

Perceptions of Career Counselling Services among Undergraduate Students

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Career counselling services are essential to increase the employability of university graduates. This study aimed to explore the perceptions of university students to the career counselling practices at public universities. Two males and four females were involved in this study. Their involvement was on a voluntary-basis. The data were collected using a semi-structured interview method and analysed using NVivo 12 software. Three (3) themes have been identified from the analysis which include: (i) refusal factor, (ii) attraction factor, and (iii) career counselling service improvement at public universities. Ten sub-themes that emerged from the themes were: ethics, counsellor's knowledge level, counsellor's experiences, types of mentoring, locations of counselling and career units, student's ignorance, intensifying counselling and career activities and increasing promotions. To conclude, counsellor's personality, knowledge, and skills influence the utilisation pattern of career counselling services and counsellors are advised to continually improve their knowledge and skills in line with the client's needs.

Key words: *career counselling, career counsellor, perception, counselling services.*

Introduction

Counselling services have become one of the most important agendas at various levels. The importance of this service is not only to improve the quality of the individual but also to make the learning and work environment safer and more secured. Counsellors' responsibilities do not only revolve around personal and mental health issues, but also career-related issues which can be one of the key challenges in the implementation of counselling services (Güneri, Aydın, & Skovholt, 2003; Shaw, Remley, & Ward, 2014; Stallman, 2012)

This challenge is compounded by the issue of marketability of graduates which has become a major issue at the university and ministry level. The inability of graduates to seek for jobs has been increasingly alarming as Malaysia's youth unemployment rate remains at 10.8 per cent higher than Singapore (4.6 %), Thailand (5.9 %), Vietnam (7.9 %), and India (10.5 %), (Parlimen Malaysia, 2019). Looking at this unemployment rate, everyone should play a role including the career counsellors to overcome graduate employability issues in Malaysia. The questions that have been raised were whether this issue was due to students' own attitudes or because the existing programs were not meeting the industry standards? The graduate employability issue might also be caused by the lack of counsellor's capability in giving advice and consultation in the related area. Therefore, this study aims to explore clients' perceptions and ways to improve career counselling services at the University.

Literature Review

Several studies have outlined the role and direct contribution of career counselling services to university graduates. The factors of attraction, obstruction, and improvement were also discussed in previous studies. Studies have shown that, there was a significant relationship between counselling services and personal development of clients. For example, Sackett and Lawson (2016), have found that the therapeutic relationship between client and counsellor would determine the client's change through the counselling process. These therapeutic relationships could, at the same time, upgrade the ability of clients to improve their career planning (Setiawan, 2007). Moreover, the counselling services would allow the students to learn about the problem-solving and learning skills and adjustments to the university environment (Reddan, 2015).

The personality of the counsellor has been identified as one of the factors that influences the client to seek counselling services. Sommers-Flanagan, 2012 (in Bhargava & Sriram, 2016) has emphasised the importance of maintaining confidentiality of issues discussed in the counselling session to reduce negative stigma toward counselling. The National Council of Counsellors and the National Career Development Association (NCDA) has firmly stated that it is the counsellor's responsibilities to maintain respect for client confidentiality and privacy

(Board of Counsellor, 2011; National Career Development Association, 2015). Personal characteristics such as caring and good listening skills are among the important components in promoting clients to use the career counselling services (Wei-Cheng Mau & Jepsen, 1988).

Some researchers have identified a number of career development programs that can be implemented at the university level such as counselling services, career guidance, resume writing workshops, psychological and career tests/assessments and should be counted as major activities at the university (Lee & Goh, 2003; Penttinen & Vesisenaho, 2013). Programs related to career information and career decision skills could also benefit the students (Amani & Sima, 2015; Lemesa, 2018; Reddan, 2015; Stan, 2016; Taip Abu & Abdul Halim Othman, 2009). The ability of the counsellor to design career activities is one of the core competencies required by the National Career Development Association (2009). Career counsellors should be able to develop a smart partnership with the selected agencies especially in their field of career, improve sources of career information and apply technology in counselling and career services.

Client's acceptance to the counselling services is correlated with the frequency of using the service (Dehlendorf, Levy, Kelley, Grumbach, & Steinauer, 2013; Mwangi & Otanga, 2015). The clients' school experiences might have contributed to their readiness to utilise the counselling services when they enter university. The findings of the study also highlighted the aspects such as the client and counsellor time limitations, difficulty in obtaining services, confidentiality issues and lack of information regarding university counselling services.

The attitude of students has been identified as an interference to clients' readiness for career counselling (Al-Darmaki, 2012; Benjamin Chan Yin-Fah, Yeoh Sok-Foon, & Melissa W.Migin, 2016; Chen & Kok, 2017; Low, 2009; Oseiwu, 2017). In addition, stigma (Lemesa, 2018) and reliance on family members when dealing with career issues are among the factors that prevent students meeting with a career counsellor (Reddan, 2015). Therefore, career counsellors are encouraged to promote the career counselling services to students proactively. This can be done through building good relationships with the students, families, and faculties. Lemesa, (2018) has proposed that the counselling career service can be offered through an online approach so it would become more easily accessed by the students anytime and anywhere.

Research Methodology

This study has utilised a qualitative approach aimed at exploring the experiences of students who use career counselling services at the university level. According to Patton, (2002) and Yin (2011), the purpose of a qualitative study is to explore the individual's experiences, as well as to understand the meaning of the experience in real contexts and unique situations.

The study has adapted a case study design that helps the researcher gain more in-depth information about experiences and views of the participants when using career counselling services at the university. Through the case study method, researchers can understand complex issues, phenomena, processes or social groups in detail despite only using a limited number of participants in the study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research participants

A total of 6 undergraduate students from different public universities in Malaysia were involved in the study. The participants consisted of 2 males and 4 females. The participants have utilised career counselling services at the university previously.

Interview questions

Semi-structured questions (Qu & Dumay, 2011; Turner, 2010) have been used to help researchers explore the clients' experiences. The questions have been categorised into three sections: (1) demographic background of the participants (age, gender and year of study); (2) the use of career counselling services; and (3) the improvement of career counselling services at public universities. The interview questions have been verified by experts in the counselling field.

Procedure

The consent from the participants has been obtained prior to the study. Interviews have been conducted with the participants. To ensure the confidentiality of the information, explanations on the purpose of the research, how the information would be analysed and documented have been included in the study. The involvement of the participants in the study was on a voluntary-basis. Each participant was interviewed for approximately 1 hour or 1½ hours using a voice recorder. Next, the transcriptions of all recordings were produced. To ensure that the transcripts produced are in line with the intent of the participants, the researchers sent the verbatim transcripts to the participants for review and verification purposes to strengthen the external validity of the data (Merriam, 2001; Pierce & Jackson, 2014).

Analysis

The data analysis process was based on the concepts formulated which included the following steps: (1) familiarisation with transcripts, (2) encoding data, (3) theme searches, (4) thematic reviews, (5) theme specifications, and (6) report writing to answer all of the research

questions. The theme that has been developed through this study has been confirmed and validated by the experts in the related field.

Finding and Discussion

Three main themes have been identified from the study which include: the attraction factors, rejection factors, and improvement of career counselling services at public universities.

Pull Factors

The identified factors that influence the clients' use of counselling services were the personality of counsellors who adhere to ethics and display unconditional positive regards in working with clients. In addition, the level of knowledge and experience of the counsellor are factors that motivate clients to use career counselling services.

i. Ethical Counsellor

The findings have shown that personality, experience, knowledge and the nature of activities carried out by the counsellor were the key factors in encouraging clients to use the university's career counselling services. Three participants P1, P2 and P6 have agreed that knowing that the counsellors are ethical was the reason for using the counselling services. For example;

...In addition, it is structured, formal and ethical (P2).

...Friendly, ethical, confidential, knowledgeable, good networking, not pushy and helpful in solving problems (P2).

Meanwhile, P1 and P6 have stated that the counsellor's ability to maintain confidentiality has allowed the clients to become more comfortable sharing their career issues. For example;

...Yes, yes. The counsellor is very protective of the ethics of confidentiality and makes me comfortable with him (P1).

...So I didn't trust my friends and I kept choosing counsellors as one way of expressing myself (P6).

This finding has suggested that counselling ethics is an important aspect of the professional counselling practice. The adherence to counselling ethics has been well stated in the Counsellor's Code of Ethics (Board of Counsellor, 2011) in Sections B.1.a and b where it is the counsellor's responsibility to maintain the privacy and respect for client confidentiality in the counselling process. This is also emphasised in the NCDA Code of Ethics (National

Career Development Association, 2015) where it is clearly stated in Part B that maintaining confidentiality and privacy of clients who use counselling services is of utmost importance. Preserving good counselling ethics practices plays a huge role in influencing student's choices to seek counselling services when dealing with personal and career issues.

ii. Unconditional Positive Regards

This study has reported that the counsellor's unconditional acceptance could be the motivating factor for the clients in using the counselling services at universities. P4, P5 and P6 have explained that;

...For instance, if someone is under pressured and if the counsellor were very strict, I would probably have chosen someone else (P5).

...For me, the counselling service at UPM is ok. Because he is such a nice person, he wants to help us (P4).

...He always call me and say goodbye and keep me updated (P6).

The attentiveness towards the client in the session have made the clients feel comfortable and allowed opportunities for an active participation in the session;

...I will also choose a counsellor who is diligent when dealing with me, when I am feeling comfortable with someone, I will ask many more questions (P5).

It can be inferred that a counsellor's personality determines the client's motivation to use counselling services. Showing concerns about the client development and becoming a good listener are the 'pull factor' for clients to use the services (Wei-Cheng Mau & Jepsen, 1988; Young Kaelber & Schwartz, 2014). Awareness on the cultural aspects also provides a good foundation in understanding the client's issue (Dixon & Arthur, 2015; Norhayati Mohd Noor & Azlin Norhaini Mansor, 2016). Providing a conducive and therapeutic counselling environment creates trust in clients to seek counselling services.

iii. Knowledge of counsellors

The participants (P3, P5 and P6) have agreed that counsellors should equip themselves with job-related information such as a salary and scope of employment to assist their clients. For example:

Very satisfied especially in terms of getting the information needed and knowledge sharing (P3).

... Counsellors need to find more detailed information on what to tell clients (P5).

... I like to have current and latest information. For me, the counsellor should know the aspects that the employer needs from the students (P6).

It is highly recommended that counsellors should upgrade their knowledge continuously to improve their work with the clients based on the study's findings. The National Code of Counsellor and the National Career Development Association (NCDA) has emphasised the responsibility of the counsellor to develop knowledge and skills in accordance with the client's needs as well as the current trends towards improving service quality (Board of Counsellors, 2011; NCDA, 2009).

iv. Counsellor experiences

Experiences of counsellors has been determined as an important aspect of providing a quality counselling service. This has been agreed by the participants (P1, P2, P4 dan P6):

... Though the student came to her sharing about an issue that she never had an experience with (on intention to change of study programme), but there were many other clients that she has deal with, so she has many experiences then (P1).

... I started worrying about finding a job and learning how to do a resume, how to undergo interviews and they have more experiences and know what to do (PP2).

For me, this is the best experience and the service provided by Mr. Ansarul was also excellent (P4).

... I like the fact that the counsellor is more serious since this requires long term relationship. I can see that this counsellor has more experiences than the other peers (P6).

The majority of participants have agreed that experienced counsellors influence the effectiveness of counselling service provision. The counsellor's experience has been developed through their practices in terms of the frequency of counselling sessions they have with the clients and the duration of their services in the field of counselling (Alvez & Gazzola, 2011; Goldberg et al., 2016). Apart from the number of client cases, the training that counsellor's received were linked with their competency in implementing counselling activities (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Zalizan Mohd Jelas et al., 2013). Therefore, career counsellors must practice continuously to become relevant in the counselling field.

v. Career Guidance Activities

The type of activities organised by the counsellor can be a pulling factor for clients to use counsellor's services to help with their career issues. Counsellors who are able to help clients

discover their personalities and interests might be able to attract clients to use the career counselling services.

a. Ability of counsellor to identify client's personality

The study has reported that career counsellors could help clients explore their personalities and do job/career matching. Several participants (P2, P3 and P5) have indicated that they would be able to do the job/career matching through the identification of their personality guided by counsellors:

...The function is to provide opportunities and the best option for students to find and choose a job and to see the suitability of the job and individual personality (P2).

...We can find out more about our personalities and potentials and career information in details (P3).

...As he helps me to find my own personality, he asks me questions and I will answer. He will tell me you are this type of person and so on (P5).

b. Ability to identify client' interests

Apart from personalities, the participants (P2, P3 and P4) have also reported that counsellors were able to tap into clients' interests and map the client's interest with the appropriate job. It is matched with statements by the following participants:

...Focus more on the career discussions, get students interested and help them find jobs (P2).

... For example we are very confused and ignorant about our potential, our career interests and so on, so we refer to them for advices (P3).

... After assessing a career interest, for instance, he would make a list of career interests. Then he'll make comparison. Lots of comparisons (P4).

Counsellor's ability to match personalities with career interests has a significant impact on a client's career choice (Ackerman & Beier, 2003). Counsellors are highly encouraged to make investigations on interests and personalities of the clients when dealing with career/job decision making issues (Ishak, Rahmat, Shahrani, Zainal, & Rahman, 2014). However, Ackerman and Beier (2003), in their career matching model, have recommended that counsellors should not limit themselves to match careers based on personality and job interests only but also to consider the life development aspects as one of the key components in understanding the client's career formation.

Push Factors

Various contributing factors in utilising the counselling services have been discussed by the participants. The identified factors were the location of the counselling unit and the student's ignorance.

i. Location of Career Counselling Unit

The participants P1, P2, P3 and P4 have reported that the location of the Career Counselling Unit was inaccessible and it has caused them difficulties to obtain counselling and career services.

... didn't even know that the UPM Counselling Unit was here, and I didn't know how I could come here because the location was too far for me (P1).

...The location is ok because it is located at the centre of SME (P2).

...I never went because it was difficult to move around because I lived in a remote area and I was too lazy to go if I have no company to join me (P3).

...Because the counselling Unit is quite distant from my place, so it is indeed challenging for me (P4)

Kamunyu (2016) in their study have reported that aspects such as counsellor's self-esteem, counselling service location, and students' perceptions towards counselling services were directly correlated with the use of counselling services on campus. This clearly indicates that location is an important factor in the provision of counselling services.

ii. Students' Ignorance

Students' ignorance has led to a lack of involvement in the programs organised by the Career Counselling Unit. P1 has admitted that he was never aware of the existence of the Unit during his time at UPM:

...Oops, I guess I just don't care about it when I was at UPM but I know it existed during my school days (P1).

...I have no interest in visiting the web site and do not know its existence (P3).

...Phone numbers and websites are not very specific. They don't include things or issues that they can handle. They only provide phone numbers and names (P6).

In addition to attitudes, stigma (Lemesa, 2018) and reliance on family members when dealing with career issues were among factors that reinforced the need to meeting with a career counsellor as an alternative option only to resolve a client's career issues (Reddan, 2015). Therefore, career counsellors are encouraged to promote their career counselling services to

students. This could be implemented through building good relationships with students, families, and faculty to encourage direct engagement with counsellors.

Services Improvement

The participants have also suggested that the university counsellors should intensify their career counselling activities and diversify promotional activities to ensure that the career counselling service is available to students.

i. Enhancing the Counselling and Career Program

Some suggestions have been made by the participants towards improving the quality of career counselling services at public universities (P1, P2, P3 and P5) which include accelerating the career programs and boosting promotional activities. For example:

...Spend more time on the resume development apart from conducting mock interviews. Then, organize career day by each faculty (P1).

...Frequently ask questions about how to improve a resume, tips for job interviews, advice on image and appearance (P2).

...Spend more time on the resume development, mock interviews, and organizing more career exhibitions with faculty involvement as well as extend invitations to social science-based companies or organisations (P3).

Based on the findings, it is also suggested that counsellors should emphasise the career activities that further strengthen their career counselling competencies such as conducting resume writing workshops, mock interviews, and building the network through smart partnerships with agencies outside the university. Thus, it would help increase the graduate employability. (Amani & Sima, 2015; Lee & Goh, 2003; Lemesa, 2018; Penttinen & Vesisenaho, 2013; Puhakka, Rautopuro, & Tuominen, 2010; Rautopuro et al., 2010; Reddan, 2015; Salleh, Abdullah, Mahmud, Ghavifekr, & Ishak, 2013; Stan, 2016; Talib, Salleh, Amat, Ghavifekr, & Ariff, 2015).

ii. Multiply Promotional Activities

Career counsellors are also encouraged to intensify their promotional activities in line with the needs of university students (P1, P2, P5 and P6). For example;

...Only certain students are aware on their existence so it is better to have more promotions about the career counselling unit (P3).

...When we first entered UNIMAS, we received information and were informed that it is ok if the students were to meet with counsellor if they have problems (P5).

...For me, what career counsellors should do is to promote themselves through all the programs they conduct (P6).

Extensive promotional activities allow students to receive accurate information about the counselling services. Nweze and Okolie (2014) in their study found that 26.67 per cent agreed that counselling services were easily accessible while 73.33 per cent of participants reported that the counselling services lacked accessibility. To help address this issue, Lemesa (2018) has recommended that career counsellors at public universities should widen their services to students through various promotional activities. From this finding, it is clear that promotional activities need to be important activities by career counsellors.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have proven that the career counselling services are equally important to other types of counselling services. To ensure that the service is comprehensive and beneficial to clients, the university must assign appropriate counsellors to help them understand post-graduate issues. Career counselling service providers must equip themselves with the current and latest knowledge and skills related to careers and expand their services to the target groups through promotional activities. The findings of this study have also highlighted the client's perspective towards career counselling services. The feedback on the experience of clients utilising the career counselling service has been used to develop a guideline for implementing career counselling services that fits with the university environment so it would truly meet the needs of the target group. Career counsellors were also recommended to continually improve their knowledge and skills to accommodate client's needs. For future studies, it is suggested that researchers explore the specific knowledge and skills required to perform career counselling services at the university level.

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