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The Effectiveness of Counselling Services on Academic Performance of Undergraduate Students in Selected Universities in Kenya

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Abstract:

Inadequate uptake of counseling services is considered as a major factor hindering high academic performance among undergraduate students in universities in Kenya. A study of the effectiveness of counseling services on academic performance of undergraduate students in selected universities in Kenya was undertaken with a sample size of 104 first year medical students as respondents. A quasi-experimental design was used. The study revealed that students who seek counselling services perform academically better than those who do not as determined by two-way ANOVA ($F(1,96) = 4.441, p = .038$). Counselling facilitated acquisition of problem-solving and study skills including time management that enabled the students to do well in their studies. Implications of these findings and recommendations for further research are discussed.

Keywords: *Effective counseling services, academic performance, selected universities in Kenya, undergraduate students*

1. Introduction

Academic performance among students in university has been a focus of considerable research. Much of these studies attribute poor performance to financial issues, emotional adjustment, grade frustration, student bereavement, aspects of college experience, and institutional environment. This study examines how counselling could mitigate these challenges in order to enhance academic performance.

A study in USA by Odes, Michelson, Locke, Oslon, & Lee, (2009) examined the relationship between counselling experience and college academic performance. In a sample of 10,009 university freshmen and transfer of students during 2004 it was established that the relationship between counselling experience and academic outcome was statistically significant. However, counselling experience was not related to academic performance when controlling for precollege academic performance (i.e., high school GPA, and verbal and math SAT scores). This would imply that it is more of intellectual ability than psychological resources that are of importance in academic performance. This is in contradiction with findings of a study conducted by Kolo, Binti, Jafaar and Ahmad (2017), who found factors such as learners attitude towards lecturers, and students'-lecturers' interaction the main factors that influence academic performance. The findings are therefore equivocal suggesting need for further research on the relationship between counselling and academic performance.

In a longitudinal study in USA investigating the role of skills learning support on first generation university students' self-regulation, motivation, and academic achievement involving 876 students, Wibrowski, Mathews and Kitsantas (2016) found that students who enrolled in a skills learning support programme had higher academic achievement when compared with students who were not enrolled in the programme. The study however, does not state clearly if the academic support services mainly focussed on counselling. In addition it appears that there were combinations of services offered to support the students' academic performance. Therefore, although counselling falls in support service within the university settings, there was need to establish the efficacy of counselling on academic performance. This is because counselling has been described as a process that enables the clients to understand their world and develop skills and knowledge to address day-to-day issues (McLeod, 2003). The focus of a student life in the university is expected to be on academic. Therefore there was need to establish in what ways counselling facilitates academic performance.

In a study investigating the decline in student resilience in university students in USA, Gray (2015) found that students are increasingly considering poor grades as a reason to complain other than as a reason to study more and they end up bringing their emotional disturbances to their lecturers instead of seeking counselling help. In a related study in Australia on resilience attributes among university students, it was found that there is decreasing resilience among

students studying in universities across the world (McGillivray & Pidgeon, 2015). The studies however do not explain the strategies that were put in place to help the students appreciate counselling services. The self-determination theory that informed this study stresses on the importance of personal agency in the healing process (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Nelson-Jones, 2011). In addition counselling is voluntary service. This has the implication that the students need to be proactive in seeking counselling service. This is only possible if the students are aware of the importance of counselling and the availability of the services. However, the study does not explain whether the students were aware of the service. It is possible that the services could exist but students lack the information of the service. Therefore, there was need to empirically establish the status of the services at the university, hence this study.

In Australia, Broadbent (2017) compared online and blended university learner's self-regulated learning strategies and their subsequent academic performance. He postulated that time management skills gave correct predictions on grades realized after exams demonstrating the influence time management has on academic performance among students. In a related study in Saudi Arabia, Aliwagait, Shahzad and Alim (2015), while investigating the impact of social media on academic performance, found that students' poor time management skills negatively affected their studies resulting in poor academic performance. It is through counselling that students learn to manage their time well while in college. Therefore, the mastery of time management skills can be enhanced through effective counselling services. In India first year students who went through time management counselling showed a significant increase in their average marks (Renuka, Devaki, Madhavan & Saikumar, 2013). A similar study in Malaysia by Thuryrajah, Ahmed and Jeyakumar (2017) found that counselling interventions in four universities led to direct student academic improvement as a result of good time management. Although many universities in Kenya have counselling services, studies that link counselling services to effective time management are scarce. Kenya university students expose culture that significantly differs from the Asian perspective. Hence time being a cultural concept for example, Nunez and Cooperrider, (2013) may be interpreted differently from one culture to the other. For example, according to the duo, time concepts such as duration and sequence belong to the realm of high-level cognition, which is mediated by language and culture. This has the implication that the concept of time and time management practices among university students in Kenya may significantly differ from those from the Asian cultures. Therefore, it was important establish if counselling from a Kenyan perspective would inspire similar outcome. In addition the main focus of counselling services in the universities in Kenya remains unclear. There was therefore need to empirically establish the effect of counselling on academic performance

Another related study in the USA that focused on how psycho-social factors affect the success of students in community colleges, Fong, Davis, Kim, Kim, Marriott and Kim (2017) found that psycho-social factors (self-perceptions, self-regulation, anxiety, attributions and motivation) play a meaningful role in determining students' persistence and academic success in college. Counselling services can effectively intervene in motivating students to perform better when the factors influencing their performance are known such as psychosocial, cognitive and demographic issues. A study investigating the relationship between undergraduate student counselling and successful degree completion in U.K., Rickinson (1998) found that after counselling, students feel better, able to deal with their problems and as a result improve their academic performance.

A similar study in Nigeria on influence of psychosocial factors on students' academic performance among college students, Kolo, Jaafar, and Ahmad (2017) found that among psychosocial factors which predict academic performance, attitude and interaction emerged as the most reliable predictors of academic performance unlike students' self-efficacy. These studies collectively point out that students benefit emotionally from counselling services and are able to shape attitudes and improve interaction in the university and as a result their academic performance is improved. However the studies remain limited in explaining the effectiveness of counselling services in address psychosocial issues to affect desired academic performance. The current study sought to establish if counselling can facilitate development of personal resources to empower students with skills and knowledge to address the psychosocial issues that interfere with their academic learning. This is because many studies reported are more general and lack specific focus of the core business at the university which is academic performance.

In South Africa, much of the research in counselling in universities has been based on how counselling can boost academic performance, identifying students at risk of dropping out due to poor performance and improving study techniques. For instance, in a study on psycho-social factors and academic performance among African women students at a predominantly white university in South Africa, Malefo (2000) found that psychosocial issues based on historical background of students determined their academic performance. These psycho-social issues include social relationships, and they play a key role in students' academic performance while in class which can be addressed through counselling. The current study explored the effect of counselling on academic performance regardless of psychosocial issues based on historical background of students.

In a related study in Ethiopia, Mersha, Bishaw and Tegegne (2013) found that personal issues and previous academic backgrounds cause academic performance of students in university. The study noted that students improved their academic performance after counselling intervention that targeted their personal issues. This study looked at the effect of active psycho-education programme on academic performance unlike general counselling.

In Kenya, a study conducted in Egerton university involving 357 students, 40 students peer counsellors, 2 student counsellors and 1 dean of students on selected factors influencing social and academic adjustment of undergraduate students of Egerton University, Kyalo and Chumba (2011) found out that counselling students on management of interpersonal relationships and positive attitude toward academic programs promote academic adjustment rate. Management of interpersonal relationships and positive attitude toward academic programs are a part of psycho-

education and therefore they cannot provide a broader understanding in on how counseling can enhance academic performance.

In a study carried out among 9 college administrators and 391 students on the influence of drug abuse on students' academic performance in public universities in Uasin-Gishu County in Kenya, Tuwei (2014) found that addiction to drug and alcohol use lead to lower academic performance, increased truancy and expulsion from school. The study aimed to establish whether there is a gap that counselling can plug in order to lower consumption of drugs and alcohol in order to boost academic performance, truancy and minimize expulsions from universities. Since psycho-education counselling equips students with the knowledge of drug and drug abuse, short and long term effects of drug, this study aimed to find out how effective psycho-education knowledge enhance academic performance.

2. Methods and Procedures

The study employed a triangulation embedded approach. A triangulation embedded approach is a mixed approach in research where one data set such as qualitative data plays a secondary supportive role in a study based primarily on the other data set such as quantitative (Creswell, 2014). In this study, quantitative data was drawn from the quasi-experiment in which the group treated with psycho-education played the primary role of informing this study. The quasi experiment was mainly an independent group design in which students selected to participate in the study were divided into two groups, one being the experimental group while the other was the control group. The participants were randomly assigned to either the control or to the experimental group. The data from observation in the performance of the two groups provided the qualitative data. The qualitative data was obtained through phenomenological experiences. The students shared their experiences through focus group discussion that played the secondary supportive role in the data collection. Triangulation embedded approach was selected because of its capacity to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data that builds the strengths of different methods used in data collection while neutralizing their weaknesses. In addition the approach allowed the researcher to increase the sample sizes which was valuable for enhancing external validity.

This study was carried out in two public universities in Kenya. This is because public universities have been a prototype of higher education long before the establishment of private universities in Kenya. They have larger classes where students are enrolled from different social cultural and economic backgrounds and are in endless effort to sustain their operations in endeavour to perform well academically and graduate within the stipulated period of their course. Students in the selected universities therefore offered a fertile environment to research on the effectiveness of counselling services on academic performance in universities in Kenya.

3. Results

Two groups comprising of an experimental group and a control group were used. The end of first-semester results for students in the two groups were presumed to be pre-test results while end of semester two results were presumed to be post-test results. The differences occasioned by comparing the two tests formed the basis of academic performance which was either high or low. The control group engaged in normal academic activities but their performance was closely monitored. The experimental group was taken through twelve sessions of psycho-education during their first year second semester. Students in the experimental group were taken through 12 sessions on study skills namely; reading skills, problem solving, creative thinking, decision making skills, time management, stress management, motivation, and attitude. These skills were important in helping students solve personal issues that affect their studies and be able to focus on their studies hence improving their academic performance.

On the other hand the students in the control group were going through the normal schooling, attending classes with the students from experimental group and were being monitored on their academic performance without them knowing for twelve weeks. Students from the two groups were allowed to sit for the end of semester two examinations and their academic performance was measured by finding the difference in marks scored in semester one examinations and semester two examinations. The findings are presented in Table 1.

		Performance index		Total	
		Improved Academic Performance	Unimproved Academic Performance		
Student group	Experimental Group	Count	33	15	48
		% within Student group	68.8%	31.2%	100.0%
	Control Group	Count	24	26	50
		% within Student group	48.0%	52.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	57	41	98
		% within Student group	58.2%	41.8%	100.0%

Table 1: Student Group and Academic Performance

Table 1 shows that within the experimental group (students treated to psycho-education counselling services), 68.8% had improved academic performance and 31.2% had a drop in their academic performance. From the table, 48% within the control group had improved academic performance and 52% had a drop in their academic performance. This

finding shows that psycho-education is effective because students who went through the programme improved in academic performance than students in the control group. Results are presented in Figure 1.

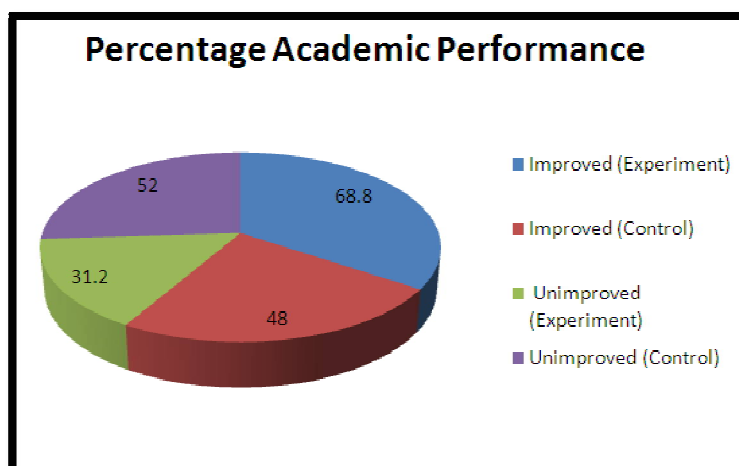


Figure 1: Academic Performance

The study found that psycho education played an important role in helping students to improve academic performance. However, there was need to test if the academic differences between the two groups was statistically significant. A two way ANOVA was used to test whether there is a statistically significant relationship between counselling services and academic performance. Results are represented in Table 2.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.083	1	1.083	4.441	.038
Within Groups	23.407	96	.244		
Total	24.490	97			

Table 2: ANOVA for Counselling Services and Academic Performance

$N = 100$; Group Df = 1; Sample Size Df = 96; $\alpha = .05$; $F = 4.441$; $P = .038$; Critical $F = 3.94$

Table 2 shows that the calculated $F(1,96) = 4.441$, at $p = .038$ is greater than critical $F(1, 96) = 3.94$. Therefore, the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between counselling services and academic performance of undergraduate students in universities in Kenya is rejected. The test concludes that counselling services influence academic performance and has proven that students who underwent psycho-education counselling in this study improved in their academic performance than those who did not participated in the psycho-education programme

This finding is consistent with a the study in USA that examined the contribution of counselling intervention in college academic performance and found that there was a statistically significant relationship between the two in that students who sought counselling performed academically better than those who did not (Odes, Michelson, Locke, Oslon & Lee, 2009). This finding shows that students can be assisted through psycho-education. Students acquired skills that helped them to have a positive attitude towards studying, time management, motivation, problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and stress management which enabled them to have concentration on studies leading to improved academic performance. McGillivray and Pidgeon (2015) found that decreasing resilience among university students in Australia was contributing to poor grades and students who sought counselling improved their grades.

Counselling services are effective in triggering students' motivation to work harder in their studies because they enable the students become aware of factors which distract them from their studies more so psychosocial, cognitive and demographic issues (Kyalo & Chumba, 2011). The psycho-education programme in this study further enhanced students' social and academic adjustment in a new environment in the university through study skills and relationship skills. Kyalo and Chumba (2011) found that students who sought counselling services on how to manage interpersonal relationships and how to acquire a positive attitude towards academic programme ended up performing better in their studies than those who did not because they were able to acquire adjustment skills to personal issues and to relate with their peers and faculty in a more healthy way. Accordingly, counselling helps in easing personal difficulties thereby facilitating adjustment (Renuka, Devaki, Madhavan & Saikumar, 2013).

From a focused group discussion with student participants, three themes emerged in regard to students' needs: psychosocial issues, time management and choice of career programme.

The first theme to emerge from the focus group discussion was relationship issues. The participants were in agreement that they have social issues that interfere with their studies. Most of these issues revolve around relationships. A participant remarked the following:

".... I never thought I will get mixed up in relationship issues...through the psycho-education programme I have realised that I must focus more on my studies than friends...." [Female student]

As can be seen from the quote, there are many factors that can interfere with academic performance. Issues of relationship can derail students from concentration on their studies. In the developmental theories, students are at the stage of young adults in which both career and relationship are important milestones. Therefore their attention and concentration could be more on relationships than academic affairs. This remark is in agreement with findings in South Africa where Malefo (2000) found that psycho-social issues based on the historical background of students such as romantic relationships and family issues influence their concentration in class during learning. For instance, a student said:

"...my boyfriend was employed and I became pregnant but when I went to visit him I found he had a wife and two children...I got downcast and wanted to abort the pregnancy...I became very confused and my grades dropped and I had problems with my parents, I suffered low self-esteem..." [Female student] Another student participant narrated how her friend got pregnant: "...she continued but now she left...took a study leave...she has not come back yet...she said she will come back..." [Female student]

In this finding, students who are involved in romantic relationships have mixed emotions such as anger, sadness, and at times feelings of joy, and excitement among others which end up taking much of their time and therefore they cannot adequately concentrate in their studies. Psycho-education programme goals are expected to help students address issues that arise from such imbalanced emotions and develop coping skills to help them improve their academic performance.

The second theme to emerge was time management. Effective time management enhances academic performance. Students who have poor time management skills end up performing poorly in academics because they end procrastinating and not setting smart goals while others find life in the university robust thus making them loose track of time. Majority of students who seek counselling want to know how to manage their time well and gain focus on their studies. They want to know how to balance time between non-academic and academic activities. Their conceptualization of time and activities is lost and this leads to the last minute rush resulting to poor performance. Psycho-education programme helped the students gain skills on time-management for better academic performance. As noted by a participant:

"... most of the time you feel so pressurized... feel like you still have a lot to do and yet you have very little time..." [Male student]

As per Aliwagait, *et al* (2014) students' poor time management skills negatively affect academic performance and therefore if students misuse their time while in college, their grades may not be good as found out by Broadbent (2017) that time management skills gives correct predictions on grades realised after exams. The main challenge to academic performance is poor time management by the students. They end up spending most of their time in non-academic activities such as hanging out with friends. They only come to realise that there is not much time left when confronted with continuous assessment tests and end of semester examinations. Therefore, the little time left for academic activities such as revision, and discussion groups cannot be enough to enable some of these students perform well academically.

This finding reinforces Olowookere, *et al* (2015) who found that time management practices influence students' character development such as idleness, laziness, which in turn determines academic performance. A student said:

"...you need to set goals ...you take it step by step and form a pattern on how to manage time and do things...and you generate a timetable...find out what works for you...find students for study group...you help others and they help you...if you fail to belong to a study group in first year, you will have problems....those who read widely release information and if you don't seem to follow or you make a mistake you feel left out or like you are in the wrong group of more focused students...if you don't understand, some will really take time and explain to you...first year is too much and time management is of great essence.." [Female student]

Students who are able to set realistic goals perform better in their academic work because they are able to remain focused on their studies and do not waste time in non- academic activities. Yusuf (2018) found that students who set individual goals and designed a study plan significantly improved their academic performance because they were able to focus better on their studies. Likewise students who engage in study groups learning perform better academically because they acquire skills such as positive attitude about learning through sharing knowledge and making study more interactive and interesting.

The findings as supported by literature underscores the personal agency which is a key factor in academic performance. As can be seen from the quote and supported by literature, students need to take initiative. The need to take personal responsibility in self-improvement is emphasized in humanistic theories of counselling. Gestalt psychologists for example aver that taking personal responsibility is crucial in attainment of personal goals (Nelson-Jones2011). Similarly Carl Rogers in his person centred theory emphasis organismic value process which sampling means the importance of self-values and taking charge of one's life. The findings are also in line with the self-determination theory that informed this study. In essence the way a student conducts his affairs affects his academic performance. For example a participant had this to say:

"...I always come to university by 7.00am....I have a habit of making calls and chatting with my friends on Facebook only to realise that I am late for class...I find the lecture has already started and students are busy taking notes....most times I am unable to hand in my assignments in time...this has made me not to get good grades...it is all my fault..." [Male student]

The above quote suggests some of the struggles university students face that affect their academic performance. Sometimes students face a lot of time robbers' technology such as use of mobile phones being one of them. They spend productive time on internet chatting with friends and abandon class lectures and assignments thus affecting their overall academic performance. Hussain and Sultan (2010) found that procrastination contributes to poor reading habits, being

anxious during exams, last minute clamming, and submitting assignments leading to being anxious during exams. These factors may lead to poor academic performance. Psycho-education counselling was meant to equip students with time management skills and good study habits of making accurate judgments to enhance their academic performance.

The third theme that emerged from the focus group discussion is choice of career programmes. The discussion revealed that students' poor academic performance was caused by lack of interest in studying as a result of poor choice of career programmes they were enrolled. A participant noted:

".....I feel motivated...my interest in my course has tremendously gone up....the motivation session helped me a lot...I try to participate in class than before...." [Male student]

These findings demonstrate the relevance of career counselling in motivating students to perform better academically as found out by Wibrowski, Mathews and Kitsantas (2016). The above study that students enrolled in the skills learning support programme (career counselling programme) in the USA end up achieving higher academic grades than students who do not enrol in the programme. This is because they are motivated to study during the skills learning programme. Motivated students are enthusiastic and curious towards their studies and end up performing better academically. Some parents direct their children to do courses which are marketable without taking into consideration their children's passion. A student participant collaborated with this view:

".....in my group of friendsone dropped out..... His parents had forced him to take a medical course so that he could take up their family business.....He could not cope with the pressure....." [Male student].

Psycho-education counselling can be employed to help students to have improved academic performance. The selected topics benefitted the experimental group in that they were equipped with skills, abilities, and knowledge that positively enhanced their academic performance. These topics included Study skills: time management, motivation, problem solving, creative thinking, attitude, stress management and career planning. Other topics were: social relationships, financial management, drug and substance abuse and building lasting habits. All these topics were selected to meet the academic needs of the university students. Therefore, universities need to strengthen counselling services in order to stifle poor grades among students during examinations.

4. Conclusion

Personal issues if not resolved may end up affecting students' academic performance negatively. Therefore, counselling in universities is modelled to help students address and manage personal issues that may affect their academic performance. Counselling services are intended to make students redirect focus to studies resulting in improved academic performance. In counselling, students' focus to studies is realised through acquiring study skills namely: reading skills, problem solving, creative thinking, time management, stress management, motivation and attitude change. The main finding is that counselling services influence students' academic performance. Students who underwent psycho-education counselling had positive academic improvement in semester two examinations compared to first semester examinations. Students who were in the control group who did not undergo psycho-education counselling during the second semester had mixed deviations in their second semester examinations. The finding shows the benefits that counselling services have on students' academic performance. The study however found that students who were enrolled in the psycho-education programme were more relaxed few days to the end of semester exams than those in the control group. Therefore, counselling services enable students to conceptualize time and activities through time management skills. The study found that students' lack of interest in studying was caused by poor choice of career programmes. Students who are unsuccessful in changing courses lack interest in their initial programme and they end up performing poorly academically.

5. Recommendations

The recommendations in this study are based on the major findings of the study and are addressing objective five that sought to identify strategies that can enhance counselling services in universities in Kenya. During the psycho-education programme, course difficulty and loss of interest in a course were identified as some of the factors affecting retention at university. These concerns arose as a result of inadequate career counselling of students during their final year in high school. There is need for counsellors to include career counselling as part of the counselling programme in order to boost retention rate in universities. The psycho-education programme in this study enabled students to acquire knowledge and skills such as problem solving, creative and critical thinking, time management, decision making and motivation that enabled them to perform better in their studies. There is need for psycho-education to be integrated as a counselling programme in the universities and more students enrolled in the programme. Counsellors need to recruit more students from all disciplines into the programme.

6. Implications of the Study

Academic performance among undergraduate students in universities in Kenya remains the core mission of universities since universities core mission is teaching and research. The success of teaching as a mission is gauged through the academic performance of students at the end of each semester. University senates keenly monitor performance of students and it is therefore important to carry out research on ways on improving academic performance. It is against this background that this study was carried out to determine whether counselling services influence academic performance. The results found out that psycho-education programme offered in counselling positively influenced academic performance of undergraduate students in the universities selected for the study. Based on this finding, university senates should put in place effective counselling programmes in universities by allocating adequate resources in terms of funding and staffing.

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