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Assessment of the Counselling Needs of Students in a Ghanaian Public University

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Abstract

Needs assessment is the starting point for developing comprehensive and relevant counselling services for students. This study assessed the counselling needs of students in the University of Energy and Natural Resources in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana. The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The population of the study consisted of all students in the University. A sample of 335 students made up of 286 males and 49 females was selected through proportional stratified random sampling and simple random sampling techniques. A needs assessment questionnaire was used to source for the data. The data were analysed using means, standard deviations and independent samples t-test. The study found that practical and vocational/career needs were the most pressing needs of students. The study further revealed that there was no significant difference between the counselling needs of male and female students. Based on the findings, it was recommended that counsellors at the University of Energy and Natural Resources should design and implement counselling services based on the most important needs of the students: practical and vocational/career needs.

Key words: counselling; needs assessment; practical needs; career needs; university students.

Introduction

In educational settings, the primary objective of counsellors is to help students address their educational, personal-social, vocational/career and practical needs. It is, however, very difficult, if not impossible, for counsellors to meet the actual needs of students without conducting needs assessment. Needs assessment is the

identification and prioritization of the needs of the target population such as students, teachers and parents. Ackumey (2003) stated that needs assessment involves finding what needs are there to be met. According to Awabil and Akande (2013), needs assessment is a prerequisite for the effective development and practice of counselling irrespective of the setting. The importance of needs assessment cannot be over-emphasized. First, needs assessment enables counsellors to meet the relevant needs of the target population to be served. Secondly, needs assessment facilitates the mobilization of both human and material resources for addressing counselling goals and objectives. Thus, needs determine the resources required for counselling provision. This perspective of needs assessment in guidance and counselling is in accordance with the views expressed earlier by several authorities (e.g. Schmidt, 1999; Kolo & Adamu, 2001; Oladele, 2007; Awabil, 2011) who believe that following the identification of the relevant needs of students, the requisite resources should be mobilized for meeting the needs.

In Ghana, some research on the counselling needs of students have been conducted in polytechnics. For example, in a survey of polytechnic students' needs at Ho Polytechnic in the Volta Region, Apreko (2010) revealed that practical and vocational needs were the greatest problems followed by personal-social and lastly, educational needs. In an earlier study, Boham (2005) revealed that the major needs of students were academic, financial, social, and career development needs. Her study covered polytechnics in the Ashanti, Central, Greater Accra, and Western Regions. Apreko and Boham studies were limited to polytechnic students and, therefore, did not cover university students in the Brong Ahafo Region. The findings of Boham's needs assessment study enabled counsellors in four polytechnics (now called Technical Universities) to adequately respond to the relevant needs of the students (Awabil, Ocansey, Apreko & Anane, 2010).

The University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR) was established by an Act of Parliament (Act 830) in 2011 with the vision to promote the development of human resources required for resolving critical energy and natural resources challenges of society and undertake interdisciplinary academic research and outreach programmes in engineering, science, economics and environmental policy (UENR, 2015). There is an increasing diversity of students in the

University of Energy and Natural Resources. These students have problems that should be addressed through counselling. Although a Counselling Centre exists in the University, there has not been any needs assessment in the University in the areas of educational, vocational, personal-social and practical needs of students. Therefore, it means that counsellors are providing counselling services based on the assumed needs of the students. It is necessary to isolate student needs from their own perspective to serve as the basis for providing counselling services and not on the assumptions or reports made by adults regarding the needs of students. The reason for this view is not far-fetched. Awabil and Akande (2013) opined that adults may not always be able to accurately perceive the counselling needs of students. When students' relevant counselling needs are identified and addressed, it can promote good academic performance. A number of studies have shown that when students' needs are not met, it can have a negative effect on their academic achievement (Nnamani, Dikko & Kinta, 2014; O'Neill, 2000; McGowen, 2007). It is against this background that the researchers undertook the study in order to make available findings that would facilitate the provision of counselling services based on the relevant needs of the students in order to positively influence their academic performance.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. identify the most important counselling needs of students at University of Energy and Natural Resources.
2. ascertain whether the counselling needs of students at University of Energy and Natural Resources depend on gender.

Research Questions

Two research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What are the major counselling needs of students in University of Energy and Natural Resources with respect to the four broad categories of students' needs?
2. What are the most prevalent specific counselling needs of students with regard to each of the four broad categories of students' needs?

Hypothesis

One null hypothesis guided the study.

1. There is no significant difference between the counselling needs of male and female students in the University of Energy and Natural Resources.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design adopted for the study was the descriptive survey design. A survey design refers to the collection of data from a defined population, perhaps about their characteristics and opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences regarding a phenomenon by asking questions and tabulating their responses (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Dada, Agbana & Adetayo, 2010). The researchers considered the survey design as the most appropriate for the present study because the study sought to describe the current counselling needs of students. The design also enabled the researchers to draw meaningful conclusions from the study.

Population

The population of the study comprised all undergraduate students in the University of Energy and Natural Resources. The total number of students in the University was 2,678. This was made up of 2,279 males and 399 females for the 2015/2016 academic year (University of Energy and Natural Resources, Students Records, 2015).

Sample and Sampling Procedure

A sample of 335 students (286 males and 49 females) was selected for the study. Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for sample size estimation was used to determine the sample size. The sampling techniques used were proportional stratified sampling and simple random sampling techniques. The proportional stratified sampling technique was first used to obtain a fair representation of the students by school, academic level and gender. The simple random sampling was then used to select the respondents for the study.

Instrumentation

The study employed a “Needs Assessment Questionnaire for Students” adapted from Apreko (2010) as the instrument for the study. The questionnaire was a 40-item instrument with a 4-point Likert-type scale of Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2 and Strongly Disagree = 1. The cut-off point for determining a priority need is a mean score of 2.5 and 2.0 for the broad and specific categories of needs respectively. The face validity and content validity of the instrument were determined by experts in the field of guidance and counselling. They affirmed that the instrument covered the intended content and was, therefore, valid for use. The reliability of the questionnaire after pre-testing by the current researchers, on the other hand, was ascertained using Cronbach’s coefficient alpha. It yielded a reliability index of 0.78, which was adjudged to be suitable for research purposes. There was 100 percent return rate of the questionnaires. This was possible since questionnaires were collected on the same day with the help of three trained research assistants.

Ethical clearance to undertake the study was sought from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast. Consent and confidentiality was considered as very significant issues and a sincere effort was made to communicate to participants the objectives of the study. Participants were assured that participation was voluntary.

Method of Data Analysis

Means and standard deviations were used to answer the two research questions. Independent samples t-test, on the other hand, was employed to test the hypothesis.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the major counselling needs of students in University of Energy and Natural Resources with respect to the four broad categories of students’ needs?

Table 1
Broad Categories of Students' Counselling Needs

Item	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
Practical	335	28.30	5.16	1
Vocational/Career	335	26.99	5.15	2
Personal/Social	335	23.23	5.42	3
Educational/Academic	335	22.78	5.08	4

The counselling needs of students based on the four broad categories are shown in Table 1. The most pressing needs of respondents were practical needs followed by career/vocational needs. In other words, respondents worried most about their practical needs followed by their career needs.

Research Question 2: What are the most prevalent specific counselling needs of students with regard to each of the four broad categories of students' needs?

The data in Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5 are used to answer research question 2.

Table 2
Practical Counselling Needs of Respondents

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
I am worried about the inadequate lecture room space in the university	335	3.18	0.92	1 st
I am worried about the high user fees charged by the university	335	3.14	0.86	2 nd
I feel the medical services offered in the university are inadequate	335	2.97	0.90	3 rd
I am worried about the inadequate transport facilities in the university	335	2.95	0.94	4 th
I am worried about the poor facilities or the disabled persons in the university	335	2.94	0.95	5 th

I am worried about the poor facilities in the university halls of residence	335	2.94	0.91	6 th
I am disturbed about the high cost of cooked food in and around the university	335	2.79	0.97	7 th
I get emotionally disturbed when I fail to meet my financial demands	335	2.58	0.96	8 th
I face financial problems in school	335	2.42	0.94	9 th
I do not have adequate information about the university	335	2.39	0.87	10 th

From Table 2, it can be observed that respondents' most important problems were worry about inadequate lecture room space in the university and high user fees charged by the university.

Table 3

Vocational/Career Counselling Needs of Respondents

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
I need more information about occupations or careers or jobs in my area of specialization	335	3.13	0.78	1 st
I need information about how to prepare and attend job interviews	335	3.12	0.75	2 nd
I need help to find placement for industrial attachment	335	2.98	0.88	3 rd
I am worried about not visiting any industry while in school to get acquainted to the industrial environment	335	2.90	0.97	4 th
I have difficulty getting information about how to start my own business after leaving school	335	2.85	0.87	5 th
I lack adequate information on job requirements	335	2.65	0.87	6 th

I am worried about job placement after leaving school	335	2.64	0.99	7 th
I have difficulty preparing good curriculum vitae	335	2.59	0.76	8 th
I am confused about the kind of job I will do in future	335	2.43	0.93	9 th
I regret choosing my current programme of study/career	335	1.68	0.87	10 th

It can be seen from Table 3 that the three most important career counselling needs of students are the need for more information about occupations or careers, need for information about how to prepare and attend job interviews, and the need to find placement for industrial attachment.

Table 4

Personal/Social Counselling Needs of Respondents

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
I need to understand more about myself	335	2.70	0.97	1 st
I need to know how to solve interpersonal conflicts	335	2.58	0.90	2 nd
I have problem with dating	335	2.52	1.05	3 rd
I have problem dealing with disappointment	335	2.51	0.97	4 th
I have a problem relating well with my lecturers/instructors	335	2.37	0.92	5 th
I have problem making new friends	335	2.24	0.97	6 th
I have difficulty relating well with other students	335	2.19	0.93	7 th
I have problem meeting family demands	335	2.16	0.89	8 th
I find it difficult to go for an HIV/AIDS test	335	2.03	1.00	9 th
I lack freedom at home	335	1.91	0.89	10 th

Table 4 shows the personal-social needs of students. The first three most pressing needs are related to the need to understand more about themselves, need to know how to resolve interpersonal conflicts and problems relating to dating.

Table 5
Educational Counselling Needs of Respondents

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
I find it difficult discussing my academic problems with my lecturers	335	2.81	0.90	1 st
I have difficulty coping with course workload in the university	335	2.57	0.83	2 nd
I have problems allocating time for my studies	335	2.54	0.88	3 rd
I have difficulty with the style of teaching in the university	335	2.50	0.86	4 th
I have problems meeting deadlines for submission of assignments	335	2.28	0.87	5 th
I have difficulty retrieving from memory during examinations	335	2.18	0.85	6 th
I have difficulty preparing for examinations	335	2.17	0.81	7 th
I have poor study skills	335	2.06	0.84	8 th
I have problems attending lectures regularly	335	1.85	0.88	9 th
I lack confidence in my ability to succeed academically	335	1.84	0.86	10 th

The prioritized educational counselling needs of students are presented in Table 5. The first three priority concerns of students are difficulty discussing their academic problems with their lecturers, difficulty coping with course workload and problems allocating time for their studies.

Testing of Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between the counselling needs of male and female students in the University of Energy and Natural Resources.

The data relating to hypothesis 1 is found in Table 6.

Table 6

Independent Samples t-test of the Counselling Needs of Students on the Basis of Gender

Needs	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-value	Sig (2-tailed)
Academic	Male	286	22.8	5.04	333	.226	.821
	Female	49	22.6	5.34			
Vocational/Career	Male	286	27.0	4.99	333	.051	.959
	Female	49	26.9	6.01			
Personal/Social	Male	286	23.2	5.34	333	-.218	.827
	Female	49	23.4	5.93			
Practical	Male	286	28.5	5.11	333	1.434	.152
	Female	49	27.3	5.39			

From Table 6, it can be realized that the p value for academic, vocational, personal-social and practical needs between male and female are all greater than the significant level of 0.05. This means that there was no statistically significant difference in the counselling needs of male and female students in the University of Energy and Natural Resources. Therefore, based on the result the null hypothesis is retained. This implies that both male and female students in the University of had similar level of needs.

Discussion of Findings

With regard to the broad categories of student needs, it was found that the practical needs were the most pressing concern of students. The findings of the current study are in line with the findings of Apreko (2010) who revealed that practical and vocational problems were the greatest problems of students followed by personal-social ones. He further revealed that the least important need was educational-related. The findings of the current study further confirmed the study of Awabil and Akande (2013) who discovered that practical need was the most pressing need of students. Further analysis of the current data showed that the specific practical needs that were of greater concern to respondents centered on worry about inadequate lecture room space in the University and high user fees charged by the University. The findings are understandable because the institution is a new university and as such did not have adequate facilities and infrastructure.

The second important broad need of respondents was related to career. This finding corroborates with the results obtained by Awabil, Apreko, Ocansey and Anane (2011) who reported that polytechnic students in Ghana rated the career need as the second most important need. Further analysis of the current data revealed that the specific career needs that were of much concern to respondents centered on the need for more information about occupations or careers, need for information about how to prepare and attend job interviews and the need to find placement for industrial attachment. The current findings further corroborate the findings of Awabil and Akande (2013) that polytechnic students in Nigeria needed information on how to prepare and attend job interviews, information about occupations or careers in their areas of specializations and worry for not visiting an industry. The current finding is not surprising. This is because the major reason why students receive higher education is to enable them to secure employment after school.

The results further showed that one of specific significant needs under the personal-social category was that students greatly desired to understand more about themselves. This finding agrees with the results of Awabil (2002) and Awabil and Akande (2013) that students needed to understand themselves. The finding that students desired self-understanding could be due to the fact that most of the respondents were people who were in their early adulthood and as such were still in the process of discovering more about themselves. One other important personal-social need was the need to know how to resolve interpersonal conflicts. This finding is consistent with the result obtained by Awabil and Akande (2013) who found that students desired greatly to know how to resolve interpersonal conflicts among themselves. Perhaps respondents in the current study came from different cultural backgrounds and this could account for different ways of perceiving issues. Consequently, conflict is inevitable.

With respect to the educational/academic needs of students, it was ranked as the least prevalent need among the respondents. This finding of the current study is in line with the finding of Apreko (2010) who revealed that educational needs were the least of concerns of students. This meant that educational/academic needs were not problematic for most of the respondents. This could be explained to be probably due to students taking their academic work seriously and as

such not having issues with regard to their academic work. Another reason could be that the Counselling Centre of the University might have addressed adequately the educational related needs of the students.

On the basis of gender, the study revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the counselling needs of male and female students. This finding is in line with the finding of Nweze and Okolie (2014) who reported in their counselling needs assessment survey of students at Ebonyi State Technical College that there was no significant difference between the counselling needs of males and females. Similarly, Apreko (2010) revealed that there were no significant differences between male and female students in terms of their needs. However, the current finding is inconsistent with the findings of some researchers (e.g. Guneri, Aydin & Skovholt, 2003; Awabil & Akande, 2013) who found significant gender differences when they investigated the counselling needs of students. In the studies conducted by Guneri et al. and Awabil and Akande, both sexes had similar level of needs, but one gender was more willing to disclose its needs than the other and this resulted in the significant difference.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. Counsellors at the University of Energy and Natural Resources should design and implement counselling services that would meet the most important needs of the students.
2. The practical and vocational/career needs of students should receive greater attention than their personal-social and educational needs.
3. Since gender is not a significant determinant of students' needs, counselling services can be planned for students without gender considerations.

Conclusion

The paper identified and prioritized the counselling needs of students at the University of Energy and Natural Resources in Ghana. It was found that students' most pressing needs were practical in nature. This was followed by vocational/career needs. Personal/social needs were ranked third while educational/academic needs were ranked the

least by respondents. The study also showed that there was no significant difference in counselling needs of students on the basis of gender. Recommendations were made to facilitate the planning and delivery of counselling services to students based on their priority needs with the view to promoting good academic performance. It is expected that the results of this study would motivate other researchers to explore the counselling needs of students in other tertiary institutions including private universities in the country so as make counselling services relevant to the needs of students. Counsellors, teachers and school administrators would also find the paper useful.

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