

Quality of Student Counseling Centre's Services at Sultan Qaboos University: Students' Perceptions

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The current study aimed to examine the quality levels of counseling services provided by the Student Counseling Centre (SCC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). The researchers developed a self-report questionnaire consisting of three main parts - the centre's general conditions, the counseling services, and reasons for not-benefiting from the services. The sample used in the study consisted of 1200 university students. Statistical differences were found between students in terms of their academic experience and the benefit they gained from the services. All services were assessed by the students and high to very high levels of quality were recorded for them all. Reasons behind students not reporting benefits from the services were also reported.

Keywords: *counseling, counseling services, quality, university, students*

Introduction

For a very long time, awareness of the benefits people gain from speaking to each other about societal or personal issues have been widespread. Close friends or family members are the individuals with whom people usually prefer to share their problems and seek help. However, as nations have developed and many social, economic and educational changes have occurred, people have started to encounter an increased variety of problems, which cause many difficulties in their lives. One of the consequences of all these changes is that the practice of sharing problems with friends and family has become less common. As a result, it is important to offer help to students which involves interaction with experts in a semi-formal setting in order to supplement interactions with friends and family. The rapid economic development that has occurred in Muslim countries over the past twenty years and the liberalizing of Islamic principles has created different types of mental health problems and stress, and, as a consequence, the need for counseling has increased (Brinson & Al-Amri, 2005).

For more than fifty years, college counseling centres have been offering different mental health services to students to help them grow and deal with late adolescence/early adulthood developmental issues and changes (McEaney & Gross, 2009). These services have become more complicated over time (Meilman, 2016) and there are now many effective professional services that universities offer which can help students make

informed decisions, resolve problems and deal with various issues. Recently, university counseling centres have started to appear in various Arab countries in order to provide services to the community.

This study aims to explore students' perceptions about counseling services provided by the Student Counseling Centre (SCC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman. Counseling, as a profession started in Oman through the SCC at SQU, when it was established based to a US model of college counseling centres, but as an independent body, during the 1999-2000 academic year (Sulaiman, 2006). The SCC provides information about counseling services that are available to university students and deals with student's mental health issues and those of the community in general (Sulaiman, 2004).

The Importance of Counseling Services for Students

As students start their university life, they can encounter a form of a cultural shock due to the massive differences they experience when compared to life during their school years. This shock may hinder students' adjustment and success. For example, Saleem, Mahmood and Naz (2013) found that, among university students, 31% of the study sample was suffering from "severe" mental health problems, while 16% suffered from "very severe" problems. Those problems were described as "lack of self-regulation," "loss of confidence," and "anxiety proneness" (p., 124). The researchers concluded that knowing the problems university students suffer from would be very helpful in planning counseling services. In addition, Alkayumi and Aldhafri (2015) explored the common problems that first year students at SQU experience, and the findings revealed that the students suffered from a great deal of problems. The most prevalent issues were lack of concentration, eating disorders and health problems.

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Consequently, there is a great need to establish student counseling centres that offer a range of services to help students to adjust personally and academically to university life and promote improved mental health. According to Sulaiman and Aldhadha (2007), counseling centres provide counseling services for students who suffer from problems such as, anxiety, indecisiveness and an inability to adjust to university life. Moreover, they offer study skills support which enables students to overcome obstacles to successful study.

In a study exploring the needs of students who attend a counseling centre, Lucas and Berkel (2005) found that students suffered from depression and anxiety symptoms, and feelings of isolation in their social relationships. In addition, Yi, Lin, and Kishimoto (2003) mentioned that counselees reported major concerns related to 'anxiety', work/course grade' and 'depression' in addition to being "worried" or "extremely worried" about their future, p.337,339). Other findings showed that anxiety was the most common complaint by university students, as reported by counselors, followed by depression (Centre for Collegiate Mental Health, 2016). It is crucial to assess counselees' ability to deal with such issues, since personal and social lives are strongly tied with vocational and educational concerns (Lucas & Berkel, 2005), which then affect students' academic success at university.

Moreover, counseling services were found to be significantly related to students' academic performance. Yang, Yon and Kim's (2013) conducted a longitudinal study of the effect of a mandatory counseling program on the academic performance of college students who had been under probation. The authors revealed that, over three semesters, the students who attended five or more counseling sessions, beyond the two mandatory sessions, showed greater improvement in their GPA than the students who did not attend the mandatory sessions. Students in Turner and Berry's (2000) study reported that the counseling centre helped them maintain or improve their academic study. In addition, the researchers found that clients of counseling centres showed higher retention (i.e., re-enrollment) rates than students who did not receive counseling. In addition, Wilson, Mason, and Ewing (1997) found that students who received six counseling sessions continued their education longer than those who did not attend such sessions. The researchers also reported that additional sessions beyond six, did not have much impact on student retention. Similarly, a positive relationship between attending counseling sessions and students' GPA and retention rates was supported by other researchers (e.g., Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, & Odes, 2009; Wlazelek & Coulter, 1999).

Types of Services Provided in Counseling Centres

Counseling centres around the world provide different kinds of services. The main types of individual and group counseling services are commonly found in any typical counseling centre. Research has been conducted to explore the important types of counseling services provided by counseling centres. Individual counseling is a core service that is assumed to be provided by all counseling centres. Through investigating the perspectives of members in two college counseling associations (AUCCCD and ACCA) in the USA, Brunner, Wallace, Reymann, Sellers and McCabe (2014) found that participants rated individual counseling as the most important service provided by counseling centres. All the counselors who participated in this study reported providing individual counseling.

In addition, most counseling centres offer group counseling along with individual counseling (Brunner et al., 2014). According to McEneaney and Gross (2009), the use of group psychotherapy has increased markedly in counseling centres as a way of effectively meeting the rapidly increasing demand for counseling. Examples of college centres providing group counseling are University of Kentucky (USA), Kean University (USA), and the University of Iowa (USA). Group counseling services are also provided by counseling centres in Arab universities such as, Qatar University and United Arab Emirates University. Beside these typical and commonly known types of counseling, counseling centres have started to develop different types of supportive counseling services which can assess and help students indirectly. Examples of these services include, developmental counseling, consultation, outreach counseling and workshops. Based on the work of Brunner et al. (2014), 97% of members of Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD) and American

College Counseling Association (ACCA) reported consultation as a supportive service provided in their centres and that counseling centre staff work as the main consultants for almost all staff, parents and students in a college or university. They provide consultation on different issues, such as how to deal with students who are at academic or different forms of psychological risk. Examples of college centres providing consultation are the University of Kentucky (UK) (2015) and the University of Iowa (2016). Similarly, counseling centres in some Arab universities provide consultation as a counseling service. Examples of these universities are Bince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University (Saudi Arabia) (2014) and United Arab Emirates University (2014).

Brunner et al. (2014) stated that almost all directors rated outreach programs and preventive counseling as important or extremely important services provided by their counseling centres. Moreover, other services, such as workshops and development counseling were reported as supportive services provided by different counseling centres all over the world (e.g., Michigan State University; University of Kentucky; United Arab Emirates University).

Students' Perceptions about Counseling Services

For the purpose of improving counseling services offered in any centre, it is important to know clients' perceptions of the quality and the usefulness of these services. In universities and colleges most of the counseling centres' clients are students, and their opinions should be highly valued and considered in any developmental process. Much research has been conducted to explore students' perceptions of counseling services. Bundy and Benschoff (2000) found that 70% of participating students thought that having a centre for personal counseling on campus would be "very helpful or helpful" and 34% reported that they would be "very likely or likely" to visit such a centre. Similarly, Gaughf, Smith and Williams (2013) found that about (54%) of the students believed that academic counseling is very necessary to their academic life and (60%) indicated that they may seek counseling services if needed. Moreover, Russell, Thomson, and Rosenthal (2008) stated that college students who received counseling services held positive perceptions about their experiences and did not feel uncomfortable about the process.

Several studies have been conducted regarding the perceptions of Arab students regarding counseling services. For example, in a study conducted for Arab students in the UAE, Brinson and Al-Amri (2005) found a high level of agreement among students that the counseling profession is important. Many students reported that they would seek counselor support, much in the same way as they would ask for help from a friend or family. In addition, most of the participants indicated that they wished more counseling services were offered for people who needed them and, even if the students did not frequently use counseling services, they believed in the importance of making these services available to the community.

Only one study has been conducted to examine the quality of counseling services provided by the Student Counseling Centre (SCC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). Almashhadani and Alfazari (2009) looked at students' perspectives of the service quality and found that counseling services provided at the centre (individual counseling, group counseling and consultation) were rated as being of high quality. Moreover, the counseling services provided outside the centre (i.e., outreach counseling, developmental counseling, and social services) as well as the centre's environment (e.g., location, organization, library) were perceived to be of moderate quality by the students. Also, the research findings did not show any significant differences with regard to the variables of gender, benefiting from the services, and academic discipline (i.e., science or humanities).

Students' Unwillingness to Visit Counseling Centres

While some students find counseling crucial, some others did not believe in the importance of counseling. Yi, Lin and Kishimoto (2003) stressed the importance of advertising and marketing counseling services for students such as these. Students who perceived counseling as an essential service, usually had a positive experience with counselors or they appreciated the vital role of this profession (Xie, 2007).

Research has examined the obstacles or reasons behind students' unwillingness to visit counseling centres. Many reasons can explain students' avoidance of counseling services, among which are the location of the centre, students' beliefs and lack of awareness about counseling, and lack of recommendations from friends or faculty.

First, the location of any counseling centre should be given some attention. Bundy and Benschhoff (2000) indicated that the students may not find it affordable or practical to seek counseling outside their college. Also, in rural areas, students may have to drive long distances to find a good counseling centre in the city. Moreover, the 'stigma' that can be linked with seeing a counselor may be reduced when the students are able to see counselors who are part of their college staff.

Students' beliefs, 'misperceptions' or lack of awareness about counseling services can be additional obstacles towards seeking counseling (Kahn, Wood, & Wiesen, 1999). Many students associate counseling only with mental health problems. In a study of students' views on counseling, Xie (2007) found that participants viewed clients who sought counseling as having mental health problems, which they cannot solve themselves. Many of the students stated that they did not know what counseling was, or how the process worked. Some of the students imagined that a counseling session was similar to a medical visit, that is, a client is lying on a couch and speaking to the counselor (Xie, 2007). It is clear that some students might

not be aware that counseling services are not meant only for mental health problems, but also for developmental and personal growth issues (Kahn et al., 1999; Xie, 2007). Moreover, a lack of knowledge about how to make an appointment, and access services could be reasons behind students not counseling services (e.g., Gaughf et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2008).

In Arab societies in particular, the idea of seeing a counselor remains hard to accept by many students. Brinson and Al-Amri (2005) claimed that Islamic beliefs are the reason why mental health counseling is not popular in Arab culture. People believe that everything that happens to them is connected with God's will. If an individual suffers from any problem, it is more likely to be viewed as a consequence of a religious deviation and, thus, if a person is reconnected to God's principals, he or she can live a better life. Another reason why Arabs do not show a great interest in using counseling services is their belief that counseling is a western practice and therefore should be automatically rejected. Supporting this claim, Al-Darmaki (2011) found that the majority of Emirates' college students preferred to rely on themselves to deal with their problems, rather than seeking help. Moreover, most students who sought the help of others reported preferring family or friends over academic staff or advisors. Also, students often consider seeking out advice from academic advisors or faculty help for academic and career problems rather counselors.

Finally, students are more likely to benefit from counseling services if they are recommended by teachers or friends. Research found that having friends who already benefited from counselling meant students were more likely to visit the counseling centre (e.g., Russell et al., 2008). Gaughf et al. (2013) suggested that if faculty lacks knowledge about the available academic counseling services and they do not recommend these services to students, then students will rarely benefit from or seek these services. The researchers recommended that faculty should be better prepared to encourage and refer students with academic difficulties to seek academic counseling. Bundy and Benschhoff (2000) suggested that, with encouragement, many college students would likely seek personal and group counseling and attend workshops.

The Student Counseling Centre at Sultan Qaboos University

The Student Counseling Centre (SCC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), launched in 1999, is one of the centres that provide support services for college students to help them adjust to university life. The SCC is a member in the world association of counseling centers and it works according to internationally accredited ethics and principles (Almashhadani & Alfazari, 2009). The centre offers many different counseling services classified into the primary internal services (i.e., at the centre), which are individual counseling and group counseling, and external support (i.e., outside the centre) services represented by developmental counseling, outreach counseling, discussion sessions and student workshops. Brief definitions for each service are as follows:

1. Individual counseling "is conducted between two persons, the guidance and counseling specialist and the counselee, in a special place according to the walk-in counselee's requests or based on an arranged appointment for a period of time. Individual counseling session aims to discuss and deal with personal issues that cannot be implemented or discussed in group counseling sessions. Counseling relationship is a pro-

professional relationship based on privacy and confidentiality of the counselees' information during the counseling session in order to achieve specific and private goals". (Student Counseling Centre, p.5, 2016a).

2- Group counseling "is a social dynamic organized process in which a group of counselees meet and work in cooperation with a guidance and counseling specialist to achieve common goals. The focus of these meetings is to discuss common academic, behavioral, psychological, or social concerns. Group counseling consists of pre-prepared and organized sessions that take place once a week". (Student Counseling Centre, p.5, 2016a).

3- Developmental counseling is provided through specialized and purposeful lectures or through workshops, which last for about one hour and can address academic, educational or psychological issues. The lectures are presented by one of the specialized counselors in the centre or by specialized staff from one of the university colleges.

4- Outreach counseling is provided through specialized lectures and can address academic, educational or psychological issues. They are presented by counselors and last for two hours. These lectures are held in places outside the centre, such as students' dormitories inside or outside the university.

5- Discussion sessions are organized by the SCC in cooperation with some professionals or academics in the different university colleges. These seminars focus on a variety of students' academic, developmental or social concerns.

6- Student workshops are purposeful activities that aim to develop certain academic or life skills. They are conducted once a week throughout the semester for not more than 30 students (Student Counseling Centre, 2016b).

Study Aim and Context

As evident from the reviewed literature, there are very few studies, to the researchers' knowledge, that have evaluated the quality of counseling services offered in college counseling centres in Arab contexts. More specifically, only one study (Almashhadani & Alfazari, 2009) was conducted to assess the quality of counseling services provided by the Student Counseling Centre (SCC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). Hence, the current study adds to the existing literature generally, and the earlier study examining SCC services in particular.

The purpose of this study is to examine the quality of counseling services provided by the SCC at SQU from students' perspectives. Specifically, the study attempts to explore students' perceptions about the quality of counseling services by focusing on, first, the centre's environment and general conditions, for example, the location of the centre, the waiting area, the library, advertising of the centre's services, making appointments and the website of the centre). Second, the quality of each service provided in the centre, for example, individual counseling, group counseling, developmental counseling, outreach counseling, discussion sessions, and student workshops.

In addition, the study investigates the reasons behind students' unwillingness to access the counseling services. Specifically, the study utilizes a descriptive design to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the most frequent sources used by students to find out about SCC services?
- 2- Are there statistically significant differences regarding the levels of student benefit from counseling services, based on students' gender and their academic year?
- 3 -What are the quality levels of the SCC environment

and the counseling services provided?

3-Are there statistically significant differences in students' perceptions of the quality of counseling services based on gender and academic year?

4-What are the most important reasons preventing students from benefiting from the counseling services?

Method

Study Population and Sample

The population of the study included all registered students at SQU in the fall of 2015 who were enrolled in all undergraduate and postgraduate programs (High Diploma, Masters and PhD). The total number of students was 17,952, based on the Dean of Admission and Registration's (2015) statistics. The sample comprised 6.68% of the population ($n=1200$), and females represented 53% of the sample.

Instrument

The researchers developed a "Counseling Services' Quality Questionnaire" (CSQQ) after reviewing some of the existing instruments in this field such as the Counseling Centre Student Satisfaction Survey developed by Queens Borough Community College; and the SMU Counseling Centre Client Satisfaction Survey by the Samuel Merritt University Counseling Centre (2013). In addition to these questionnaires, the researchers reviewed Almashhadani's and Alfazari's (2009) questionnaire for evaluating SCC services, as perceived by prospective graduate students.

The CSQQ consisted of three main parts in addition to the demographic variable part. After providing some personal information such as gender, college, academic year, and subject area, participants indicated whether they had already benefited from SCC services or not. Based on this, participants who had benefited from the services answered the first two parts. The first part (23 items) related to the centre's environment and general conditions (waiting area, receptionists, library, location), and the second part asked participants to evaluate only the service(s) they benefited from, whether it was individual counseling (18 items), group counseling (21 items), developmental programs (14 items), outreach programs (14 items), discussion sessions (15 items) or student workshops (16 items). On the other hand, participants who had not benefitted from SCC services answered the third part of the questionnaire, in which they revealed the reasons for not benefiting from the services. All items were scored using a 4-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Face validity of the CSQQ was assessed by reviewers specialized in the area of psychology and evaluation and measurement. Moreover, reliability coefficients were derived for each of the CSQQ domains using Cronbach's alpha. Coefficients ranged from 0.61- 0.93 (see table 5).

Evaluation Criteria for data analysis

The researchers developed an evaluation criteria to be used in the data analysis. The criteria were used to distinguish Weak, Medium, High, or Very High levels of quality. Since the items were scored using a 4-point Likert scale, the range was 3 (i.e., $4-1 = 3$) and, thus, interval length for the 4 categories equals 0.75 (i.e., $3-4 = 0.75$). Table 1 represents the evaluation criteria used in this study.

Table 1. Evaluation criteria used for measuring services' quality levels

Means	Levels
1.00-1.74	Weak
1.75-2.49	Medium
2.50-3.24	High
3.25-4.00	Very high

Procedures

First, the questionnaire was sent by Planning and Statistics Department at SQU to all registered students during the fall of 2015. Students were assured of the confidentiality of their information and were informed that all data would be used only for research purposes. A total number of 1053 online filled questionnaires were retrieved. Second, students were reached in different sites, such as student dormitories and at the locations of the centre's activities or workshops. Hard copies of the questionnaire were distributed to them in order to increase the number of participants. A total of 147 hard copies were retrieved for a grand total of 1200 students participated in this study.

After data collection, the questionnaire forms were classified into two groups; Group1 were the students who had benefited from the SCC services and Group 2 were students who had not benefited from the services. The total number of students who had benefitted was 232 and of those who had not benefitted was 968.

Results

Prior to the data analysis, data were screened for outliers and none were identified. Some missing data were found due to items being left blank. Research questions were answered based on the two groups - benefited students and non-benefited students. Hence, questions 1 and 2 were answered using data from the whole study sample, questions 3 and 4 were answered using benefited students' responses (Group 1), and question 4 was based on non-benefited students' responses (Group 2).

Descriptive statistics were utilized to answer the first question, "What are the most frequent sources used by the students to find out about SCC services?", and these are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Sources used by students to learn about the SCC

No.	Methods	Number	Percentage
1	Student orientation week	466	38.90
2	SCC advertisement	348	29.00
3	Friends	191	15.90
4	Social Media	78	6.50
5	SCC website	70	5.80
6	SCC publications	36	3.00
7	More than one method	11	0.90
Total		1200	100%

The findings showed that the highest frequency sources used by the students to learn about the counseling centre and its services were "student orientation week" and "SCC advertisements" respectively. The source used least, on the other hand, was "SCC publications". In addition, some students reported that they knew about the centre through more than one

method.

Now to examine the second question - "Are there statistically significant differences in the levels of students' benefits from counseling services based on students' gender and their academic year?". First, to examine gender differences, an independent sample t-test was utilized (presented in Table 3). The results showed no statistically significant differences regarding gender in the levels of students' benefits from the counseling services (p= 0.239).

Table 3. Gender differences in levels of students' benefits from counseling services

Gender	n	Mean	Std. Dev.	t	p
Male	564	0.18	0.38	1.17	0.239
Female	636	0.21	0.40	-	-

Regarding the second part of this question related to differences in students' benefits from counseling services based on academic years - these were examined through one way ANOVA and presented in Table 4. The findings showed that there were statistically significant differences in the levels of students' benefits from counseling services based on their academic years (F= 2.81, p = 0.06). A Post Hoc test showed that the highest levels of benefit from counseling services was among students enrolled in 3rd - 6th academic years. However, students with 1st 2nd and 7th, or more, academic years benefitted less from counseling services.

Table 4. One way ANNOVA for differences in benefits based on the academic year

Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Staistic	p
3.04	0.43	(7, 1191)	0.006
183.45	0.15	2.82	

Constant: Benefit from services

To answer the third question, "What are the quality levels of SCC environment and the counseling services provided?", descriptive statistics were calculated at the item level and service level based on the responses of students who benefited from the services only (Group 1). Table 5 shows descriptive statistics at the service level and the quality level of each service according to the evaluation criteria justified in the methodology. (Note: descriptive statistics at the item level are included as a supplementary material in appendix 1).

As is clear from Table 5, student workshops and individual counseling had the highest quality levels ("very high") based on students' perceptions. The rest of the services showed "high" quality levels. Regarding the SCC environment, Table1 in appendix 1 reveals results related to the environment. The highest means ("very high") were found for the two items - "The location of the SCC ensures privacy to students," and "Receptionists in the counseling centre meet students with amiability and gentleness". On the other hand, the lowest means ("medium level") were found for "I have visited the SCC library and benefited from its services," and " The SCC website is not known to me.

Regarding the fourth question, "Are there statistically significant differences in students' perceptions about the quality of counseling services based on gender and academic experience?", an independent sample t-test was used to examine differences based on gender.

Table 5. Reliability coefficients, descriptive statistics, and quality level of services (n= 232)

Variable	No.	<i>a</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Quality Level
Student workshops	16	0.85	3.66	0.89	Very high
Individual Counseling	18	0.89	3.15	0.43	Very high
Discussion Sessions	15	0.85	3.12	0.40	High
Group Counseling	21	0.91	3.08	0.41	High
Developmental Counseling	14	0.85	2.97	0.42	High
Outreach Counseling	14	0.93	2.90	0.57	High
SCC environment	23	0.82	2.75	0.36	High
Reasons for not benefiting*	11	0.61	2.57	0.37	---

*Note: Quality level is not provided for this dimension as it measures different reasons for not benefiting from the services and not a single service. It is included only to demonstrate Cronbach's Alpha value.

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Table 7 presents the one way ANOVA results which also demonstrates no statistically significant differences in students’ perceptions of services’ quality based on their academic year.

Finally, to answer the last question related to the most important reasons which prevent students from benefiting from counseling services, the responses of students who did not benefit (Group 2) were analyzed. Descriptive statistics (i.e., means, standard deviation, and the quality level of each item based on the evaluation criteria) concerning the reasons scale are presented in Table 8.

As shown in Table 8, the most important reasons hindering students from coming to the centre and benefiting from its services were “I am not aware of the student counseling centre’s services,” “Student counseling centre’s services are not clear to me,” and “I don’t know student counseling centre’s location”. The least important reasons were “Asking for counseling help means that I suffer from a mental disorder,” “A friend has advised me not to seek student counseling centre’s services,” and “The information in the student counseling centre’s website is not useful”

Table 6. Gender differences in students’ perceptions about counseling services’ quality (n=232)

Services	Gender	No.	Mean	Std. Dev.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
SCC environment	Male	88	2.73	0.32	0.79	0.425
	Female	97	2.77	0.39		
Individual counseling	Male	38	3.06	0.43	1.88	0.064
	Female	33	3.25	0.41		
Group counseling	Male	13	3.03	0.43	0.55	0.585
	Female	19	3.11	0.40		
Developmental counseling	Male	11	2.89	0.52	0.78	0.439
	Female	21	3.02	0.37		
Outreach Counseling	Male	4	2.87	0.66	0.16	0.877
	Female	1	3.00	-		
Discussion session	Male	35	3.04	0.40	2.63	0.012
	Female	10	3.40	0.27		
Student Workshops	Male	11	2.85	0.50	0.36	0.721
	Female	5	2.76	0.28		

Table 7. Differences in students' perceptions about counseling services' quality based on their academic experience (n=232)

Variables	Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
SCC environment	Between groups	0.86	7	0.12	0.92	0.491
	Within groups	23.81	177	0.13		
Individual counseling	Between groups	1.78	7	0.11	0.58	0.769
	Within groups	12.23	63	0.19		
Group counseling	Between groups	1.42	5	0.28	1.94	0.121
	Within groups	3.81	26	0.14		
Developmental counseling	Between groups	1.22	5	0.24	1.43	0.246
	Within groups	4.43	26	0.17		
Outreach Counseling	Between groups	0.69	2	0.34	1.09	0.479
	Within groups	0.63	2	0.31		
Discussion session	Between groups	0.780	5	0.15	0.98	0.440
	Within groups	6.015	38	0.15		
Student Workshops	Between groups	1.20	4	0.30	1.90	0.180
	Within groups	1.73	11	0.15		

Table 8. Reasons for not benefiting from the counseling services (n=968)

No.	Items	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level
1	I am not aware of the student counseling centre's services.	3.18	0.75	Very high
2	Student counseling centre's services are not clear to me.	3.07	0.75	Very high
3	I don't know student counseling centre's location.	2.89	0.94	High
4	The centre's announcements haven't attracted my attention.	2.86	0.83	High
5	I face difficulty arriving to the student counseling centre.	2.78	0.83	High
6	I prefer to solve my problems by myself rather than consulting somebody else.	2.72	0.89	High
7	I feel shy to seek counseling services.	2.72	0.89	High
8	I don't trust the confidentiality of information I reveal to the counselor.	2.53	0.91	High
9	The information in the student counseling centre's website is not useful.	2.41	0.73	Medium
10	A friend has advised me not to seek student counseling centre's services.	1.68	0.85	Weak
11	Asking for counseling help means that I suffer from a mental disorder.	1.64	0.67	Weak
10	A friend has advised me not to seek student counseling centre's services.	1.68	0.85	Weak
11	Asking for counseling help means that I suffer from a mental disorder.	1.64	0.67	Weak

Discussion

The current study aimed to primarily explore the quality of counseling services provided in the Student Counseling Centre (SCC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). Secondly, it aimed to examine the most significant reasons that prevented the students from benefiting from the services.

The findings suggested that regarding the ways by which the students became familiar with the counseling services, "student orientation week" and "SCC advertisement" were the most frequent sources utilized by the students. This finding supports the vital role that student orientation week plays at the beginning of each semester. Students who attended activities organized during this week have the chance to gain awareness of all aspects of university life such as the facilities, services, laws... etc. The SCC prioritizes advertising its services and support activities to the students during this week, which according to this study contributes a great deal towards the students' awareness

of the centre. This indicates a need to continue providing and strengthening the quality of these two methods, so as to familiarize the students with SCC services. SCC publications were found to be the least frequently mentioned source used by the students, which could be attributed to students being more influenced by people speaking directly with them about the services (i.e., in orientation week) and through advertisements on the internet and social media, which are brief and capture the attention and passion of today's generation better than printed publications. Yet, the SCC staff need to find a better advertising plan to encourage students' to read publications, since they include a lot of important information regarding students' adjustment to university life such as dealing with anxiety, dealing with emotions, self-development and studying strategies.

No gender differences were found in the levels of benefits from the SCC services, however, statistical differences based on years of academic experience were found. Students in their 3rd to 6th academic years benefited from the services more

than those enrolled in the 1st, 2nd and 7th or more academic years.

This could be due to several reasons: students who enrolled in the 1st and 2nd years might be less aware about the centre than those who have been studying longer as they were more familiar with the university and services provided. In addition, as students in the first year often have to study English at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, they may feel less engaged with university life until they become more integrated when they start attending their colleges in their second year. Moreover, students first starting university life are coming from a home environment where they are used to receiving social support through speaking with parents, relatives or friends about problems that they may face. It could be difficult for them to become accustomed to the culture of counseling and thereby benefit from its services. As suggested by Brinson and Alamri (2005) the idea of seeing a counselor was rejected by Arabs, who believe that the solution to any problems they face is to be found in their faith in God. This idea still exists among students currently, although to a lesser extent, especially in those who are newly enrolled and those needing some time to realize the importance of counseling.

Regarding the more experienced students, there were very few students enrolled in their 7th year or higher since most colleges at SQU entail only 4-6 years of study, which could be a reason why students enrolled in these years benefit less from the centre. The university years (3rd to 6th), on the other hand, are the years when students are generally in the midst of their busiest period of study and, therefore, may face many challenges which make them more likely to benefit from counseling services. These results are inconsistent with Tahhan and Abu Eitah (2002) who found that first and second year students revealed a greater usage of counseling services than fourth year students. However, in the current study, it cannot be assumed that 3rd to 6th year students have higher counseling needs than their 1st and 2nd year counterparts, because they might have benefitted from counseling services since their first year. However, by the time the study was conducted they were enrolled in their 3rd to 6th years. There was no question included in the questionnaire that asked the students in which academic year they benefited from the SCC services. As a result, future studies will need to examine when students have higher needs of counseling services.

Regarding the main purpose of the current study, in general, all counseling services were found to have high levels of quality. Student workshops and individual counseling were rated the highest level of quality ("very high") and the remaining services were rated as being "high" in terms of quality. These results are consistent with Almashadani and Alfazri's findings in relation to SCC services in 2009. In their research, counseling services were rated as being moderate to high quality as perceived by graduate students. These consistent results reinforce the notion that SQU students believe in the necessity and the quality of counseling services which SCC provides for them. These findings are also in line with other studies (e.g., Brinson & Alamri, 2005; Bundy & Benschhoff, 2000; Thomson & Rosenthal, 2008).

Regarding the SCC environment, most students agreed that the centre's location ensured they could maintain their privacy. Furthermore, the students agreed that the reception staff that greeted them were affable and relaxed, which are essential qualities of receptionists in any counseling centre so as to attract students to the centre and make them feel comfortable and welcome.

Many reasons which could inhibit student from accessing and benefiting from the counseling services were examined in the current study. The participants who did not benefit from the services said the main reasons they did not access the centre were that they were not aware of the counseling services, that the role of the counseling services were not clear to them, and that they were unaware of the SCC location. This result is in agreement with findings by Xie (2007), who found that students who were not aware about counseling sessions and had no idea about how they worked. As mentioned earlier, counseling, as a profession, only started in Oman after the establishment of the Student Counseling Centre at SQU (Al-Darmaki, & Sulaiman, 2008). Private counseling centres have just recently opened in some major Omani cities and, hence, many students are not aware of or familiar with counseling services. The centre has made great efforts to make the students aware of its services through different mediums and activities such as orientation week, social media, advertising campaigns, outreach programs, and presentations at colleges and other places, however, despite these efforts, some students still do not know about these services either because they do not care to know about them or because they sincerely do not know.

This result suggests that staff at the SCC need to diversify the activities they organize and the channels they use to reach students. It is also recommended that the centre tries to reach all students at SQU through a mandatory course, which all students should take in their first year at SQU called "Life Skills" or "Study Skills". These courses would contribute to raising students' awareness towards university life, how to adjust to the university environment, the kind of problems they may face and how they can overcome them alone or with the help of SCC services. Yang et al. (2013) showed the positive results of a mandatory counseling program on the academic performance of students who were under probation. Moreover, recommendations from staff, faculty and friends to access and benefit from counseling services are very effective tools to raise students' awareness, as shown by research by Gaughf et al. (2013), and Russel et al., (2008). Moreover, the students themselves should also take some responsibility to find out about SCC services and seek them when needed.

The findings of the present study demonstrated that, based on the perspectives of students who benefitted from counseling (Group1), the current location of the SCC at SQU ensures privacy which is perceived as an advantage. On the other hand, non-benefitted students perceived the SCC location as "unknown to them" and being difficult to find. These findings seem to contradict each other; while benefitted students liked the location of the centre and liked to be able to access it anonymously, it remained unknown to those who had not benefitted from the services. The reason might be because the current location of the SCC is near a small botanical garden which may make the centre look somewhat isolated to some students. It is recommended that either a new building is established in a place that is visible to all students, or an intensive awareness plan needs to be conducted to familiarize students with the centre's location. Currently, efforts to raise awareness of the existing site are underway by all staff in the SCC. The centre has been working to advertise its location to all students, either through social media, or the centre's publications and announcements. Bundy and Benschhoff (2000) addressed the importance of student familiarization with the location of a counseling centre, and further studies may be needed to investigate the impact of the SCC location on students

benefiting from counseling services.

The least important reason for not benefiting from the SCC services was "Asking for counseling help means that I suffer from a mental disorder". This finding is quite remarkable, since it shows that most students at SQU were aware of the role of counseling and they could recognize the difference between the counseling provided for students by the SCC and that provided by mental health medical services. The efforts that were made by the SCC staff to strengthen students' awareness concerning the meaning of counseling and its goals, have led to positive results in students' understanding. This is a very promising finding which could result in an increase in the number of students benefiting from counseling services in the future.

Limitations of the Study

As with any research, the current study is not without limitations. First, utilizing a larger sample size in the study of students who benefited from SCC services, could have helped ensure a more accurate evaluation of the SCC. Second, in the current study, the quality of SCC services was assessed based only on the students' point of view. Further studies could also assess the quality of these services from the perspectives of SCC counselors. Third, this study focused only on the services provided for students, but there are also some counseling services that are provided for SQU staff and the community. The quality of these services could be evaluated from the perspectives of counselees as well. Fourth, a self-report scale was used that might be affected by social desirability and bias, and, thus, students may tend to overestimate or underestimate the quality of the services provided. Thus, a qualitative design could be utilized, using open-ended questions or interviews.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study has given an insight about the quality levels of services provide currently by the SCC. The results have indicated "high" to "very high" level of quality to all services which highlights the study's sample satisfaction about the center's services. However, the researchers emphasized the importance of continuing with improving counseling services provided by the SCC and with evaluation of their qualities.

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