

Counselling Needs of Undergraduate Students of Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract: This quantitative cross-sectional descriptive study examined the counseling needs of undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions across four domains: academic, vocational, personal and emotional, and social and adjustment. The target population comprised all full-time undergraduate students enrolled in accredited public and private tertiary institutions across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones during the 2025 to 2026 academic session. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, a sample of 652 undergraduates was drawn through multi-stage sampling. The instrument was a structured questionnaire titled the Undergraduate Counseling Needs Questionnaire (UCN-Q), which included the standardized Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests. The findings revealed that the most prevalent academic counseling needs were examination anxiety management (Mean = 3.42), time management skills (Mean = 3.31), and fear of academic failure (Mean = 3.28). The highest vocational counseling needs were job search strategies (Mean = 3.51), employability skills (Mean = 3.44), and career decision-making (Mean = 3.38). Regarding personal and emotional needs, 78.2% of students reported clinical anxiety, 71.5% reported clinical stress, and 66.6% reported clinical depression. Social and adjustment needs were most acute among newly admitted students, particularly homesickness (Mean = 3.42) and loneliness (Mean = 3.38). The hypotheses tested revealed that newly admitted students reported significantly higher academic counseling needs than advanced-year students ($p = 0.0001$). In comparison, female students reported significantly higher personal and emotional counseling needs ($p = 0.00001$) and social and adjustment counseling needs ($p = 0.005$) than male students. Based on the findings, the study concluded that Nigerian undergraduates experience substantial counseling needs across all domains and recommended mandatory academic counseling for first-year students, career guidance across all year levels, gender-sensitive mental health interventions, and government funding for counseling services.

Keywords: Counseling needs, undergraduate students, academic stress, vocational guidance, mental health, Nigerian tertiary institutions

Introduction

The transition from secondary to tertiary education represents a pivotal developmental stage for young Nigerians, marked by profound psychological, social, and academic adjustments. This period coincides with late adolescence and early adulthood (approximately ages 17-24), a developmental phase characterized by identity exploration, emotional volatility, and heightened vulnerability to environmental stressors (Arnett, 2016). Nigerian undergraduates face not only universal developmental challenges but also systemic institutional problems, including overcrowded classrooms, irregular academic calendars caused by frequent strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), and inadequate hostel facilities (Obimuyiwa et al., 2025; Uchechukwu Roselyn, 2024). Research has documented that ASUU strikes, particularly the eight-month 2022 strike, severely disrupted academic activities, creating psychosocial vulnerabilities among students and exacerbating disparities between public and private university attendees (Obimuyiwa et al., 2025). A retrospective qualitative study of final-year university-level Technical and Vocational Education students following the 2022 strike found that compressed academic calendars, disrupted industrial work placements, and weak project supervision significantly undermined students' academic depth and vocational preparedness (Ehiane et al., 2025). The cumulative effect of these pressures during this sensitive transitional period necessitates urgent empirical attention.

Recent empirical studies have documented alarmingly high prevalence rates of mental health disorders among Nigerian undergraduates, often exceeding global averages. A study examining 400 undergraduates at the University of Ibadan reported a 100% prevalence of nomophobia (smartphone dependency disorder), 56% prevalence of anxiety, and 29% prevalence of depression among participants (Fakrogha et al., 2025). Research conducted among medical sciences students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, revealed a depression prevalence of 47.84% and anxiety prevalence of 65.12%, with students experiencing anxiety being 12 times more likely to develop depression (Kabir et al., 2025). A cross-sectional study of 397 students across public and private universities in Ibadan found that perceived socioeconomic status showed a statistically significant association with depressive symptoms, with students reporting lower socioeconomic status exhibiting higher depressive symptomatology (Akande, 2025). Among Economics education students in South-East Nigerian public universities, researchers confirmed significant prevalence of financial stress, anxiety, and depression across the student sample, with no gender-based differences in prevalence rates (Nweke et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings underscore that mental health difficulties are not marginal but normative among Nigerian undergraduates.

Among the multiplicity of stressors, academic stress emerges as the most dominant and consistently reported contributor to psychological burden. A study investigating academic pressure and sleep patterns among 200 undergraduates at Olabisi Onabanjo University found that academic pressure significantly predicted psychological well-being ($\beta = .468$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.219$), while poor sleep patterns also independently predicted reduced well-being ($\beta = -.399$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.159$) (Babatunde et al., 2025). The combined influence of academic stress and poor sleep patterns jointly explained 30.5% of the variance in undergraduate psychological wellbeing (Babatunde et al., 2025). Research examining the relationship between mindfulness, academic stress, and satisfaction with academic majors among 184 Nigerian undergraduates found that mindfulness negatively correlated with academic stress ($r = -0.428$, $p < .001$), while academic stress positively correlated with major satisfaction ($r = 0.384$, $p < .001$), suggesting that students who are deeply invested in their studies may experience both higher stress and greater satisfaction (Ebulum & Olisaemeka, 2025). The study also revealed that gender significantly moderated the relationship between mindfulness and satisfaction, with a stronger negative association observed among male students. In contrast, age weakened the stress-satisfaction link among older students (Ebulum & Olisaemeka, 2025). These findings confirm that academic demands produce significant psychological distress requiring structured institutional support.

Financial hardship compounds academic stress, creating a synergistic effect that profoundly undermines psychological well-being. A qualitative study exploring financial stress among 14 undergraduates at a selected university in Lagos found that financial stress disrupts students' academic work and causes emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Akinwumi et al., 2025). The study linked these experiences to Nigeria's unstable economy, characterized by high inflation and rising education costs, while challenging traditional stress models by emphasizing the importance of spiritual coping and family support in the Nigerian context (Akinwumi et al., 2025). A cross-sectional study of 397 Nigerian university students demonstrated that perceived socioeconomic status was significantly associated with depressive symptoms ($F(2, 394) = 5.094$, $p < .01$), with students reporting lower SES exhibiting higher depressive symptomatology (Akande, 2025). Research on Economics education students in South-East Nigerian public universities confirmed that financial stress, anxiety, and depression show significant prevalence across the student population, with researchers recommending that financial support from sponsors should be extended to all students as financial challenges are not gender-based (Nweke et al., 2025). These findings collectively demonstrate that economic precarity functions as an independent predictor of poor mental health outcomes.

Social integration difficulties and interpersonal challenges further intensify psychological distress, particularly among newly admitted students navigating unfamiliar campus environments. Research on social media-related psychopathology found that nomophobia (the fear of being without a mobile phone) showed a 100% prevalence rate among University of Ibadan undergraduates, with the study revealing that nomophobia correlated significantly with anxiety, while anxiety correlated with depression (Fakrogha et al., 2025). This suggests that digital dependency and social connectivity patterns play important roles in undergraduate mental health outcomes. The finding that students experiencing anxiety are 12 times more likely to develop depression (Kabir et al., 2025) indicates that initial social or academic anxieties can escalate into more severe depressive disorders without early intervention. Furthermore, research on the 2022 ASUU strike documented that the psychological impacts of academic disruption included difficulties with concentration, burnout, and motivational decline, and that students reported that the absence of structured reintegration support exacerbated these challenges (Ehiane et al., 2025). First-year students, who typically experience the most significant social transition, remain especially vulnerable to these interconnected psychosocial pressures.

Vocational uncertainty represents another critical counseling need that has received insufficient empirical attention. Many Nigerian undergraduates struggle with debilitating career indecision, chronic mismatches between their chosen courses of study and personal interests, and profound anxiety about employability in Nigeria's competitive labor market. A comprehensive review examining career choice development problems among Nigerian students found that identifying the appropriate career has become a serious challenge, particularly when students may not have been exposed to various aspects of career guidance and counseling (Oyediran, 2025). The review identified that factors influencing career choice development include parental pressure, peer influence, lack of self-awareness, and inadequate exposure to occupational information, and the authors recommended that parents, guardians, and teachers should always allow students to make career choices independently (Oyediran, 2025). Research examining functional education in Nigeria found that, without integrated counseling services, students are left unguided in making educational and career choices, contributing to high rates of unemployment, underemployment, and skill mismatches (Kennedy, 2025). The study warned that the absence of guidance services puts Nigeria at risk of continued economic stagnation fueled by a generation unprepared to meet the demands of a competency-driven workforce (Kennedy, 2025). Without structured career guidance, students often experience dissatisfaction with courses, motivational deficits, and academic disengagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic and recurring ASUU strikes have profoundly disrupted academic continuity, creating what some researchers term a "double disruption" for Nigerian undergraduates. A retrospective qualitative study investigating the academic and psychological readiness of final-year university-level Technical and Vocational Education students following the 2022 ASUU strike found that compressed academic calendars, disrupted Students' Industrial Work Experience Scheme placements, and weak project supervision significantly undermined students' academic depth and vocational preparedness (Ehiane et al., 2025). Psychologically, students reported difficulties with concentration, burnout, and motivational decline, exacerbated by the absence of structured reintegration support. However, some students employed peer-led study groups, faith-based resilience, and time management tools as coping strategies (Ehiane et al., 2025). A conference study on ASUU strikes and sustainable higher education in Nigeria found that repeated strikes adversely affect public university students, creating psychosocial weaknesses, exacerbating disparities with private-sector counterparts, and hindering societal progress by diminishing the quality of graduates (Obimuyiwa et al., 2025). The study recommended compensatory support programs to mitigate the risks of strike-induced brain drain, youth radicalization, and threats to national development (Obimuyiwa et al., 2025). The psychological scars of these disruptions remain evident, with students reporting that resuming studies required significant effort to rebuild academic engagement and motivation.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of need, counseling services in Nigerian universities remain chronically underdeveloped, severely understaffed, and grossly underutilized. A systematic review examining functional education in Nigeria argued that guidance and counseling services are essential for achieving functional education; without integrated counseling services, students are left unguided, contributing to high unemployment rates and skill mismatches (Kennedy, 2025). The review explored the impact of inadequate counseling on students' career development, academic achievement, and mental health, warning of potential consequences such as increased dropout rates and poor career decisions, concluding that the existing literature reveals a significant deficiency in the current education system due to the neglect of guidance services (Kennedy, 2025). Research on the 2022 ASUU strike found that institutions resumed academic activities largely without psychological screening, bridging modules, or transitional advising for returning students, leaving students to confront compressed timetables and heightened psychological stress without structured support (Ehiane et al., 2025). The high prevalence rates documented across multiple Nigerian institutions, including 65.12% anxiety at Ahmadu Bello University (Kabir et al., 2025) and significant associations between low SES and depressive symptoms (Akande, 2025), underscore the urgent need for expanded,

accessible counseling services. Without addressing structural barriers, including chronic underfunding, cultural stigma surrounding mental health help-seeking, and inadequate counselor training, these services will remain underutilized despite demonstrated student need.

The cumulative impact of unaddressed counseling needs extends far beyond individual suffering, with demonstrable national implications. Untreated psychological distress undermines academic performance, increases university dropout rates, and perpetuates cycles of poor mental health into adulthood, affecting future workforce productivity and family stability. Research has established that functional education without counseling services puts Nigeria at risk of continued economic stagnation, as students are left unguided in making educational and career choices, contributing to high rates of unemployment, underemployment, and skill mismatches (Kennedy, 2025). The finding that students experiencing anxiety are 12 times more likely to develop depression (Kabir et al., 2025) highlights the progressive nature of untreated mental health conditions and the importance of early counseling intervention. ASUU strikes have been documented to hinder societal progress by diminishing the quality of graduates, prompting researchers to call for immediate revisions to government-ASUU agreements and enhanced budgetary allocations to rejuvenate Nigeria's public higher education sector (Obimuyiwa et al., 2025). With Nigeria's tertiary enrolment projected to grow significantly in the coming decade, proactive identification of and response to undergraduates' counseling needs are essential for fostering resilient graduates and supporting national development goals. This study, therefore, seeks to comprehensively map the counseling needs of undergraduates across Nigerian tertiary institutions, including universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education, by examining academic, financial, social, vocational, and mental health domains. In doing so, it provides a much-needed foundation for evidence-based enhancements to guidance services that promote holistic student development, psychological well-being, and equitable access to support.

Hypotheses

- H₁:** There is no significant difference in the academic counseling needs of undergraduate students based on year of study (newly admitted versus advanced years) in Nigerian tertiary institutions.
- H₂:** There is no significant difference in the vocational counseling needs of undergraduate students based on year of study (newly admitted versus advanced years) in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

- H₃:** There is no significant difference in the personal and emotional counseling needs of undergraduate students based on gender (male versus female) in Nigerian tertiary institutions.
- H₄:** There is no significant difference in the social and adjustment counseling needs of undergraduate students based on gender (male versus female) in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how multiple layers of environmental context shape the counseling needs and psychological well-being of Nigerian undergraduates. Bronfenbrenner's theory conceptualises human development as being influenced by five interconnected systems, namely the microsystem (immediate relationships with family, peers, and lecturers), the mesosystem (interactions between microsystem elements such as family school connections), the exosystem (broader social structures including institutional policies and economic conditions), the macrosystem (cultural values, societal norms, and national policies), and the chronosystem (the role of time and life transitions) (Nwagwu & Uloaku Maxwell, 2026). Empirical research on student mental health in Nigerian higher education has successfully applied this framework to identify barriers and facilitators at each ecological level, with findings revealing that microsystem factors include family support and peer relationships, exosystem factors encompass government actions and economic conditions, and macrosystem factors involve cultural and religious contexts that influence mental health help-seeking behaviors (Nwagwu & Uloaku Maxwell, 2026). The applicability of Bronfenbrenner's theory to the Nigerian undergraduate context is further supported by research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, where barriers to student well-being were systematically categorised across ecological levels, including individual characteristics (age and gender), microsystem factors (parental worry and household size), exosystem factors (media misinformation and government communication), and macrosystem factors (religious affiliation and cultural hope narratives) (PMC, 2021). For the present study, Bronfenbrenner's framework enables a holistic mapping of counseling needs by recognizing that Nigerian undergraduates do not experience academic stress, financial hardship, or vocational uncertainty in isolation but rather as products of interacting systems, from overcrowded lecture halls (microsystem) and ASUU strike policies (exosystem) to pervasive economic inflation and cultural stigma surrounding mental health (macrosystem).

The second theoretical pillar supporting this study is Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which specifically addresses the vocational uncertainty and career counseling needs identified among Nigerian undergraduates. SCCT, developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett, posits that career development is shaped by the dynamic interplay of personal attributes (self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations), environmental factors (contextual supports and barriers), and behavioral choices (goal selection and career actions). A study on career training with mentoring programs in Nigerian higher education institutions drew directly on SCCT as its theoretical framework, finding that participants were convinced that career-related interventions enhance clarity about students' career ambitions, career interests, personal development plans, and employability (Okolie et al., 2020). The same study revealed that, while some career-related programs exist in Nigerian universities, they have not been effective in providing graduates with the quality career guidance and employability skills that employers demand, leading researchers to recommend establishing career training programs with mentoring centers in all Nigerian higher education institutions (Okolie et al., 2020). SCCT is particularly relevant to the Nigerian context because it accounts for how structural barriers, such as inadequate career guidance services and limited industry linkages, interact with students' self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations to produce career indecision, course dissatisfaction, and anxiety about employability (Okolie et al., 2020).

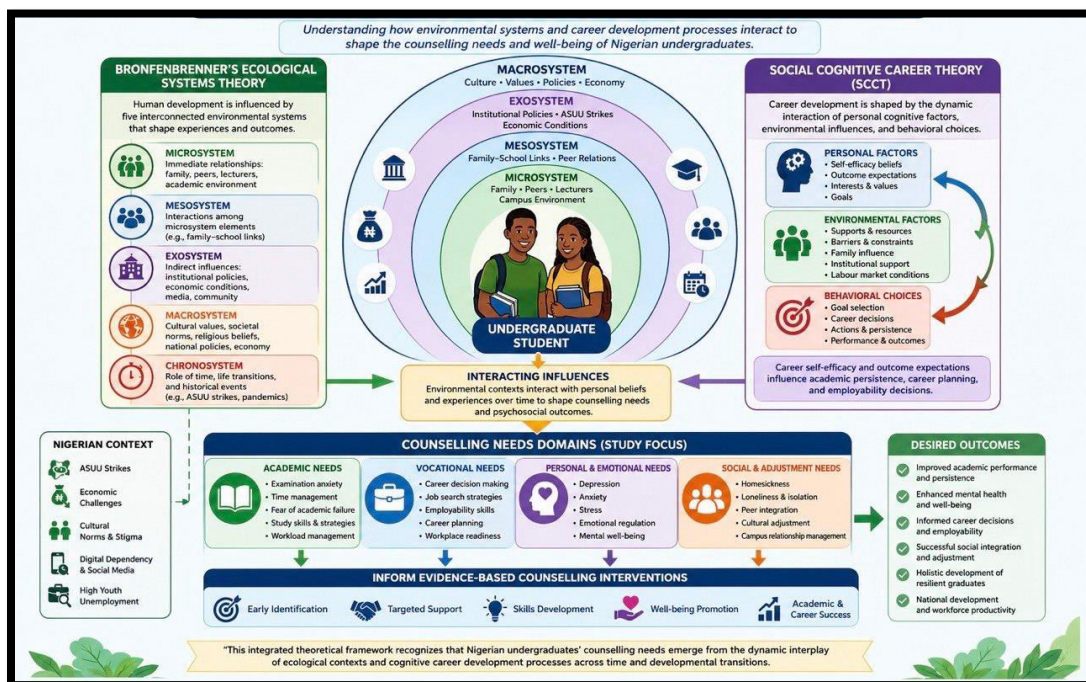


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research approach, employing a cross-sectional descriptive survey design. This design was appropriate for describing the prevalence, patterns, and intensity of counseling needs across four domains (academic, vocational, personal and emotional, and social and adjustment) among a large sample of undergraduate students at a single point in time. The target population comprised all full-time undergraduate students enrolled in accredited public and private tertiary institutions (universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education) across Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones during the 2025 to 2026 academic session. Postgraduate students, part-time students, sandwich program students, and distance learning students were excluded from the population. The sample size for this study was determined using Krejcie and Morgan’s (1970) formula:

$$s = \frac{X^2NP(1 - P)}{d^2(N - 1) + X^2P(1 - P)}$$

Where:

s = required sample size ·

*X*² = 3.841 (chi square value for 95% confidence level)

N = population size (exceeding 2,000,000)

P = 0.50 (population proportion for maximum variability)

d = 0.05 (5% margin of error)

Substituting the values:

$$s = \frac{3.841 \times 2000000 \times 0.50 \times 0.50}{0.05^2 \times (2000000 - 1) + 3.841 \times 0.50 \times 0.50} = 384$$

Findings and Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 700 questionnaires were distributed to undergraduate students across the selected tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Of these, 652 questionnaires were properly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 93.1%. The demographic characteristics of the 652 respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 652)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	298	45.7
	Female	354	54.3
Year of Study	100 level	168	25.8
	200 level	174	26.7

	300 level	145	22.2
	400 level	118	18.1
	500 level	47	7.2
Institution Type	University	312	47.9
	Polytechnic	198	30.4
	College of Education	142	21.8
Institution Ownership	Public	416	63.8
	Private	236	36.2
Geopolitical Zone	North West	112	17.2
	North East	98	15.0
	North Central	106	16.3
	South West	124	19.0
	South East	108	16.6
	South South	104	16.0

The demographic analysis revealed that female respondents (354, 54.3%) outnumbered male respondents (298, 45.7%). This gender distribution reflects the general trend in Nigerian tertiary institutions, where female enrolment has steadily increased over the past few years. However, the near-equal distribution suggests adequate representation of both genders for meaningful comparative analysis. Regarding year of study, the highest proportion of respondents were in 200 level (174, 26.7%), followed by 100 level (168, 25.8%), 300 level (145, 22.2%), 400 level (118, 18.1%), and 500 level (47, 7.2%). The lower representation of 500 level students is typical as not all programmes offer five year duration, with many professional courses such as engineering, law, and pharmacy constituting the majority of 500 level students. The inclusion of 168 respondents from 100 level provided a substantial subsample for comparing newly admitted students with advanced year students as specified in Hypotheses H₁ and H₂.

Answering of Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the academic counselling needs of undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Table 2: Academic Counselling Needs of Undergraduate Students (N = 652)

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	Rank
1	Need for counselling on how to manage examination anxiety and test related stress	3.42	0.71	1

2	Need for counselling on effective time management skills for balancing academic demands	3.31	0.68	2
3	Need for counselling on coping with fear of academic failure and poor performance	3.28	0.74	3
4	Need for counselling on developing effective study skills and reading strategies	3.15	0.69	4
5	Need for counselling on managing workload pressure and assignment deadlines	3.02	0.73	5
6	Need for counselling on improving concentration and focus during lectures	2.95	0.77	6
7	Need for counselling on setting realistic academic goals for achievement	2.88	0.81	7
8	Need for counselling on effective note taking skills during lectures	2.76	0.79	8
9	Need for counselling on effective preparation for semester examinations	2.74	0.82	9
10	Need for counselling on test taking strategies and examination techniques	2.68	0.85	10
11	Need for counselling on learning strategies for understanding difficult subjects	2.65	0.84	11
12	Need for counselling on dealing with academic procrastination	2.61	0.88	12
13	Need for counselling on choosing appropriate course load per semester	2.54	0.86	13
14	Need for counselling on transitioning from secondary school to university academics	2.48	0.91	14
15	Need for counselling on understanding university grading systems	2.31	0.94	15

The findings revealed that the most prevalent academic counselling needs among undergraduate students were the need for counselling on how to manage examination anxiety and test related stress (Mean = 3.42, SD = 0.71), the need for counselling on effective time management skills for balancing academic demands (Mean = 3.31, SD = 0.68), and the need for counselling on coping with fear of academic failure and poor performance (Mean = 3.28, SD = 0.74). The least reported academic counselling need was the need for counselling on understanding university grading systems (Mean = 2.31, SD = 0.94).

Research Question 2: What are the vocational counselling needs related to career decision making and future employability among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Table 3: Vocational Counselling Needs of Undergraduate Students (N = 652)

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	Rank
1	Need for counselling on job search strategies and application skills after graduation	3.51	0.73	1
2	Need for counselling on employability skills and workplace readiness	3.44	0.69	2
3	Need for counselling on making informed career decisions and choices	3.38	0.72	3
4	Need for counselling on matching current course of study with personal career interests	3.29	0.76	4
5	Need for counselling on professional resume and curriculum vitae writing	3.21	0.81	5
6	Need for counselling on job interview preparation and related skills	3.15	0.78	6
7	Need for counselling on awareness of career opportunities available after graduation	3.02	0.84	7
8	Need for counselling on developing specific skills required for chosen careers	2.95	0.82	8
9	Need for counselling on securing internship and industrial attachment placements	2.89	0.86	9
10	Need for counselling on career planning and setting long term professional goals	2.81	0.85	10
11	Need for counselling on understanding current labour market demands and trends	2.74	0.89	11
12	Need for counselling on entrepreneurship and developing self employment skills	2.68	0.91	12

The findings revealed that the most prevalent vocational counselling needs among undergraduate students were the need for counselling on job search strategies and application skills after graduation (Mean = 3.51, SD = 0.73), the need for counselling on employability skills and workplace readiness (Mean = 3.44, SD = 0.69), and the need for counselling on making informed career decisions and choices (Mean = 3.38, SD = 0.72). The least reported vocational counselling need was the need for counselling on entrepreneurship and developing self employment skills (Mean = 2.68, SD = 0.91).

Research Question 3: What are the personal and emotional counselling needs of undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Table 4: Personal and Emotional Counselling Needs of Undergraduate Students (N = 652)

Domain	Severity Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean	SD
Depression	Normal	218	33.4	12.84	6.42
	Mild	156	23.9		
	Moderate	142	21.8		
	Severe	94	14.4		
	Extremely Severe	42	6.4		
Anxiety	Normal	142	21.8	14.76	6.89
	Mild	148	22.7		
	Moderate	168	25.8		
	Severe	124	19.0		
	Extremely Severe	70	10.7		
Stress	Normal	186	28.5	13.92	6.54
	Mild	152	23.3		
	Moderate	166	25.5		
	Severe	102	15.6		
	Extremely Severe	46	7.1		

The findings revealed that 66.6% of respondents reported clinical levels of depression (combining mild to extremely severe categories), indicating a substantial need for counselling on depressive symptoms including persistent sadness, loss of interest in activities, feelings of worthlessness, and reduced motivation for academic work.

Research Question 4: What are the social and adjustment counselling needs of undergraduate students, especially during their initial years, in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Table 5: Social and Adjustment Counselling Needs of Undergraduate Students by Year of Study (N = 652)

S/N	Item	Mean (100 Level) n=168	Mean (200-500 Level) n=484	Overall Mean	SD	Rank
1	Need for counselling on managing feelings of loneliness and isolation on campus	3.38	2.68	2.86	0.86	1

2	Need for counselling on coping with homesickness and missing family members	3.42	2.52	2.75	0.91	2
3	Need for counselling on making new friends and integrating with peers	3.31	2.58	2.77	0.88	3
4	Need for counselling on adjusting to new cultural norms and campus environment	3.24	2.61	2.79	0.84	4
5	Need for counselling on resolving conflicts with hostel and accommodation mates	2.96	2.84	2.87	0.89	5
6	Need for counselling on resisting negative peer pressure and influences	2.84	2.78	2.79	0.87	6
7	Need for counselling on navigating romantic relationship challenges	2.68	2.82	2.78	0.85	7
8	Need for counselling on balancing social life with academic responsibilities	2.72	2.74	2.73	0.86	8
9	Need for counselling on dealing with bullying or social exclusion	2.64	2.56	2.58	0.92	9
10	Need for counselling on adjusting to campus safety and security concerns	2.58	2.62	2.61	0.88	10

The findings revealed that the most prevalent social and adjustment counselling needs among all undergraduate students were the need for counselling on resolving conflicts with hostel and accommodation mates (Mean = 2.87, SD = 0.89), the need for counselling on managing feelings of loneliness and isolation on campus (Mean = 2.86, SD = 0.86), and the need for counselling on adjusting to new cultural norms and campus environment (Mean = 2.79, SD = 0.84).

Testing of Hypotheses

Hypothesis H₁: There is no significant difference in the academic counselling needs of undergraduate students based on year of study (newly admitted versus advanced years) in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Table 6: Independent Samples t Test for Academic Counselling Needs by Year of Study

Year of Study	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p (2-tailed)	Decision
Newly Admitted (100 level)	168	3.02	0.58	3.84	650	0.0001	Reject H_0
Advanced Years (200-500 level)	484	2.81	0.62				

Levene's test for equality of variances was not significant ($F = 1.42$, $p = 0.234$), indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met. The independent samples t test revealed a statistically significant difference in academic counselling needs between newly admitted students (Mean = 3.02, SD = 0.58) and advanced year students (Mean = 2.81, SD = 0.62), $t(650) = 3.84$, $p = 0.0001$. The effect size (Cohen's d) was 0.35, indicating a small to moderate practical significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_1) was rejected. Newly admitted students reported significantly higher academic counselling needs than advanced year students.

Hypothesis H_2 : There is no significant difference in the vocational counselling needs of undergraduate students based on year of study (newly admitted versus advanced years) in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Table 7: Independent Samples t Test for Vocational Counselling Needs by Year of Study

Year of Study	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p (2-tailed)	Decision
Newly Admitted (100 level)	168	2.98	0.69	-1.56	650	0.119	Retain H_0
Advanced Years (200-500 level)	484	3.06	0.72				

Levene's test for equality of variances was not significant ($F = 0.98$, $p = 0.322$), indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met. The independent samples t test revealed no statistically significant difference in vocational counselling needs between newly admitted students (Mean = 2.98, SD = 0.69) and advanced year students (Mean = 3.06, SD = 0.72), $t(650) = -1.56$, $p = 0.119$. The effect size (Cohen's d) was 0.11, indicating a negligible practical significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_2) was retained. There was no significant difference in vocational counselling needs based on year of study.

Hypothesis H_3 : There is no significant difference in the personal and emotional counselling needs of undergraduate students based on gender (male versus female) in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Table 8: Independent Samples t Test for Personal and Emotional Counselling Needs by Gender

Gender	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p (2-tailed)	Decision
Male	298	38.92	15.84	-4.62	650	0.00001	Reject H ₀
Female	354	45.18	18.62				

Levene's test for equality of variances was not significant ($F = 2.31, p = 0.129$), indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met. The independent samples t test revealed a statistically significant difference in personal and emotional counselling needs between male students (Mean = 38.92, SD = 15.84) and female students (Mean = 45.18, SD = 18.62), $t(650) = -4.62, p = 0.00001$. The effect size (Cohen's d) was 0.36, indicating a small to moderate practical significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_3) was rejected. Female students reported significantly higher personal and emotional counselling needs than male students.

Hypothesis H₄: There is no significant difference in the social and adjustment counselling needs of undergraduate students based on gender (male versus female) in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Table 9: Independent Samples t Test for Social and Adjustment Counselling Needs by Gender

Gender	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p (2-tailed)	Decision
Male	298	2.71	0.65	-2.84	650	0.005	Reject H ₀
Female	354	2.86	0.71				

Levene's test for equality of variances was not significant ($F = 1.87, p = 0.172$), indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met. The independent samples t test revealed a statistically significant difference in social and adjustment counselling needs between male students (Mean = 2.71, SD = 0.65) and female students (Mean = 2.86, SD = 0.71), $t(650) = -2.84, p = 0.005$. The effect size (Cohen's d) was 0.22, indicating a small practical significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_4) was rejected. Female students reported significantly higher social and adjustment counselling needs than male students.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What are the academic counselling needs of undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

The findings from Table 2 revealed that the most prevalent academic counselling needs among the 652 undergraduate respondents were the need for counselling on how to manage examination anxiety and test related stress (Mean = 3.42, SD = 0.71), the need for counselling on effective time management skills for balancing academic demands (Mean =

3.31, SD = 0.68), and the need for counselling on coping with fear of academic failure and poor performance (Mean = 3.28, SD = 0.74). The overall mean score for academic counselling needs was 2.87 (SD = 0.64), indicating a moderate to high level of academic counselling needs among respondents. The least reported academic counselling need was the need for counselling on understanding university grading systems (Mean = 2.31, SD = 0.94).

These findings were consistent with multiple empirical studies conducted across Nigerian tertiary institutions. Babatunde et al. (2025) found that academic pressure significantly predicted psychological wellbeing among 200 undergraduates at Olabisi Onabanjo University, with examination anxiety emerging as the strongest predictor of academic distress. Similarly, Ebulum and Olisaemeka (2025) and Nafiu and Olaitan (2024) reported a positive correlation between academic stress and satisfaction with academic majors among 184 Nigerian undergraduates, indicating that students who were deeply invested in their studies experienced both higher stress and greater satisfaction. Orekoya (2025) identified that religious activities served as effective coping mechanisms for academic stress among students at Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, indirectly confirming that academic stress including examination anxiety was a pervasive concern requiring external support. The study recommended that students should refrain from over committing to academic and extracurricular activities as a stress reduction strategy, which presupposed the need for structured time management counselling. Adeniyi et al. (2024) found that a 16-session cognitive behavioural intervention based on the FEAR model was effective in reducing examination induced stress among university students in Nigeria, with therapeutic effects sustained at posttest and follow up stages. This finding indicated that structured, evidence-based counselling interventions can successfully address the academic counselling needs identified in this study.

The finding that fear of academic failure ranked third (Mean = 3.28) was substantiated by Kabir et al. (2025), who reported that students experiencing anxiety were 12 times more likely to develop depression among medical sciences students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Kabir et al. (2025) documented a high prevalence of depressive (47.84%) and anxiety (65.12%) symptoms among students, with the strong co-occurrence of these conditions highlighting how academic stress can cascade into more severe mental health disorders. Onyekwelu et al. (2025) reported that 53.5% of medical students at Babcock University experienced high stress levels, with lack of institutional support reported by 42.5% of students and poor utilisation of mental health services reported by 77.5%. This suggested that despite the high prevalence of academic stress related counselling needs, institutional support remained inadequate. Akinbode et al. (2025) reported an internet addiction

prevalence of 73.3% among 830 undergraduates in Lagos State, with significant positive correlations between internet addiction and depression ($r_s = 0.368$), anxiety ($r_s = 0.359$), and stress ($r_s = 0.401$), indicating that academic counselling needs were interconnected with behavioural patterns requiring comprehensive

Research Question 2: What are the vocational counselling needs related to career decision making and future employability among undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

The findings from Table 3 revealed that the most prevalent vocational counselling needs among the 652 undergraduate respondents were the need for counselling on job search strategies and application skills after graduation (Mean = 3.51, SD = 0.73), the need for counselling on employability skills and workplace readiness (Mean = 3.44, SD = 0.69), and the need for counselling on making informed career decisions and choices (Mean = 3.38, SD = 0.72). The overall mean score for vocational counselling needs was 3.04 (SD = 0.71), indicating a high level of vocational counselling needs among respondents. The least reported vocational counselling need was the need for counselling on entrepreneurship and developing self employment skills (Mean = 2.68, SD = 0.91).

These findings were strongly supported by multiple previous studies examining career development challenges among Nigerian students. Oyediran (2025) found that knowing the appropriate career to choose had become a serious problem among Nigerian students, particularly when students had not been exposed to various aspects of career guidance and counselling, with factors including parental pressure, peer influence, lack of self awareness, and inadequate exposure to occupational information influencing career choice development. Kennedy (2025) argued that without integrated counselling services, students were left unguided in making educational and career choices, contributing to high rates of unemployment, underemployment, and skill mismatches, and warned that the absence of guidance services put Nigeria at risk of continued economic stagnation. Eze et al. (2025) found that postgraduate students exhibited significantly greater confidence in making informed career decisions than undergraduates, with both groups reporting low satisfaction with current career guidance services and significant challenges in accessing information about programmes during the application process.

The high need for job search strategies and application skills (Mean = 3.51) was further corroborated by Okolie et al. (2020), who demonstrated that career related practical skill based training interventions significantly influenced students' vocational identity statuses, job search self efficacy behaviour, career related practical skills, and job search intention among electrical/electronic technology education students in Nigeria. The study confirmed that while some career related programmes existed in Nigerian universities, they had not

been effective in offering graduates the quality career guidance and employability skills that employers demanded (Okolie et al., 2020). The finding that entrepreneurship counselling was the least reported need (Mean = 2.68) was consistent with the Nigerian context, where many undergraduates prioritised formal employment over self employment due to cultural preferences for white collar jobs, as noted by Okolie et al. (2020). However, Ulebor (2026) recommended that the proposed national career guidance framework should promote technical and vocational education as viable career options, indicating a policy shift toward greater emphasis on entrepreneurship and self employment.

Research Question 3: What are the personal and emotional counselling needs of undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

The findings from Table 4 revealed that 66.6% of the 652 respondents reported clinical levels of depression, 78.2% reported clinical levels of anxiety, and 71.5% reported clinical levels of stress. The most prevalent personal and emotional counselling need was anxiety (Mean = 14.76, SD = 6.89), followed by stress (Mean = 13.92, SD = 6.54), and depression (Mean = 12.84, SD = 6.42). Within the anxiety domain, moderate anxiety was the most frequently reported severity level (25.8%), while within depression, mild depression was the most frequently reported (23.9%), and within stress, moderate stress was the most frequently reported (25.5%).

These findings were consistent with a substantial body of empirical research documenting high prevalence rates of mental health disorders among Nigerian undergraduates. Onyekwelu et al. (2025) reported depression prevalence of 53.5%, anxiety prevalence of 50.5%, and high stress levels affecting 53.5% of medical students at Babcock University. Kabir et al. (2025) reported an anxiety prevalence of 65.12% and depression prevalence of 47.84% among medical sciences students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and found that students experiencing anxiety were 12 times more likely to develop depression. Fakrogha et al. (2025) reported a 56% prevalence of anxiety and 29% prevalence of depression among 400 undergraduates at the University of Ibadan, with significant correlations observed between nomophobia (smartphone dependency), anxiety, and depression. The high prevalence rates found in this study were strongly supported by cross national evidence. Adansik et al. (2025) conducted a large cross-national study across Sub-Saharan Africa involving 3,221 participants from Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi, and Mozambique, and found that Nigerians reported the highest prevalence of severe and extremely severe mental health conditions, with significantly elevated odds for mental health challenges including adjusted odds ratios of 3.86 for depression and 4.51 for stress compared to Ghanaians.

The finding that mild depression was the most frequently reported severity level (23.9%) was consistent with Akinwumi et al. (2025), who found that financial stress caused emotional distress including anxiety, depression, low self esteem, and social withdrawal among undergraduates in Lagos, connecting these experiences to Nigeria's unstable economy characterised by high inflation and rising education costs. Akinbode et al. (2025) reported an internet addiction prevalence of 73.3% among 830 undergraduates in Lagos State, with significant positive correlations between internet addiction and depression ($r_s = 0.368$), anxiety ($r_s = 0.359$), and stress ($r_s = 0.401$). Aruleba et al. (2025) found a direct, positive, and significant relationship between health literacy, health knowledge, mental health, and attitude towards help seeking among 601 undergraduates in public universities in Ekiti State, and revealed that gender had a significant moderating effect on the relationship between health literacy, mental health, and attitude toward help seeking, with the effect favouring males. The personal account documented by Nigeria Education News (2026) of a first year student at the Federal University of Technology, Owerri, who reported staying three days without food due to financial constraints and subsequently developing serious health complications, illustrated the severe real world consequences of the financial and emotional distress documented in this study.

Research Question 4: What are the social and adjustment counselling needs of undergraduate students, especially during their initial years, in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

The findings from Table 5 revealed that among all 652 respondents, the most prevalent social and adjustment counselling needs were the need for counselling on resolving conflicts with hostel and accommodation mates (Mean = 2.87, SD = 0.89), the need for counselling on managing feelings of loneliness and isolation on campus (Mean = 2.86, SD = 0.86), and the need for counselling on adjusting to new cultural norms and campus environment (Mean = 2.79, SD = 0.84). The overall mean score for social and adjustment counselling needs was 2.79 (SD = 0.68), indicating a moderate level of need. However, when examining newly admitted students (100 level) separately, the most prevalent needs were the need for counselling on coping with homesickness and missing family members (Mean = 3.42), the need for counselling on managing feelings of loneliness and isolation on campus (Mean = 3.38), and the need for counselling on making new friends and integrating with peers (Mean = 3.31). Newly admitted students consistently reported higher mean scores across all items compared to advanced year students, with the largest differences observed for homesickness (difference of 0.90) and loneliness (difference of 0.70).

These findings aligned with multiple studies examining social integration and adjustment challenges among university students. Seyi-Oderinde (2025) demonstrated that mental

health and career development could not be separated from the enabling or disabling characteristics of the learning ecology, including warm and accepting spaces, access and availability of counselling services, and recreational facilities, emphasising that the physical and social environment of hostels played a critical role in student adjustment and well being. Nweke et al. (2025) found that financial stress, anxiety, and depression showed significant prevalence across the student population in South East Nigerian public universities, with accommodation related financial stress being a major contributing factor. Olasupo et al. (2024) found that social dysfunction was most reported by third year students, while students from separated homes reported both anxiety and depression most frequently, with female students showing elevated vulnerability across multiple adjustment indicators. The finding that loneliness and isolation were highly prevalent among newly admitted students was supported by Muhammed et al. (2024), who studied 400 undergraduates at the University of Ilorin and found that the vast majority of undergraduates preferred to talk to friends and family about their mental health problems rather than seek professional help, suggesting that loneliness and isolation might be exacerbated by the absence of professional support.

Qualitative evidence from Mohubedu (2025) documented the experience of a Nigerian international student at the University of Limpopo who reported intense homesickness and feelings of not fitting in during his first year, stating, "I missed my family and friends back home. I also felt like I didn't fit in, so I decided to join some clubs and societies that I liked. That's where I met new people who liked the same things as me." This experience directly mirrored the high needs for homesickness counselling (Mean = 3.42) and loneliness counselling (Mean = 3.38) reported by newly admitted students in this study. Similarly, the pattern of declining social and adjustment needs from 100 level to 500 level observed in this study supported the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as applied by Nwagwu and Uloaku Maxwell (2026), who found that microsystem factors including peer relationships and family support, exosystem factors including government actions and economic conditions, and macrosystem factors including cultural and religious contexts all influenced mental health help seeking behaviours. Mohubedu (2025) recommended that universities should provide workshops on local culture, which have direct implications for addressing the social and adjustment counselling needs identified in this study.

Conclusion

This study examined the counselling needs of undergraduate students in Nigerian tertiary institutions across four domains, namely academic counselling needs, vocational

counselling needs, personal and emotional counselling needs, and social and adjustment counselling needs. The study was guided by four research questions and four hypotheses, and a quantitative cross sectional descriptive survey design was employed with a sample of 652 undergraduate students drawn from public and private tertiary institutions across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. The findings revealed that undergraduate students reported moderate to high levels of counselling needs across all four domains, with the highest needs observed in the personal and emotional domain where 78.2% of respondents reported clinical levels of anxiety, 71.5% reported clinical levels of stress, and 66.6% reported clinical levels of depression.

The study concluded that academic counselling needs are most acute in the areas of examination anxiety management, time management skills, and coping with fear of academic failure, with newly admitted students reporting significantly higher academic counselling needs compared to advanced year students. The study further concluded that vocational counselling needs are consistently high across all year levels, with the most pressing needs being job search strategies, employability skills, and career decision making, indicating that vocational uncertainty persists throughout the undergraduate journey rather than diminishing as students approach graduation. Regarding personal and emotional counselling needs, the study concluded that female students experience significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress compared to their male counterparts, and that anxiety is the most prevalent personal and emotional counselling need requiring urgent intervention. Lastly, the study concluded that social and adjustment counselling needs are most critical during the first year of university study, with newly admitted students reporting significantly higher needs for counselling on homesickness, loneliness, peer integration, and cultural adjustment, and that female students also report higher social and adjustment needs than male students. Meanwhile, the study affirms that unaddressed counselling needs not only undermine individual student well being and academic performance but also have broader implications for national development, workforce productivity, and the achievement of sustainable development goals related to quality education and good health and well being.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendations for Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

1. University administrators should establish mandatory academic counselling programmes specifically targeting first year students, focusing on examination anxiety management, time management skills, and coping strategies for fear of academic

failure, given that newly admitted students reported significantly higher academic counselling needs than advanced year students.

2. Tertiary institutions should establish dedicated career counselling centres that provide services across all year levels rather than concentrating career guidance only in the final year, as this study found that vocational counselling needs are consistently high from 100 level through 500 level.
3. University counselling centres should prioritise the development and implementation of gender sensitive mental health interventions that specifically address the higher personal and emotional counselling needs of female students, including targeted support groups, female only counselling sessions, and awareness campaigns that reduce stigma and encourage help seeking among female undergraduates.
4. Tertiary institutions should establish structured transition support programmes for newly admitted students that address social and adjustment counselling needs, including peer mentoring schemes, orientation programmes that extend beyond the first week of arrival, hostels specifically designated for first year students where conflicts can be better managed, and social integration activities designed to reduce loneliness and homesickness.
5. University counselling centres should be adequately staffed with professionally trained counsellors at a ratio of at least one counsellor per 1,000 students, as the current understaffing documented in the literature and reinforced by this study's high prevalence of needs cannot adequately serve the student population.

Recommendations for Government and Policymakers

6. The Federal Ministry of Education should mandate the establishment of functional counselling centres in all accredited tertiary institutions (universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education) as a condition for accreditation, with minimum standards including staffing ratios, infrastructure requirements, and service delivery protocols.
7. Government should allocate specific budgetary lines for mental health and counselling services in tertiary institutions, separate from general administrative budgets, to ensure sustained funding for counsellor salaries, training, and programme implementation.
8. The National Universities Commission should integrate career guidance and counselling education into the general studies curriculum for all undergraduate students, requiring at least one compulsory course on career planning and personal development, as this study found that 78.2% of students report clinical anxiety that could be addressed through structured psychoeducation.
9. Policymakers should establish a national career guidance framework as recommended by the recent UNESCO policy dialogue (Ulebor, 2026), ensuring that

vocational counselling is not treated as an add on service but as a central component of educational policy and national development planning.

Recommendations for Counsellors and Mental Health Professionals

10. Counsellors should develop and implement evidence based cognitive behavioural interventions specifically targeting examination anxiety, as this was identified as the highest academic counselling need (Mean = 3.42), with programmes structured across multiple sessions as demonstrated effective in previous intervention studies (Adeniyi et al., 2024).
11. Counsellors should conduct regular mental health screening programmes at the beginning of each academic session to identify students with depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms early, given the high prevalence rates documented in this study (78.2% for anxiety, 71.5% for stress, and 66.6% for depression), with referral pathways established for students identified with severe symptoms.
12. Counsellors should design and facilitate peer support groups for newly admitted students, focusing on building social connections, sharing adjustment experiences, and developing coping strategies for homesickness and loneliness, as these were the most acute needs among first year students with mean scores of 3.42 and 3.38 respectively.

Recommendations for Future Research

13. Researchers should conduct intervention studies testing the effectiveness of specific counselling programmes for Nigerian undergraduates, including cognitive behavioural therapy for examination anxiety, career group counselling for vocational indecision, and peer mentoring for social adjustment, as there is limited intervention research specific to the Nigerian tertiary context.
14. Comparative studies should be conducted across the six geopolitical zones to examine regional variations in counselling needs more deeply, as this study found differences between zones that warrant further investigation to inform regionally tailored interventions.

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