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Evaluation of Counseling Services at Student Counseling Centers in Universities Under the Supervision of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The present study aimed to evaluate the counseling services provided by university counseling centers operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology.

Methods and Materials: From a methodological perspective, this research is an exploratory mixed-method study utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data analysis was conducted in two formats, qualitative (content analysis) and quantitative, depending on the nature of the research questions. The research sample consisted of 17 experts and specialists in counseling services and 400 students currently enrolled in universities under the supervision of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology.

Findings: The findings revealed that female students and those who received services from non-residential counseling centers expressed greater satisfaction with the counseling services.

Conclusion: The results indicated that student counseling centers, as one of the essential components of universities, play a central role in enhancing the quality of higher education. These centers significantly contribute to increased academic motivation and personal and social development by providing psychological, academic, and career services.

Keywords: Services, Quality, Student Counseling Centers, Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology.

1. Introduction

Universities and institutions of higher education, as complex and multifaceted entities playing a crucial role in the growth and comprehensive development of societies, are of significant importance (Esmaili et al., 2024; Haseli Songhori & Salamti, 2024; Khorasaniyan, 2022; Ofem, 2023; Rezazadeh Taloukolaei et al., 2024). Enhancing the quality and standards of these institutions is vital due to their role in training skilled and influential professionals. For many students, universities symbolize the beginning of independence, independent decision-making, and managing emerging roles. From a personal development perspective, university life represents a highly sensitive and critical period, as students actively seek their identity and strive to define themselves. Therefore, attending university extends beyond the mere process of classroom education. Consequently, a wide range of student services is offered alongside classroom activities. These services typically include extracurricular activities, student support programs, and student counseling services (Cattani et al., 2021).

Student counseling is essential and indispensable. Counseling services are an integral part of the educational system within universities and fulfill their primary purpose through counseling, education, prevention, intervention, and treatment (Suad, 2019). Everyone involved in university settings may encounter students who are emotionally distressed or experiencing difficulties. In addition to academic counselors, other staff members can also assist students facing challenges. With the presence of counseling or mental health centers at most universities, students in critical situations can be referred to these centers. University staff and faculty, regardless of their specific interactions with students, should receive adequate training to handle situations that cause student distress effectively. This is particularly significant today, as research indicates that a large number of students struggle with serious psychological issues such as mood disorders, anxiety, and depression. These problems, which were less prevalent in the past, are now increasingly observed among students (Yaghoubi et al., 2009).

Student counseling can be regarded as a type of supportive service. Student counseling centers have the responsibility of fulfilling three key roles in serving students. The most important of these roles is providing counseling and therapeutic services to students who face personal, professional, developmental, or psychological challenges and require specialized assistance. The second role of these

centers is prevention, which involves helping students better understand themselves and acquire skills to achieve their academic goals and life aspirations. The third role of university counseling centers is supporting and promoting students' mental health through guidance and counseling services. Accordingly, a counseling center should offer diverse programs, activities, and services, including academic and educational counseling, career counseling, individual counseling, psychological testing, supervision and training, research, professional development, teaching, and administrative tasks (Shabani et al., 2022; Suad, 2019).

Service quality is recognized as the main factor in the success of any organization in today's competitive world, and any decline in client satisfaction due to poor service quality raises serious concerns. Service quality is essentially defined as the alignment of provided services with client expectations. Understanding and assessing client perspectives and expectations is an essential step in improving service quality within organizations (Zamani et al., 2023; Zaree et al., 2019). Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (2010) define the service quality gap as the difference between what clients expect and what they actually receive. The first step in reducing this gap is to precisely identify clients' expectations and perceptions of service quality and determine the extent of this difference. By doing so, organizations can effectively prioritize quality improvement initiatives and allocate resources more efficiently. This effort contributes to enhancing service quality, increasing client satisfaction, and encouraging continued use of services (Ghorbani et al., 2023).

Gysbers et al. (1992) argued that in today's world, counseling program planners require continuous evaluation of their programs to achieve the highest quality levels. They viewed evaluation as an integral and necessary part of the counseling process and even considered it a prerequisite for the success of any program. Since client needs continuously evolve due to social changes and various events, accurately understanding these needs and evaluating the effectiveness of counseling services in higher education is essential (Dehghan et al., 2022).

Although most universities and higher education institutions today have student counseling centers, it appears that some of these centers have not been fully effective in meeting students' needs and have failed to ensure their complete satisfaction. Despite numerous reports on these centers' activities, comprehensive and theory-based studies in this area are rare. Meanwhile, the increasing number of students and their migration from smaller towns to larger

cities have created unique social challenges requiring broader counseling services (Fazeli, 2002; Fazeli, 2022).

A review of the existing literature reveals a variety of approaches to understanding and assessing the counseling needs and services within university settings. Zamani et al. (2023) conducted a cross-sectional study on 400 students at Shahroud University of Medical Sciences, finding that most students expressed a need for counseling, particularly in areas of personal growth and career issues, with these needs influenced by factors such as age, faculty, field of study, year of enrollment, and maternal employment (Zamani et al., 2023). Similarly, Ghorbani et al. (2023) examined the counseling needs of 598 students at Semnan University of Medical Sciences, noting that students commonly sought guidance on personal growth, career opportunities, time management, family and marital issues, and stress management. The study highlighted a demand for solutions to personal and professional challenges across various demographic and academic groups (Ghorbani et al., 2023). In another study, Dehghan et al. (2023) investigated students' perspectives on academic guidance services at Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences, revealing a general dissatisfaction with the current state of guidance while highlighting a desire for improved advisory roles to foster educational development (Dehghan et al., 2022). Getachew (2020), in a qualitative exploration, underscored the critical role of counseling centers in addressing academic difficulties, psychological challenges, and communication problems. Participants advocated for increased attention to these issues as a means to enhance both academic performance and overall student well-being (Getachew, 2020). Mitchell et al. (2019) offered a multifaceted perspective on the organizational structures of counseling centers, noting the absence of a universally optimal model while emphasizing the importance of tailored approaches based on institutional needs and resources (Mitchell et al., 2019). Despite these extensive efforts, none of the reviewed studies provided a comprehensive model for university counseling centers. This highlights the necessity for further research aimed at constructing a well-defined, actionable framework for effective student counseling services.

Given the aforementioned considerations, the present study aimed to evaluate the services of university counseling centers operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. The results of this research provide valuable insights for universities, policymakers, and researchers, which can significantly improve the quality of counseling services and enhance

students' mental health. Additionally, by presenting evidence of the effectiveness of counseling services, the study can help garner support from university administrators for the development of these centers.

2. Methods and Materials

The research methodology employed in this study is applied and exploratory in nature. The study aimed to enhance practical knowledge and provide innovative solutions to improve counseling services in universities. Given that the findings can be utilized to enhance the quality of counseling services in universities and aid in the optimization of tools, methods, and policies for the development of higher education, the research is considered applied and developmental.

Strategically, this study follows a mixed-methods approach (combining qualitative and quantitative methods). Initially, qualitative data were collected, followed by quantitative data. In the first phase, a field study was conducted. This involved a comprehensive review of all accessible research literature up to 2024, which informed the development of semi-structured interview questions to evaluate counseling center services. These questions were reviewed by experts and academic faculty, revised, and finalized for collecting qualitative data.

Before conducting interviews, participants were informed that their responses would be recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The recorded responses were transcribed, verified, and edited as needed. The transcribed interviews were then analyzed using thematic analysis, and the identified themes were used to design an optimal model for student counseling centers.

In the subsequent phase, a researcher-developed questionnaire comprising 14 items was used to evaluate students' satisfaction with the counseling services. The study population included all specialists, experts, and counselors at student counseling centers, as well as students from universities under the supervision of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. Sampling was purposive, targeting experts, specialists, and students from counseling centers, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The sample included 17 experts and 400 students.

3. Findings and Results

The descriptive findings of this study were derived from data collected through 17 interviews with specialists in student counseling services and 400 student questionnaires. This section examines the key demographic characteristics, including gender, age, education level, and type of counseling service accessed.

In this study, female students accounted for a higher proportion (52.5%) compared to male students (47.5%). Additionally, most participants were 23 years old (14.5%), while the least frequent age among participants was 39 years.

Regarding education level, most participants held a bachelor's degree (51.5%), followed by master's degree holders (48.3%), while doctoral degree holders represented the smallest proportion (3%).

Out of the 400 respondents, 368 students accessed non-residential counseling centers, while 32 students used residential counseling centers. Since the total number of respondents was 400, it is evident that non-residential counseling services were accessed more frequently compared to residential services.

Table 1

One-Way ANOVA Test for Evaluating Services of University Student Counseling Centers

Item	Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
What is your opinion about student counseling centers?	Between Groups	270.312	2	135.156	7.868	.000
	Within Groups	6819.278	397	17.177		
	Total	7089.590	399			
The receptionist's behavior was helpful and friendly.	Between Groups	42.847	2	21.423	21.504	.000
	Within Groups	395.513	397	.996		
	Total	438.360	399			
Were you satisfied with the timing of your appointment?	Between Groups	3.179	2	1.589	10.471	.000
	Within Groups	60.259	397	.152		
	Total	63.438	399			
Did your counselor listen to you attentively and actively during sessions?	Between Groups	43.527	2	21.764	30.518	.000
	Within Groups	283.113	397	.713		
	Total	326.640	399			
Do you intend to continue counseling sessions?	Between Groups	190.054	2	95.027	4.349	.014
	Within Groups	8675.536	397	21.853		
	Total	8865.590	399			
Has counseling impacted the resolution of your issues?	Between Groups	21.491	2	10.745	10.468	.000
	Within Groups	407.509	397	1.026		
	Total	429.000	399			
Do counseling sessions improve knowledge about physical and psychological health?	Between Groups	1.407	2	.704	5.459	.005
	Within Groups	51.170	397	.129		
	Total	52.577	399			
Do counseling sessions help you live a better and more balanced life?	Between Groups	23.328	2	11.664	14.424	.000
	Within Groups	321.032	397	.809		
	Total	344.360	399			
Do you trust your counselor and believe in their confidentiality?	Between Groups	26.947	2	13.473	30.144	.000
	Within Groups	177.443	397	.447		
	Total	204.390	399			

Based on the results, the significance level of the ANOVA test for evaluating the role of services provided by university counseling centers is 0.14, which is greater than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H0) cannot be rejected.

The hypothesis on the role of counseling center services shows no significant difference.

For the second hypothesis regarding student satisfaction with counseling services, the ANOVA significance level

was found to be 0.684, indicating that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, and there is no significant difference.

For the third hypothesis, which examines the role of counseling services in higher education development, the ANOVA significance level is 0.5. Thus, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, showing no significant difference in the role of counseling services in developing higher education.

Descriptive analysis results indicate that the highest satisfaction levels in student counseling centers were reported by female students in non-residential centers.

For qualitative data, thematic analysis was utilized. Initially, existing documents and guidelines were

meticulously reviewed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature and activities of university counseling centers. To achieve the research objectives, a series of questions focusing on the primary needs of counseling services were developed and discussed in interviews with university counseling center counselors.

The qualitative data collected from interviews were analyzed using MAXQDA 2020 software, identifying the main aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. The main and subcategories derived from the interviews are presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Categories Extracted from Interview Texts

Row	Subcategory	Main Category
1	Location of student counseling centers Expertise of professionals Topics of counseling centers	Features of student counseling centers
2	Prevention of social harm	Role of counseling center services
3	Mental health leadership	Features of student counseling centers
4	Follow-up on student issues and problems Conducting workshops and courses	Engagement of counseling centers

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The optimal student counseling center should not only provide services but also possess features such as addressing social issues, pre- and post-marital and divorce-related problems, psychological services, psychotherapy, reducing social harm, social work, and enhancing life skills.

This study aimed to evaluate the services of university counseling centers under the supervision of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. Based on the results of the one-way ANOVA analysis, the significance level for evaluating the impact of services provided by university counseling centers on the dependent variable was 0.14. Since this value is greater than the standard significance level of 0.05, the null hypothesis (H_0), which suggests no significant differences among various groups, cannot be rejected with 95% confidence. Hence, it cannot be concluded that the services provided by counseling centers have a statistically significant effect on the studied dependent variable.

Regarding student satisfaction with counseling services, the significance level was calculated as 0.684, which is much higher than the significance threshold. This indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in satisfaction levels among different student groups.

Quantitative findings showed that the mean satisfaction score of female students with counseling center services was 7.84, the highest among the various groups. This finding aligns with the qualitative results from interviews, where many female students highlighted the availability of a safe environment, better understanding of their needs, and more specialized services in counseling centers. Additionally, data indicate that non-residential female students significantly utilized counseling services more than other groups, which may be attributed to social and cultural factors related to women in academic environments.

Factors Influencing Student Satisfaction with Counseling Services:

- The counselor's knowledge, experience, and communication skills are crucial in building trust and providing effective solutions.
- Offering a variety of services tailored to diverse student needs, including individual, group, academic, and career counseling, positively impacts satisfaction.
- Creating a safe and confidential environment for discussing issues and emotions is vital for gaining students' trust.

- Convenient office hours, online appointment booking, and accessible counseling centers across campus facilitate access to services.
- The cost of counseling services can influence students' decisions to utilize them.
- Promoting a culture of counseling among students and reducing the stigma associated with it can increase service utilization and satisfaction.

To continuously improve the quality of student counseling services and enhance students' mental health and productivity, the following strategies are proposed:

- Conduct regular training programs, support applied research, and establish specialized networks to enhance counselors' knowledge and skills.
- Provide a conducive work environment, competitive salaries and benefits, and opportunities for professional growth to attract and retain skilled professionals.
- Offer online, group, and specialized services to address a wide range of student needs.
- Create a safe and calm environment to foster effective communication between counselors and students.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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