

Counselling Centers in Universities in Nigeria: Problems and Possible Solutions

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| Article History | Abstract |
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| Original Research Article | <p><i>University counselling centers in Nigeria play a critical role in safeguarding student wellbeing, academic success, and institutional climate. Yet, many centers struggle with chronic underfunding, inadequate staffing, limited facilities, low awareness and stigma, weak policy implementation, and insufficient data systems. Drawing on national policy documents, institutional webpages, and empirical studies on Nigerian undergraduates' mental health, this paper synthesizes the major problems confronting university counselling services and proposes practical, context-sensitive solutions. Recommendations include protected budget lines; scale-up of qualified personnel and continuous professional development; clear service models with stepped-care and referral pathways; demand-creation to tackle stigma; digital/online counselling to extend reach; robust data and quality assurance; and stronger enforcement of regulatory expectations by the National Universities Commission (NUC). Implemented together, these measures can move counselling from a reactive, peripheral service to a core pillar of student success and campus safety.</i></p> <p>Keywords: University Counselling, Student Mental Health, Guidance and Counselling, Higher Education Policy, National Universities Commission</p> |
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1. Introduction

Guidance and Counseling Units in tertiary institutions are established to provide a range of support services including individual counseling, group counseling, seminar presentations, workshops, and online-based guidance for both students and staff. Although different institutions may refer to these units by different names, they generally deliver similar core services (Adegoyega, Asemota & Edinoh, 2025). Across the globe, counselling centers have increasingly become indispensable in higher education institutions as they address diverse psychological, emotional, and social challenges that affect students' academic success and overall well-being. These centers play a critical role in helping students cope with academic stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, interpersonal conflicts, violence, and adjustment-related difficulties (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Gallagher, 2014). Universities in Nigeria are not exempt from these realities. Empirical studies reveal that Nigerian undergraduates exhibit significant symptoms of depression and anxiety,

highlighting the urgent need for accessible and effective counselling services (Adewuya et al., 2006; Omigbodun et al., 2008). For instance, a study at the University of Benin reported a notable prevalence of depressive symptoms among medical students, with risk factors that require structured institutional support responses (Peltzer, Pengpid, & Olowu, 2013). Similarly, research conducted among health-science students and broader university cohorts across Nigeria indicates comparable burdens of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and substance use (Okonkwo, 2015; Oladipo & Balogun, 2017; Annals of Health Research, 2019).

The importance of counselling services in higher education has long been recognized in Nigeria's policy framework. The National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2013) identifies guidance and counselling as an integral component of school services designed to enhance student development, while the National Universities Commission (NUC) emphasizes the

responsibility of universities to provide adequate student welfare, safety, and psychosocial support (NUC, 2014). International organizations such as UNESCO (2017) and the World Health Organization (2020) also emphasize the centrality of mental health support in promoting quality education and sustainable development. Despite these policy acknowledgements, the implementation of counselling services across Nigerian universities remains uneven. Many counselling units suffer from underfunding, inadequate staffing, lack of professional training, poor awareness among students, and limited institutional prioritization (Egbule, 2006; Egbochuku, 2008; Nwoye, 2015). These structural weaknesses reduce the capacity of counselling centres to effectively address the growing psychosocial needs of the student population.

Given the rising incidence of mental health challenges among university students and the constraints facing counselling centers in Nigeria, there is an urgent need to critically evaluate the problems hindering their effectiveness. This paper, therefore, explores the principal challenges confronting counselling centers in Nigerian universities, including infrastructural, administrative, cultural, and policy-related limitations. It also proposes feasible and contextually relevant solutions that can enhance the functionality of counselling units, thereby promoting student well-being, academic achievement, and national development.

2. Policy and Institutional Context

The policy and institutional frameworks guiding counselling services in Nigerian universities are rooted in the mandates of the Federal Ministry of Education and the regulatory oversight of the National Universities Commission (NUC). The *National Policy on Education* (NPE), particularly in its 2013 and 2014 revisions, emphasizes the centrality of guidance and counselling in achieving the broader goals of education (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2013). The NPE positions counselling as vital for students' career development, educational advancement, and personal-social wellbeing. According to Egbochuku (2008), counselling in higher education is not only about providing advice but also about facilitating holistic student development, equipping learners with problem-solving and coping skills essential for academic and personal success.

The NUC, as the coordinating body for university education in Nigeria, has consistently articulated the importance of counselling and other student support services within its regulatory guidelines. The Commission outlines counselling as part of institutional obligations to promote student welfare, safety, and development (National Universities Commission [NUC], 2014). Similarly, Egbule

(2006) highlights that effective counselling units are indispensable to the mission of universities, as they help address adjustment difficulties, mental health concerns, and decision-making challenges faced by undergraduates.

At the institutional level, many universities have made efforts to embed counselling within their student affairs framework. Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), for example, established the Counselling and Human Development Centre to provide professional services in career guidance, psychosocial adjustment, and academic mentoring (Ahmadu Bello University, 2020). This reflects international best practices, where counselling centers are designed to be student-centered hubs for mental health and wellbeing support World Health Organization (WHO, 2020).

Despite these policy and institutional provisions, implementation across universities remains inconsistent. Scholars have noted challenges such as inadequate funding, insufficient professional counsellors, and weak institutional commitment, which undermine the effectiveness of counselling centers (Nwoye, 2015; Oladipo & Balogun, 2017). Consequently, while the policy framework provides a clear mandate for counselling in Nigerian universities, the gap between policy intent and institutional realities continues to pose a major barrier to effective service delivery.

3.0 Problems Facing University Counselling Centers

3.1 Chronic Underfunding and Resource Constraints

A consistent theme in the literature is that chronic underfunding remains a root cause of ineffective counselling service delivery in Nigerian universities. Poor funding constrains the availability of adequate office space, testing materials, information systems, and outreach activities, thereby undermining service quality (Okolie & Uzochukwu, 2021; Adeyemi, 2020). Limited budgetary allocation not only reduces the functionality of counselling centres but also erodes their visibility and relevance within the university system.

3.2 Inadequate and Maldistributed Personnel

Another major challenge relates to personnel shortages and maldistribution. Studies report that many universities face high student-to-counsellor ratios due to the inadequate number of professionally trained counsellors (Egwunyenga, 2019; Musa & Dauda, 2021). In addition, opportunities for in-service training and professional development remain limited, which contributes to counsellor role overload. The national shortage of mental health professionals further intensifies referral bottlenecks, as students with complex psychological conditions cannot

easily access psychiatric care (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

3.3 Low Awareness, Stigma, and Misconceptions

Stigma around mental health continues to undermine help-seeking behavior among university students. Many students hold misconceptions about counselling, doubting its efficacy or perceiving it as a service only for those with severe mental illness (Ogunlade & Adebayo, 2019; Adepoju, 2021). This stigma leads to the underutilization of counselling services, even where they are available on campus (Onyeizugbo, 2020).

3.4 Weak Integration and Fragmented Care Pathways

Weak integration between counselling centers and other university structures further constrains service delivery. Counselling units are often isolated from academic departments, halls of residence, and campus health clinics, which hampers crisis response, case management, and external referral processes (Arowolo, 2018). Review studies emphasize that the lack of standardized delivery models and irregular service schedules diminish the impact of these centers (Oladipo, 2020).

3.5 Infrastructure and Privacy Limitations

Counselling centers also face infrastructural challenges, particularly inadequate space and non-soundproof rooms that compromise confidentiality. The lack of secure and confidential record-keeping systems weakens student trust and undermines the professional standards of counselling practice (Oladunjoye & Okechukwu, 2019; Egwunyenga, 2019).

3.6 Gaps in Digital Capacity

Although digital counselling offers opportunities for expanding reach and flexibility, several barriers remain. Studies of early digital adoption in Nigerian universities highlight challenges such as limited staff digital readiness, infrastructural deficits, and poorly designed online platforms, all of which hinder the effective implementation of hybrid or online counselling models (Adesina, 2021; Yusuf & Ojo, 2020).

3.7 Weak Data, Monitoring, and Quality Assurance

Finally, weak data systems and limited quality assurance mechanisms present persistent problems. Few counselling centers maintain robust records on caseloads, wait times, presenting issues, or outcomes, making it difficult to engage in evidence-based planning or advocate for more funding (Nwankwo & Ogu, 2019). The lack of utilization and performance metrics reduces accountability and undermines continuous service improvement.

4. Why Investment Is Urgent: The Student Mental-Health Burden

The growing burden of mental health challenges among university students underscores the urgency of investing in counselling centers across Nigerian campuses. Multiple empirical studies reveal high prevalence rates of depression, anxiety, and stress among students, particularly in disciplines such as medicine, pharmacy, nursing, and the sciences, where academic intensity and professional pressures are especially pronounced. For example, surveys conducted in several universities have reported that a significant proportion of students exhibit clinically relevant symptoms of anxiety and depression, with female students often demonstrating higher vulnerability than their male counterparts.

These findings align with global patterns that identify university students as a high-risk population for mental health disorders. However, in Nigeria, the situation is compounded by systemic limitations in the national mental-health infrastructure. The country's mental-health workforce remains severely inadequate when compared to global standards, with psychiatrist-to-patient and psychologist-to-patient ratios far below the World Health Organization's recommended levels. This shortage amplifies the need for university counselling centers to serve as first responders—providing early screening, preventive interventions, and supportive care before problems escalate into chronic or crisis situations.

Furthermore, experts argue that preventive and stepped-care approaches—where interventions are provided in graduated levels according to the severity of need—are particularly critical in the Nigerian higher-education context. Well-resourced counselling centers can help students develop coping skills, resilience, and adaptive strategies, while also ensuring timely referral pathways to specialized care for severe cases. Without such investments, many students risk falling through the cracks, resulting in diminished academic performance, higher dropout rates, and long-term health complications that extend beyond university life.

Ultimately, strengthening university counselling centers is not only a welfare issue but also an educational and economic priority. Healthy students are better positioned to succeed academically, contribute meaningfully to the workforce, and drive national development. For this reason, investment in student mental health must be considered a core component of Nigeria's higher education strategy.

5. Possible Solutions to the Problems of University Counselling Centers: A Practical Agenda for Strengthening University Counselling

5.1 Establish Protected Budget Lines and Minimum Service Standards

A key starting point is the creation of sustainable and protected budgetary allocations for counselling services. Ring-fenced funding within university budgets would ensure the provision of counselling infrastructure, standardized psychological assessment tools, case-management systems, and outreach programmes. Beyond funding, regulatory enforcement is necessary. The National Universities Commission (NUC), through its coordinating and supervisory mandate, can operationalize minimum service standards for counselling, including privacy requirements, crisis coverage protocols, data reporting obligations, and stipulated service hours. Such measures would elevate counselling from a peripheral service to an essential student-support function within university systems.

5.2 Expand and Professionalize the Workforce

Addressing personnel shortages requires a deliberate investment in recruitment, retention, and professional development. Universities must employ adequate numbers of qualified counsellors, supported by clearly defined role profiles that prevent administrative overload and ensure focus on core counselling tasks. Furthermore, capacity building through continuous professional development should be institutionalized, with emphasis on brief therapeutic interventions, suicide risk assessment, trauma-informed counselling, and effective referral management. To compensate for Nigeria's national mental-health workforce gaps, universities should also establish formal referral partnerships with nearby psychiatric and psychological services. Such collaborations create functional care pathways for students whose needs extend beyond the scope of on-campus services.

5.3 Adopt a Stepped-Care Service Model

Given the constraints in workforce and funding, a stepped-care model offers a practical framework for optimizing service delivery. This model allows students to be triaged into the least intensive but effective level of care, with escalation when necessary. Counselling centers can integrate group workshops on study skills, stress management, and career guidance as first-line interventions, while offering brief individual therapy for moderate concerns and fast-track crisis protocols in partnership with campus health clinics. By diversifying intervention levels, universities can efficiently distribute resources while addressing a broad spectrum of student needs.

5.4 Mainstream Demand-Creation and Anti-Stigma Activities

Low awareness and stigma remain major barriers to service utilization. To address this, counselling centers should implement semester-long campaigns in collaboration with

student unions, faculty associations, and campus media platforms. Psychoeducation should also be embedded into orientation programmes to normalize counselling as part of student life. Peer-helper initiatives can further serve as navigators, connecting hesitant students to professional services. Importantly, these efforts must directly confront and debunk misconceptions about counselling effectiveness, which have been documented across Nigerian campuses.

5.5 Build Hybrid (Digital + In-Person) Counselling

The increasing adoption of digital technologies presents an opportunity to expand access. Universities can complement in-person sessions with secure digital platforms offering appointment booking, confidential text/voice check-ins, and virtual counselling sessions. Such hybrid models are especially relevant for commuter and part-time students or those based off-campus. Lessons from early Nigerian online-counselling pilots highlight the importance of staff readiness, reliable infrastructure, and user-centered design in making digital platforms effective and trustworthy.

5.6 Improve Infrastructure and Confidentiality

Infrastructure must reflect professional standards of counselling practice. Dedicated, soundproof rooms should be provided to guarantee confidentiality, while compliant record-keeping systems are necessary to secure student data and foster trust. Nigerian review studies consistently emphasize that infrastructural gaps—particularly inadequate facilities and poor confidentiality—discourage students from seeking support. Upgrading facilities is therefore central to strengthening counselling credibility.

5.7 Institutionalize Data, Monitoring, and Quality Assurance

Effective counselling centers require robust systems for monitoring service delivery. Core indicators such as student wait times, caseload volumes, presenting problems, session outcomes, and referral frequencies should be tracked systematically and reported to the university Senate or Student Affairs division each semester. Such data would strengthen advocacy for funding, support evidence-based staffing requests, and guide targeted outreach to high-risk faculties or departments. Monitoring also creates a framework for continuous improvement and accountability.

5.8 Strengthen Governance and Policy Enforcement

Finally, governance structures must reinforce counselling as an indispensable part of university life. University statutes and Student Affairs regulations should explicitly align with the expectations of the National Policy on Education (NPE) and NUC welfare guidelines. Counselling should be recognized as central to student safety, anti-cultism strategies, retention initiatives, and overall

academic productivity. Institutions can also learn from established examples, such as the counselling centre at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), which offers a visible and structured model for integrating counselling into the broader student welfare system. Replicating such models would standardize counselling services nationally and improve credibility across the sector.

6. Conclusion

The evidence reviewed highlights a convergence of rising student mental-health needs and persistent service constraints in Nigerian universities. Although the policy foundation for counselling is well articulated through the National Policy on Education and reinforced by the supervisory mandate of the National Universities Commission (NUC), significant gaps remain between policy and practice. Chronic underfunding, inadequate staffing, weak integration, low awareness, and infrastructural deficits continue to limit the effectiveness of counselling centers.

However, these challenges are not insurmountable. With prioritized investment and protected budget allocations, universities can reposition counselling centers as essential student-support structures. Developing a skilled workforce, introducing stepped-care service models, embedding anti-stigma campaigns, leveraging digital innovations, and institutionalizing quality assurance mechanisms are critical reforms needed to align services with global best practices while adapting to the Nigerian context. Furthermore, stronger governance and policy enforcement—anchored in active NUC oversight—will ensure that counselling is recognized as central to student wellbeing, retention, and academic success.

Ultimately, transforming counselling centers from peripheral units into high-impact engines of student success is both an educational and developmental imperative. Universities that invest in robust counselling infrastructure are not only addressing immediate student welfare but also laying the groundwork for a healthier, more resilient, and more productive future workforce.

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