

Students' Perceived Needs and Expectations from University Counselling Services: A Qualitative Review

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the personal, social and academic needs of students presenting to a University counselling service. Responses were obtained from 641 students who completed an open response quality assurance survey consisting of four questions. Qualitative results were analysed using thematic and axial coding. Results indicated that students reported needs for connectedness and personal guidance to enable traditional goals of academic success and intrapersonal/interpersonal/personal development. Students also highlighted the need for counselling services to be professionally staffed, accessible and affordable. Overall, the study suggested that students viewed counselling services as an institutional resource providing objective, professional and trustworthy expertise at a time of unique developmental challenges in their lives.

Introduction

In Australia, 857,000 domestic and 335,000 international people are enrolled in tertiary education annually, 61% of whom are aged between 15 and 24 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). For the majority of these young people, engaging in tertiary studies occurs at a time in their lifespan where demands to adapt personally, socially, academically, and to make key decisions regarding their future are crucial (Byrd & McKinney, 2012; Taylor, Doane, & Eisenberg, 2014). Young people's ability to adapt as successful students is important given the advantages that education provides both to the individual and broader society in terms of economic, social and culture capital (Baum, Ma & Payea, 2013; Feinstein & Hammond, 2004; Hammond, 2002; Nussbaum, 2012). However, students are increasingly faced with a tertiary education system that is both complex and competitive (Shepler & Woosley, 2011). Indeed, within the tertiary student cohort, moderate to severe levels of depression, anxiety, self-harm, eating disorders, drug and alcohol issues, and sexual abuse are reported (Cvetkovski, Reavley & Jorm, 2012; Leahy, Peterson, Wilson, Newbury, Tonkin, & Turnbull, 2010). Such psychological issues are associated with student self-report of greater levels of psychological distress and lower psychological flexibility, in addition to more associated days being unable to carry out normal activities (Renner, O'Dea, Sheehan, & Tebbutt, 2014). From a positive youth development perspective, young people's challenges can be seen in the broader context of their strengths and future potential (Lerner 2000; Lerner, Bowers, Geldof, Gestsdottir, & De Souza, 2012). Consistent with such a developmental perspective, young people report that they want health services to foster their growth and development rather than to be solely focused on the diagnosis of illnesses (Kefford, Trevena & Willcock, 2005).

Given that developmental perspectives suggest that the context of the young person can promote positive or protective assets (Lerner, Agans, Arbeit, Chase, Weiner, Schmid, & Warren, 2013), Universities provide counselling services to support students to overcome personal risks and obstacles in pursuing academic success. Consistent with this, counselling services provide brief interventions from bibliotherapy and e-resources to individual services, groups and workshops. They additionally work to strengthen the capacity of the University system to support student success in terms of promoting the development of integrated academic and personal student competencies (Watson & Schwitzer, 2010).

Students' own academic goals and intentions are implicated in success (Tinto, 2012), and involve a combination of internal and external motives (Kennett, Reed & Lam, 2014). Self-authorship theory provides a model to investigate how the development of an internal capacity to define beliefs, identity, and social relationships impacts upon students' academic success (Baxter & Magolda, 2001). This model's emphasis on developing capabilities in cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal domains is consistent with the idea of creating positive developmental pathways to enable students to experience self-identity, belonging and purpose. However, in the context of emerging adulthood, achieving such developmental skills can prove difficult (Arnett, 2012). Indeed, during this highly non-normative stage of life, many individuals have not reached full biological or psychosocial maturity, and may require assistance to complete this transition (Arnett & Tanner, 2006).

The developmental processes identified in both self-authorship and emerging adulthood theories suggest a role for Counselling Services in providing the scaffolding and structure to allow students to achieve personal, social and associated academic growth. The psychological scaffolding provided can be seen to parallel many of the processes identified in instructional scaffolding (Wood & Wood, 1996). The first feature of instructional scaffolding refers to collaborative interaction between the learner and expert, which can be seen to reflect the therapeutic concept of the working alliance. The working alliance refers to non-specific factors such as empathy, unconditional positive regard, and therapist attributes, which are used to engage the client in a collaborative approach towards achieving their goals (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003). These non-specific factors have been demonstrated to have a consistent impact on treatment outcomes separate to the specific treatment modalities being implemented (Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000). The significance of the working alliance has been noted for both long and short-term interventions, highlighting the value of connection in therapeutic engagement (Bhola & Kapur, 2013; Newman, 1998; Shirk & Karver, 2011). The second scaffolding feature refers to an awareness of the learner's current level and an intention to work beyond this level. This feature reflects the therapeutic process of promoting psychosocial development through the dissemination of knowledge intended to motivate change. The third scaffolding feature is guidance and its progressive removal throughout the interactions to promote autonomy. This feature again reflects the core aim of therapeutic interventions to provide support so that new life skills can be developed.

Given the practical stressors facing tertiary education cohorts, and developmental models which suggest a need for facilitating and promoting students' personal development, the current study aimed to conduct a needs analysis of students engaging with a University Counselling Service. It was hypothesised that students would identify needs and expectations related to academic, personal and emotional skills. Overall, this study aims to assist university counselling services in identifying areas of student need that could facilitate better development and deployment of interventions in promoting both young people's development and student success.

Method

Ethical approval was not required for this study as the aim was internal quality assurance.

Protocol

Students attending the Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) unit of a major metropolitan Australian University for their first session were given the Quality Assurance Survey. They were informed by Reception that completion of the form was voluntary, anonymous, and for unit quality assurance purposes. Students were asked to complete the survey prior to their first session. Data was collated over a six month period to obtain feedback relevant to an entire semester.

Questionnaire

The Quality Assurance Survey was a structured questionnaire with four open questions and an area

for additional comments. The questions asked were:

1. What aspect of receiving treatment at CAPS is most important to you?
2. What motivated you to attend CAPS?
3. What do you think students want from campus psychological services?
4. Have you any ideas on how CAPS could better reach the student body?

Participants

All new clients attending CAPS during the data collection period were invited to complete the Quality Assurance Survey (n = 2325). Of these students, 641 (28%) completed the Quality Assurance Survey. The four questions were completed as follows: 588 responded to Question 1; 641 responded to Question 2; 552 responded to Question 3; 325 to Question 4; and 31 left additional comments. Demographic data was not collected on participants.

Data analyses

A qualitative approach was used to explore students' expectations of the CAPS unit. Three of the investigators read collated spreadsheets of question responses to uncover themes, and generate broad descriptive categories (open coding). Subsequently axial coding was employed to identify relationships between the categories and subcategories within the narrative framework. The axial coding level involved continuous discussion between authors until consensus was reached regarding emerging (sub)themes and their position within the narrative framework. All transcripts were then reviewed by the authors to extract relevant theme-related data.

Results

Elements in the final coding system are shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3 below. The following are the main themes that emerged in the course of qualitative analysis:

1. Connectedness

The most recurrent main theme reported by students was a desire for connection through the Counselling Service and with the wider University.

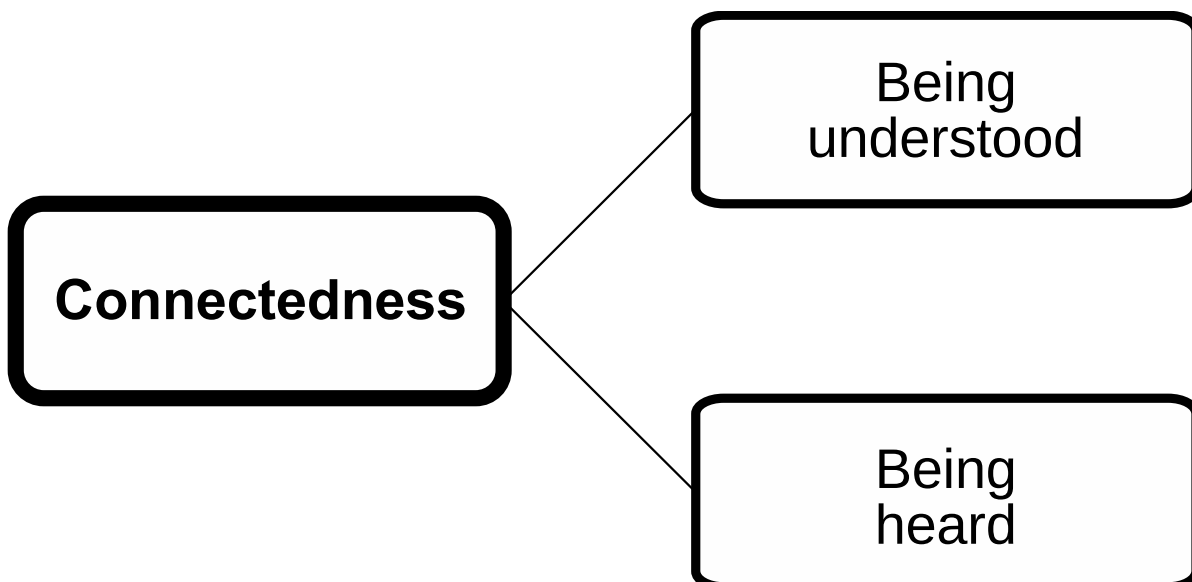


Figure 1. Connectedness theme and subthemes

1.1. Being understood

Students described a sense of not being heard whilst at university. They reported feeling anonymous within the institutional context of the university and had a desire to be recognised as important. Students stated that they believed the Counselling service provided a source of empathy and validation within the University.

Caring, the feeling that someone in this great institutional hulk knows who we are and gives a damn.

Talking to people willing to consider your concerns or/and [sic] the issues that are important for you that can disrupt your everyday activities to a great extent. As opposed to people who tell you the concerns you raise are not meaningful.

1.2. Being heard

Students' indicated that one of the primary reasons they attended the Counselling Service was because of a need to communicate face-to-face with a person when university demands became excessive. They reported that they had limited alternative options for receiving emotional and/or practical support from within the University. Additionally, many stated that they found it difficult to communicate their needs regarding university with family and friends who did not understand the system. As such, students highlighted the importance of having access to university services that could validate their concerns and provide support when it was often the case that no other accessible alternatives existed.

Someone to listen, often out of their circle of friends/family; solutions: a way forward; confirmation: that their issues, perspectives and thoughts are valid.

Having someone who is understanding to help calm any bad feeling in order to return to a balanced, stress free lifestyle in which I can successfully study.

2. Assistance

The second main theme that arose from the data was assistance. This included gaining advice, developmental progress, well-being and university specific aid.

2.1. Advice

Students reported a need to receive advice and mentoring from the Counselling Service.

2.1.1. Guidance/wisdom

Students emphasised the need for guidance in finding perspective when confronting academic and developmental issues that were beyond those with which they were familiar or comfortable. Students indicated that the Counselling Service was seen as a place that supported empowerment by helping students develop through adverse experiences such as stress, depression, anxiety, and identifying a positive pathway forward.

Guidance and advice. I understand that everyone has bad moments in life but I feel that with understanding of how to deal with it life can be made easier.

I wanted to deal with my problem very pro-actively and utilise professional opinion and guidance to undertake this task.

Someone to talk to who understands what you're going through and can give you practical advice.

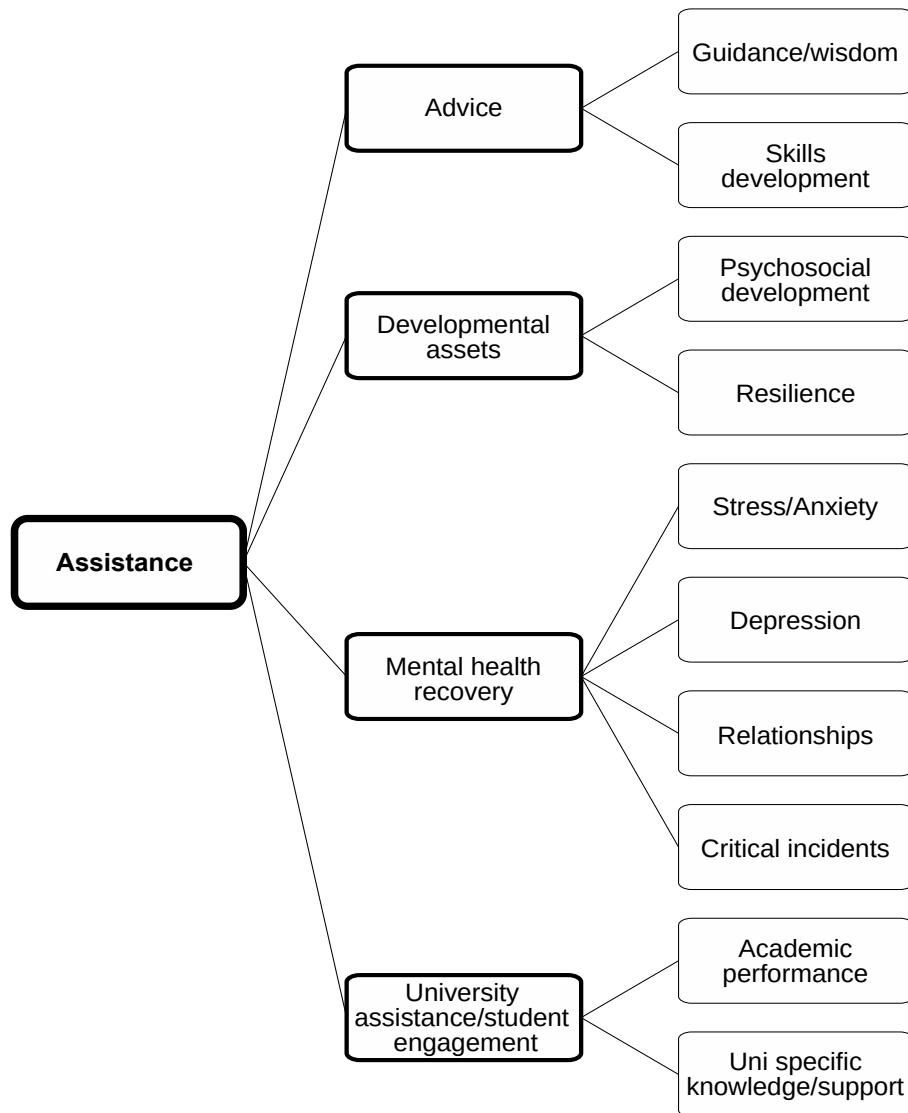


Figure 2. Assistance theme and subthemes

2.1.2. Skills development

Students reported that a major reason for attending the Counselling Service was to receive both advice and skills related to problem solving. Students predominantly wanted assistance in identifying areas of their life that were prohibiting them from succeeding both cognitively and personally. Additionally, the value of having a counsellor to assist in the execution of the developed plan was emphasised.

Helping me identify the source of my unhappiness and providing some solutions forward.

Gaining a different perspective of my situation and establishing strategies to deal with my worries.

Creating a plan to resolve my issues, and actually seeing it through and monitoring its progress.

2.2. Developmental Assets

2.2.1. Psychosocial development

The theme of development was characterised strongly by a desire to overcome emotional difficulties and improve performance. Students reported that they perceived the Counselling Service as a way of sourcing personal skills to help them manage obstacles, thereby allowing them to progress academically.

I need to change my behaviour and get out of bad habits/cycles in times of stress, I can't handle not doing anything to deal with my stress (I don't want it to be an excuse but a motivator).

Earlier experiences have taught me to be more proactive in talking to someone.

Accepting challenges in my life and feeling as though I am actively addressing and engaging with difficulties.

2.2.2. Resilience

Students reported that they attended the Counselling Service to develop resilience skills in relation to the challenges encountered at university and life in general. Additionally, students highlighted that they recognised the short and longer term importance of life skills.

This degree is very important to me. I attended [another University] from 2010-2011 straight after school and struggled due to my depression resulting in failing and leaving. So I want to get help and make it through my degree.

To assist with self-growth and processing, better management with problems that arise.

2.3. Mental Health recovery

In addition to issues relating to development and guidance, students also reported attending the Counselling Service for assistance with mental health issues.

2.3.1. Stress/anxiety

Students emphasised the high level of stress and anxiety experienced in relation to their university career. They stated that this often inhibited their capacity to function both academically and personally. Students reported that they were attending the Counselling Service to help develop the necessary skills to manage stress/anxiety independently.

An anxiety attack - build up that left me unable to do anything and I don't have time for that.

Achieving a state where I am confident in being able to implement strategies to calm my anxiety.

2.3.2. Depression

Students similarly reported depression as a major reason for attending the Counselling Service. They reported frequent difficulties with motivation due to depression and noted the impact this had on their ability to complete assessments.

I'm not motivated to study, this has been happening throughout the semester. Thought of seeking help, but felt I can overcome it myself. I think of the future and become afraid of it.

Hopefully developing coping methods for anxiety and depression - additionally, having a space to safely talk about these issues where I can be taken seriously.

2.3.3. Relationships

Students noted the impact of their personal lives on their university studies. Many mentioned that navigating intimate relationships, often for the first time, caused disruptions to their cognitive and emotional functioning. They indicated that they were uncertain of how to deal with the impact of relationship breakups, critical feedback about their competency/adequacy as a person, and valued the opportunity to discuss and process these situations with a professional.

To sort out my life, stop my personal life affecting my studies at [the university].

To help my [sic] deal with issues concerning relationships and family so I can focus on uni. To help me focus more and be motivated.

2.3.4. Critical incidents

Students stated that the Counselling Service was an important resource during times of crisis. They reported that the Counselling Service enabled them to process issues such as sudden deaths,

suicides, and issues of domestic violence. Additionally, students highlighted the importance of the service as an accessible first point of contact for issues such as psychotic episodes.

My father died last Saturday right before uni started. I am shocked, overwhelmed with responsibility and guilt.

2.4. University assistance/student engagement

2.4.1. Academic performance

Students rated highly the importance of receiving assistance that could improve academic performance. They were aware of the stressors associated with student life and were keen to ensure that this did not impact on academic outcomes. Students also stressed the time pressures associated with being a student and noted that they consequently did not feel they could afford to experience emotional difficulties within the semester.

Both ensuring my wellbeing on a personal level, and ensuring that my recent misfortunes do not detract from my studies significantly.

I needed to seek help when I could not work for the last week due to being constantly nervous, and I do not have the luxury of spending time out, as I have very few months left.

2.4.2. University specific knowledge/support

Students emphasised the importance of attending a Counselling Service that had contextual knowledge of the University. They noted that this enabled the service to provide tailored assistance related to their student needs rather than seeing the problem as an individual's mental health issue. They also regarded the institutional knowledge of the Counselling Service as valuable when trying to resolve issues with the university. Many stated that this enhanced the Counselling Service's capacity to provide guidance, particularly in the case of International students who may not be aware of the University's systems.

An alternative point of view/clarification of my situation and options to that of my usual psychiatrist, friends, family and self, from someone who has knowledge of how university works.

Advice that comes from knowledge about how the uni operates. Outside counselling services don't know how [the university] works, therefore no practical support.

Someone who knows the realistic ins and outs of youth/drug/domestic issues with experience with student struggles.

3. Professionalism

The third major theme identified was professionalism. Students highlighted the need to have quick access to a reliable service staffed by qualified non-judgmental professionals that understood the student experience.

A professional, proficient and friendly experience that is effective in helping me deal with my issues.

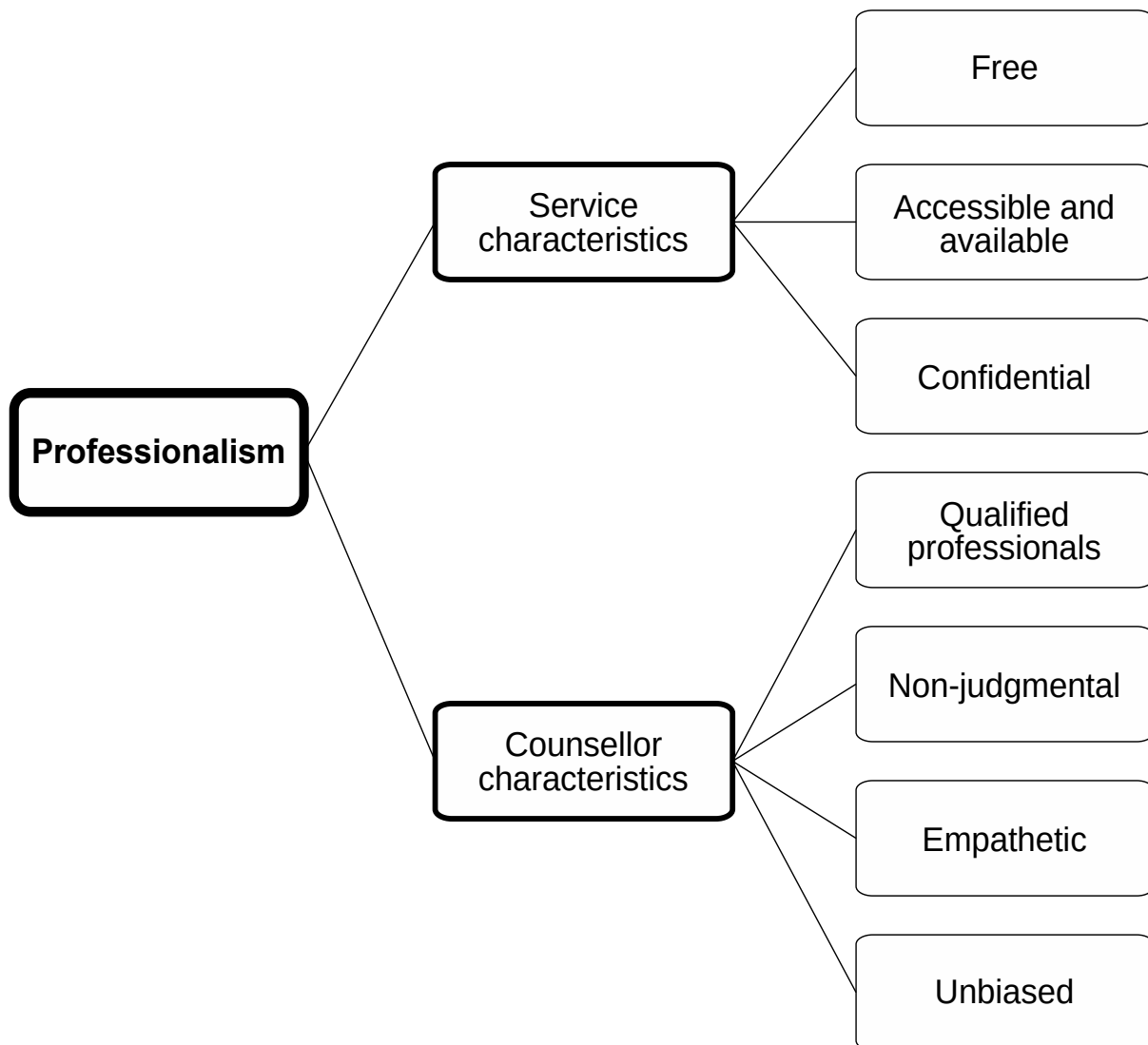


Figure 3. Professionalism theme and subthemes

3.1. Service characteristics

The students reported that they desired the Counselling Service to possess certain logistical characteristics.

3.1.1. Free

Students stressed the need for a free service. Many indicated that in the absence of the Counselling Service they would be unable to access any other form of therapy.

I really needed help but couldn't afford a therapist.

The fact that it is free - I couldn't afford any other type of counselling.

3.1.2. Accessible and available

In addition to being free, students reported the importance of the service being easily accessible and that appointments be quickly available. Students noted the benefit of being able to attend drop-in appointments without being placed on a wait-list. Many students noted that this was different to other medicare-based services that provided subsidised treatment.

Its [sic] ready availability in a central location on campus; the fact that it is free helped, also that there were appointments available on the day I called.

Other psychological services have lengthy waiting times. Urgent help.

3.1.3. Confidential

Students stressed the importance of the Counselling Service being confidential. Many students reported a lack of knowledge about the governance of confidentiality within the service.

I want to beat my anxiety - I don't not [sic] want it to have a hold of my thoughts, actions and goals for the rest of my life. Furthermore, I was given misinformation that attending these sort of services would flag on the student system when applying for degrees such as medicine. Now that I know that this is not true, I have taken the steps to get help.

3.2. Counsellor characteristics

Students reported that they expected certain characteristics from Counsellors employed by the Counselling Service.

3.2.1. Qualified professionals

The majority of students agreed that they wanted access to qualified psychological health professionals. They highlighted the need for such professionals to have university specific knowledge.

Someone with a qualified knowledge of methods that can be employed to overcome psychological issues.

Strategies to take home and apply to everyday life. Mature, experienced professionals, perhaps specific to problem areas - client centred.

3.2.2. Non-judgmental

Students reported that it was important that Counsellors be non-judgmental. They reported that this trait was difficult to access when dealing with family, friends and the University. Moreover, they believed this trait was fundamental to making them feel comfortable within the therapeutic environment.

Having an avenue to deal with my issues and feelings without taking it out on my close family and friends. Getting advice and expressing myself to a non-biased non-judgmental person

Anonymity and no judgement. Very glad this is free or I couldn't afford to get help.

3.2.3. Empathetic

Empathy was listed by students as an equally important trait for Counsellors to possess. Students indicated that this would allow them to comfortably explore issues that were inhibiting their potential. They again indirectly highlighted the value of guidance and wisdom in conjunction with empathy.

Having someone to talk to who is non-judgmental, empathetic and is there to listen to my problems rather than try to solve them.

Understanding from someone who is patient, receptive of our needs and desires and wishes and opinions, knowledgeable enough to give sound advice that will make a change in our lives.

3.2.4. Unbiased

Students reported the importance of speaking with a Counsellor that was unbiased and impartial. They commonly noted that they found this difficult to access outside of a professional service. Moreover they highlighted the value of having someone who had a focus specifically on their needs.

The confidentiality of talking to a person with no vested interest in me other than to help.

Someone to talk to that isn't related or has bias. To be able to reach out and get help for assignments if I can't manage my work well, so extra time to be able to feel safe and knowing someone cares.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to conduct a qualitative investigation into the needs and expectations of students attending a University Counselling Service. There were three over-arching themes identified: Connectedness, Assistance and Professionalism. Connectedness highlighted a perceived need for greater interpersonal interaction within the context of the University. Students indicated feeling increasingly anonymous, unrecognised and disengaged within the University system. Students emphasised the need for multidimensional assistance across a range of areas including mental health, university performance and developmental support. Students reported that connection and assistance were optimised when services are free, readily available and staffed by qualified professionals with an in-depth understanding of the university system. These areas were all identified as equally fundamental to students' capacity to succeed at university.

Developmental factors such as the search for meaning and connectedness are significant for students who need to acquire the psychosocial competencies to manage personal practical setbacks within an increasingly disconnected culture. Students can benefit from brief mental health or well-being interventions; however the centrality of the need for connectedness (therapeutic working alliance) and psychosocial development (positive development/self-authorship) is highlighted in these results. Students identified that services such as counselling provide opportunities for connectedness, the development of psychological skills, and recovery from negative experiences.

Student interest in personal growth is consistent with evidence that development of an integrated internal identity provides greater outcomes both at university and in later life (Saklofske, Austin, Mastoras, Beaton, & Osborne, 2012). Students indicated that receiving guidance from an easily accessible psychological professional who possessed institutional knowledge was important for this process. As students are generally of an age in which they are still undergoing individuation, it may be possible that the desire to engage with a face-to-face counsellor is both emotional and practical. Students may have difficulties obtaining advice from their parents, either due to individuation or lack of knowledge, and their peers are of a similar life experience stage (Pizzolato & Hickien, 2011). Therefore, a counsellor is able to act as a guide that possesses the required knowledge, but also has the relational distance to act as a mentor rather than an authority figure. Such a dynamic highlights the importance of the therapeutic working alliance in enabling developmental learning (Shirk & Karver, 2003).

Traditionally, psychology looks at alliance in terms of the therapeutic relationship and its role in promoting treatment gains across a variety of disorders (Karver, Handelsman, Fields, & Bickman, 2006; Lambert & Barley, 2001; McLeod, 2011). However, the current findings suggest that within the context of a university counselling service, the alliance role also has a function in promoting the development of positive developmental assets such as resilience, optimism, coping, social support, life satisfaction, self-esteem and effective help seeking behaviour (Bhola & Kapur, 2013).

When considering the range of services provided to students, the results suggest that while students can work with different levels of service engagement, connectedness and professionalism are highly valued in terms of help seeking. Review of this need is increasingly important given the current trend towards service delivery via online means (Barak & Grohol, 2011; Jorm, Morgan, & Malhi, 2013). Whilst online therapeutic service options have the capacity for universal reach, the current findings suggest that such approaches may negate the areas of socialisation and professional mentoring valued at this developmental stage. Reports to date remain unclear about the long-term/developmental benefits of such online interventions, despite their increased application with adolescent and young adult populations (Davies, 2014). As such, the function of the personalised alliance in promoting student development and success needs to be taken into consideration in terms of providing optimal services to students.

Limitations

The current study has several limitations as a consequence of the data being gathered for quality assurance purposes. Firstly, the study surveyed only new students attending the Counselling Service. Additionally, the results represent a quarter of the students attending the Counselling Service during the six-month collection period. As such, caution must be taken in drawing correlations to the counselling service population and broader university population. However, the large amount of data that was gathered across the six-month collection period provided a satisfactory saturation of themes. Secondly, as information on prior therapeutic interventions was not recorded, there is possible ambiguity as to whether students were reporting on their needs or expectations of counselling. Finally, as no demographic data was collected, it is not possible to determine the proportion of respondents that were either male or female; young adult or mature age; international or local students; or had any history of previous treatment. Future studies would benefit from collating such data to enable examination of any interactions between these variables and the perceived benefits of the Counselling Service.

Conclusions

Given the demands of a tertiary education environment, it is unsurprising that increasing levels of distress are reported among the student cohort (Stallman, 2010). However, from the perspective of developmental and connectedness factors, the results of the current study suggest that university counselling services have a complex role; far broader than a focus on preventing or treating mental illness. These findings suggest that students desire professional counselling services that enable the process of personal, social and academic development. This implies that students experience a need for connectedness at both a service unit and institutional level. The results from this survey suggest that counselling services and the broader University culture have roles to play in enabling student development, facilitating connectedness, and optimising integrated student success.

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