

## Students' Perspectives on the Role of Counsellors in the University of Bamenda, Cameroon

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### Abstract

*In spite of the importance and the availability of Guidance and counselling services in the University setting, it is observed that students barely exploit these services. It is common place to find students facing problems which can easily be handled by counsellors but who end up channelling their challenges to inappropriate remedial sources. This makes one to wonder whether they are aware of the Guidance and counselling services which are provided by the university. It is based on this reflection that this paper was designed to find out students perspectives on the role of counsellors in the University of Bamenda (UBa). Specifically the paper sought to find out whether or not students are aware of the role of counsellors in UBa, to examine the extent to which they use the services and to find out the impression students have about the role of counsellors in UBa. The descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The sample size of 250 students was selected randomly from the Faculties of Arts, Economics and Management Sciences, Law and Political Science, and the Faculty of Science. After analysing the data using descriptive and inferential statistics, the findings revealed that an overwhelming majority of the students were not aware of the role of counsellors in UBa, and most of the students had negative impressions on the role of counsellors. It is clear that if students are not aware of the role of guidance counsellors, they will hardly go for counselling. Therefore a wider publicity on the role of counsellors has to be made in order to create awareness of the existing counselling services in UBa.*

**Key words:** *Counselling, Counsellor, Guidance, Role and Impression*

### INTRODUCTION

In Cameroon, school counsellors are trained by the government and posted to secondary schools and the Universities to assist students in multifaceted ways. They are expected to carry out both guidance and counselling services at their respective stations. Guidance and Counselling is a specialized field that has a wide assortment of undertakings and services intended to help students understand themselves, their challenges and the environment around them (Egbochuku, 2008; Oniye & Alawaye 2008; Eyo, Joshua, & Esuong, 2010; Lunenburg, 2010). According to Noel, Levitz & Saluri (1985), proper counselling services lead students to greater developmental independence, and to more effective participation in the educational process. Alice, Alice & Patrick (2013) reiterate that effective counselling, especially in institutions of learning has now become an imperative. In Cameroon state universities in general and the University of Bamenda (UBa) in particular, it has been observed that despite the availability of counsellors and the significance placed on the role of counsellors in most higher institutions of learning, students' problems, notably from psychological, social, emotional, career choices and learning difficulties are still on the rise. Some of these students turn to seek help from their peers or lecturers who may not really have the professional knowledge to meet their needs. Based on these observations, there appear to be a blur link between the Guidance and Counselling services and students in the university milieu. Therefore this paper is designed to examine students' perspectives on the role of Counsellors in UBa, one of the eight public state Universities in Cameroon.

### BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

An investigation of the attitude of students towards guidance and counselling services has derived impetus from the assumption that students are the major recipients of guidance and counselling services in the school setting. It is believed that the success of any programme in school is informed by students' attitude towards it. The way

students respond and perceive guidance and counselling services, will to a great extent, determine whether or not guidance and counselling services are needed or will be effectively utilized in schools. In this light some researchers have carried out diverse research related to students' awareness of the role of counsellors, the use of counselling services and students' impressions towards counsellors. Contributing on the extent of awareness on the guidance and counselling services on school campuses, Rutondoki (2000) found out that although students generally have a favourable attitude towards counselling related services, only few of them are aware of the opportunities offered by guidance and counselling. Rutondoki's study further reveals that although some students are aware of the role of school counsellors, they do not seek help from the counsellors because they believe they are capable of solving their issues or getting help from their peers. Similarly, Nyokabi and Thinguri (2015) investigated on students' awareness and attitudes toward counsellors and reported that most students know of existing counselling programmes and have positive attitudes towards them. According to Ondima, Mokogi, Ombaba, and Osoro (2013) students perceived guidance and counselling programme as being effective in enhancing their personal, career and academic competencies but they shy away from counselling due to the fear of being teased and bullied by peers in school. Chan and Quinn (2012), for their part state that some students are aware of the role of counsellors but do not seek their services for fear of stigmatization from others who find out or see them going for such services. All these are indications that some students are aware of the role of counsellors but because of one reason or the other they do not utilize the services.

Looking at why students barely use counselling services, Fox and Butler (2007) opine that it is due to dearth of knowledge emanating from limited publicity. Ogunlade and Akeredolu (2012) argue that most students do not use the services of guidance counsellors because most counsellors in the school system are untrained and this can affect efficiency and the ability to woo more clients. They indicate that most students in schools make career choices without informed opinions because professionally trained counsellors with the requisite knowledge are usually not available. Anagbogu (2008) justifies that many school counsellors do not have access to the requisite professional training that could empower them to be impactful in schools. This indicates that there is inconsiderate attention to the training of professionally adept Guidance Counsellors to meet the demands of clients in most schools. Le Surf & Lynch, (1999); Mushaandja, Haihambo, Vergnani, & Frank, (2013) and Setiawan (2006) for their part state that some students do not seek the services of guidance counsellors because they doubt the degree of confidentiality assured by counsellors.

The extent to which students use the services of school counsellors is also determine by the impressions they have about the role of counsellors (Dalley & Lenoy, 2004). According to Aspen et al, (2015) some students assert that counsellors play a crucial role in their career decisions through the information service and this makes them to have positive impressions of the counselors' role. On the other hand, Menon (2010) reports that students do not consider counsellors as central in the decisions made about their careers. Agi (2014), argues that students hold negative views of counselling because they perceive counsellors as not sufficiently informed to guide them towards prospective career choices. Ogunlade and Akeredolu (2012) holds that most students make wrong career decisions because they have no informed counsellors to support them in their decision-making process. Buttressing these views, Gitonga, (1999); Nyamwange, Nyakan & Ondima, (2012) indicate that students do not consider counselling necessary in schools as they overwhelmingly reported a negative attitude towards guidance and counselling programmes. Although some findings have shown that students have negative impressions about counsellors and their services, Egbo (2015) on his part argues that students perceive counsellors to be impactful in their choices in life if they recognize the individual differences of each student and strive to meet their needs. Patterson and Levy (2007) further states that students perception of counsellors can only be positive if the counsellors have genuine interest in helping them solve their diverse problems rather than just providing them with basic or general information which may not be of help to them. This goes back to the importance of individual considerations during counselling sessions. McLaughlin (1999) asserts that counsellors who are inaccessible due to added teaching or administrative responsibilities are bound to have limited or no impact at all on students' career choices.

From the breadth and depth of extant research on the existence and knowledge of Counsellors and their services in schools, it is evident that a lot has been focused in pre-university instances. This is probably due to the fact that, as junior learners, students in secondary schools are considered to be premature in managing socio-emotional, educational and psychological challenges. More so, they are not socialized in the art of making informed career choices. Interestingly, attention on the perception of learners about Guidance and Counselling services has most often unintentionally sideline those in the university milieu where students have diverse and at times complex issues that require professional counselling therapies. Absence of a proper information system on the association of students psycho-social, pedagogic and prospective career choices with competent counselling services in post-secondary school levels obliges a study to understand the motivations in order to revalorise the importance of counselling services especially in the university circle. It is in this context that this study seeks to find out the extent to which students are aware of the role of counsellors, the extent to which they use the counselling services and their impressions about the role of counsellors in UBa.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- To what extent are students aware of the role of counsellors in the University of Bamenda?
- To what extent do students use counselling services in the University of Bamenda?
- What impression do students have about the role of counsellors in the University of Bamenda?
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### METHODS AND PROCEDURE

The design used in this study was a case study. This study was carried out in The University of Bamenda. The simple random and stratified sampling techniques were used to select the faculties and a sample of 250 respondents respectively as indicated on table 1 (Appendix). The research instrument used for this study was a semi-structured questionnaire which comprised both open and closed ended items. The questionnaire comprised four sections: Section A: Demographic information, Section B: students' awareness of the role of counsellors, Section C: the extent to which students use counsellors, Section D: students impressions on the role of counsellors in UBa. Sections B, C and D had five items each. The fifth item in section D was an open-ended question. Therefore the instrument had fifteen items. Respondents were expected to choose the response that best fit their views and give their opinions where necessary.

After designing the questionnaire a pilot test was carried out with 20 students in Bamenda University of science and Technology (BUST) in order to test the content and face validity. BUST is a private higher Education institutes situated 5 miles off from UBa. In order to get access to the Schools and Faculties implicated in the study, authorization was taken from the Deans and Directors. The instrument was administered in the various Faculties with the help of research assistants. The respondents were assured of confidentiality and the academic purpose of the research. The consents of the participants were solicited and only those who consented filled the copies of questionnaire. It was also ensured that the research instruments did not pose any psychological damage to the respondents by avoiding the use of derogatory words. After collecting the data, the electronic entering of data from the copies of the questionnaire was done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Data was analysed using descriptive statistics.

### RESULTS

The results are presented according to the research questions

**Question One:** To what extent are students aware of the role of counsellors in the University of Bamenda?

The results on table 2 (Appendix) show that very few (11%) of the respondents had knowledge on the location of counsellors' offices in UBa. This means that majority (89%) of the students had no idea about the location. When respondents were quizzed about the availability of counselling services/page on the university

Website, all of them (100%) indicated that there was no counselling page on the University website as of the time of the investigation. This leaves the puzzle on how counselling is carried out during the admission process which is online. As far as the issue of notice boards were concerned, majority (79.2%) of the respondents indicated that there were no notice boards on campus for creating awareness on counselling, while a minority (20.8%) of the respondents indicated that they had come across notice boards on campus aimed at creating awareness on counselling services. This means that there were some boards which majority of the students were not aware of probably due to their positions or disinterest. When respondents were asked whether they were sensitized on the role of counsellors upon their admission into the university, an insignificant number (18%) accepted. Some of them indicated that they were sensitized during their Faculty/School orientation. Consequently, majority (82%) of the respondents did not receive such sensitization on the role of counsellors. Some explain further that counsellors were introduced to them during the orientation programmes in their schools but little or nothing was said about their roles.

When asked whether the respondents knew the counsellors of their respective Schools and Faculties, very few (14%) of them accepted. Some explained that counsellors were introduced to them but since nothing or little was said about their role they had no interest in knowing them further. From the aggregate scores (30.6% for “yes” and 69.4% for “no”) of the frequency distribution as indicated on table 2 (Appendix), the conclusion that could be arrived at is that majority of the students were not aware of the role of the counsellors in the University of Bamenda and that may account for the negative attitudes towards counselling services at UBa.

**Research question two:** To what extent do students use counsellors in the University of Bamenda?

Looking at the statistics on table 3 (Appendix), an insignificant (1.6%) number of the research participants were of the view that the counsellor helped them to choose their field of study, while 98.4% stated that the counsellors did not help them. Therefore majority of the students did not receive any counselling service during the admission process. When asked whether the respondents participated in the orientation session of newly admitted students, very few (27.2%) of them accepted to have taken part in the session while majority (72.8%) of them did not. From the qualitative data, most of the respondents indicated that they did not take part in the orientation session because they were not aware of the schedule.

Apart from the orientation programme, the respondents were also asked whether they had ever visited any of the counsellors in UBa, a few (14%) of them stated that they had visited the counsellor severally, while an overwhelming majority (86%) indicated that they had not visited the counsellor. On the issue of group guidance and counselling, very few (8.4%) of the respondents indicated that they were offered that service, while a majority (91.6%) of the respondents were of the view that they had never taken part in a group counselling session. The respondents were also asked whether they have had individual counselling sessions, the results on table 3 (Appendix) shows that only a few (4.4%) of the respondents indicated to have had individual counselling sessions with the counsellor, while a majority (95.6%) of the respondents stated that they had never had an individual counselling session with a counsellor. When asked why they never visited any counsellor, nor had neither individual nor counselling sessions with the counsellors, majority of the respondents indicated that they had no idea about the existence and the functions of counsellors in UBa. From the aggregate scores on table 3 (Appendix), it can be concluded that the majority of UBa students do not use counsellors. From both qualitative and quantitative data it is clear that UBa students barely use guidance counsellors because they are not aware of their availability in UBa.

**Research Question Three:** What impressions do students have about the role of counsellors in the University of Bamenda?

In an attempt to get the students’ impression of counsellors, the respondents were asked whether they thought counsellors in UBa were really helping students. From the results on table 4 (Appendix) very few (14.8%) of



the respondents confirmed that counsellors were really helping students while an overwhelming majority (85.2%) had a contrary view. In addition, the respondents were also questioned whether they admired the way counsellors in UBa were working, an insignificant number (10.4%) of respondents accepted while majority (89.6%) of them stated otherwise. Most of the respondents who did not admire the way counsellors in UBa were working further explained that counsellors had not made themselves known to the students and some of them were more concerned with other administrative duties than counselling. This could be further seen on the rating of the counsellors effectiveness by the respondents as only 7.6% of the respondents said that counsellors were effectively carrying out their functions, while most (92.4%) of them did not think counsellors were effectively carrying out their functions in UBa. Still on the issue of effectiveness, only 9.6% of the research participants indicated that they were satisfied with the functions of counsellors in UBa. Judging from the aggregate scores on table 4 (Appendix), the respondents seemed not to have a good impression about the functions of counsellors in UBa. In order to collect qualitative data, an open-ended question was asked to respondents to describe their impressions about counsellors.

The statistics on table 5 (Appendix) shows that the majority (88.4%) of the respondents had a negative impression about the role of counsellors in UBa while a few (11.6%) of them indicated to have a positive impression. Those who had negative impressions about counsellors explained that most of the counsellors were “lazy” and had never come to any of the classes to talk to students. One reported as follows” I have a negative impression about counsellors in UBa because I think they are lazy, if not they would have been going to classes to make themselves known to students. I thought counsellors are sent to the university to help students...” Another respondent said “I have been going through learning difficulties and other emotional issues and I have never known that there are counsellors in UBa. This means they have not been carrying out their functions effectively”. Another respondent asked “if we really have school counsellors in UBa where are their offices located? and why are they not helping students with problems?” These responses show that there is inadequate awareness on the existence and role of counsellors in UBa.

Although majority of the students had a negative impression on the role of counsellors, there were some few respondents who indicated that they had positive impressions about counsellors and their functions in UBa. Some attested that counsellors in UBa are very experienced and helpful to students. One stated that “when I was admitted into UBa it was not easy for me to adapt; I had a lot of stress which really hindered my studies. I decided to seek the services of our counsellor who was introduced during orientation. I had several sessions with the counsellor and I finally adapted to university life”. This shows some students have been exploiting the counselling services although the numbers are few and inconsequential compared to the potential numbers of clients in university of about 17.000.

## **DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS**

The findings of this study revealed that most of the students were not yet aware of the role of counsellors in UBa. This may be due to inadequate information of the students on the services of the guidance counsellors. The findings of this study align with the work of Onyekuru & Ibegunam (2014) on the status of counselling awareness among secondary school students in Oji River Local Government Area of Enugu State in Nigeria which show that most of the students were not aware of the counselling services as provided by the counsellors. This is an indication that Counsellors are being trained and sent to schools but they do not really create awareness for the students. This may be as a result of negligence on the part of the school administrators as well as school counsellors. Counsellors are supposed to create time and give group guidance to students in their various classes but this is yet to be a culture in UBa. If counsellors carry out this particular activity especially at the beginning of the academic year many students will be aware of their services and will also seek these services when need be. Although it is indicated that majority of students in UBa and some other universities are not aware of the role of counsellors, the works of Losade, Lawal and Ofodile (2017) show contrary results based on their investigation on students' needs, awareness, perception and use of Guidance and Counselling Services in the Federal University of Agriculture of Abeokuta. Their results indicate that majority

of the students are aware of the existence of Guidance and Counselling Services as a result of diverse ways of sensitization which is somehow overlooked in UBa. Also the work of Nyokabi and Thinguri (2015) contradict the findings of this study by stating that majority of students know of existing counselling programmes and have positive attitudes towards them. This is a clear indication that students awareness of the role of counsellors vary in different settings but it becomes a cause for concern if majority of the students are not aware of the role of counsellors in their institutions of learning like the case of UBa.

Both qualitative and quantitative data revealed that a significant number of students in UBa do not use counselling services. It is obvious that if students are not aware of the role of counsellors they will not seek counselling services. This finding corroborate with that of Fia (2011) which state that students of Ho municipality in Ghana are not making good use of Guidance and Counselling services in schools despite the availability of demarcated counselling centres created to cater for the needs of the students. Just like the case of UBa, Fia's study indicates that the absence of group guidance and counselling of students by counsellors in the school creates ignorance among students about counselling and that is why students scarcely seek the services of the school counsellors. The findings of this work entrenches that of Setiawan (2006) who state that some students do not seek the services of guidance counsellors because they doubt the degree of confidentiality assured by counsellors. This was also one of the reasons advanced by some UBa students. According to them they were not sure the counsellors could respect this vital ethical issue. Confidentiality is imperative in counselling and if the counselee is not sure of it, it becomes difficult to seek the services of a counsellor. On the other hand, the findings of Losade, Lawal & Ofodile (2017) indicate that majority of students in the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta use Guidance and Counselling Services effectively. This relates to the fact that most students in that University are aware of the role of counsellors and seek the services of counsellors when necessary. The fact that counsellors are in UBa but majority of the students do not seek their services despite the number of problems they face indicate that the counsellors are not used for the purpose they were trained for and this really constitute a major problem which policy managers need to address.

The findings of this study also revealed that a majority of respondents had negative impressions about the role of counsellors in Uba. The fact that majority of students are not aware of the role of counsellors and do not seek their services can justify why they perceive counsellors negatively. The findings somehow matches with the results of the study carried out by Agi (2014) in the Cross River State-Nigeria on the evaluation of students' perception of school counselling. Agi's findings indicate that most of the respondents held a negative view of counselling due primarily to perceptions held about the counsellor. Also the findings of this study are in congruence with the work of Menon (2010) who states that students do not consider counsellors as central in the decisions made about careers and therefore have negative impressions about them as far as their career choices are concerned. On the contrary, Musgrove, (1973) in the study on High School students' attitude toward guidance and counselling services discovered a favourable overall attitude toward their guidance counsellors. It is inferred that the needs and expectations of the majority of the students are being met by the guidance and counselling services. Therefore, counsellors in UBa have to be more involved in activities which affect students directly such as admission, orientation and career decisions. This will elevate the status of the counselling services and counsellors in the institution.

## **CONCLUSION**

Counsellors and their services are of utmost importance to students in the university. They help students to adjust to university life and also help them to cope with socio-emotional, psychological and educational problems. Despite this fact, counsellors are still not creating the desired impact on the lives of students in UBa. After analysing the data, it was realised that majority of students were not yet aware of the role of the counsellors in UBa and that may account for the negative attitudes towards counselling services in the university. Furthermore, it was revealed that a significant number of students were not using counsellors in UBa due to the fact that they were not aware of their availability as well as locations on campus. The findings also revealed that an overwhelming majority of students had a negative impression about the role of counsellors in

UBa since the counsellors made little or no efforts to create awareness about their presence and the role they can play in helping students. To change students' impression on the role of counsellors, the counsellors should therefore be ready to sell their services to students, lecturers and even the school administration, most of whom are yet to fully grasp the role of the counsellor and by extension the importance of counselling services. Through these agents, students' positive attitude can be developed towards the school counsellors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Counsellors should create awareness of the existing counselling services by giving it a wider publicity in the University so as to improve students' attitude towards the services. This can be done by organizing career seminars, orientation and group counselling sessions, use of bulletin boards, posters and dedicating a page on the university website for counselling services.
- Programmes and activities should be organised to create awareness and encourage the use of counselling facilities. Activities along this line should include talks on guidance services, displays of guidance materials, posters, use of bulletin boards, private interviews, seminars, workshops and conferences.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1:** Target, accessible and the sample size of the study

Faculties	Departments	Target population	Accessible population	Sample size
<b>Law and Political Science</b>	English Private Law	641	205	39
	Public Law	381	141	27
	Political Science	132	52	10
<b>Arts</b>	History and Archaeology	370	33	6
	Linguistic and African Languages	169	32	6
	Philosophy	42	14	3
	Performing and Visual Arts	67	29	6
	English Language	315	85	16
	Communication and Development Studies	182	84	16
	Geography and Planning	908	154	28
<b>Science</b>	Biochemistry	250	108	21



	Mathematics and Computer Science	135	77	15
	Physics	95	47	9
	Chemistry	76	30	6
	Geology, Mines and Environmental Science	48	31	4
<b>Economics and Management Science</b>	Economics	111	52	10
	Accounting	134	90	17
	Management	180	56	11
<b>Total</b>		<b>4236</b>	<b>1312</b>	<b>250</b>

**Table 2:** Frequency distribution of responses on students’ awareness of the role of counsellors in UBa

Items	Options	
	Yes	No
I know where offices of counsellors are located on campus	28(11%)	222(89%)
There is a counselling page on the UBa website.	0(0%)	250(100%)
There is a notice board on campus meant for creating awareness about counselling to students through posters and publications.	198(79.2%)	52(20.8%)
When I gained admission in to UBa, I was immediately sensitized on the role of the counsellor.	45(18%)	205(82%)
I know the counsellor of my Faculty/School	35(14%)	215(86%)
<b>Aggregate score</b>	<b>306(30.6.8%)</b>	<b>694(69.4%)</b>

**Table 3:** Frequency distribution of responses based on the extent to which students use counsellors in the UBa.

Items	Options	
	Yes	No
The school counsellor helped me to choose my field of study.	4 (1.6%)	246 (98.4%)
Our school counsellor talked to us during the orientation session of fresh students into UBa.	68 (27.2%)	182 (72.8%)
I have visited my counsellor severally	35 (14%)	215 (86%)
I have been participating in group counselling sessions coordinated by our school counsellor.	21 (8.4%)	229 (91.6%)
I have had individual counselling sessions with my counsellor.	11 (4.4%)	239 (95.6%)
<b>Aggregate score</b>	<b>139 (13.9%)</b>	<b>861 (81.6%)</b>

**Table 4:** Frequency distribution of responses based on students’ impressions about the role of counsellors in the University of Bamenda.

Items	Options	
	Yes	No
Do you think counsellors in UBa are really helping students?	37 (14.8%)	213 (85.2%)
I admire the way Counsellors in UBa work.	26 (10.4%)	224 (89.6%)
Counsellors have been carrying out their functions effectively.	19 (7.6%)	231 (92.4%)
I am satisfied with the functions of the counsellors in UBa.	24 (9.6%)	226 (90.4%)
<b>Aggregate score</b>	<b>106 (10.6%)</b>	<b>894 (89.4%)</b>

**Table 5:** Frequency distribution of responses on students’ general impressions about counsellors role in UBa

Positive	Negative
29 (11.6%)	221( 88.4%)