



RESEARCH PAPER

Guidance and Counseling Services for Students at Public Sector Universities: A Case of Gilgit-Baltistan

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study was to identify, how students of a public sector University get benefits from different guidance and counseling services provided by the organization during their academic life. This research further explored the challenges hindering the provision of guidance and counseling services in universities in Pakistan. The provision of effective guidance and counseling (G&C) services is crucial for supporting students' academic success, emotional well-being, and career development—particularly in regions facing unique socio-economic and geographic challenges. Gilgit-Baltistan, a remote and underrepresented area of Pakistan, presents a distinct context where students often confront psychological stress, limited exposure to career opportunities, and academic adjustment difficulties due to isolation, cultural constraints, and underdeveloped institutional support systems. The researcher selected a qualitative approach for data collection and data analysis, and case study design was selected and KIU (Karakoram International University) was the case. A number of 12 participants were selected using a convenient sampling technique, where semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection. Through semi-structured interviews with faculty, heads of departments, and students from different departments. It was identified that there is a lack of proper planning, trained resource persons, financial aid, and infrastructure to provide such services. Additionally, there is a lack of awareness on behalf of the administration, teachers, and students. Furthermore, the administration does not pay adequate attention to providing such services. The researchers discussed issues related to trustworthiness, teacher's attitude towards adaptation to new responsibilities, and the lack of human resources and infrastructure as some of the major hindrances in providing guidance and counseling services. It is recommended that proper planning, training, and awareness are necessary to make these services available for all students in universities in Pakistan. Universities should provide such awareness and trainings to students and staff.

KEYWORDS Counseling and Guidance, Higher Education, University Students, Pakistan

Introduction

Many university students face multifaceted challenges during their academic life, including academic, social, professional, institutional, and psychological problems (Mdidi, 2015). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are responsible for equipping students with the tools to navigate these challenges, and guidance and counseling services are widely recognized as critical interventions in this process (Hartwig Moorhead, Duncan, & Fernandez, 2023).

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) of South Africa defines guidance as a practice enabling students to acquire skills to direct their educational, professional, and social lives effectively (Euvrard, 1992). This definition has evolved in the digital age, where

online platforms now play a pivotal role in delivering counseling services, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Conde, Santos, & Prado, 2021). Similarly, Oviogbodu (2015) conceptualizes counseling as a systematic problem-solving process, the same view expanded by Canzittu (2023), who emphasizes that providing proper guidance as an approach to tailored volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. Elizabeth, Esther, and Egenti (2016) highlight the role of counseling in fostering decision-making, career selection, and positive attitudes, while Wang, Ye, Gao, Lee, Zeng, and Wang (2024) stress its importance in addressing vocational students' learning-related stress, especially academic goal-setting and coping with setbacks.

The provision of effective guidance and counseling (G&C) services is crucial for supporting students' academic success, emotional well-being, and career development—particularly in regions facing unique socio-economic and geographic challenges. Gilgit-Baltistan, a remote and underrepresented area of Pakistan, presents a distinct context where students often confront psychological stress, limited exposure to career opportunities, and academic adjustment difficulties due to isolation, cultural constraints, and underdeveloped institutional support systems. Despite growing enrollment in higher education, public sector universities in Gilgit-Baltistan generally lack structured G&C frameworks tailored to local needs. This research is significant as it aims to explore the availability, accessibility, and effectiveness of current G&C services, identify key challenges faced by students, and assess institutional readiness to support students holistically. Findings from this study will inform policy recommendations for establishing or enhancing student-centered guidance systems in line with national education goals, the Pakistan Education Policy, and global benchmarks such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being). It will also contribute to reducing educational inequity by bringing attention to the psychosocial and career needs of students in peripheral regions.

Literature Review

Ihsanullah (2020) outlines three functions of guidance, adjustment (adapting to new environments), distributive (universal accessibility), and adaptive (curriculum alignment with student needs). These functions align with Alexander, Ramer, Nicola, Kenyon, and Carroll (2022), who found that school counselors during the COVID-19 pandemic faced heightened demands to address mental health crises, particularly among marginalized students. Khan (2018) similarly argues that counseling helps students adapt to challenging situations, another important notion was highlighted by Molla (2023), whose study links academic self-concept and belief in counseling effectiveness to proactive help-seeking behaviors.

Despite these recognized benefits, systemic gaps persist globally in the implementation and execution of proper guidance and counseling services. Salgong, Ngumi, and Chege (2016) note that inadequate counseling infrastructure correlates with student misbehavior, a finding discussed in Aslam, Saeed, and Muneer's (2021) survey of Karachi's secondary schools, where 72% of the schools lacked counseling services. In China, Sun and Yuen (2012) observed emerging career guidance practices, a gap partially addressed by Wang, Ye, Gao, Lee, Zeng, and Wang (2024), who advocate for collaboration between vocational college teachers and counselors to address students' learning-related needs. In Pakistan, Khan (2012) and Ihsanullah (2020) criticize the absence of structured counseling services in universities, a systemic failure compounded by Javed and Malik's (2021) finding that 89% of Pakistani university students lacked access to professional counselors. Emerging innovations, such as psychedelic-assisted counseling, offer promising but ethically complex avenues for addressing mental health challenges, though their integration into mainstream practice requires rigorous training and cultural sensitivity (Burt, 2023). Meanwhile, Oliveira and Araújo (2023) argue that early career exploration in childhood lays the foundation for academic success, urging HEIs to adopt

lifelong learning frameworks. Further signlanguage interpreters may also be used in providing such services where there are lack of resources especially humans (Bashir et al, 2025,)

In conclusion guidance and counseling services are essential in the context of education worldwide, especially in universities (Samson, 2015). Students come from various socio-economic backgrounds and may encounter many issues that can affect their productivity, such as psychological, social, spiritual, academic, financial, and gender-related problems. To help them adjust to this new environment, considerable interest should be given to providing guidance and counseling services, which can assist students in facing any complex problems they may encounter. Without such services, the overall quality of higher education could suffer, as students may not reach their full potential due to difficulties adjusting to their new surroundings. Considering these situations, a considerable amount of research has been done to investigate the effectiveness of guidance and counseling services provided by institutes all over the world. Firstly, the researcher is not aware of any study conducted on such an important topic in the context of Karakorum international University, which draws her attention toward this study. Secondly, the researcher aims to investigate whether central or departmental guidance and counseling services are provided by KIU University to its students or not. If yes, then how these services are enacted?

Material and Methods

The researchers employed qualitative research method using case study design to collect data to assess the "Availability of guidance and counseling services in KIU Gilgit." All students and faculty at Karakorum International University served as the research population, from which using a volunteer sampling technique, a sample of 12 participants was selected. This sampling technique was chosen due to its ability to accommodate participant willingness to participate. To ensure a comprehensive representation of the university, representatives from all 19 departments were contacted, however, only 12 participants responded. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and teachers from different departments. The researcher used thematic analysis of data obtained through interviews.

Results and Discussion

Concerning the availability of guidance and counselling services for students across different departments it was found that, **orientation, information, and placement services** are the most frequently given services by all the departments as mentioned by the respondents. Additionally, the results show that, in some of the departments' follow-up and evaluation services are also given to the students when needed. The findings also highlighted as, these practices were carried out informally so it is evident that although guidance and counseling services are given to the students when needed in all the departments, there is a lack of proper planning at the departmental level. The university needs to include it as the priority and develop some policies for proper implementation in all the departments equally as mentioned by one of the respondents,

"We provide guidance to our students when it is needed, but I think it is the responsibility of the organization to make such kind of activities an important part of academics, but we lack a central policy and plan".

Considering above mentioned scenario, it was proved that university management needs to address this gap to make academic practices more effective for students , in addition the similar notion was addressed by Ihsan Ullah, (2020) in his empirical study where the researcher argues that the universities lack the provision of guidance and counseling services in the context of Pakistan. The researcher further stated that the

higher authorities need to establish guidance and counseling cells not only in universities but also in schools and colleges in Pakistan. Recent studies corroborate this, showing that even institutions with counseling frameworks often fail to implement centralized policies, leading to fragmented support (Wang, Ye, Gao, Lee, Zeng, & Wang, 2024).

Pre-admission services are one of the most important types of guidance provided to students at the university level where (Borrow, 1983) argues that guidance and counseling programs (pre-services) are helpful to assess students in course selection and get to know about required qualifications needed to get admission in a particular course in result students can better understand their capabilities and develop self-realization. Comparing participants' responses, the researcher found that there are no properly structured pre-admission services available at the university. Participants stressed that there must be a proper guidance and counseling program to help students in the selection of areas for specialization keeping in view their capabilities and interest.

'I never got a chance to attain any guidance and counseling program arrange by the university before getting admission to the English department. I found most of the subjects difficult and less interesting for me. I think I made some wrong decisions.'

"University does not offer any guidance and counseling programs before admission. Most of the students suffer from psychological and academic problems because they made wrong choices at the beginning"

This aligns with findings from Wang et al. (2024), who emphasize that vocational students in China require structured pre-admission counseling to address learning-related anxieties, suggesting such gaps are global. There must be a proper well-planned approach to career guidance to help the students according to their needs interest and local demand, by generating proper networking and accessible guidance programs in universities.

The usefulness of guidance and counseling programs

There is a large volume of published studies describing the importance of guidance and counseling in the field of education in general. The findings of this study reveal that all the participants stressed that guidance and counseling services are the most important areas that help students in different ways. Participants pointed out that these programs are helpful to resolve students' problems and help them make smart choices about their future. In universities, students face a lot of problems as mentioned by the research participants these problems could be, psychological, financial, academic, and social.

"Guidance and counseling services are very important, in our context students coming from diverse areas face a lot of challenges during their academic years, i.e. financial, social, adjustment-related, academic, and psychological. Every faculty member in our department tries to help students but I think we need a centralized system"

"As a student, I think guidance and counseling are very helpful to resolve our problems. Many times, we get guidance from our teachers regarding academic-related issues. They are always welcoming us to approach them but we need more assistance for example sometimes we need counseling while facing any psychological problem'.

Molla (2023) reinforces this, showing that students' belief in counseling effectiveness correlates with proactive help-seeking behaviors, which are critical for academic success. Keeping in view participants' points of view it is evident that guidance and counseling services are as important as other curricular activities within an organization. All the study participants admire that these programs are very helpful and important not only for students but to maintaining a well-organized learning environment as mentioned by one of the participants,

"We have a disciplinary committee in our department which helps us to maintain departmental rules and regulations this committee also provides guidance and counseling to the students who are involved in any unethical activity"

A majority of participants indicated that guidance and counseling services are proving to be very helpful during educational years. These services if provided adequately can help the students and teachers in different ways, as mentioned by (Nkechi, Ewomaoghene, & Egenti, 2016) that these programs are helpful to prepare students for challenges related to academics, social, career, and psychological development. It also helps them to gain knowledge about themselves and others, and develop problem-solving skills through the proper development of interpersonal skills. Similarly, Oliveira and Araújo (2023) argue that early career exploration fosters lifelong academic success, highlighting the need for structured counseling frameworks.

Challenges hindering the provision of guidance and counseling services

It was evident that guidance and counseling are some of the most important areas that needed thoughtful consideration in terms of implementation in educational jurisdiction. Although a bulk of research suggests that educational institutes need proper planning to make these services accessible for all students, there is a gap hindering the process in universities in Pakistan. There are several challenges and hurdles highlighted by the research participants as

"As a head of the department, I strongly believe that guidance and counseling are one of the most needed and I would like to say the most ignored facilities in our university. There is a lack of proper planning, trained resources persons, financial aids and infrastructure."

Some of the participants believed that there was a **lack of awareness** on behalf of the administration, teachers, and students.

'As a psychologist, I believe that there is a lack of awareness about the importance of these programs. We need a centralized body of structure to perform such kind of task because sometimes university faces serious problems regarding law and order situations and these problems could be solved by proper counseling of students involved in such kind of activities'.

This mirrors findings by Aslam, Saeed, and Muneer (2021), who reported that 72% of Karachi's secondary schools lacked counseling departments due to administrative neglect.

Sometimes students are **reluctant to participate** in such kinds of programs so they need awareness of the usefulness of these programs.

"This is my fourth semester at university but I never heard about such kind of programs and facilities given by the university. I think it is difficult to trust any random person while sharing any kind of financial and psychological problem"

Most of the participants blame the **administration does not pay any attention** to providing such kind of facilities to the students. Hartwig Moorhead, Duncan, and Fernandez (2023) attribute such gaps to weak professional advocacy for counselor identity, urging institutions to prioritize counselor training and policy reform.

"I think there are several problems which hinder the provision of such kind of programs starting from the upper level of hierarchy to down. These areas were ignored and do not exist in the main agenda of the organization. We need well-trained counselors and we can also arrange seminars and workshops to provide awareness among students and teachers."

A similar notion was addressed by the researchers (Nyamwaka, Ondima, Nyamwange, Ombaba & Magaki, 2013) inadequacy in counselors' training (Nkechi, Ewomaoghene, & Egenti, 2016) mentioned issues related to trustworthiness (Wong & Yuen, 2019) teacher's attitude towards adaptation of new responsibilities and (Ihsan Ullah, 2020) addressed the notion of the lack of human resources and infrastructure. Mielgo-Conde, Seijas-Santos, and Grande-de-Prado (2021) add that institutions lacking digital counseling infrastructure—a gap exposed during COVID-19—struggle to meet modern student needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, guidance and counseling services are very important for the benefit of both students and teachers. However, it is evident that many challenges hinder the provision of these services in universities in Pakistan, ranging from a lack of awareness among students and teachers to inadequate resources and funding. To overcome these issues, it is necessary to create a centralized body of structure to ensure the proper implementation of such services. Additionally, awareness campaigns should be conducted to inform students and teachers about the importance of guidance and counseling services. With adequate resources and funds, universities can provide these essential services that will help in the social, career, and psychological development of students.

Recommendations

To enhance the intended result of guidance and counseling services in Pakistani universities, a multi-pronged strategy is crucial. First, institutional frameworks must designate the establishment of a centralized administrative body tasked with standardizing, implementing, and monitoring these services across departments to ensure fair and equitable access and adherence to national policies. Concurrently, universities should distribute dedicated funding and infrastructural resources, including hiring trained counselors and developing digital platforms, to address systemic gaps in service provision. To encourage awareness and engagement, targeted campaigns and collaborative workshops involving faculty, students, and parents should be organized to destigmatize counseling and highlight its role in academic and personal development. Equally curriculum reforms are critical; integrating modules on psychosocial skills, career planning, and emotional resilience into academic programs would empower students to navigate challenges proactively. Professional development opportunities, such as seminars and certifications for counselors, must be institutionalized to align practices with global standards, while partnerships with external mental health organizations could provide specialized support and resource-sharing. A reliable process designed to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, impact of a program and service, including periodic audits and feedback systems, should be implemented to assess program effectiveness and inform iterative improvements. Finally, policies mandating interdepartmental collaboration and financially helping students facing psychological or economic hardships must be codified to ensure holistic student welfare. Collectively, these measures would not only address existing disparities but also align Pakistani universities with international benchmarks for student support systems.

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