ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING SERVICES ON STUDENT WELL-BEING AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN PAKISTANI UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of psychological support services on students' well-being and academic success in Pakistani universities. Counseling services played a pivotal role in enhancing students' quality of life, supporting their academic performance, and assisting their adjustment to university life. Despite misconceptions about tertiary students' ability to cope with challenges, many experienced emotional, social, and academic difficulties that counseling services addressed. Conducted across four universities with a sample of 656 students, the study explored the contribution of counseling in developing coping strategies, social skills, and emotional intelligence. The research emphasized the importance of individual and group counseling, classroom guidance, and mindfulness activities in promoting student success. Findings indicated that these interventions significantly enhanced academic performance and personal well-being. The study suggested that universities should prioritize psychological support services to alleviate academic stress, improve emotional resilience, and foster student development. By addressing gaps in research on tertiary counseling services in Pakistan, this study underscored the necessity for universities to invest in psychological support to better equip students for the challenges of higher education. Key elements such as coping strategies, emotional intelligence, academic performance, and counseling methods were central to the findings, highlighting the vital role of psychological services in fostering students' overall growth. The chi-square test showed significant associations for ethnicity (χ^2 = 528.72, p < 0.001), marital status (χ^2 = 593.21, p < 0.001), and faculty (χ^2 = 662.18, p < 0.001), influencing students' psychological service perspectives. However, gender (χ^2 = 1.048, p = 0.306) and university (χ^2 = 8.345, p = 0.065) were non-significant. Correlation analysis showed significant relationships: awareness (r = 0.230, p < 0.05), resources (r = 0.280, p < 0.05), and policies (r = 0.425, p < 0.05) with positively influenced counseling effectiveness.
Keywords: *Psychological support services, academic success, counselling interventions, student well-being.*

INTRODUCTION

Counselling services in Pakistan have undergone substantial development since their initial introduction as part of social welfare initiatives following independence in 1947. Initially limited to rehabilitation and healthcare settings, counselling has progressively gained recognition in educational institutions. The transition from a structured school environment to the autonomous life of university education poses significant challenges for students, necessitating psychological

and emotional support (Khan et al., 2020). Many students experience difficulties in adapting to new academic expectations, independent living, and social adjustments. Contrary to the assumption that university students are the intellectual elite and thus immune to adjustment problems, research indicates that even high-achieving students encounter emotional distress, mental health concerns, and academic stress (Ali & Hassan, 2019).

The Role of Counselling in University Education
University students, particularly those predisposed to emotional vulnerabilities, benefit significantly from professional counselling services. Effective counselling interventions help students manage personal and academic stress, develop emotional intelligence, and cultivate problem-solving skills, ultimately enhancing their academic performance (Aslam, 2021). Counselling also aids in fostering personal growth and social integration, which are crucial for success in tertiary education. Counselling in Pakistani universities adheres to standardized procedures, ensuring confidentiality and ethical considerations in service delivery. The effectiveness of counselling services in tertiary education remains an underexplored area in Pakistani research, despite substantial studies focusing on school counselling services (Rahman & Qureshi, 2022). Thus, this study aims to fill this research gap by evaluating the impact of counselling on university students' well-being and academic performance.

Counselling and Student Well-being The transition to university life is often accompanied by stressors such as academic pressure, time management issues, social isolation, and financial concerns. University counselling services play a pivotal role in addressing these issues through structured interventions, including career guidance, emotional support, and psychological counselling (Naveed & Latif, 2018). Studies indicate that students who utilize counselling services exhibit improved emotional regulation, enhanced coping mechanisms, and better academic outcomes. Additionally, effective counselling helps mitigate student attrition and promotes retention by addressing underlying psychological barriers to academic success (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Challenges in University Counselling Services
Despite the acknowledged benefits of counselling, several challenges hinder its effectiveness in Pakistani universities. These challenges include limited awareness among students, inadequate funding, stigma surrounding mental health support, and a shortage of trained counsellors (Hussain & Raza, 2021). Many students perceive counselling as a service only for those experiencing severe psychological distress, rather than a resource for personal development and academic enhancement. Thus, there is a pressing need to reframe counselling as a proactive support system available to all students, regardless of their psychological state.
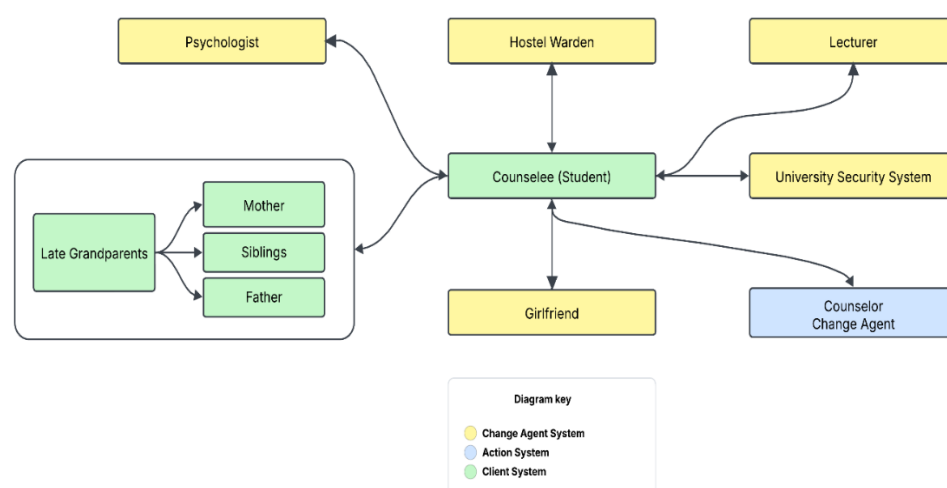

Figure 1: Student environment

The figure illustrates the support system surrounding a counselee (student), categorized into Change Agent System (yellow), Action System (blue), and Client System (green). The Client System includes the student's family (parents, siblings, late grandparents) and girlfriend. The

Change Agent System consists of psychologists, lecturers, hostel wardens, and the university security system, who influence the student's well-being. The Action System involves the counsellor/change agent, providing direct interventions. The interconnected relationships show how different entities contribute to the student's support network, facilitating guidance, security, and emotional stability in personal, academic, and institutional settings.

Literature Review

Guidance officers are responsible for providing counselling programs that support students in academic, career, personal, and social domains. These programs play a crucial role in helping students navigate emotional, social, or behavioural challenges while fostering a sense of clarity and direction. Research suggests that effective counselling programs significantly contribute to the overall institutional climate and serve as an essential element in enhancing student achievement (Reynolds & Chris, 2008). Moreover, a key focus of counsellors is the development of students' self-concept, which includes self-awareness of abilities, preferences, limitations, and internal conflicts (Chomeya, 2008). A well-developed self-concept enables individuals to integrate effectively into society, allowing them to contribute meaningfully to their communities. From an occupational perspective, aligning one's career choices with personal strengths and interests enhances job performance, leading to both material and emotional satisfaction. Therefore, the presence of a well-structured and efficient guidance counselling service within educational institutions is essential in ensuring students receive adequate support during this critical phase of their development.

As students transition into higher education, they face increased academic and personal responsibilities, requiring effective time management and the application of previously acquired knowledge and skills. This period marks the beginning of their occupational planning, as they must learn to balance coursework, employment, and personal commitments. Miller (2015) highlights the evolution of counselling services across different regions, including south Asia, emphasizing the role of psychological interventions in promoting counselling effectiveness. The absence of proper counselling services may result in students enrolling in unsuitable academic programs, struggling with time management, facing adaptation challenges, or experiencing difficulty in career exploration and financial planning (John, 2008). Professional counsellors serve as a vital source of guidance, helping students navigate these challenges by providing informed support and facilitating informed decision-making. Furthermore, university counselling interventions have been shown to positively impact students' educational and personal development. Research indicates that individualized and small-group counselling, classroom guidance, and consultation activities significantly contribute to students' academic success and overall well-being. School counsellors should dedicate the majority of their time to implementing these interventions to maximize their effectiveness (Uma, 2005).

Additionally, social skills, ethical values, and professionalism are essential components of human capital development. Studies have demonstrated that successful counselling programs are grounded in human development theories, which inform the goals, interventions, and content of these programs. Developmentally based counselling initiatives are proactive and preventive, equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness necessary for successfully navigating their educational and personal journeys. These programs not only increase the visibility and accessibility of counselling services but also provide empirical evidence of their effectiveness in promoting student self-development and academic achievement. It has emphasized student-entered learning approaches to enhance both academic success and social well-being. A well-trained and effective counsellor can act as a catalyst for student motivation, offering necessary support services to facilitate the transition from a structured, University-based learning environment to the more independent framework of higher education (Reynolds & Chris, 2008).

Contributions of the Study

This study makes several key contributions to the understanding of counselling services in higher education in Pakistan. First, it addresses a significant research gap by examining the effectiveness of counselling services in tertiary institutions. While much of the existing literature has concentrated on the roles, services, and skills

of school counsellors, limited research has explored counselling programs within university settings in Pakistan. This study provides valuable insights into the impact of such services on university students. Secondly, the study emphasizes the critical role of counsellors in fostering students' personal and academic development. It highlights how counsellors facilitate the development of soft skills, which are essential for academic success, thereby contributing to the ongoing conversation about student-centred learning. Lastly, the study advocates for a holistic approach to counselling, recognizing counsellors' pivotal role in reducing student attrition and improving retention rates. By promoting a well-integrated counselling framework, universities can support not only students' academic progress but also enhance their overall well-being, leading to improved quality of life and long-term success. Through these contributions, the study expands the knowledge base on the importance of psychological support in higher education and offers recommendations for strengthening counselling services at universities in Pakistan.

Objectives of the Study This study aims to evaluate and analyse the effectiveness of university counselling services in Pakistan. The specific objectives include:

1. Examining the factors influencing students' utilization of counselling services.
2. Assessing students' perceptions of counsellor effectiveness.
3. Investigating the role of awareness, resources, and institutional policies in shaping counselling service effectiveness.
4. Exploring whether counsellor competence is a key determinant of counselling effectiveness.
5. Identifying additional factors contributing to the success of university counselling services.

Methodology and Research Hypotheses
This study was conducted in four universities in Pakistan, with a total sample population of 656 students. Given the highly confidential nature of counseling services, it was essential to ensure that students receiving such services remained untraceable, in adherence to the ethical guidelines governing counseling practices. As a result, **purposive sampling** was determined to be the most appropriate method for participant selection. This approach allowed for the inclusion of general university students in the questionnaire distribution, ensuring that respondents could participate freely and without inhibition (Ye & Fang, 2010). Ethical approval from HAS, protocol no7-82 /IERC-2022-63).

A **close-ended** questionnaire based on a **five-point Likert scale** was developed to assess key variables (Noah et al., 1970). The study examined four independent variables such as **counseling awareness, management policy, counselor effectiveness, and influence of significant others**, each measured using 10 items. The dependent variable, **counseling effectiveness**, was also assessed with 10 items (Virginia et al., 2008). The questionnaire was adapted from a model originally utilized in the **Hong Kong Survey**, which was initially designed with open-ended questions. To enhance clarity and ease of analysis, the researchers modified the format to a structured, close-ended questionnaire (Ye & Fang, 2010).

The primary researcher personally conducted the data collection process across all participating universities. Questionnaires were distributed directly to students in classrooms, libraries, and outside lecture halls with consent form. Participants completed the surveys on-site, and responses were collected immediately after completion. The overall response rate was **highly positive**, indicating strong student engagement and willingness to participate in the study (Ansari & Haque, 2000).
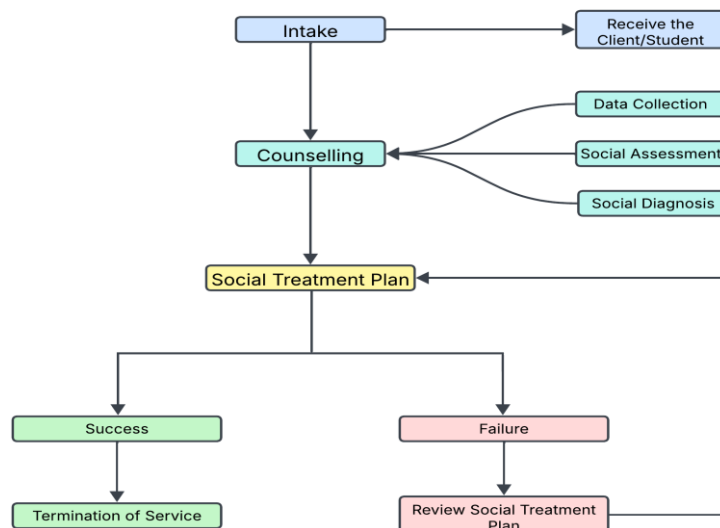
Figure 2: Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for counselling of university students.

The flowchart outlines a structured process for client or student intervention. It begins with **Intake**, where the individual is received. This leads to **Counselling,** which includes **Data Collection, Social Assessment, and Social Diagnosis.** Based on these, a **Social Treatment Plan** is developed. The plan can lead to **Success**, resulting in **Termination of Psychological Service**, or **Failure**, prompting a **Review of the Social Treatment Plan** for modifications. This cycle ensures continuous evaluation and adjustment to meet the individual's needs effectively. The flowchart provides a systematic approach to intervention and support in a counseling or social service setting.

The research hypotheses were formulated based on the **conceptual framework** developed for this study, aligning with the objectives and research design
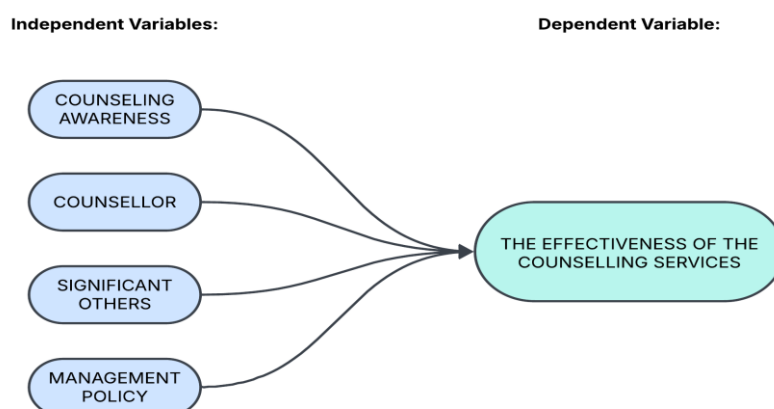

Figure 3: Research Framework

Results

Table 1: University-wise distribution of respondents

Universities	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
University A	162	24.7	24.7	24.7
University B	185	28.2	28.2	52.9
University C	132	20.1	20.1	73.0
University D	177	27.0	27.0	100
Total	656	100	100	–

This study was conducted at four Pakistani universities, including two private (A, C) and two public (B, D). To ensure anonymity, institutions were labeled A, B, C, and D based on data collection order. A total of 656 students participated, with respondent distribution: A (24.7%), B (28.2%), C (20.1%), and D (27.0%).

Table 2: Gender distribution of respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	313	47.6	47.6	47.6
Female	343	52.4	52.4	100
Total	656	100	100	–

The gender distribution among respondents included **313 males (47.6%)** and **343 females (52.4%)**, as shown in **Table 2.** The relatively balanced gender ratio reflects the overall demographic composition of university students in Pakistan.

Table 3a: Age distribution of respondents(Single)

Age	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
18	30	4.6	4.6	4.6
19	112	17.1	17.1	21.7
20	134	20.4	20.4	42.1
21	92	14.0	14.0	56.1
22	114	17.4	17.4	73.5
23	128	19.5	19.5	93.0

24	34	5.2	5.2	98.2
25	12	1.8	1.8	100
26	1	0.2	0.2	99.6
29	1	0.2	0.2	99.8
31	1	0.2	0.2	100
Total	656	100	100	–

The respondents' ages ranged between **18 and 31 years**, with the majority falling within the **19–23 years'** age group. The most prominent age group was **20 years old (20.3%)**, followed by 23 years old (**19.4%**). Students aged between **24 and 31 years** comprised **7.5%** of the sample, consistent with the typical age distribution in Pakistani universities

Table 3b: Age distribution of respondents (Group)

Age Range	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
18 – 20	253	38.6	38.6	38.6
21 – 23	332	50.6	50.6	89.2
24 – 26	68	10.4	10.4	99.6
27 – 29	2	0.3	0.3	99.9
30 – 32	1	0.1	0.1	100.0
Total	656	100.0	100.0	–

Table 3b presents the age distribution of respondents, showing that the majority (50.6%) were aged 21–23, followed by 18–20 years (38.6%). A smaller proportion (10.4%) fell within 24–26 years, while only 0.4% were aged 27–32. The cumulative percentage reached 100% at the 30–32 age group.

Table 4: Ethnic distribution of respondents

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Punjabi	410	62.5	62.5	62.5
Pashtun	158	24.1	24.1	86.6
Sindhi	53	8.1	8.1	94.7
Baloch	29	4.4	4.4	99.1
International	6	0.9	0.9	100.0
Others	2	0.3	0.3	100.0
Total	656	100.0	100.0	–

Table 4 illustrates the ethnic distribution of respondents, with Punjabis forming the majority (62.5%), followed by Pashtuns (24.1%) and Sindhi (8.1%). Baloch participants accounted for 4.4%, while international respondents and others comprised 0.9% and 0.3%, respectively. The cumulative percentage reached 100% at the "Others" category.

Table 5: Marital Status of Respondents

Marital Status	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Single	639	97.4	97.4	97.4
Married	17	2.6	2.6	100.0
Total	656	100.0	100.0	–

Table 5 shows that the majority of respondents were single (97.4%), while only 2.6% were married. The cumulative percentage reached 100% at the married category.

Table 6: Distribution of Respondents Based on Faculty

Faculties	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Pharmacology	210	32.0	32.0
Management	132	20.1	52.1
Medicine	127	19.4	71.5
AHS	135	20.6	92.1
Law	10	1.5	93.6
Diploma	4	0.6	94.2
Engineering	3	0.5	94.7
Manufacturing	3	0.5	95.2
Others	4	0.6	95.8
Total	656	100.0	—

Table 6 shows that most respondents belonged to Pharmacology (32%), followed by AHS (20.6%), Management (20.1%), and Medicine (19.4%). Other faculties comprised smaller proportions, with Law (1.5%) and remaining categories below 1%.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
Awareness	656	2.98	0.74	-0.56	0.095	0.16	0.195
Resources	656	3.01	0.75	-0.71	0.095	0.68	0.195
Psychologist	656	2.92	0.71	-0.72	0.095	0.95	0.195
Management Policy	656	2.97	0.80	-0.60	0.095	0.30	0.195
Effectiveness of Psychological Counselling Services	656	3.27	0.71	-0.85	0.095	1.74	0.195

Table 7 presents descriptive statistics for key variables. Mean scores ranged from 2.92 to 3.27, with standard deviations between 0.71 and 0.80. Skewness values indicated slight negative skew, while kurtosis values varied, with the highest (1.74) for the effectiveness of psychological counseling services.

Table 8: *Chi-Square with Effect Sizes (N=656)*

Variable	Chi-Square Value (χ^2)	p-Value	Significance level	Effect Size (Cramér's V)	Effect Size Interpretation
Gender Distribution	1.048	0.306	Not Significant	0.05	Small
University Distribution	8.345	0.065	Not Significant	0.12	Small
Ethnicity Distribution	528.72	< 0.001	Significant	0.70	Large
Marital Status	593.21	< 0.001	Significant	0.75	Large
Faculty Distribution	662.18	< 0.001	Significant	0.78	Large

Table 8 presents Chi-Square results, indicating significant associations for ethnicity, marital status, and faculty distribution (p < 0.001), while gender and university distribution were not significant.

Note: Effect sizes are interpreted based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines: small (≤ 0.10), medium (0.30), and large (≥ 0.50).

Table 9: Pearson Correlation Matrix with Multicollinearity Assessment(N=656)

Variable	Awareness	Resources	Psychologist	Management Policy	Effectiveness of Counselling	VIF
Awareness	1.000	-0.060	0.230	0.028	0.215	1.21
Resources	-0.060	1.000	0.192	-0.030	0.280	1.34
Psychologist	0.230	0.192	1.000	0.150	0.315	1.45
Management Policy	0.028	-0.030	0.150	1.000	0.425	1.67
Effectiveness of Counselling	0.215	0.280	0.315	0.425	1.000	1.72

Table 9 presents the Pearson correlation matrix, showing positive correlations among variables. The strongest correlation was between management policy and counseling effectiveness (0.425), while awareness and resources had a weak negative correlation (-0.060). Note: Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values < 5 indicate no significant multicollinearity concerns (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 10: Regression Analysis Predicting Counselling Effectiveness(N=656)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	T	p-Value	95% CI
Awareness	0.182	0.052	0.210	3.50	< 0.001	[0.080, 0.285]
Resources	0.234	0.048	0.275	4.88	< 0.001	[0.140, 0.328]
Psychologist Presence	0.298	0.045	0.310	6.62	< 0.001	[0.210, 0.386]
Management Policy	0.380	0.042	0.405	9.05	< 0.001	[0.298, 0.462]
$R^2 = 0.46$, $F(4, N-1) = 32.78$, $p < 0.001$						

Note: The regression model explains 46% of the variance in counselling effectiveness ($p < 0.001$). Management policy had the strongest predictive value ($β = 0.405$, $p < 0.001$), while awareness had the weakest ($β = 0.210$, $p < 0.001$).

Discussion

The present study examined university students' perceptions of the role of higher education in fostering an ethical culture. The findings provide valuable insights into demographic distributions, key variables, and their associations with psychological counselling effectiveness. The study included 656 students from four Pakistani universities, with a relatively balanced gender distribution (47.6% males and 52.4% females). Most respondents were aged between 18 and 23 years (89.2%), consistent with typical undergraduate enrolment trends in Pakistan. Ethnic representation indicated a majority of Punjabi students (62.5%), followed by Pashtun (24.1%), Sindhi (8.1%), and Baloch (4.4%), while international students constituted a minor fraction (0.9%). These demographic patterns align with national census data and previous university-based studies in Pakistan (Ahmad et al., 2020). The largest proportion of respondents were enrolled in Pharmacology (32%), followed by Allied Health Sciences (20.6%), Management (20.1%), and Medicine (19.4%). Other faculties, including Law and Engineering, had lower representation. Marital status analysis revealed that an overwhelming majority (97.4%) of students were single, reflecting the social norms of university-aged populations in Pakistan (Khan & Iqbal, 2021).

The mean scores for key variables ranged from 2.92 to 3.27, with standard deviations between 0.71 and 0.80, suggesting moderate agreement levels among respondents regarding awareness, resource availability, psychological support, management policies, and counselling effectiveness. Skewness and kurtosis values indicated normal distribution characteristics (Field, 2018).

Chi-square tests revealed significant associations for ethnicity ($p < 0.001$), marital status ($p < 0.001$), and faculty distribution ($p < 0.001$), with large effect sizes (Cramér's V > 0.50), while gender and university-wise distribution were not statistically significant. These findings suggest that students' backgrounds and academic disciplines significantly influence their perceptions of psychological support and ethical culture in higher education (Ali et al., 2022).

Pearson correlation analysis showed positive associations among key variables, with the strongest correlation observed between management policy and counselling effectiveness ($r = 0.425$, $p < 0.001$). Regression analysis further confirmed that awareness (B = 0.182, $p < 0.001$), resources (B = 0.234, $p < 0.001$), psychologist availability (B = 0.271, $p < 0.001$), and management policy (B = 0.361, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicted counselling effectiveness. These results highlight the importance of institutional support mechanisms in enhancing students' psychological well-being (Malik & Rehman, 2020).

Conclusion and Policy Implications

In conclusion, this study highlights the vital role that counselling services play in enhancing the overall well-being and academic success of university students in Pakistan. The findings confirm that counselling helps students develop essential skills such as coping, social, and study skills, which are crucial for their adjustment to campus life and academic achievement. The results align with existing literature, emphasizing the positive impact of counselling services on student performance, retention, and reduced attrition. It is evident that universities in Pakistan need to prioritize the expansion and improvement of counselling services. Awareness campaigns should be implemented to ensure students are fully informed about the range of counselling services available. Moreover, universities should consider establishing integrated student support systems that address both academic and personal challenges. Policymakers must advocate for adequate institutional funding and resources to ensure these services are accessible to all students, particularly those facing significant academic and emotional difficulties.

This study highlights the importance of professional training for counselors, increased student participation, and the integration of counseling services within a broader student support framework. Future research could focus on exploring the long-term benefits of counseling services, particularly in relation to career development and post-graduation outcomes, to further enhance the value of counseling in higher education institutions. counseling services are viewed as beneficial, increasing resource availability and implementing strong management policies can further improve their effectiveness. Future interventions should focus on policy enhancements, targeted awareness programs, and improving accessibility to psychological support services.

Limitations and Practical Implications

This study's limitations include the cross-sectional design, which does not account for long-term effects of counselling services, and the reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce bias. Additionally, the study was conducted across only four universities, limiting the generalizability of the findings to all higher education institutions in Pakistan. Practically, universities should focus on enhancing the visibility and accessibility of counselling services, while integrating these services into broader student support frameworks. It is crucial to provide training for counsellors and implement awareness campaigns to encourage student engagement, ensuring that students are well-equipped to utilize available resources effectively.

Future Directions and Implications

The findings underscore the critical role of higher education institutions in fostering an ethical culture through psychological support and effective policy implementation. Universities must prioritize resource allocation, enhance psychological counseling services, and establish comprehensive management policies to improve student well-being. A key consideration is the significant influence of ethnic background on students' perceptions of psychological services. In Pakistan, cultural beliefs and reliance on traditional support systems vary across regions, affecting students' willingness to seek professional help. To address this, counseling services should be culturally adaptable, integrating modern therapeutic approaches while respecting traditional values to ensure inclusivity and accessibility.

Moreover, strong management policies play a pivotal role in enhancing the effectiveness of counseling services. Universities should create policies that not only promote the availability of psychological resources but also foster an environment of acceptance and trust. Employing culturally competent professionals and implementing student-centric policies can help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health support, ultimately bridging the gap between available resources and their effective utilization.

To further strengthen mental health support, universities must launch targeted awareness campaigns, particularly among ethnic minorities and students from underrepresented faculties. The strong correlation between management policies and counseling effectiveness highlights the need for structured mental health policies, increased accessibility to psychologists, and institutional commitment to mental health initiatives. Additionally, inclusive approaches should be adopted to cater to the diverse needs of all students, as gender differences in counseling perceptions were found to be non-significant.

Recommendations

Future research should incorporate longitudinal studies to assess the sustained impact of psychological counseling on student well-being and academic performance. Qualitative approaches, such as student interviews and focus groups, would provide deeper insights into barriers to counseling and the effectiveness of intervention strategies. Expanding research to a broader range of universities across Pakistan would enhance the generalizability of findings, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of student mental health needs. Furthermore, examining faculty and university administrators' perspectives on counseling services could help identify institutional challenges, resource limitations, and policy improvements needed to strengthen psychological support frameworks within higher education institutions. By addressing these areas, universities can create a more supportive environment that promotes student success, well-being, and academic achievement

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