

Assessing the Belief in School Guidance and Counselling Effectiveness: Implications for Academic Help-Seeking Behaviour among Undergraduates in Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Academic help-seeking behaviour, the deliberate act of seeking assistance from available support structures when facing academic difficulty, is widely recognized as an adaptive strategy associated with improved academic outcomes, yet participation in formal guidance and counselling services within Nigerian tertiary institutions remains comparatively low relative to documented student need. This paper assesses undergraduates' belief in the effectiveness of school guidance and counselling services in Anambra State tertiary institutions and examines the implications of this belief for academic help-seeking behaviour. Drawing on social cognitive theory and the theory of planned behaviour, and a qualitative synthesis of counselling psychology and higher education literature, the paper argues that undergraduates' willingness to seek academic help through formal guidance and counselling channels is substantially predicted by their perceived efficacy of these services, itself shaped by prior personal or vicarious experience, perceived counsellor competence and confidentiality, and broader institutional and cultural attitudes toward help-seeking. The paper finds that where undergraduates hold low expectations of counselling effectiveness, often linked to under-resourced counselling units, perceived stigma associated with seeking psychological or academic support, and limited awareness of available services, help-seeking behaviour is correspondingly suppressed, with students instead relying predominantly on informal peer networks for academic support. The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening both the actual and perceived effectiveness of guidance and counselling services within Anambra State tertiary institutions, in order to improve academic help-seeking behaviour among the undergraduate population.

Keywords: Guidance and counselling, help-seeking behaviour, undergraduates, Anambra State, self-efficacy

1. Introduction

Academic help-seeking behaviour, encompassing a range of actions from consulting lecturers and academic advisors to engaging formal institutional guidance and counselling services, is consistently identified in the educational psychology literature as an adaptive response to academic difficulty, associated with improved academic performance and persistence. Despite this, participation rates in formal guidance and counselling services within Nigerian tertiary institutions, including those in Anambra State, are widely documented as comparatively low relative to the scale of academic and psychosocial difficulty reported by undergraduate populations.

This paper examines undergraduates' belief in the effectiveness of school guidance and counselling services in Anambra State and considers the implications of this belief for academic help-seeking behaviour. The central premise is that help-seeking is not a simple function of need but is substantially mediated by students' subjective expectations regarding whether seeking help through formal counselling channels will actually be effective, an expectation shaped by both direct and vicarious experience as well as broader cultural and institutional context. The paper asks: to what extent do Anambra State undergraduates believe in the effectiveness of school guidance and counselling services, and how does this belief shape their academic help-seeking behaviour?

The paper proceeds as follows: section two reviews relevant literature on help-seeking behaviour and guidance and counselling service perception in Nigerian tertiary education; section three presents the theoretical framework; section four outlines the methodology; section five discusses findings regarding belief formation and its behavioural implications; and section six concludes with recommendations for strengthening guidance and counselling service effectiveness and perception.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Academic Help-Seeking Behaviour

The academic help-seeking literature distinguishes between adaptive help-seeking, characterized by strategic, need-appropriate requests for assistance aimed at mastering material or overcoming a specific difficulty, and help-seeking avoidance, in which students facing academic difficulty decline to seek available assistance, often due to concerns about appearing incompetent or a perceived low likelihood that the help sought will be effective. This literature identifies perceived helper competence and perceived likely effectiveness of the help-seeking channel as significant predictors of whether students engage in adaptive help-seeking or instead default to avoidance or reliance on informal, lower-stakes support sources such as peers.

2.2 Guidance and Counselling in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Literature addressing guidance and counselling service provision within Nigerian tertiary institutions documents persistent challenges including inadequate staffing of professionally trained counsellors relative to student population size, limited institutional funding and physical infrastructure for counselling units, and documented gaps in student awareness of available services. These structural constraints have been linked in the literature to generally low utilization rates of formal counselling services among Nigerian undergraduates, despite documented high levels of self-reported academic and psychosocial stress within this population.

2.3 Stigma and Cultural Attitudes toward Help-Seeking

A further significant strand of literature addresses the role of stigma and cultural attitudes in shaping help-seeking behaviour within Nigerian and broader Sub-Saharan African higher education contexts, documenting persistent concern among students that seeking formal counselling support, particularly for concerns perceived as psychological or emotional rather than narrowly academic, may be perceived negatively by peers or interpreted as a sign of personal weakness or instability. This stigma-related literature suggests that even where formal counselling services are adequately resourced, cultural and social attitudes toward help-seeking may independently suppress utilization, a dynamic distinct from, though potentially compounding, direct beliefs about service effectiveness.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, and specifically the construct of outcome expectancy, the belief regarding the likely consequences of a given behaviour, to conceptualize how undergraduates' beliefs about guidance and counselling effectiveness shape their willingness to engage in academic help-seeking. Within this framework, a student who holds low outcome expectancy regarding counselling effectiveness, believing that seeking such help is unlikely to produce meaningful improvement in their academic difficulty, is theorized to be correspondingly less likely to engage in that help-seeking behaviour, regardless of the objective severity of their academic need.

This is complemented by Icek Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour, which situates help-seeking intention as a function of attitudes toward the behaviour, itself shaped by outcome expectancy, subjective norms, reflecting perceived peer and social attitudes toward counselling utilization, and perceived behavioural control, reflecting the practical accessibility of counselling services. This combined framework allows the paper to examine not only students' direct beliefs about counselling effectiveness but also the social and practical accessibility factors that jointly determine whether these beliefs translate into actual help-seeking behaviour.

4. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design based on a desk review and thematic synthesis of counselling psychology, educational psychology, and Nigerian higher education literature addressing guidance and counselling service provision, help-seeking behaviour, and stigma within tertiary education contexts, supplemented by documented reports and studies specific to Anambra State tertiary institutions where available. Thematic analysis is applied to organize the review around three areas: the formation of undergraduates' beliefs about counselling effectiveness, the influence of stigma and cultural attitudes on help-seeking, and the practical accessibility factors shaping the translation of belief into behaviour. This approach is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the inquiry and the current scarcity of large-scale primary survey data specifically measuring counselling effectiveness beliefs among Anambra State undergraduates using standardized psychometric instruments.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Formation of Effectiveness Beliefs

The evidence reviewed suggests that undergraduates' beliefs regarding guidance and counselling effectiveness in Anambra State tertiary institutions are shaped substantially by both direct personal experience, where prior utilization has occurred, and vicarious experience, transmitted through peer accounts and campus-wide reputation of the counselling unit, consistent with Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasis on both direct and observational sources of outcome expectancy formation. Where counselling units are perceived as under-resourced, inconsistently staffed, or lacking confidentiality safeguards, these perceptions appear to propagate through peer networks and depress broader student population beliefs about service effectiveness, independent of any individual student's own direct experience.

5.2 Stigma as a Compounding Factor

Consistent with the broader Nigerian and Sub-Saharan African literature on help-seeking stigma, the findings indicate that concerns about negative peer perception constitute a significant subjective norm factor within the theory of planned behaviour framework, independently suppressing help-seeking intention even among students who hold moderately positive beliefs about counselling effectiveness. This suggests that improving actual and perceived counselling service quality alone may be insufficient to substantially increase help-seeking behaviour without also addressing the stigma-related subjective norms that independently discourage utilization.

5.3 Practical Accessibility and Perceived Behavioural Control

Findings further indicate that practical accessibility factors, including counselling unit operating hours, physical location relative to student residential and academic areas, and appointment scheduling processes, function as a distinct perceived behavioural control factor shaping help-seeking behaviour independent of underlying effectiveness beliefs. Students holding positive effectiveness beliefs but facing significant practical accessibility barriers appear to default to informal peer-based support rather than formal counselling channels, underscoring accessibility

as a necessary, though not independently sufficient, condition for translating positive effectiveness beliefs into actual help-seeking behaviour.

5.4 Reliance on Informal Peer Support

Finally, the findings point to a consistent pattern in which low effectiveness beliefs, combined with stigma and accessibility barriers, lead Anambra State undergraduates to rely predominantly on informal peer networks for academic support in lieu of formal guidance and counselling services. While peer support carries some documented benefits, the literature notes it lacks the professional training, confidentiality safeguards, and structured intervention capacity of formal counselling services, suggesting that heavy reliance on informal peer support may leave more serious academic or psychosocial difficulties inadequately addressed.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has assessed undergraduates' belief in guidance and counselling effectiveness in Anambra State tertiary institutions and its implications for academic help-seeking behaviour, finding that low effectiveness beliefs, compounded by stigma-related subjective norms and practical accessibility barriers, substantially suppress formal help-seeking in favour of informal peer reliance. These findings underscore that increasing academic help-seeking behaviour requires addressing not only the actual quality of counselling services but also the belief systems, social norms, and practical barriers that mediate whether students engage with those services.

The paper recommends: first, tertiary institutions in Anambra State should prioritize adequate staffing and resourcing of guidance and counselling units, given the documented link between perceived under-resourcing and depressed effectiveness beliefs; second, targeted stigma-reduction campaigns, potentially including peer testimonial approaches that leverage positive vicarious experience, should be employed to address the subjective norm barriers identified in this paper; third, practical accessibility improvements, including flexible scheduling and confidential, low-visibility appointment processes, should be prioritized to address perceived behavioural control barriers; and fourth, further empirical research, including direct survey-based measurement of counselling effectiveness beliefs and help-seeking behaviour among a

representative sample of Anambra State undergraduates, is recommended to quantitatively substantiate and refine the patterns identified in this qualitative synthesis.

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