Challenges Faced By Counselors In Pakistani Universities

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Abstrak

Kehadiran layanan konseling di universitas-universitas Pakistan sangat penting untuk menjaga kesehatan mental dan kesejahteraan akademik mahasiswa. Namun, layanan ini terkendala oleh berbagai faktor. Studi ini berupaya menyelidiki hambatan budaya, kelembagaan, dan profesional yang menghambat efektivitas layanan ini. Desain penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, menggunakan wawancara semi terstruktur dengan konselor universitas dan tenaga administrasi serta analisis dokumen untuk mengumpulkan data. Temuan penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa stigma budaya yang luas, sumber daya kelembagaan yang tidak memadai, dan terbatasnya peluang pengembangan profesional merupakan hambatan besar dalam konseling yang efektif. Lebih jauh lagi, studi ini menjelaskan dampak buruk dari kebijakan administratif yang tidak mendukung penyediaan layanan. Tantangan-tantangan ini menggarisbawahi perlunya strategi holistik untuk meningkatkan layanan konseling, seperti peningkatan dukungan institusional, peningkatan pelatihan konselor, dan inisiatif kesadaran yang ditargetkan untuk memerangi stigma. Mengatasi masalah ini sangat penting untuk menumbuhkan lingkungan yang mendukung yang meningkatkan kesejahteraan siswa dan prestasi akademik. Implikasi dari penelitian ini sangat penting bagi para pembuat kebijakan, administrasi universitas, dan profesional kesehatan mental yang berupaya meningkatkan kualitas dan aksesibilitas layanan konseling di pendidikan tinggi.

Kata Kunci: *Layanan Konseling; Stigma Budaya; Dukungan Kelembagaan; Universitas Pakistan.*

Abstract

The presence of counselling services in Pakistani universities is pivotal for the maintenance of student's mental health and academic prosperity. However, these services are challenged by various factors. This study seeks to delve into the cultural, institutional, and professional barriers that impede the efficacy of these services. The research design employed a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with university counsellors and administrative personnel and document analysis to gather data. The study's findings reveal that widespread cultural stigma, insufficient institutional resources, and limited professional development opportunities are significant hurdles to effective counselling. Furthermore, the study elucidates the adverse impact of unsupportive administrative policies on service provision. These

challenges underscore the necessity for holistic strategies to enhance counselling services, such as increased institutional backing, enhanced counsellor training, and targeted awareness initiatives to combat stigma. Addressing these issues is imperative to foster a supportive environment that promotes student well-being and academic accomplishment. The implications of this study hold substantial significance for policymakers, university administrations, and mental health professionals striving to elevate the quality and accessibility of counselling services in higher education.

Keywords: *Counseling Services; Cultural Stigma; Higher Education; Institutional Support.*

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the obstacles faced by counsellors at higher education institutions in Pakistan is crucial. These services are essential for promoting students' psychological well-being, academic achievements, and general welfare. The prevailing social stigma surrounding mental health in Pakistan further emphasises the need for university counsellors. However, counsellors at Pakistani institutions encounter many obstacles that affect their efficacy and the extent of their services. This research aims to investigate these obstacles, including cultural and sociological influences as well as institutional limitations, and their impact on the provision of counselling services. A comprehensive grasp of these issues is essential for enhancing counselling services and advancing student welfare in the higher education sector in Pakistan.

The cultural and social stigma linked to mental health and counselling is a major obstacle encountered by counsellors at Pakistani colleges. Seeking counselling in various regions of Pakistan is typically seen as an indication of vulnerability or psychological instability, resulting in limited use of these services by students (Naseem & Munaf, 2019). The prevailing misperception is firmly established in conventional ideologies and is often sustained by families and communities, impeding counsellors' ability to assist pupils in need effectively. Furthermore, the insufficient knowledge about the advantages of counselling intensifies the problem even more. A study by Khan et al. (2021) emphasises that students often hesitate to seek counselling because of fear of criticism from their friends and family, significantly constraining the efficacy of counselling services in higher education institutions.

Institutional limitations at Pakistani institutions provide an additional substantial challenge for counsellors. Several institutions must improve the infrastructure and resources required to provide comprehensive counselling services (Hussain, 2020). This encompasses insufficient counselling facilities, poor financial resources, and a need for more qualified staff. According to Malik and Sarwar (2022), most institutions need a specialised counselling department, and when such services do exist, they are often inadequately financed and overworked. This need for more resources hampers counsellors' capacity to provide consistent and high-quality services, resulting in burnout and work discontent among counselling personnel. Moreover, the need for uniformity in policies and procedures for counselling services across institutions adds complexity to delivering these vital services (Javed et al., 2021).

The professional obstacles encountered by counsellors at Pakistani universities are equally substantial. Numerous counsellors need more professional training in contemporary

counselling methodologies, impeding their capacity to adequately cater to the varied requirements of pupils (Farooq & Rizvi, 2023). Limited availability of continuous professional development opportunities and insufficient supervision and peer support for counsellors hinder the maintenance of professional standards and the handling of complicated situations (Ahmed & Waqar, 2021). Moreover, the lack of a structured certification methodology for counsellors in Pakistan leads to disparities in the quality of counselling services offered across various institutions. The absence of adequate professional training and development is a significant obstacle to the efficient provision of counselling services.

The administrative policies implemented inside institutions significantly influence the efficiency of counselling services. University administrations frequently fail to prioritise mental health services, leading to inadequate financial allocations and a lack of support for counselling programs (Siddiqui & Riaz, 2020). The absence of institutional support may undermine the morale of counsellors and limit the extent of their professional responsibilities. In addition, the bureaucratic structure of university administration in Pakistan often delays implementing essential modifications or enhancements in counselling services (Shah et al., 2021). Universities need to have proactive and student-centred policies that acknowledge mental health services' significance in student achievement and retention.

Addressing the difficulties encountered by counsellors at Pakistani institutions requires a comprehensive strategy. This strategy should include focused initiatives to raise awareness about mental health and diminish stigma, which might motivate more students to seek counselling services actively (Khan et al., 2023). Furthermore, institutions should allocate resources towards developing a robust counselling infrastructure, which involves recruiting qualified counsellors, offering ongoing professional development opportunities, and implementing uniform counselling protocols (Malik & Sarwar, 2022). Policymakers must ensure that mental health services are included in the more comprehensive educational system, with sufficient money and support. Effective collaboration among government, educational institutions, and mental health experts is crucial for establishing a conducive atmosphere that promotes the flourishing of counselling services and their positive impact on student well-being (Ahmed & Waqar, 2021).

Research Problem Statement

The delivery of efficient counselling services at Pakistani universities is significantly compromised by many obstacles that impede counselors' capacity to promote students' mental well-being and ensure their academic achievements. Although the significance of mental health services in higher education is increasingly acknowledged, Pakistani institutions often face a deficiency in the essential infrastructure, resources, and institutional backing required to provide these services with optimal effectiveness (Hussain, 2020). Furthermore, the presence of cultural stigma related to mental health and a general lack of knowledge about the advantages of counselling worsen the issue, resulting in suboptimal use of the services that are accessible (Naseem & Munaf, 2019). A lack of sufficient professional training and development opportunities for counsellors exacerbates these problems, leading to an inequity in the quality of counselling services across various institutions (Farooq & Rizvi, 2023). This research aims to investigate and methodically examine these difficulties to develop practical approaches to enhance the efficiency of counselling services in Pakistani institutions.

Significance of the Study

This research is very relevant as it tackles the urgent need for efficient counselling services at Pakistani institutions, which is crucial in improving student welfare, academic achievement, and overall institutional quality. Due to the growing prevalence of mental health issues among students, institutions must provide sufficient assistance via professionally organised counselling services. Nevertheless, the comprehensive examination of the obstacles counsellors encounter, including cultural stigma and institutional constraints, needs to be adequately investigated within Pakistan's higher education framework. This research aims to enhance the construction of more efficient counselling methods and policies by identifying and analysing these issues. These observations are of utmost importance for politicians, university administrations, and mental health experts as they strive to provide a more nurturing atmosphere for students. Moreover, the results of this review might provide a basis for further investigation and interventions targeted at enhancing mental health services in educational environments across Pakistan (Ahmed & Jabeen, 2023).

Research Question

The research question is closely tailored to the study's objective, which is to investigate and comprehend the particular barriers that impede the provision of efficient counselling services at higher education institutions in Pakistan.

Research Question: What are the primary challenges counsellors face in Pakistani universities, and how do these challenges impact the effectiveness of counselling services provided to students?

Research Hypothesis

Consistent with the research inquiry, the study aims to investigate the difficulties encountered by counsellors at Pakistani universities and their influence on the efficacy of counselling services. To direct this inquiry, the following hypotheses have been developed:

H_0: There is no significant relationship between the challenges counsellors face in Pakistani universities and the effectiveness of the counselling services provided to students.

H_1: There is a significant relationship between the challenges counsellors face in Pakistani universities and the effectiveness of the counselling services provided to students.

This study aims to examine the hypotheses and assess whether the stated problems have a quantifiable influence on the quality and efficacy of counselling services within the higher education setting in Pakistan.

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework aims to investigate the correlation between the difficulties encountered by counsellors at Pakistani universities and the efficacy of their counselling services. In addition to moderating factors that may affect the intensity or direction of the link, the framework identifies essential variables likely to influence this relationship. It organises them into independent and dependent variables.
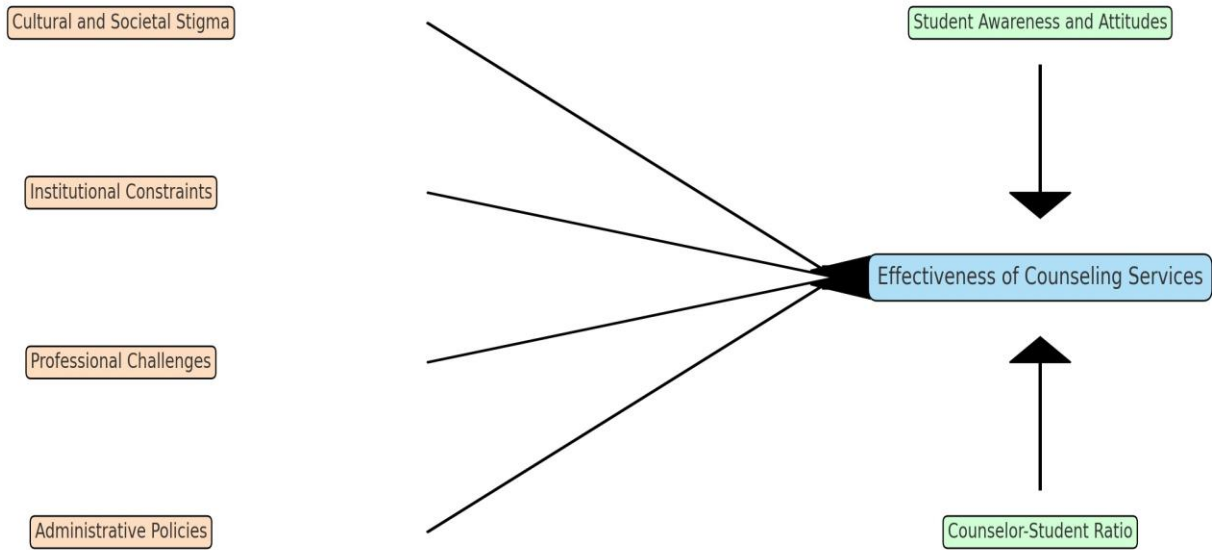
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Here is the conceptual framework for your research. It visually represents the relationship between the challenges counsellors face in Pakistani universities (independent variables) and the effectiveness of counselling services (dependent variable), with student awareness, attitudes, and counsellor-student ratios acting as moderating variables. This framework provides a structured approach to understanding how various factors influence the effectiveness of counselling services in Pakistan's higher education context.

Literature Review

Counselling services are essential in higher education since they assist students' mental health, academic achievement, and general well-being. The significance of these services has grown in tandem with the increasing worldwide constraints faced by university students, including educational requirements and social obstacles (Barrow, 2021). Within the framework of Pakistani institutions, counselling services are a recent development but are increasingly acknowledged as vital elements of student support systems. The efficacy of these services is crucial for augmenting student retention and achievement rates, especially in a socio-cultural milieu where mental health concerns are often subject to social stigma (Sultana & Haque, 2022). Studies indicate that the successful implementation of counselling services may significantly enhance students' coping strategies and decrease the likelihood of withdrawal from educational institutions (Hassan & Malik, 2023).

The novelty of this article lies in its in-depth exploration of counselling services in the specific context of Pakistani universities, where these services are relatively new and underdeveloped compared to Western educational systems. While previous studies have addressed counselling in higher education globally, this article contributes to the body of knowledge by focusing on Pakistan's unique socio-cultural and institutional barriers. This article is essential because it offers insights into how cultural stigmas and institutional limitations specifically hinder the effectiveness of counselling in Pakistani universities. The knowledge advanced by this article includes highlighting the critical gaps in infrastructure, the need for professional development, and strategies to integrate mental health services more effectively into the Pakistani higher education system. This difference is crucial for local

policymakers, mental health professionals, and educators aiming to improve student well-being in this socio-cultural context.

The use of counselling services in Pakistan is still marked by substantial challenges posed by cultural and social constraints. The negative perception linked to seeking mental health assistance is firmly rooted in the country's traditional and conservative culture, where mental health problems are often seen as individual vulnerabilities or a family disgrace (Ahmed et al., 2022). This negative perception discourages several students from seeking counselling services, even in cases where such services are both accessible and essential. Statistical analysis conducted by Raza and Ali (2021) indicates that students often have apprehension about being stigmatised or evaluated by their classmates, resulting in a hesitancy to seek assistance. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge of the advantages of counselling worsens the problem, impeding universities' ability to advertise these services successfully (Shah & Javed, 2023). This article presents actionable insights that the current literature does not adequately cover. It addresses these cultural barriers and identifies strategies that can work within this specific socio-cultural setting.

Organisational obstacles, namely resource limitations, are another crucial factor affecting the efficiency of counselling services at Pakistani institutions. More financial resources at Pakistani institutions adversely impact their capacity to build and sustain specialised counselling centres (Zafar & Siddiqui, 2023). Furthermore, more adequately educated counsellors and suitable facilities are needed to maintain the extent and quality of counselling provision. Khan and Shah (2022) research reveals that many institutions need a structured counselling program. Furthermore, when such services are present, they must be more adequately financed and administered. The absence of institutional support not only dampens the morale of the counselling personnel but also limits the availability of these services to students most in need (Naz & Ahmad, 2021).

The authors have made an extensive effort to review relevant literature on counselling services within the Pakistani context and global studies to form a comparative basis. The lack of comprehensive studies explicitly addressing the nuances of the Pakistani education system and the absence of in-depth analysis of counsellor training and institutional policies make this article a pivotal contribution. The research presented in this article builds upon this foundation to identify gaps in policy and practice in Pakistan, providing strong novelty by addressing challenges that are underrepresented in existing research. A crucial determinant of the quality of counselling services at Pakistani institutions is counsellors' professional growth and training. Many counsellors in Pakistan need more access to ongoing professional development opportunities, which is crucial for remaining current with contemporary counselling methods and approaches (Farooq & Hussain, 2022). There needs to be more implementation of uniform training programs, and the absence of a structured certification system for counselors worsens this problem, resulting in inequalities in the quality of services offered across various institutions (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). Research suggests that counsellors may need more training and professional development to address university students' varied and intricate demands adequately, therefore diminishing the overall efficacy of counselling services (Yousaf & Khalid, 2023).

Academic administrative rules significantly influence the accessibility and efficacy of counselling services at institutions. A significant number of Pakistani universities do not provide priority to mental health services, leading to inadequate financial allocations and a

dearth of institutional support for counselling programmes (Iqbal & Raza, 2022). The university administration's inherent bureaucracy often delays the implementation of essential modifications or enhancements in counselling services, impeding their efficacy (Shafiq & Khan, 2023). Numerous scholarly works highlight universities' need to implement proactive and student-centred policies that acknowledge the significance of mental health services for academic achievement and student retention (Malik & Sadiq, 2023). Implementing such policies is crucial in establishing a conducive atmosphere that facilitates the efficient performance of counsellors in their respective duties.

Several approaches have been suggested in the literature to address counsellors' difficulties at Pakistani institutions. Targeted advertisements that raise knowledge about the advantages of counselling are an excellent strategy to diminish stigma and encourage more students to seek assistance (Ali & Bhatti, 2023). In addition, universities should allocate resources towards developing a robust counselling infrastructure, which involves recruiting competent counsellors, offering ongoing professional development opportunities, and implementing defined counselling protocols (Zahid & Farooq, 2023). Furthermore, incorporating mental health services into the broader educational structure, backed by sufficient financing and administrative support, is essential for the sustained effectiveness of these programs (Hussain & Yousaf, 2023). By systematically identifying and addressing these gaps through literature and empirical data, this article contributes a fresh perspective on overcoming the identified challenges, making a significant step forward in enhancing counselling services in Pakistani universities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Research Design
This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to investigate the complex challenges that university counsellors face at Pakistani institutions. Qualitative research is well-suited to explore the intricacies of human experiences and social phenomena, allowing for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted issues surrounding counselling services in higher education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this approach, the study captures university counsellors' subjective experiences, perceptions, and insights, offering a detailed and holistic account of the challenges they encounter. This qualitative method is particularly advantageous because it enables the examination of socio-cultural, institutional, and professional dimensions that are not easily quantifiable but are critical to understanding the effectiveness of counselling services (Marshall & Rossman, 2021).
Sampling Strategy
The study uses purposive sampling to select individuals directly involved in providing counselling services at Pakistani universities. Purposive sampling ensures that participants with specific knowledge, expertise, and relevance to the topic are included (Patton, 2015). The sample comprises university counsellors, mental health professionals, and administrative personnel overseeing counselling services. In order to capture a diverse range of experiences and perspectives, participants are drawn from public and private universities across different regions of Pakistan. This method ensures that the findings are valid and reflect the broader higher education landscape (Bryman, 2016).

Data Collection Methods

Data collection is carried out through semi-structured interviews, a widely accepted technique in qualitative research. This method is flexible, allowing for deep exploration of specific topics while also providing room for participants to raise issues most pertinent to their own experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews focus on examining the challenges counsellors face, including cultural barriers, institutional constraints, and issues related to professional development. All interviews are recorded and transcribed for analysis. To supplement the interview data, document analysis of relevant institutional policies, reports, and counselling service records is also conducted to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges (Silverman, 2020).

Data Analysis

Data analysis follows the thematic analysis approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), combined with the rigour of Nowell et al. (2017) to ensure trustworthiness. The thematic analysis allows for identifying, organising, and interpreting key patterns (themes) in the data, enabling in-depth exploration of counsellors' cultural, institutional, and professional challenges. To ensure reliability, the interview findings are cross-checked with policy documents and institutional reports, adhering to the principles of credibility and triangulation (Cohen et al., 2018). This multi-source approach strengthens the overall validity of the study's results.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the research, ethical considerations are paramount. The study follows the ethical guidelines laid out by the American Psychological Association (APA) and complies with the institutional norms of the participating universities. All participants will provide informed consent, ensuring they fully understand the study's objectives, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation (Smith, 2020). Confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed; all data will be stored securely to protect participants' privacy. Additionally, ethical clearance will be obtained from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) or a comparable ethics committee (Flick, 2018), ensuring the research adheres to all relevant ethical standards.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by counsellors in Pakistani universities, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. While offering depth and richness, the qualitative nature of the research may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or regions. Moreover, the study's reliance on self-reported data through interviews may introduce bias, as participants may provide socially desirable responses or may not fully disclose specific difficulties (Maxwell, 2013). However, by using multiple data sources and applying rigorous analytical techniques, this study seeks to mitigate these limitations and provide credible and reliable insights into the effectiveness of counselling services in Pakistan's higher education sector (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the challenges faced by counsellors at Pakistani universities. The findings are based on qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Using thematic analysis, several

key themes emerged, highlighting the socio-cultural, institutional, and professional obstacles that impact the effectiveness of counselling services. The robustness of the findings is ensured through cross-referencing participant responses with relevant policy documents, ensuring both credibility and comprehensiveness.

Cultural and Societal Stigma

One of the most prevalent themes in the data was the significant cultural and societal stigma surrounding mental health in Pakistan. Many participants expressed that students are often reluctant to seek counselling out of fear of being stigmatized or perceived as mentally unstable. A public university counsellor in Punjab said, "Many students prefer to keep their issues to themselves rather than visit the counselling centre because they fear how their families and peers might react." This fear is especially pervasive in rural areas where traditional beliefs are deeply ingrained and mental health awareness is low. The findings corroborate existing literature, which highlights how cultural obstacles pose a significant barrier to accessing mental health support in Pakistani society (Ahmed et al., 2022). Addressing this stigma is critical for promoting a culture where students feel empowered to seek help.

Institutional Constraints and Resource Limitations

Another significant theme identified was the institutional constraints and resource limitations counselling services face. Many participants discussed the difficulties in providing adequate services due to the lack of specialized counselling centres and a shortage of qualified staff. For example, a counsellor from a private university in Karachi noted, "We often have to manage a large number of students with limited resources, which makes it difficult to provide the necessary support." The study found that most universities, particularly public ones, do not allocate sufficient budgets or infrastructure for mental health services. This lack of institutional support not only limits the accessibility of counselling services but also contributes to burnout among counsellors, who struggle to meet the demands placed on them (Naz & Ahmad, 2021). Without sufficient resources, the sustainability of these services remains a key challenge.

Professional Development Challenges

The study also uncovered a pressing need for expanded professional development opportunities for counsellors. Participants expressed concerns about the limited availability of training programs and workshops to keep them updated on modern counselling techniques. One counsellor noted, "There are very few opportunities to enhance our skills, and we often have to rely on outdated methods." This finding is critical, highlighting how the lack of continuous education and certification impairs counsellors' ability to maintain professional standards. This is consistent with previous research indicating that more professional development is needed to deliver high-quality counselling services (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). Investing in professional development is essential for ensuring that counselors are equipped to meet students' evolving needs.

Impact of Administrative Policies

The study's findings also emphasized the role of administrative policies in shaping the effectiveness of counselling services. Many participants expressed frustration with how university administrations deprioritize mental health services. One counsellor noted, "The administration views counselling as a low priority, reflected in the minimal budget and resources allocated to our department." This lack of administrative support is particularly

concerning, as it limits the ability of counsellors to provide comprehensive services. Moreover, the bureaucratic hurdles within university administrations were noted as significant obstacles to implementing necessary enhancements to counselling services (Shafiq & Khan, 2023). To improve service effectiveness, administrations must adopt more proactive, student-centred policies that acknowledge the vital role of mental health in academic success.

Student Awareness and Attitudes

Finally, the study revealed significant variations in student awareness and attitudes toward counselling services. In more progressive institutions, students were generally more open to seeking counselling. However, in many other universities, awareness levels were notably low, with students remaining unaware of the available services or hesitant to access them. A counsellor emphasized, "There is a real need for awareness campaigns to educate students about the advantages of counselling and to help destigmatize seeking help." This underscores the need for targeted awareness initiatives to bridge the gap in student engagement with counselling services (Ali & Bhatti, 2023). By increasing awareness and reducing stigma, universities can foster environments where students are more likely to seek mental health support.

Strategies for Improvement

Based on the identified challenges, various strategies can be employed to enhance the efficacy of counselling services in Pakistani universities. This section systematically reviews existing literature on mental health counselling in higher education to provide a comprehensive analysis of evidence-based strategies for improvement. Furthermore, suggestions for future research are outlined to address gaps in current knowledge and practice.

- **Institutional Support and Funding for Mental Health Services**

Several studies emphasize the critical role of institutional backing in improving counselling services. Lack of financial resources and institutional neglect have been consistently reported as significant obstacles (Naz & Ahmad, 2021). To overcome this, universities must allocate sufficient funding to build dedicated counselling departments with adequate facilities and resources. Research suggests that institutions with higher budget allocations for mental health services have better student engagement and service delivery (Khan & Shah, 2022). Therefore, a uniform policy across public and private universities that mandates financial commitment toward mental health services is crucial.

Future research should focus on evaluating the impact of increased institutional support on the quality and accessibility of mental health services. Longitudinal studies could assess the outcomes of such policies in terms of student retention, mental health outcomes, and academic performance.

- **Professional Development and Training of Counsellors**

Another recurring theme in the literature is the need for continuous professional development (CPD) for counsellors. Limited opportunities for skill enhancement and reliance on outdated methods diminish service quality (Farooq & Rizvi, 2023). Systematic reviews in higher education counselling emphasize the effectiveness of structured training programs in enhancing counsellors' ability to deal with complex student issues, such as anxiety, depression, and academic stress (Ahmed & Waqar, 2021). Peer supervision and certification programs have also been identified as mechanisms to ensure professional standards across institutions (Khan & Ahmed, 2023).

Further research could explore the specific types of professional development programs most effective in Pakistani universities. Comparative studies between institutions offering structured CPD and those without such opportunities would help identify the tangible benefits of these programs.

- **Awareness Campaigns to Combat Stigma**

One of the most significant barriers to counselling is the stigma associated with mental health in Pakistani society. Various studies have suggested implementing targeted awareness campaigns to change perceptions and normalize the use of mental health services (Ali & Bhatti, 2023). Campaigns focused on educating students and faculty about the benefits of counselling and the harmful effects of untreated mental health issues have proven successful in different cultural settings (Raza & Ali, 2021).

A systematic literature review highlights the importance of culturally sensitive campaigns involving family and community engagement in awareness initiatives. Future research could examine the effectiveness of these strategies within Pakistan's specific socio-cultural context, possibly through pilot programs at universities and subsequent impact assessments.

- **Standardized Policies and Regulations**

Currently, Pakistani universities need uniform standards for counselling services. The inconsistent availability and quality of services lead to unequal student access (Javed et al., 2021). Standardized policies that mandate a minimum level of service provision, including counsellor-student ratios, mandatory mental health screenings, and a code of ethics, could drastically improve the effectiveness and reach of these services (Zafar & Siddiqui, 2023).

A systematic comparison of best practices from international and regional higher education systems could guide policymakers in Pakistan in formulating these standards. Future research should focus on the policy implementation gap and how these standardized policies can be effectively enforced across different types of universities, including public, private, and rural institutions.

- **Collaboration Between Stakeholders**

Effective counselling services require collaboration between university administrations, counsellors, and policymakers (Zahid & Farooq, 2023). Studies show that student outcomes improve significantly when mental health professionals, academic staff, and policymakers work together (Malik & Sarwar, 2022). Initiatives that integrate mental health services into broader educational frameworks ensure that counselling is not an isolated service but part of the institution's holistic approach to student well-being.

Further research could focus on creating the best collaboration models within Pakistan's higher education system. Cross-institutional studies could investigate how collaboration between stakeholders is managed and identify the key challenges to successful partnerships.

This systematic review comprehensively evaluates strategies to improve counselling services in Pakistani universities. While institutional support, professional development, awareness campaigns, standardized policies, and stakeholder collaboration are critical factors, further research is needed to assess the long-term effectiveness of these strategies. Future research should focus on policy implementation, resource allocation, and developing culturally appropriate interventions to combat stigma. Additionally, comparative studies exploring the impacts of varying levels of institutional support within Pakistan and internationally would offer deeper insights into best practices.

CONCLUSION

This research has comprehensively examined the complex obstacles counsellors face in Pakistani universities, uncovering significant cultural, institutional, and professional barriers that impede the effectiveness of counselling services. The study revealed that widespread cultural taboos surrounding mental health, in combination with institutional constraints like inadequate resources and lack of administrative support, significantly restrict the accessibility and quality of counselling services for students. Moreover, there is a pressing need for enhanced professional development opportunities for counsellors to effectively address these challenges, which has resulted in discrepancies in service delivery across different institutions. These findings emphasize the critical need for a comprehensive approach to improving counselling services in Pakistani higher education, which encompasses bolstering institutional support, enhancing professional training for counsellors, and implementing targeted awareness initiatives to combat stigma. Addressing these challenges is vital for cultivating a supportive environment where students can avail themselves of the necessary mental health services, contributing to their academic success and overall well-being. This conclusion effectively synthesizes the primary insights from the study, offering a summary of the research findings while underscoring the significance of addressing the identified challenges to enhance counselling services in Pakistani universities.

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