

Assessing the Effectiveness of Counselling Therapy in Addressing Mental Health Challenges among Students at Eswatini Medical Christian University

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APA Citation and Referencing: Mvubelo, K., & Matuka, C. (2025). Assessing the Effectiveness of Counselling Therapy in Addressing Mental Health Challenges among Students at Eswatini Medical Christian University. *JENER Journal of Empirical and Non-Empirical Research*, 2(1), 143-146

ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Published on 7th Jan 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Counselling therapy Mental health challenges University students Eswatini Service effectiveness</p>	<p>Mental health challenges among university students are a significant public health concern affecting academic performance, social functioning, and overall well-being. This study assessed the effectiveness of counselling therapy in addressing mental health challenges among students at Eswatini Medical Christian University (EMCU). A phenomenological qualitative design was adopted, using purposive sampling to select 30 students who had accessed counselling services. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework. Counselling therapy helped students manage emotional distress, develop coping mechanisms, and improve academic resilience. However, utilization was hindered by stigma, lack of awareness, doubts about effectiveness, and perceived age gaps between counsellors and students. Students reported that while counselling was effective in providing support, barriers such as fear of judgment and inadequate counsellor-student rapport limited wider uptake. Counselling therapy is essential for student mental health but requires enhanced awareness campaigns, stigma reduction initiatives, and improved counsellor-student relationships to maximize its impact and accessibility.</p>

1. Introduction

Mental health challenges among university students have emerged as a significant public health concern, affecting students' academic performance, social functioning, and overall well-being. Globally, studies indicate that university students experience elevated levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders due to academic pressures, social adjustment, financial burdens, and personal life challenges.

1.1 Mental Health in University Settings

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), one in five university students worldwide experiences a mental health disorder during their academic journey, yet access to effective mental health support services remains limited. Mental health difficulties can lead to poor academic outcomes, social withdrawal, substance abuse, and in severe cases, suicidal ideation.

1.2 The Context of Eswatini

In Africa, mental health challenges among students are compounded by stigma, cultural misconceptions, and limited institutional capacity to provide professional psychological services. In Eswatini, research shows that university students face significant psychological distress linked to academic pressure, socio-economic challenges, and personal issues, yet mental health support services are often insufficient and underutilized.

2. Literature Review

The literature reveals varied experiences of university students with counselling therapy across different regions, influenced by institutional resources, cultural attitudes, and policy frameworks.

2.1 Lived Experiences with Counselling Therapy

Studies from the United States and Brazil highlight that university counselling services encompass individual therapy, group sessions, peer support programs, and digital mental health platforms. These services enhance early detection, provide coping strategies, and support academic performance, though findings primarily reflect high-resource settings.

2.2 Barriers to Service Utilization

Research indicates that stigma, concerns about treatment effectiveness, financial barriers, and cultural factors significantly hinder students' utilization of counselling services. Studies from Australia and the United States show that self-reliance preferences, fear of judgment, and logistical barriers further discourage access to support services.

3. Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative research design was adopted to investigate the lived experiences of students at Eswatini Medical Christian University with counselling therapy in relation to their mental health challenges.

3.1 Study Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of students who had accessed counselling services at EMCU. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 participants, with data saturation reached at 25 participants but extended to 30 to strengthen representation across diverse experiences.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded with informed consent, and supplemented with note-taking. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, using an inductive approach to allow themes to emerge naturally from the data.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The study employed participant validation, triangulation, thick descriptions, reflexivity, and maintained an audit trail to ensure validity, reliability, and ethical rigor in data collection and analysis.

4. Findings

This section presents the demographic characteristics of participants and the thematic findings from the qualitative analysis, organized around the study's major themes and sub-themes.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

The study included 30 participants with 60% female and 40% male representation. The majority were aged 18-25 (50%), with second-year students forming the largest group (40%).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	12	40
	Female	18	60
Age	18-25	15	50
	26-36	10	33
	37 and above	5	17
Year of Study	First Year	8	27
	Second Year	12	40
	Third Year	10	33

Source: Research Data, 2025

4.2 Thematic Findings

The analysis revealed three major themes with corresponding sub-themes related to students' experiences with counselling therapy.

Table 2: Major Themes and Sub-Themes

Major Themes	Sub-Themes
Lived experiences with counselling therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age of service providers • Managing Emotional Distress • Coping Mechanisms
Factors affecting utilization of counselling services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of role of counselling • Fear of Stigma • Doubts about effectiveness • Lack of awareness or knowledge
Suggestions for improving counselling services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness and education • Enhance counsellor-student relationships • Counsellor-student age appropriateness

Source: Research Data, 2024

Qualitative Insights:

Participants reported that the age of counsellors influenced their comfort level, with some expressing discomfort discussing sensitive issues with older counsellors. Counselling helped students manage emotional distress related to exams and personal issues, with one participant noting: "Talking to the counsellor helped me calm down and see exams as not something that should affect me negatively" (Participant 5).

Barriers to utilization included stigma, particularly among male students who perceived counselling as a sign of weakness, and lack of awareness about available services. Some students doubted counselling effectiveness initially but recognized benefits after engagement.

4.3 Effectiveness of Counselling Therapy

Students reported that counselling provided emotional relief, coping strategies, and resilience to navigate academic and personal stressors. However, effectiveness was moderated by the quality of counsellor-student relationships and perceived confidentiality.

5. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

This section synthesizes the core findings from the study, draws overall conclusions regarding the effectiveness of counselling therapy for student mental health at Eswatini Medical Christian University, and provides actionable, evidence-based recommendations to improve service delivery, accessibility, and policy frameworks. The discussion integrates both qualitative insights and demographic data to present a holistic view of the current state and future potential of counselling services in the university context.

5.1 Summary

The study employed a phenomenological qualitative design to explore the lived experiences of 30 students at Eswatini Medical Christian University who had utilized counselling services. Findings revealed that counselling therapy is effective in helping students manage emotional distress—particularly academic stress, anxiety, and personal challenges—and in fostering coping mechanisms and resilience. Key thematic areas included students lived experiences with counselling, factors affecting service utilization, and suggestions for improvement. Despite its effectiveness, counselling uptake was significantly hindered by barriers such as stigma (especially among male students), lack of awareness about available services, doubts regarding effectiveness, and perceived generational gaps with counsellors. Students valued counselling as a support system but highlighted the need for more relatable, accessible, and destigmatized services.

5.2 Conclusion

Counselling therapy at EMCU serves as a vital mental health resource that contributes positively to student well-being and academic adjustment. However, its full potential remains unrealized due to persistent structural, cultural, and perceptual barriers. The study concludes that while counselling is effective in mitigating mental health challenges, systemic efforts are required to enhance visibility, reduce stigma, and foster trusting counsellor-student relationships. A more integrated, student-centered approach—one that acknowledges cultural context and student diversity—is essential to transform counselling from an underutilized service into a cornerstone of campus mental health support.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen counselling services and improve mental health outcomes for university students:

1. **Enhance Awareness and Outreach:** Implement continuous, multi-channel awareness campaigns using social media, orientation programs, workshops, and campus posters to educate students about the availability, benefits, and confidentiality of counselling services.
2. **Combat Stigma Through Normalization:** Introduce peer-led mental health ambassador programs, open forums, and mental health clubs to foster a campus culture where seeking help is viewed as a strength, particularly targeting male students and reducing gender-based stigma.
3. **Improve Counsellor-Student Relatability:** Address the age and relatability gap by incorporating younger counsellors or peer supporters, ensuring ongoing counsellor training in youth-friendly and culturally sensitive approaches, and facilitating regular feedback mechanisms between students and counselling staff.
4. **Strengthen Institutional Policy Integration:** Advocate for the formal integration of mental health and counselling services into university academic and wellness policies, including allocated funding, clear referral pathways, and routine service evaluation to ensure sustainability and accountability.
5. **Promote Early Intervention and Prevention:** Develop proactive, preventive mental health programs such as stress-management workshops, resilience-building sessions, and routine psychoeducation to equip students with coping skills before crises arise, thereby reducing the long-term burden on counselling services.

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