to see the counsellor, he will not be available. So I think they should be there always”.

Discussion

Guided by the interpretive phenomenological research approach, alongside the theoretical underpinnings of the self-determination theory that anchored this study, we identified participants’ perceptions of counsellors’ low sense of initiative as the greatest service barrier to students from the three Ghanaian public universities featured in our study. Apart from the two extrinsic factors, perceived counsellor unavailability and inconvenient physical location of service facilities on the various institutional campuses, all other mentioned barriers reflect study participants’ intrinsic service factors.

Taking the initiative to perform an act fundamentally relates to internal human thought processes, though the ability to persevere through the act for goal-achievement requires considerable force to drive the individual into action (Oudeyer & Kaplan, 2009). In this case, more active drive also implies greater inner determination and a relentless effort to reach the desired goal, which Oudeyer and Kaplan (2009, p. 1) simply refer to as “spontaneous exploration and curiosity”. The innate source of such internal drives renders them most enduring and ultimately worthwhile (Chaudhuri, 2020). For that matter, Cholewa et al. (2016) found school counsellors’ use of initiative as a major step towards providing worthwhile support services to their groups of students. In their study, counsellors’ useful sense of initiative to promote their work often demanded more creativity and intelligence, to increase the value of their work (Cholewa et al., 2016).

Taking initiative and intrinsic interest or motivation represent the primary dual factors propelling worthwhile goal-attainment generally (Esposito et al., 2014a; Oudeyer & Kaplan, 2009). By directly impacting goal-setting and perceived difficulty of the anticipated task (the key elements to goal-achievement) (Esposito et al., 2014b), taking personal initiative and intrinsic interest can be considered as the most critical promoters of life advancement. Equally, self-efficacy beliefs align meaningfully with intrinsic motivation and a sense of initiative, given their exclusive role in promoting resilience and greater inner determination during the entire goal-attainment process (Chaudhuri, 2020). In effect, every commendable activity outcome often results from an internal will and desire to bring the specified goal to fruition. The counsellors’ low “self-efficacy beliefs” as perceived by participants in the present research study (Esposito et al., 2014b, p. 1) are thus central to the additionally identified students’ subjective service barriers in this study.

As major service providers, it is expedient that counsellors make time to strategize and put greater effort into utilizing their available resources for the smooth implementation of their service-delivery plans (Oudeyer & Kaplan, 2009; Cholewa et al., 2016). Participants’

perceptions of counsellors' seemingly low sense of initiative comprise the greatest service barrier in this study, considering its devastating effects on students' sense of belonging at the institution (Cooper, 2021). It is also the general belief that once students get securely attached to their respective institutions, their levels of academic commitment and educational resilience appreciate profoundly, culminating in their improved academic performance, promotion and timely graduation. Students' sense of connection to their institutions thus simply resonates in their greater self-confidence, academic excellence and institutional retention (Cooper, 2021), which remain the key desires of each student at the higher education level. Some of the participants' perceptions of the current situation in the studied institutions reflect a loss of self-confidence, increased academic stagnation and greater risk of attrition from university.

Participants' perceived lack of counsellor initiative in this case likewise has implications for their reported low service awareness, perceptions of counsellor unavailability and seemingly uninviting physical settings of facilities on the various institutional campuses. It is worth noting, however, that a number of participants' accounts in the study stressed awareness of counsellors' excessive workloads as a principal hindrance to their perceived unavailability. For this reason, participants expressed their desire for counsellors' reduced workload to allow them ample time with clients at the service centres.

Ultimately, the study revealed that counsellors' perceived low sense of initiative appears to precipitate some key student service barriers, including poor service awareness, the prevalence of service misconceptions among the participant population and a correspondingly poor service advertising effort. Evelyn and Tyav (2012) stressed the potential fallout of students' high service ignorance in many institutions. Related to the issues raised in the present study, in their study, participants' service accounts highlighted the subject of students' lacking familiarity with the uses of flyers, identifying pictures and brochures as their preferred forms of disseminating counselling-related information.

Recommendations

To offset the students' counselling hindrances in Ghanaian higher education, as highlighted in the present study, we offer the following recommendations. First, to establish a student-friendly advertising committee that will consistently facilitate service awareness and delivery on the various campuses, thereby fostering counselling service use among students at public universities. Second, the organisation of bi-annual training programmes for the purpose of providing students with better understanding of counsellor roles and functions on the various institutional campuses would be of great benefit to the entire student population regarding counselling services. Finally, petitioning the Ghana Education Service for the reduction of teaching loads of counsellors, thus allowing them more time to dedicate to their counselling service.

Conclusion

Overall, the subjective narratives of the participants in this research study underscored the personal barriers encountered by participants as they sought counselling services at their

respective institutions. The key barriers comprised poor service accessibility, perceived counsellor unavailability, perceived uninviting conditions of counselling service buildings and locations, and low levels of awareness of counselling service availability in the engaged institutions. To reduce students' service barriers to accessing counselling, counsellors are encouraged to show greater initiative and further establish a regime of daily service advertising. The results of this qualitative study, based on the perceptions of 13 students, contribute to our understanding of students' perceptions of counselling services at three public universities in Ghana.

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